

# Legal Aid in Child Welfare: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial of Mi Abogado

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## Introduction

Research Question: Can improvements to the foster care legal system improve child wellbeing?

- ▶ Policy concerns over bureaucratic frictions
- ▶ Large (correlational) literature on harms associated with length of stay

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Intervention: Mi Abogado ( “My Lawyer” )

Empirical Strategy: Pragmatic Randomized Controlled Trial

- ▶ Experimental Policy Initiative & Randomization
- ▶ Administrative Data

# Preview of Findings

Substantial reduction in length of stay (cost-effective)

No increase in re-abuse

Substantial reduction in criminal justice involvement

Suggestive evidence on school attendance

# Plan

- ▶ Background
- ▶ Mi Abogado
- ▶ Randomization and Empirical Strategy
- ▶ Results
- ▶ Conclusion

## Background: Child Welfare

Child protective services are surprisingly common

- ▶ Childhood incidence in US and Denmark both approximately 5%
- ▶ Current levels: 6 per 1000 in US; 2.5 per 1000 in Chile (11,000 children)

Various types of placement: kin, non-kin family, institutions

Typical goal: family reunification within 2 years

Foster children are at high risk of poor life outcomes (e.g. homelessness, imprisonment)

## Background: Legal Aid in Child Welfare

Large concerns over bureaucratic delays in family court system  
(Miller, 2004; Farber et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2020)

Large literature on negative correlation between length of stay and child wellbeing

Little causal evidence on interventions aimed at speeding the time to permanency or legal aid

- ▶ Orlebeke et al. (2016) RCT in Washington and Georgia for additional lawyer training finding faster times to permanency (within first six months of foster care)
- ▶ Rashid and Waddell (2019) study staggered laws mandating lawyer representation and find increased speed to adoption (a 14% increase in adoption within one year of foster care entry)

## Background: Chilean Child Protection System

10,700 children in substitute care

Allegations: About half neglect, half abuse

Average length of stay: 3 years (Julian et al., 2019)

In 2019, 41% in institutional homes

- ▶ Highly critical report of residential care in 2017

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# Mi Abogado Program

Case management team: lawyer, psychologist and a social worker

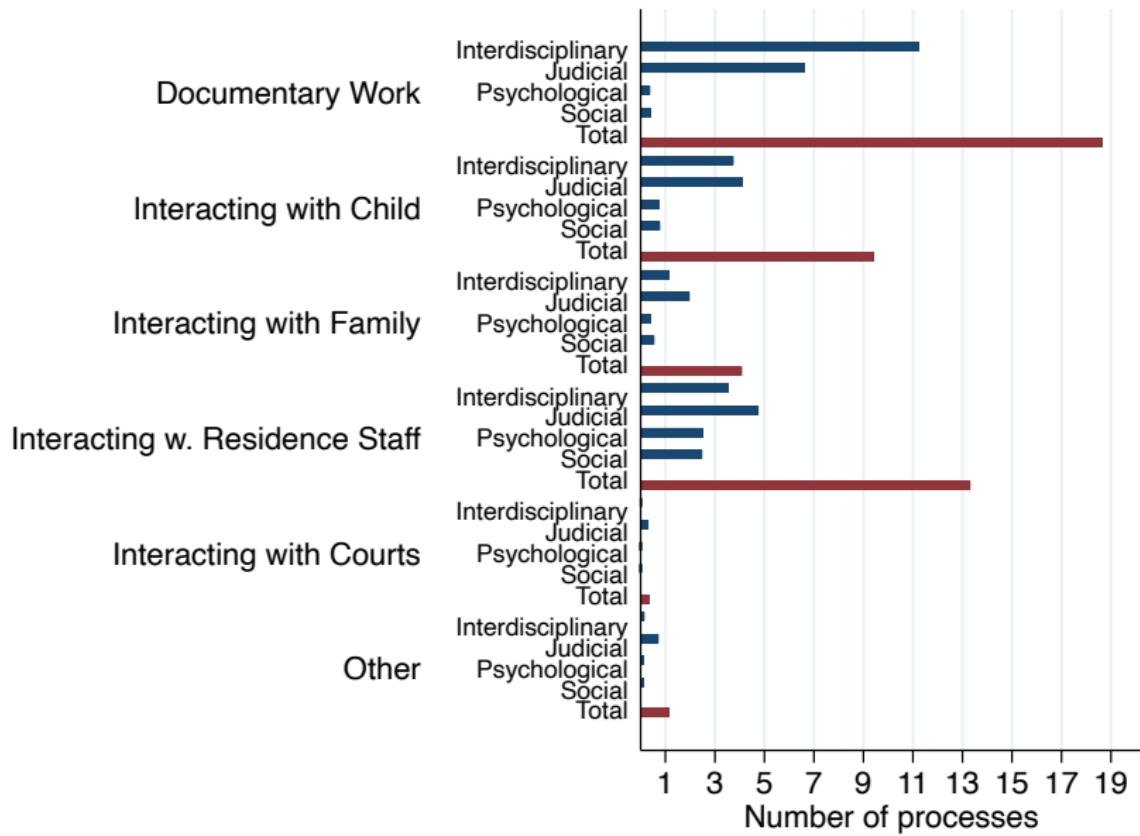
Lawyer represents the child in court and aims to promote “best interests of the child”

- ▶ Smaller caseloads per lawyer (nominally < 60)

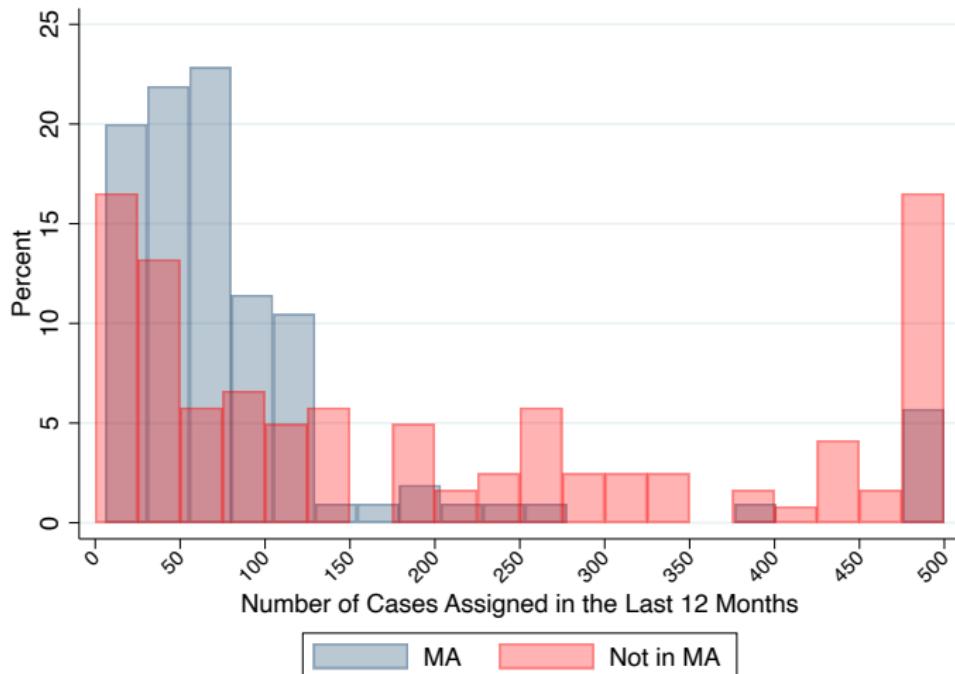
Interdisciplinary plan w/ team including access to services for children

- ▶ Psychologist & social worker caseloads closer to 200
- ▶ Lawyer cost: over 90% of the program

# Mi Abogado Tasks



## Cases Assigned in Last 12 Months



MA Mean: 109

Non-MA Mean: 309

# Plan

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- ▶ **Randomization and Empirical Strategy**
- ▶ Results
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## Experimental Design

Capacity constraints, so randomize to roll out expansion of the program

Children ages 6-18 in institutions in January/February 2019

Strata: age groups, sex, and 4 regions

(Main) Randomization on March 30 2019

Out of 1871 eligible children, 581 were assigned to treatment

Noncompliance due to lawyer assignment by judges

# Pragmatic RCT



4 largest regions in Chile

Region	N	Treated	Share
Santiago	623	200	0.32
Maule	451	413	0.92
Valparaíso	419	42	0.10
Bío Bío	378	28	0.07

# Data Description

Administrative data to track outcomes

- ▶ Less costly
- ▶ Updated daily

Registry Data with social-security-number linkage

- ▶ SENAME (Child Welfare)
- ▶ Ministry of Justice (Police reports and Courts)
- ▶ Ministry of Education

# Child Welfare Data

Dates of placement and placement changes

Observe exit to family

Key outcome is “Permanency” in a given quarter:

- ▶ Returned home, living with kin outside the child protection system, or adopted
- ▶ or turned 18 while living with family

# Courts and Criminal Justice Data

Crime reports where child is suspect

Crime reports where child is victim

Juvenile jail sentences (pending)

Types (and cost) of crimes (pending)

Outcome today: Number of crimes in a quarter

# Schooling

Attendance (monthly)

Grades (yearly) percentiles of the grade distribution

## Empirical Strategy

Intention-to-treat comparison of costs and outcomes

Event Study for child  $i$  in quarter  $t$ :

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta X_i + \sum_{q \neq -1} \gamma_q \mathbb{1}\{Q_t = q\} + \sum_{q \neq -1} \theta_q \mathbb{1}\{Q_t = q\} \times T_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where  $T_i$  is an indicator for those in the treatment group

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where  $T_i$  is an indicator for those in the treatment group

Will report IV to explore treatment effect dynamics

Standard errors are clustered at the child level.

## Empirical Strategy

Overall program effect for child  $i$ :

$$Y_{it} = X_i \beta + \gamma T_i + \delta Post_t + \psi T_i Post_t + \varepsilon_{it}. \quad (2)$$

Standard errors are clustered at the child level.

# Plan

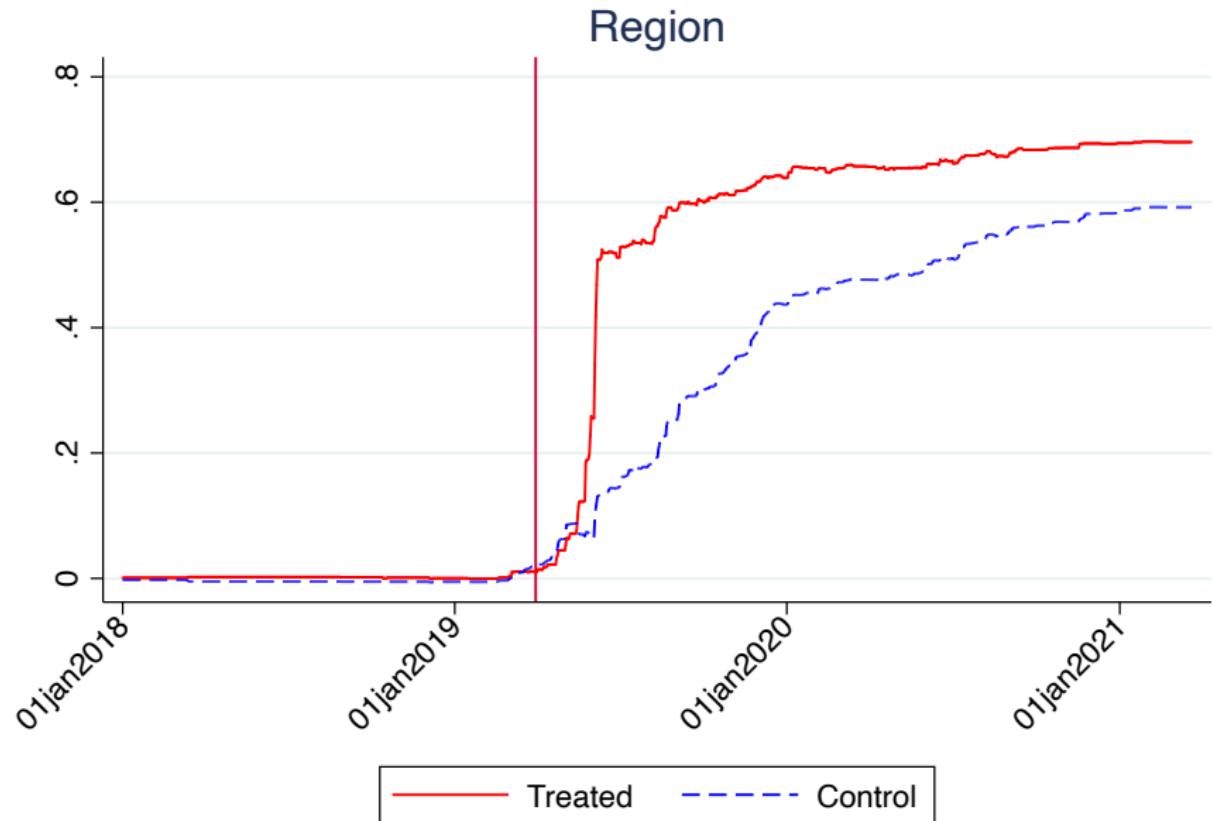
- ▶ Background
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# Balance

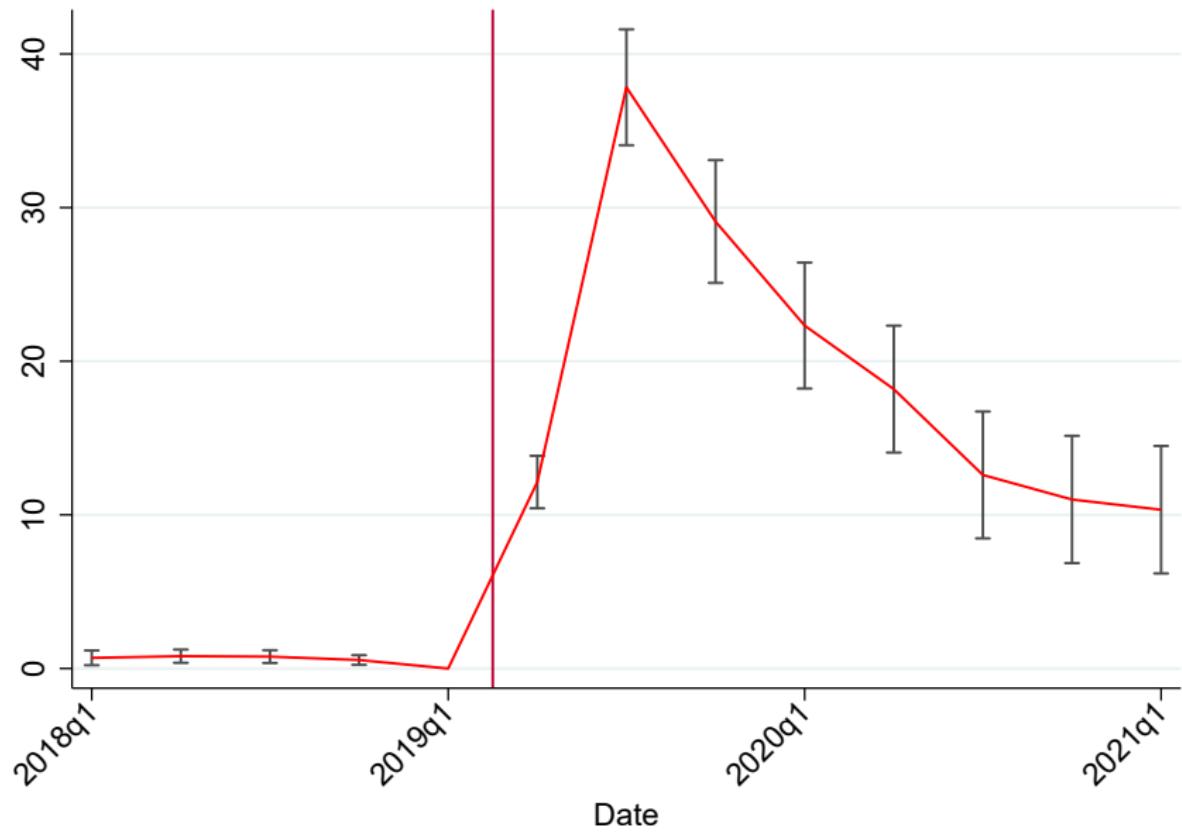
Table 1: Balance in Baseline Covariates

	N	Periods	Mean T	Mean C	SD	p
Wrists/Qtr	1,871	41	2.772	2.603	6.384	0.107
Hearings/Qtr	1,871	42	0.205	0.188	0.487	0.233
Days Living with a Family/Qtr	1,869	12	1.118	1.722	29.561	0.584
Days Living In a Residence/Qtr	1,869	12	54.716	52.420	43.569	0.659
Times Suspect Crimes/Qtr	1,871	24	0.025	0.026	0.388	0.377
Times Missing/Qtr	1,871	69	0.027	0.022	0.336	0.327
Times Victim of Abuse/Qtr	1,871	68	0.005	0.006	0.091	0.361
School Percentage of Attendance	1,871	25	0.698	0.662	0.408	0.450
Grades Percentile	1,616	2	27.448	25.878	23.747	0.147

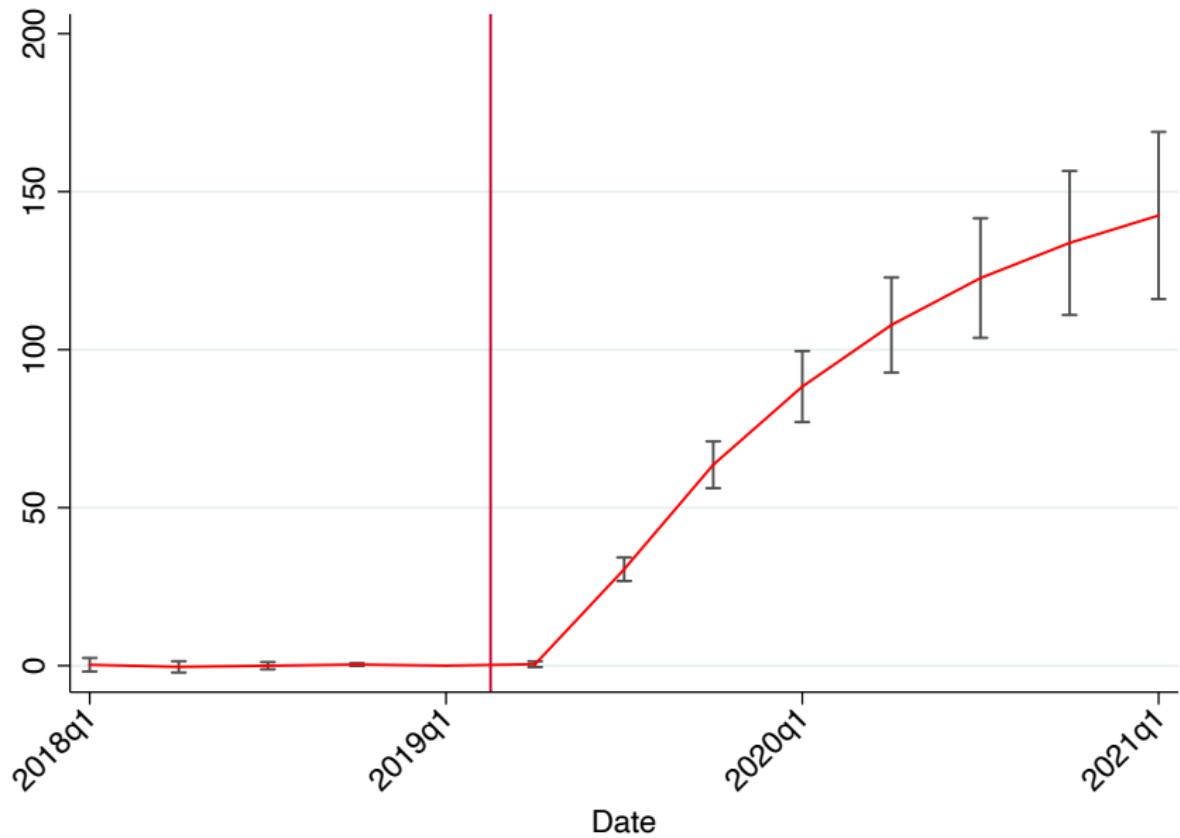
# Participation in the Program by Experimental Group



## Event Study: Days in Mi Abogado that quarter



# Event Study: Cumulative Days in Mi Abogado



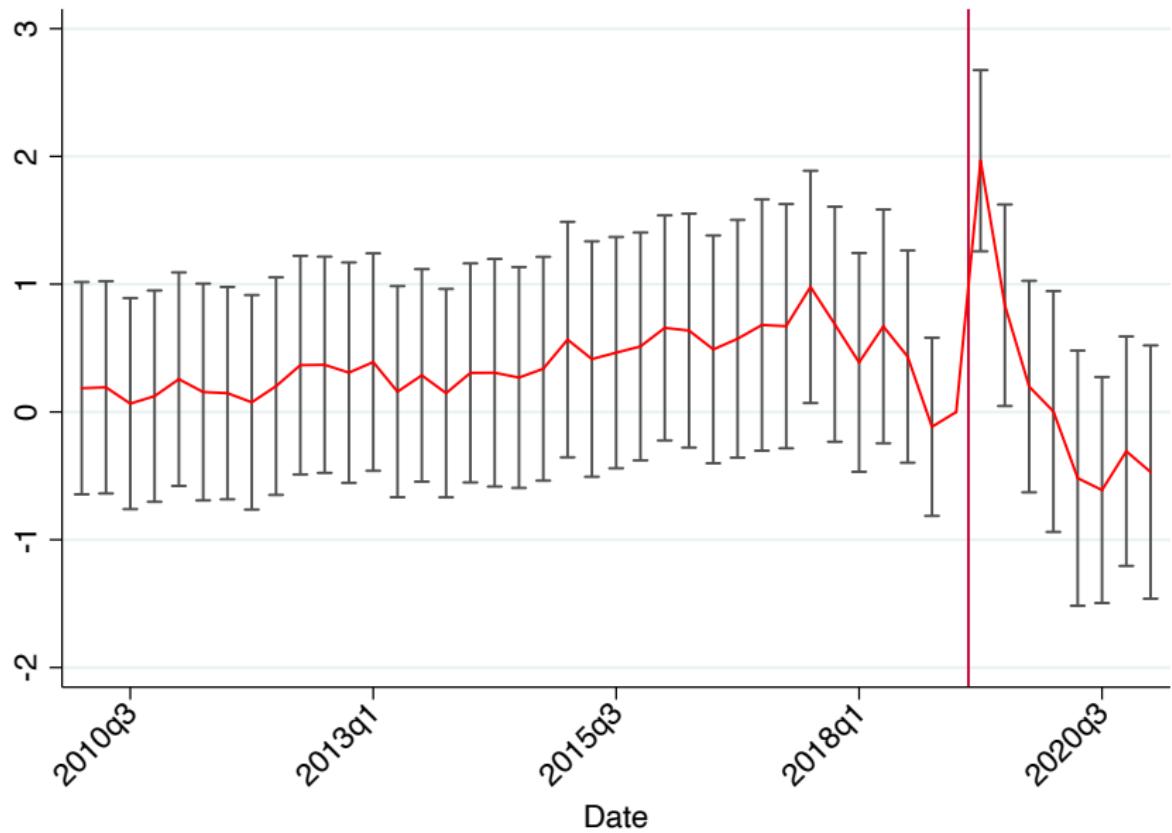
# Obligatory COVID Acknowledgement



Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

CC BY

# Wrts

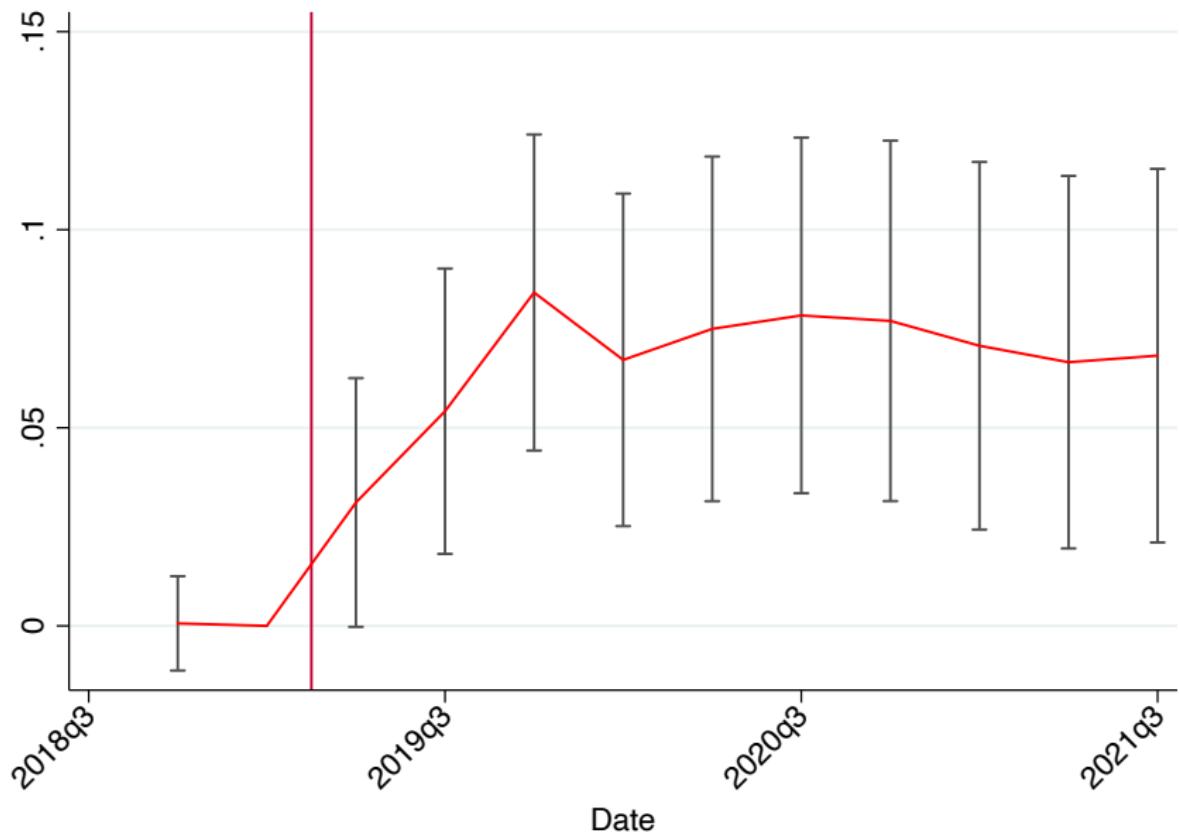


## Recall: Child Welfare Data

Key outcome is “Permanency” in a given quarter:

- ▶ Returned home, living with kin outside the child protection system, or adopted
- ▶ or turned 18 while living with family

# Permanency

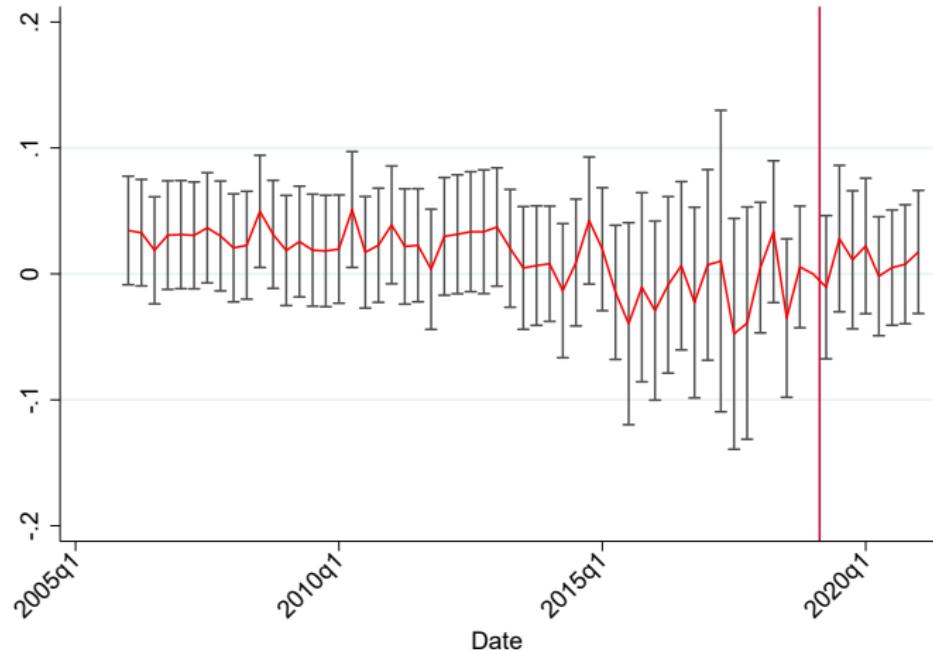


# Permanency

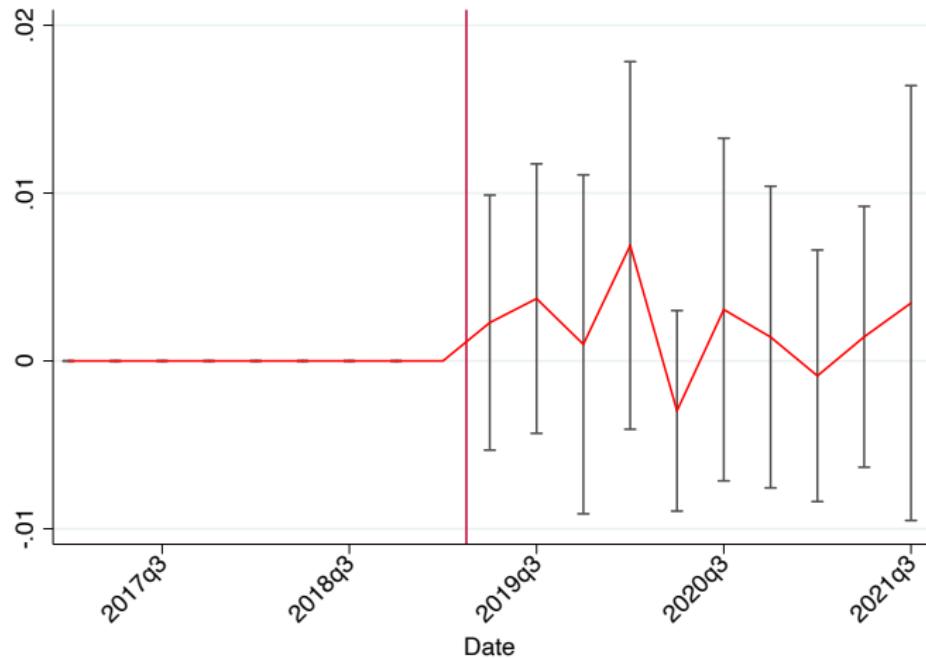
	(1) Dependent Variable: Ever Living w/ Family/Qtr.	(2) Dependent Variable: Ever Living w/ Family/Qtr.	(3) Dependent Variable: Ever Living w/ Family/Qtr. Females	(4) Dependent Variable: Ever Living w/ Family/Qtr. Males	(5) Dependent Variable: Ever Living in Residence/Qtr.	(6) Dependent Variable: Ever Living in Residence/Qtr.
Treatment x Post	0.066 (0.019)***	0.067 (0.018)***	0.045 (0.025)*	0.089 (0.028)***	-0.045 (0.024)*	-0.045 (0.024)*
Treatment Group	-0.024 (0.013)*	-0.023 (0.012)*	0.003 (0.018)	-0.058 (0.018)***	0.021 (0.021)	0.012 (0.013)
Post Randomization	0.214 (0.011)***	0.193 (0.012)***	0.246 (0.015)***	0.173 (0.016)***	-0.044 (0.014)***	-0.044 (0.014)***
<i>N</i>	31,548	31,548	17,867	13,681	35,511	35,511
Control Group Mean	0.254	0.254	0.254	0.254	0.640	0.640
Controls	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes

\*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

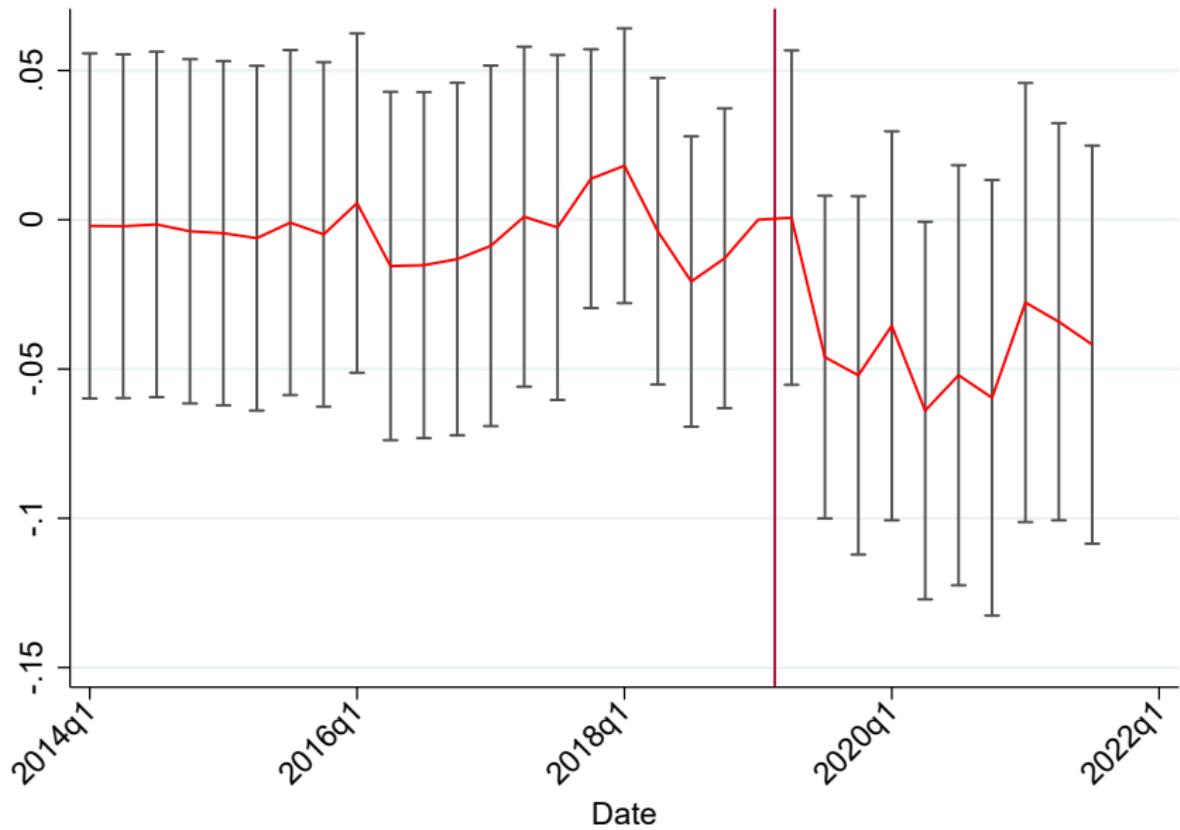
## [New] Re-Entry? Child Protection Investigation



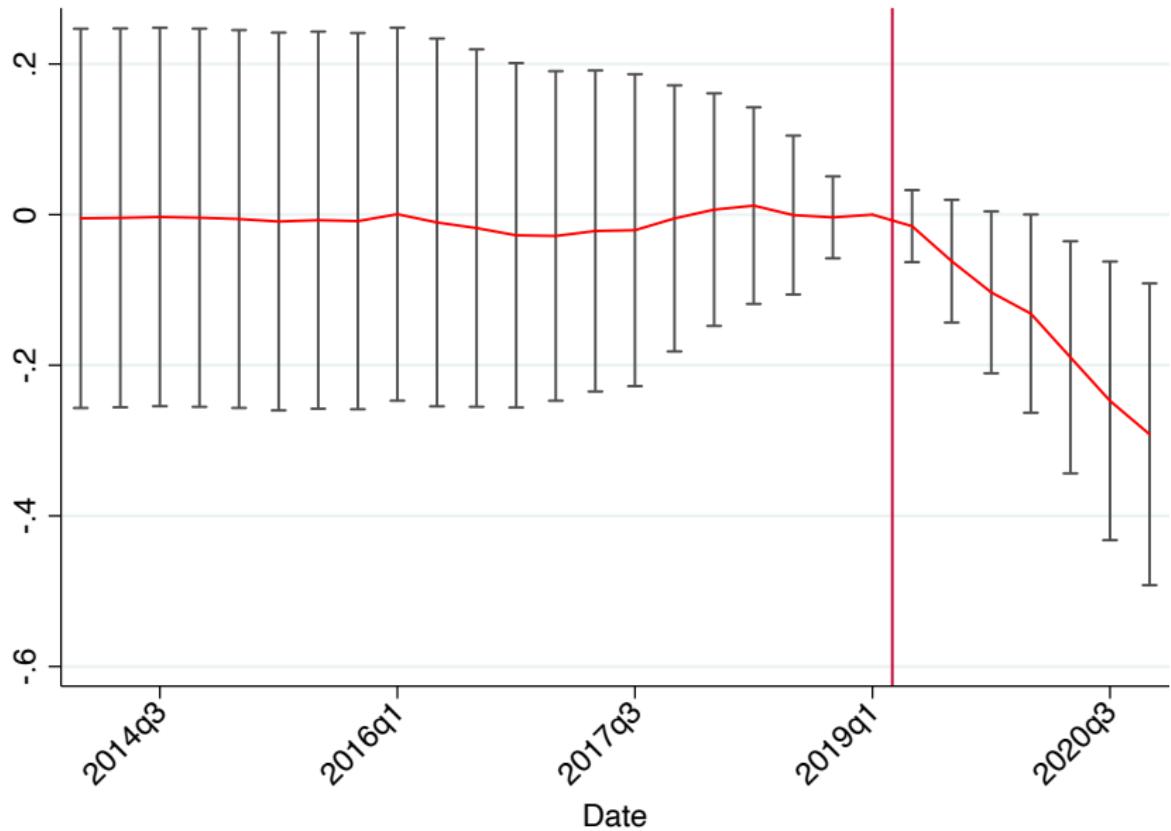
## [New] Foster Care Re-Entry



# Criminal Justice Involvement



## Cumulative Criminal Justice Involvement



# Criminal Justice Involvement

Table: Quarterly Crimes, by Sex

	(1) Dependent Variable: Crime Reports/Qtr.	(2) Dependent Variable: Crime Reports/Qtr.	(3) Dependent Variable: Crime Reports/Qtr. Females.	(4) Dependent Variable: Crime Reports/Qtr. Males.
Treatment x Post	-0.032 (0.012)***	-0.032 (0.012)***	-0.010 (0.009)	-0.058 (0.026)**
Treatment Group	0.010 (0.011)	0.012 (0.011)	0.025 (0.014)*	-0.011 (0.018)
Post Randomization	0.089 (0.009)***	0.089 (0.009)***	0.043 (0.006)***	0.149 (0.019)***
<i>N</i>	58,001	57,939	33,201	24,800
Control Group Mean	0.116	0.116	0.059	0.189
Controls	No	Yes	No	No

\*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

# Crime Types

	(1) Dependent Variable: Property Crimes Reports/Qtr.	(2) Dependent Variable: Violent Crimes Reports/Qtr.	(3) Dependent Variable: Substance use Crimes Reports/Qtr.	(4) Dependent Variable: Other Crimes Reports/Qtr.
Treatment x Post	-0.009 (0.004)**	-0.022 (0.006)***	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.014 (0.004)***
Treatment Group	0.008 (0.007)	0.006 (0.004)	0.000 (0.000)	0.002 (0.002)
Post Randomization	0.015 (0.003)***	0.053 (0.005)***	0.002 (0.000)***	0.033 (0.003)***
<i>N</i>	57,939	57,939	57,939	57,939
Control Group Mean	0.023	0.066	0.003	0.038
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

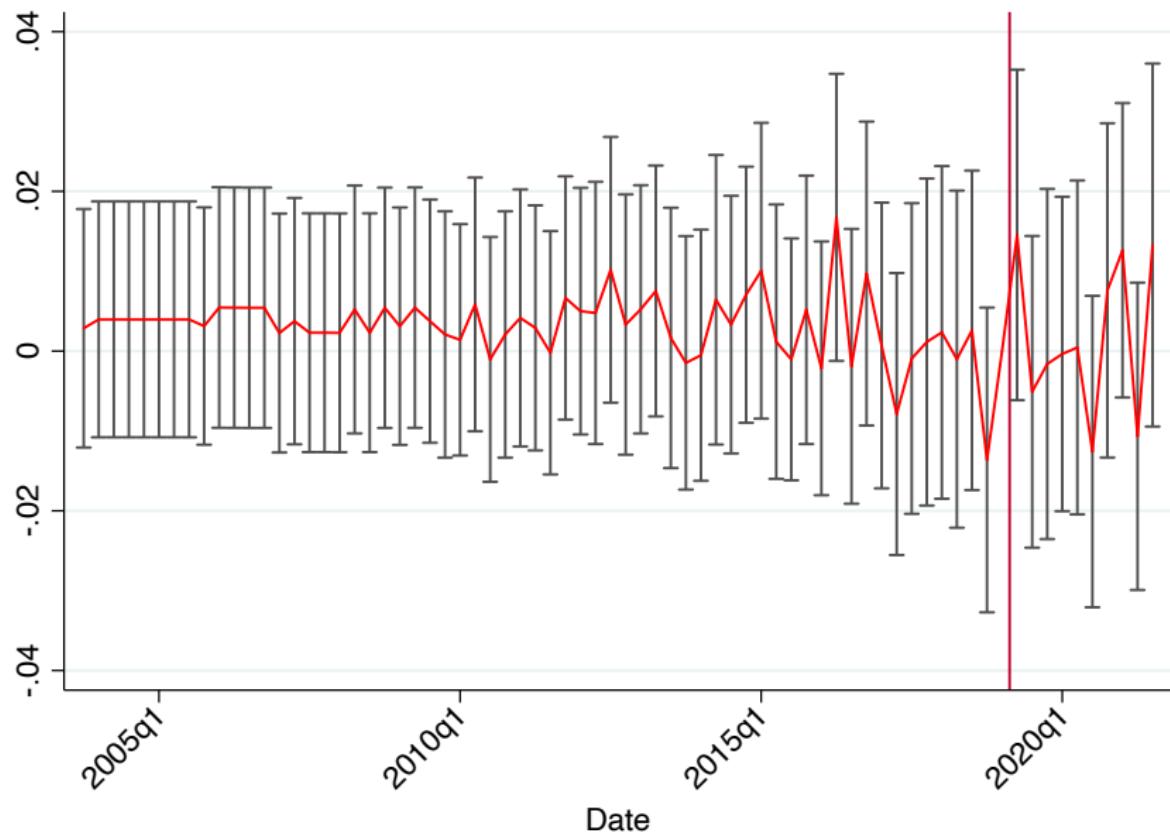
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# Guilty Sentences

	(1) Dependent Variable: Guilty Sentences/Qtr.	(2) Dependent Variable: Guilty Sentences/Qtr.	(3) Dependent Variable: Guilty Sentences/Qtr. Females.	(4) Dependent Variable: Guilty Sentences/Qtr. Males.
Treatment x Post	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.010)
Treatment Group	0.008 (0.009)	0.009 (0.009)	0.011 (0.011)	0.004 (0.015)
Post Randomization	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	0.005 (0.005)
<i>N</i>	43,033	42,987	24,633	18,400
Control Group Mean	0.010	0.010	0.001	0.022
Controls	No	Yes	No	No

\*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

# Reported Child Abuse



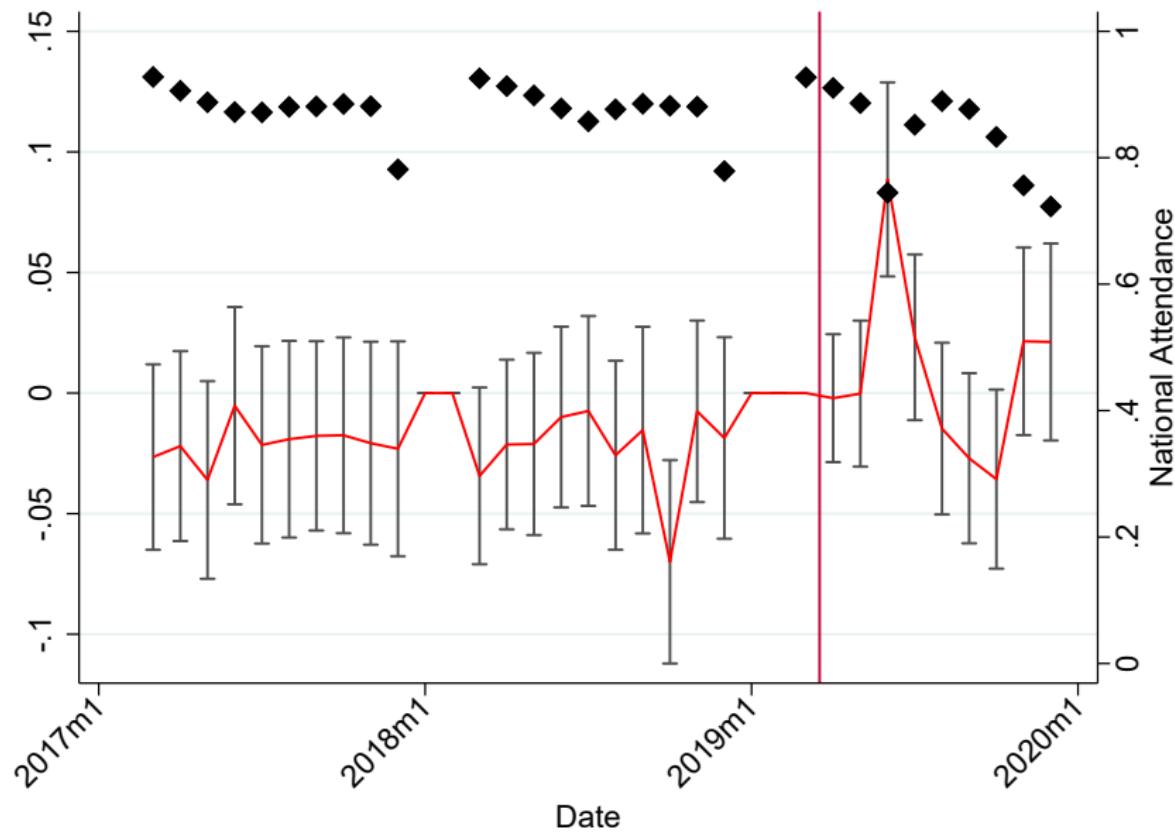
# Missings (Presunta Desgracia) and Child Abuse

Table: Child Abuse

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Dependent Variable: Times Missing/Qtr. Model: Panel ITT No controls.	Dependent Variable: Times Missing/Qtr. Model: Panel ITT Controls.	Dependent Variable: Child Abuses/Qtr. Model: Panel ITT No controls.	Dependent Variable: Child Abuses/Qtr. Model: Panel ITT Controls.
Treatment x Post	-0.027 (0.015)*	-0.027 (0.015)*	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)
Treatment Group	0.001 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Post Randomization	0.117 (0.010)***	0.117 (0.010)***	0.016 (0.002)***	0.016 (0.002)***
<i>N</i>	12,200,791	12,187,749	12,200,791	12,187,749
Control Group Mean	0.141	0.141	0.022	0.022

\*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

# School Attendance



## Cost-Benefit Analysis at 2 years

ITT Costs over two years:

- ▶ 148 more days receiving Mi Abogado services
- ▶ MA average cost is \$3.28 per child per day vs. \$2.70 for non-MA
- ▶ Resulting in \$86 in additional cost for treatment group

## Cost-Benefit Analysis at 2 years

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### ITT Savings over two years:

- ▶ 4.6 fewer days in public residences @ \$67/day
- ▶ 30.3 fewer days in private residences @ \$28/day
- ▶ Resulting in \$1157 in savings for treatment group

# Interpretation

Across Treatment vs. Control:

- ▶ Cumulative program participation difference is concave through time
- ▶ Substantial and sustained impacts on permanency and living in residences
- ▶ Substantial and sustained improvement in crime outcomes
- ▶ Suggestive evidence of improved school attendance
- ▶ No effect detected on grades (imprecise)

# Treatment Effect Dynamics?

$$Y = f(\text{Days since program enrollment}) \quad (3)$$

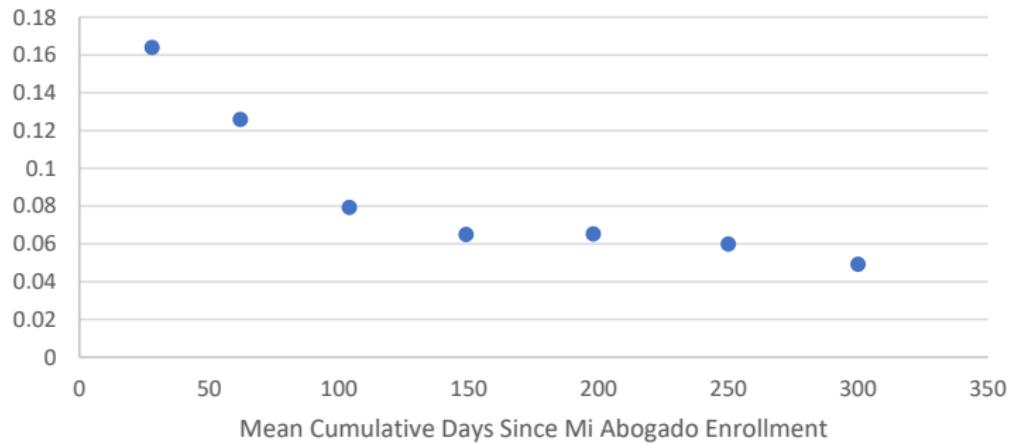
# Treatment Effect Dynamics?

$$Y = f(\text{Days since program enrollment}) \quad (3)$$

- ▶ By quarter: Difference in cumulative exposure
- ▶ By quarter: Difference in outcomes
- ▶ By quarter: Implied IV for different levels of exposure
- ▶ By quarter: Effects could vary over calendar time too...

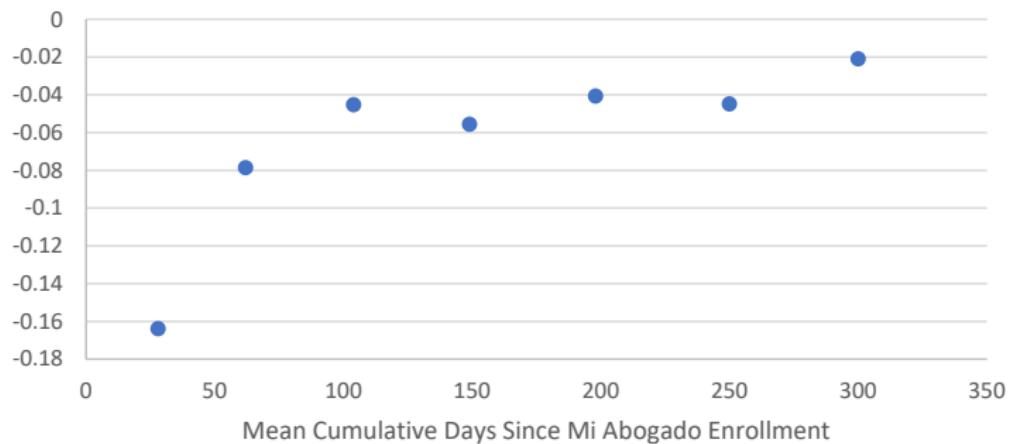
# Treatment Effect Dynamics?

Implied IV for Permanency



# Treatment Effect Dynamics?

Implied IV for Criminal Justice Involvement



# Conclusion

Mi Abogado sped the exit from institutions and resulted in lower criminal justice involvement

- ▶ Judicial interventions can improve child outcomes
- ▶ Suggests children are staying too long in care

# Going Forward

Exploring mechanisms and heterogeneity

- ▶ Types of children
- ▶ Types of MA teams
- ▶ Types of group homes
- ▶ Group home residence crime timing

Next RCT: MA for children in family foster care