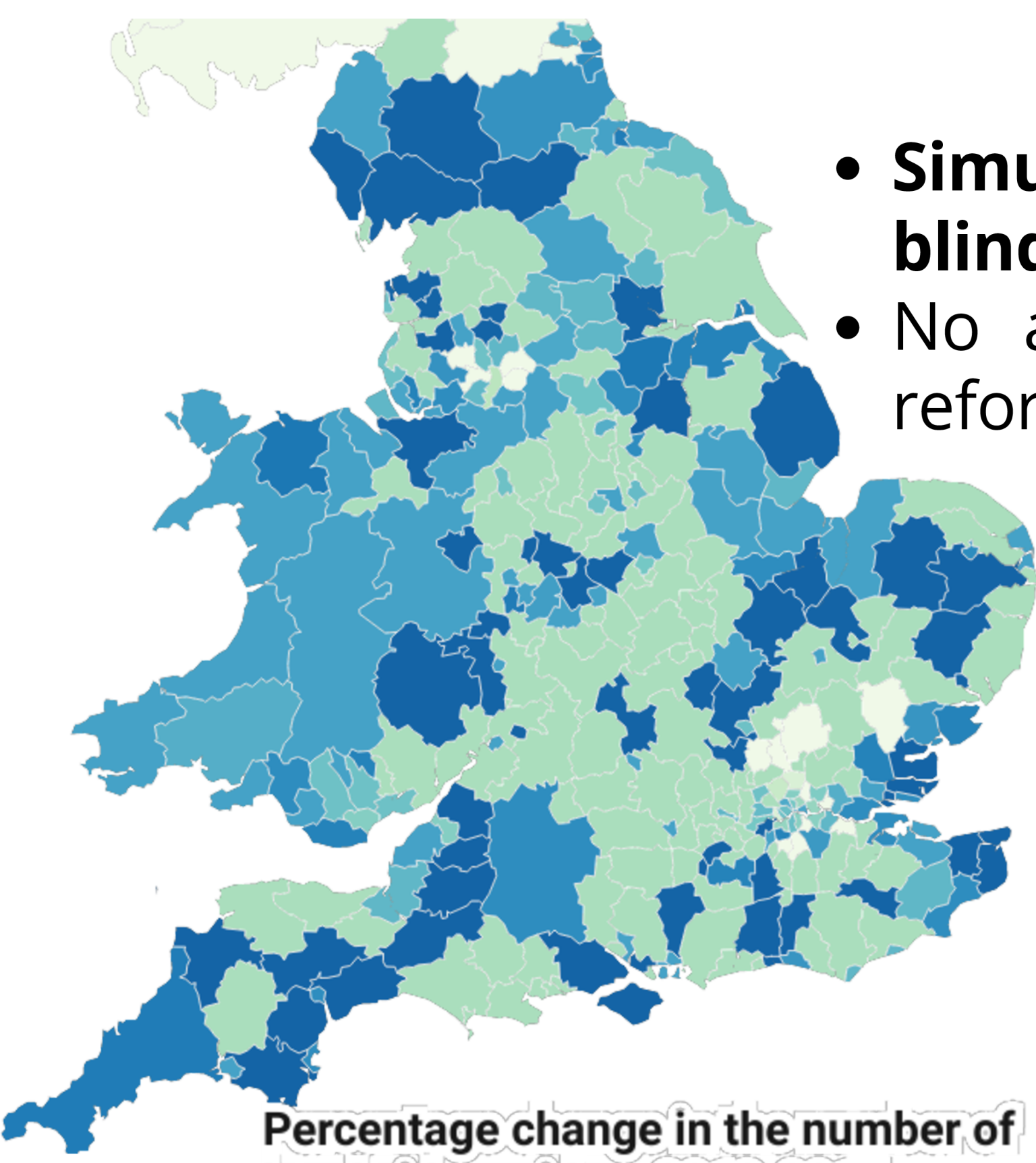


Justice Under Austerity - The Impacts of Reduced Access to Legal Assistance

SOURCES OF EXOGENEOUS VARIATIONS

SPATIAL VARIATION

- Simultaneous and uniform/place-blind implementation of the reform
- No account for local levels of pre-reform provision and needs dynamics



Percentage change in the number of legal aid providers 2012-2015



TREATED
Areas most affected
(top quintile treatment)

CONTROLS
Areas little to no affected
(no change in distance)

OVERTIME VARIATION

- Large negative funding shock and displacement of unmet demand
- Gradual congestion and closure of legal aid providers
- Intensification of advice deserts

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent does provision of legal assistance matter for welfare? Does legal aid provide a protective buffer in times of austerity?



LEGAL AID REFORM

POLICY OBJECTIVES

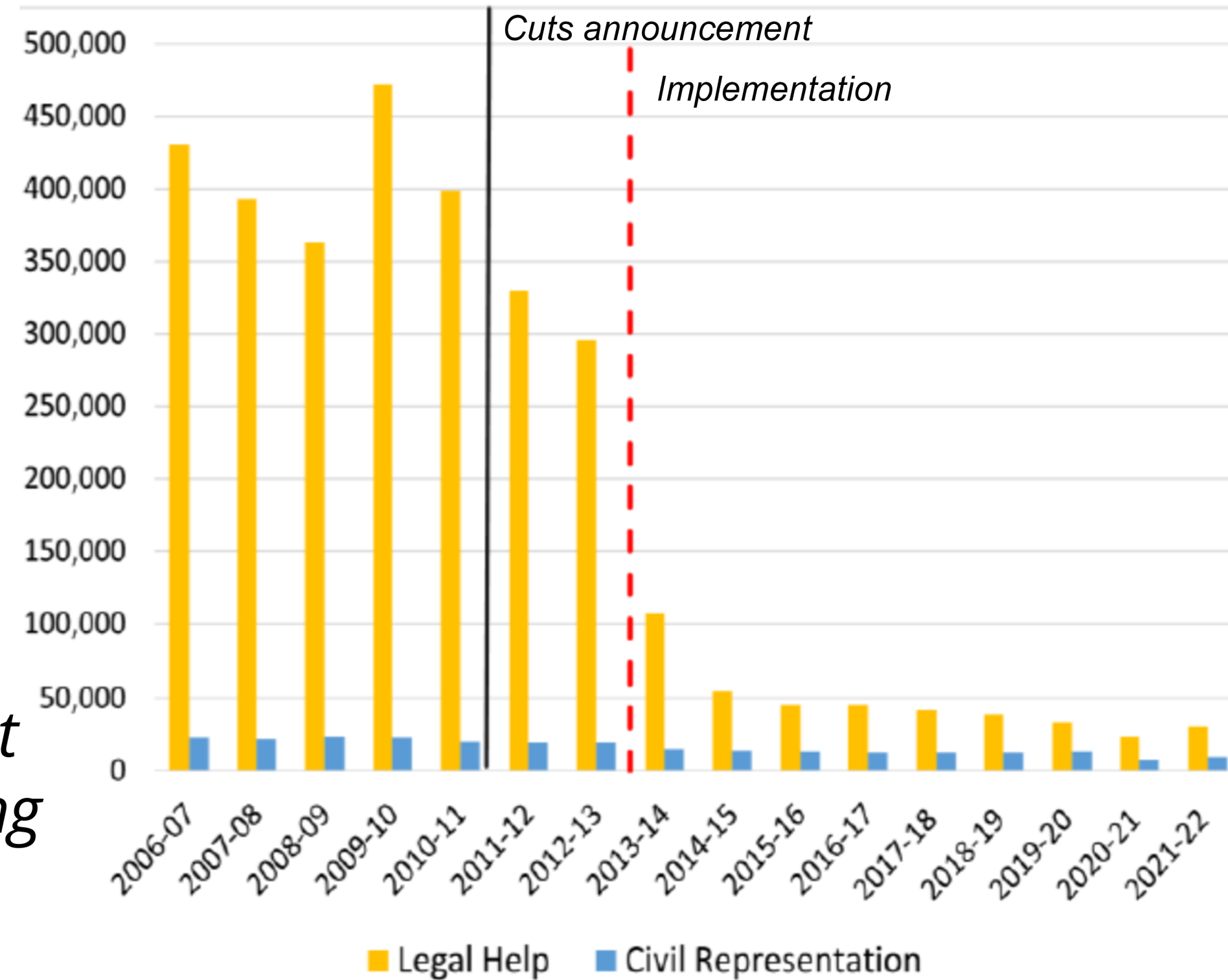
"discouraging unnecessary litigation"

"restricting to cases with direct threats to housing security and health"

POLICY CONTEXT

In England and Wales, the 2013 LASPO Act removed public funds for means-tested legal aid to deal with everyday legal problems: **housing, debts and benefits** disputes, shifting from **early-stage** prevention to **last-resort** courtroom defense.

Evolution of the number of cases by type of assistance



RESEARCH DESIGN

TREATMENT

Change in **DISTANCE & CONGESTION** to the nearest provider

STATIC

Change between 2012 Q2 - 2014 Q1

STAGGERED

Increase at any point 2012-2023

FRAMEWORK

MARGINAL VALUE OF PUBLIC FUNDS

- Cost shifting from **central government** to courts, local authorities, healthcare services, and housing market

DATA

- Panel data on **legal aid providers' activity** in England and Wales between 2009 and 2023 with location, operation dates, and costs structure
- **Population-level** outcomes at the **7,264 Middle Super Output Areas** level:
 - Mortgage and Landlord Possession Statistics
 - Local Authority Homelessness Tables
 - Age-Adjusted Mortality Statistics
- **Individual-level** administrative **benefits data** linked to legal aid casework data & survey

DIFFERENCE-IN-DIFFERENCES with **CONTINUOUS & DYNAMIC TREATMENT**

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta \cdot Access_{i,t} + \theta_t + \delta_i + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

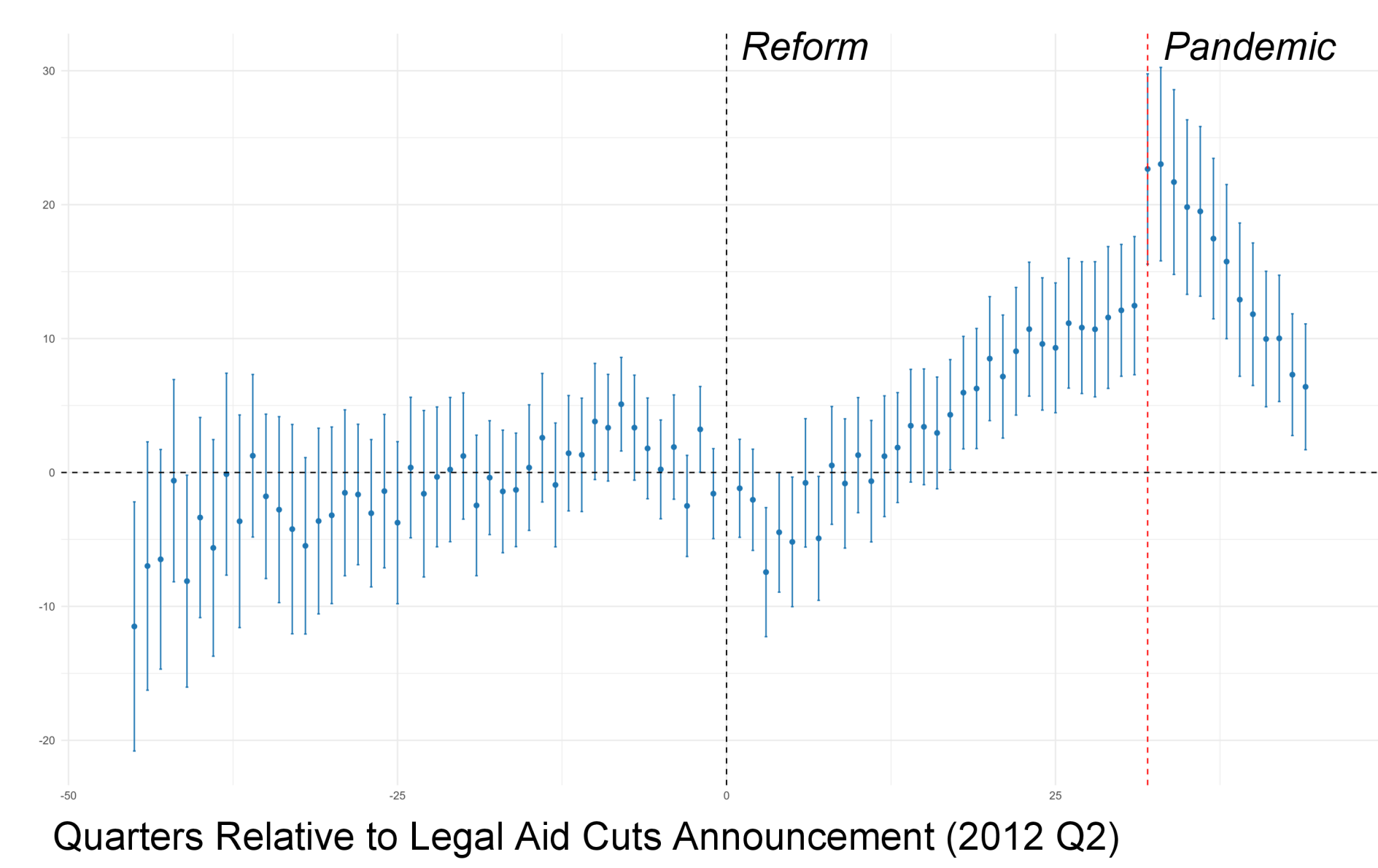
Population-weighted outcomes
$$Access_{i,t} = D_i \times Post_t$$

Treatment intensity: distance/caseload
Pre/post reform indicator
Area Fixed Effects
Time Fixed Effects
Clustered standard errors

EVICTON

- 12% increase in filings (+1.7/qtr), 7% in orders (+1.2/qtr) wrt. 2011

Eviction filings rate per 100,000 inhab.

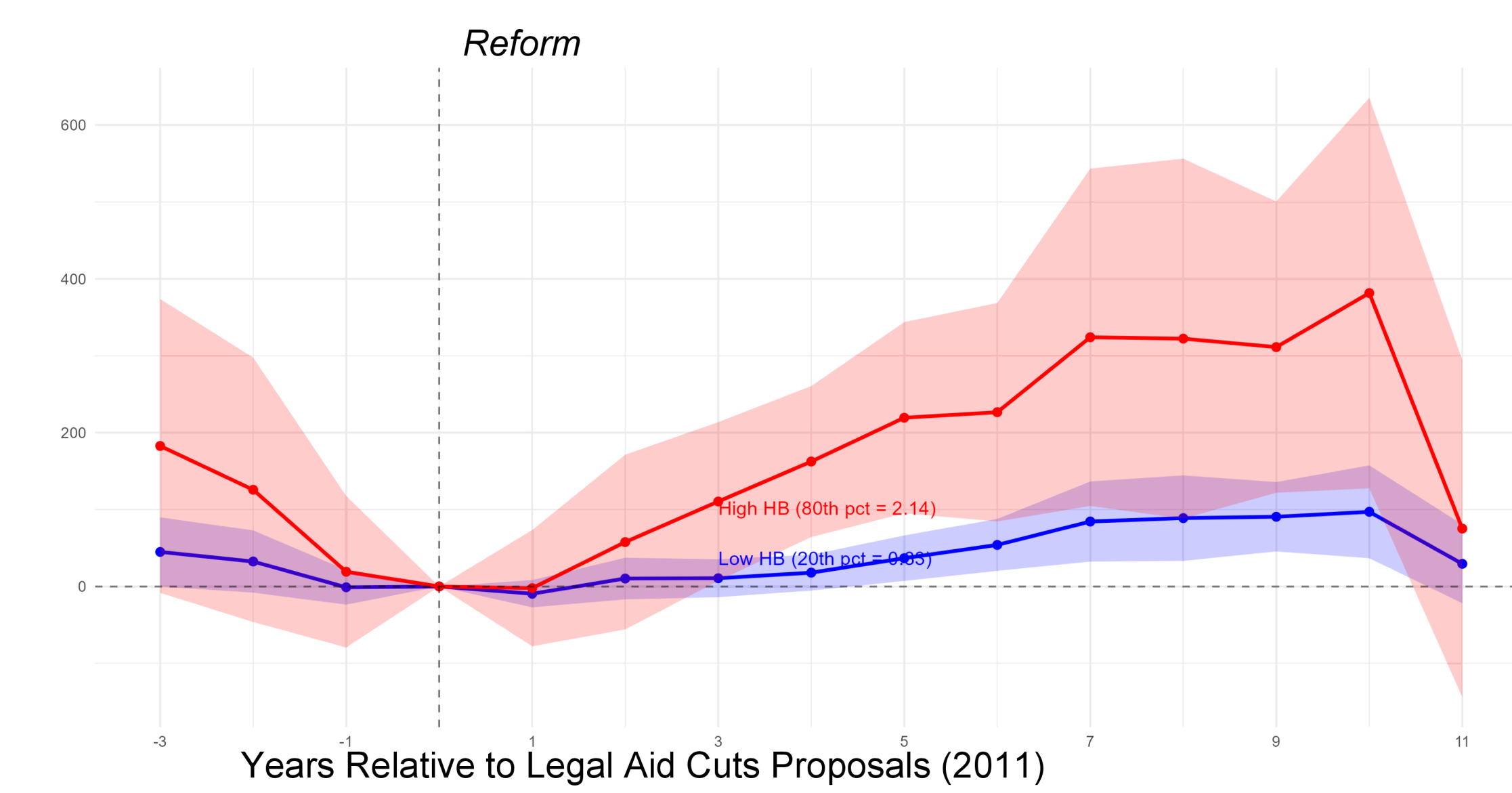


HOMELESSNESS

cf. Fetzner et al. (2019)

- +175 per 100k for areas with largest rental assistance cuts (7 x Bottom Quintile)

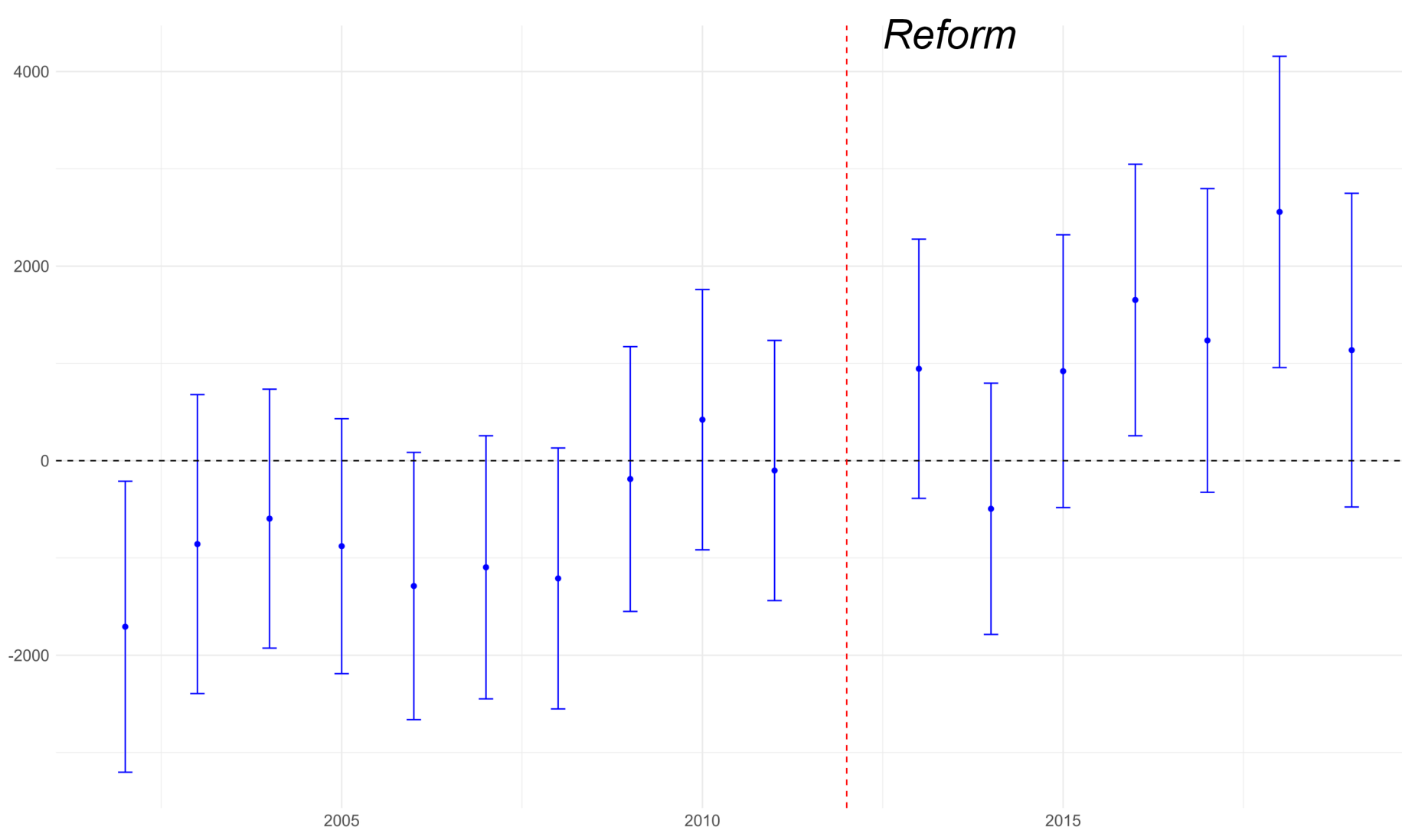
Homelessness assessments rate per 100,000 inhab.



MORTALITY

- 0.9% increase in age-adjusted mortality (+3.9/year) wrt. 2011

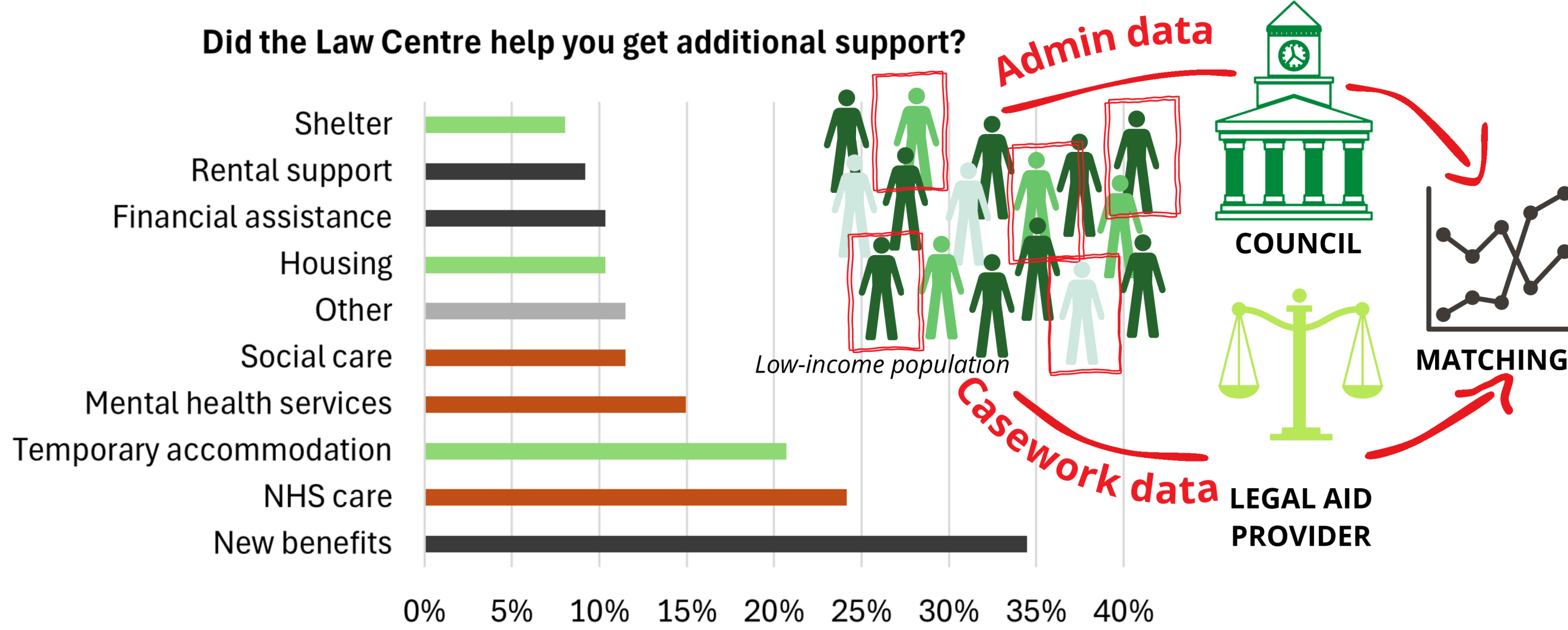
Age-adjusted excess deaths 2012-2019



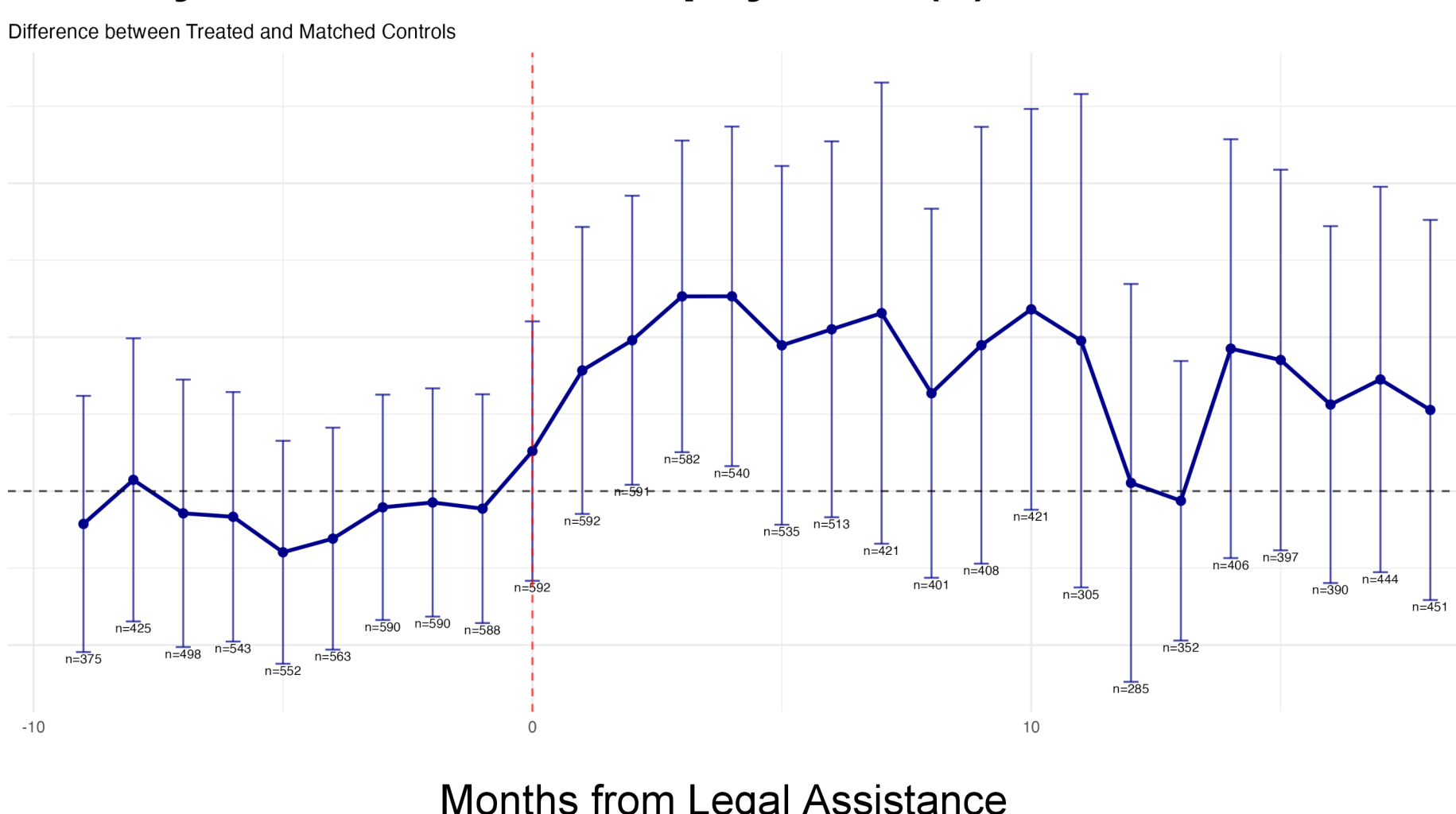
OUTCOMES

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATA LINKAGE & MATCHING

- **Pilot linkage & survey:** 450 case records, 150 individuals linked to local admin data (n=30,000)



Weekly rental assistance payment (£)



MECHANISMS

HYPOTHESES

- **Disproportionate exit of nonprofits** specialized in early-stage support with expertise across multiple legal domains (hospitals of legal aid)
- Role of **early-stage support** to de-escalate crisis before court stage
- Legal aid lawyers as **navigators of the safety net:** support to claim benefits, coordination between agencies, referrals to healthcare & social services
cf. Britto et al. (2025); Caspi & Rafkin (2025)

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- **Right-to-counsel** programs in the U.S. focus on eviction defense at the expense of preventive services
→ *Survey of housing lawyers & social workers collaborations*
- **Potential of AI** to flag vulnerability, reduce administrative burden, and support referrals
→ *RCT with Elliott Ash (ETH Zurich)*
- Value of **hubs of services:** medico-legal partnerships, social workers
→ *Evaluation of Dep. Veteran Affairs MLPs*



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To know more, scan the QR code!

