Growing Up in Ireland
National Longitudinal Study of Children

Growing up in a One-Parent Family:
The relationship between family structure and child outcomes

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Preliminary Findings

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Introduction

- Main focus is on the link between family structure and child outcomes
- Little research on the impact of lone-parenthood on children in Ireland
- The impact of lone-parenthood is believed to operate through a number of mechanisms; income, education, time, stress etc
- Recent baby boom has lead to an increase in the *number* of births occurring outside of marriage
- Recent figures from Eurostat show nearly a quarter of Irish children live in one-parent homes (23.2% 2008)

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Research Aims

Selection Bias.

The factors that make single parenthood more likely also have direct effects on child outcomes of interest.

- To present unbiased estimates of the effects of growing up in a one-parent family on a range of child outcomes at age 9 (for today, we focus on education)
- Make comparisons across different types of one and two-parent families

Can the relationship between family structure and children's wellbeing be explained by selection effects?

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Method

Propensity Score Matching

- Estimate the “counterfactual group” to adjust for selection bias. In the simplest case, estimates the level of an outcome, such as educational attainment, that a child would have reported had he/she had two-parents living together rather than one-parent.
- It is possible to estimate this counterfactual by matching cases that are similar on confounding factors, but differ on the focal independent variables.
- Cases were matched on multiple characteristics (a priori and fixed) of both the PCG and child.

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Family Types

Family Type Primary Caregiver (father n=37)	N	%
Missing Marital Status	158	0.77
No-partner		
Separated	331	3.86
Divorced	109	1.27
Widowed	50	0.58
Never Married	468	5.86
Partnered		
Married (Control group)	6949	81.76
Separated	66	0.77
Divorced	37	0.43
Widowed	5	0.06
Never Married	395	4.63
Total	**8568**	**100**

Child Outcomes

Academic achievement:

- Drumcondra reading (vocabulary) and Maths tests
- Completed in group-settings within the school
- Tests developed for Irish school children

School Attendance:

- Number of days absent from school (teachers report)

Family wellbeing:

- Equivalised household annual income

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Some socioeconomic differences

PCG	**One-parent (%)**	**Two-parents (%)**
Mean age	36.9	40.2
Degree or higher	20.3	26.9
Not religious	7.2	13.7
Foreign born	17.9	15.7
Smoked	25.0	11.2
Alcohol	35.5	39.5
Study Child		
Birth order (1st)	53.9	40.5
Birth weight (KG)	3.4	3.5
Breastfed	42.4	52.3
Parent Prison	2.8	0.3

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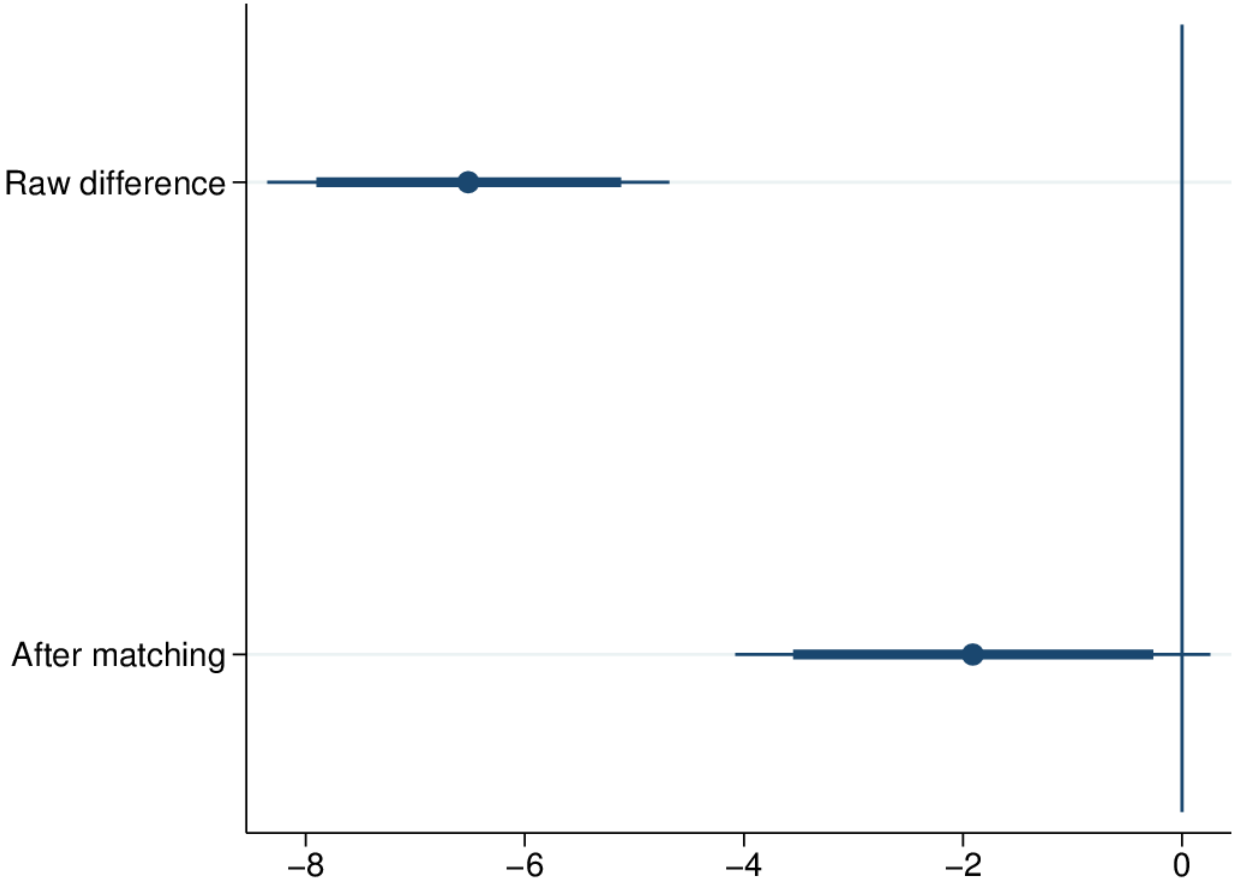
Reduction in Bias

PCG	%	SC	%
Age	96.6	Gender	52.2
Height	91.0	Aged 10	43.1
No Religion	79.5	Birth weight	91.1
Religiosity	97.5	Birth timing: early	98.7
Higher Education	97.8	Delivery mode (SA)	84.8
Native language	-109.6	Perinatal ICU	74.7
Citizenship	17.5	Breastfed	96.9
Birth country	19	Country birth	42.7
Chronic illness	96.1	Birth order	93.4
Smoked	91.3	Parent prison	62.0
Alcohol	92.6	**Full data**	*n* = 8568
Deprived in youth	94.4	**Matched sample**	*n* = 8041

Drumcondra Reading (PCT)



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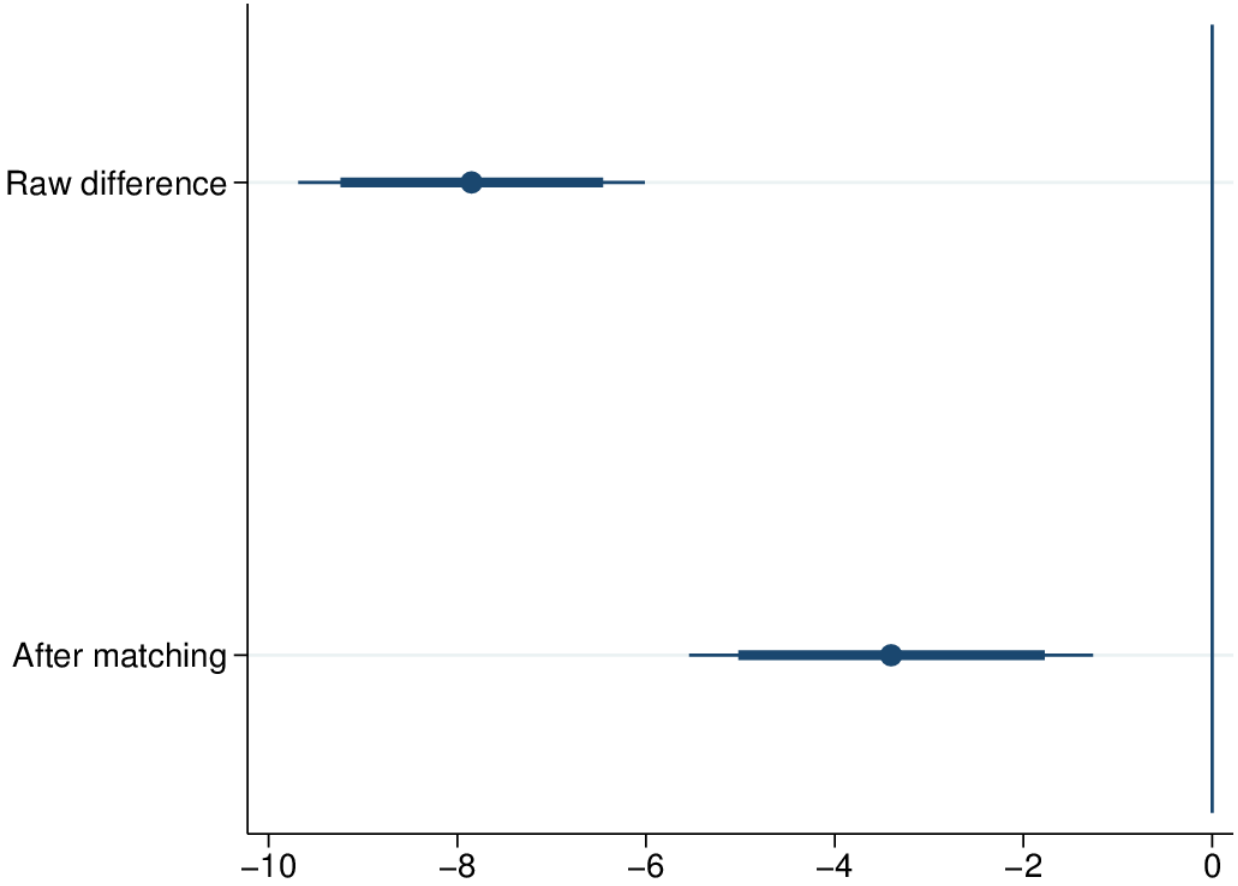
Drumcondra Maths (PCT)



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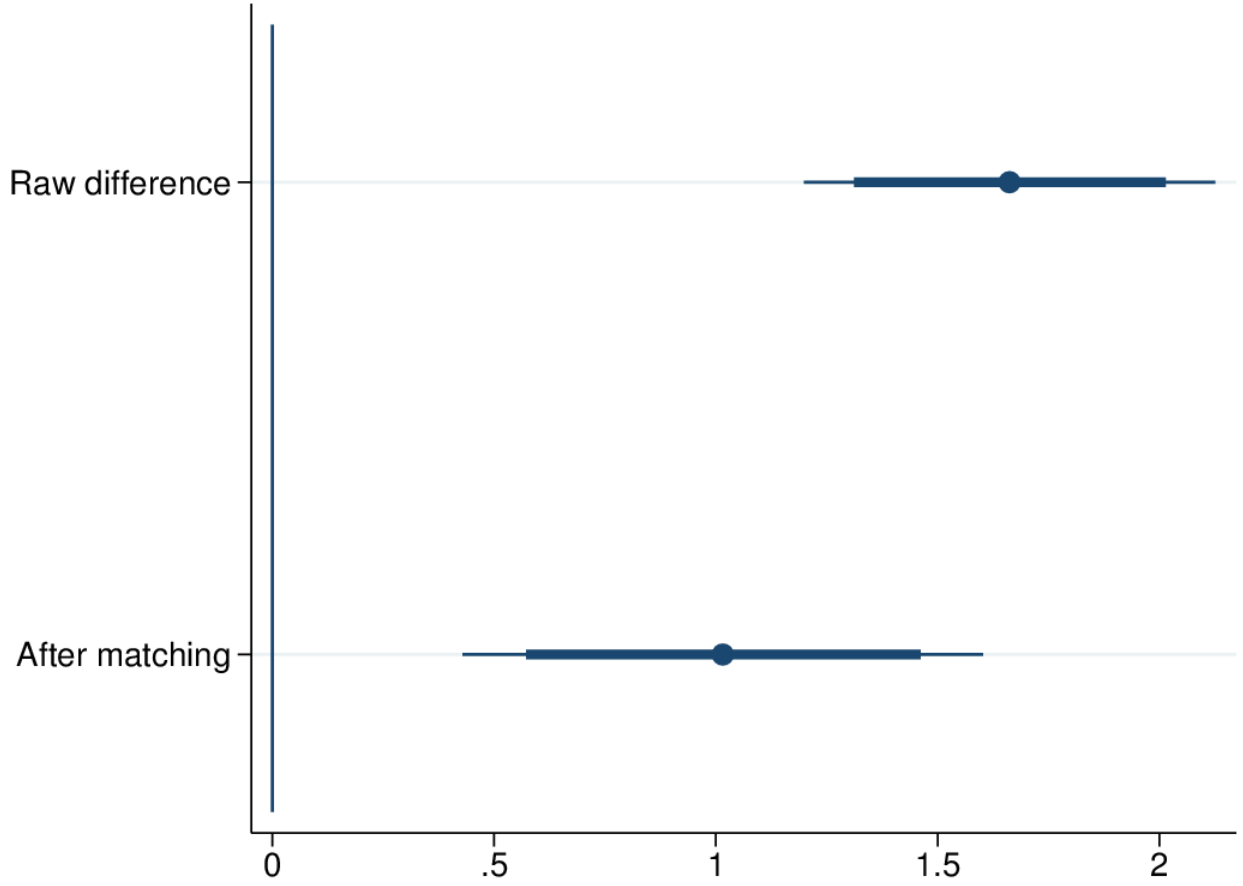
Number days missing from School



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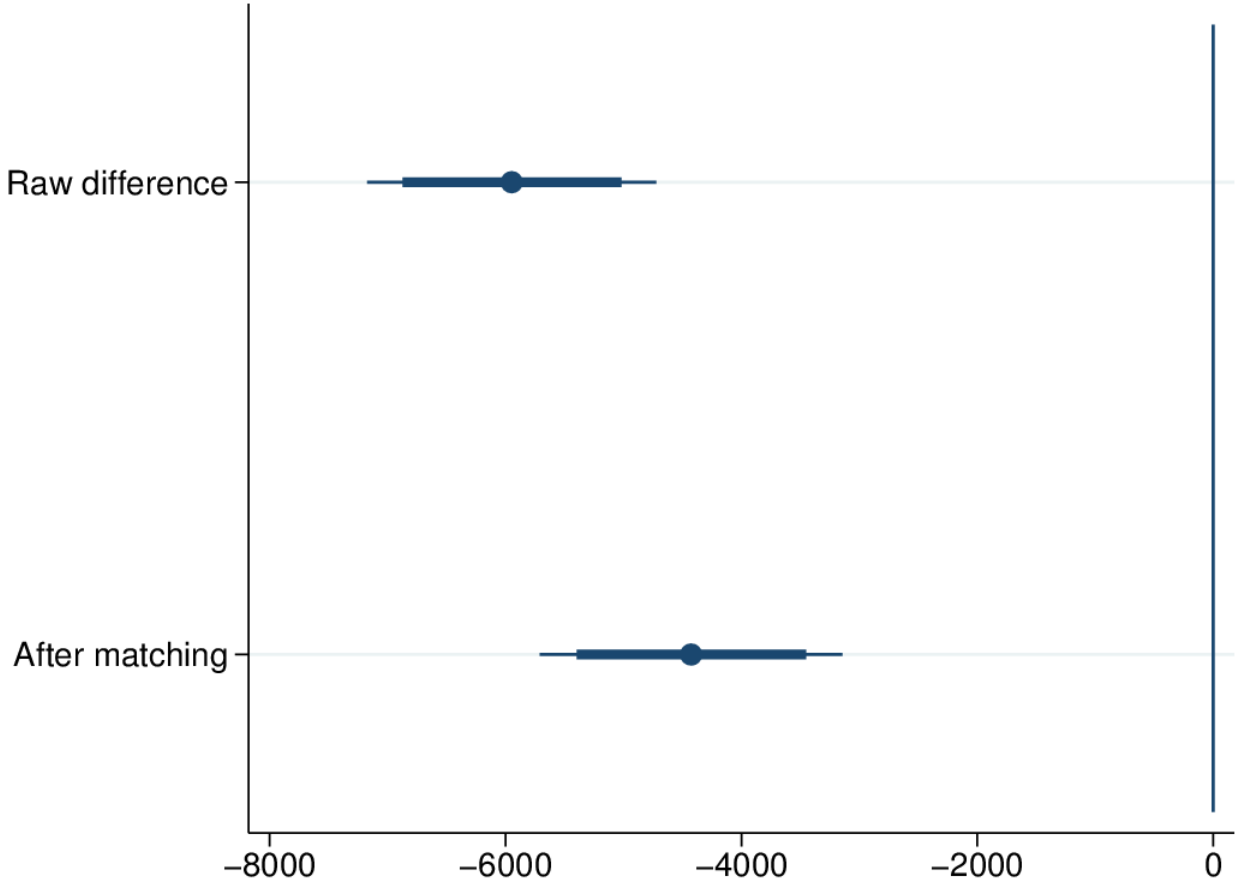
Family Wellbeing: Income



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Socioeconomic differences (%)

	Two-parents:		One-parent:	
PCG	**Married**	**Cohabiting**	**Never-married**	**S/D/W**
Mean Age	40.5	35.4	33.9	40.1
Degree or high	27.9	14.3	16.5	24.0
Not religious	6.0	17.2	17.73	9.59
Foreign born	15.8	17.7	14.2	21.8
Smoked	10.0	25.1	28.9	21.0
Alcohol	39.4	39.1	35	35.9
Study Child				
Birth weight kg	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.3
Breastfed	53.5	35.7	34.7	50.3
Parent Prison	0.2	1.4	4.2	1.4
First Born	39.2	56.7	70.9	36.5

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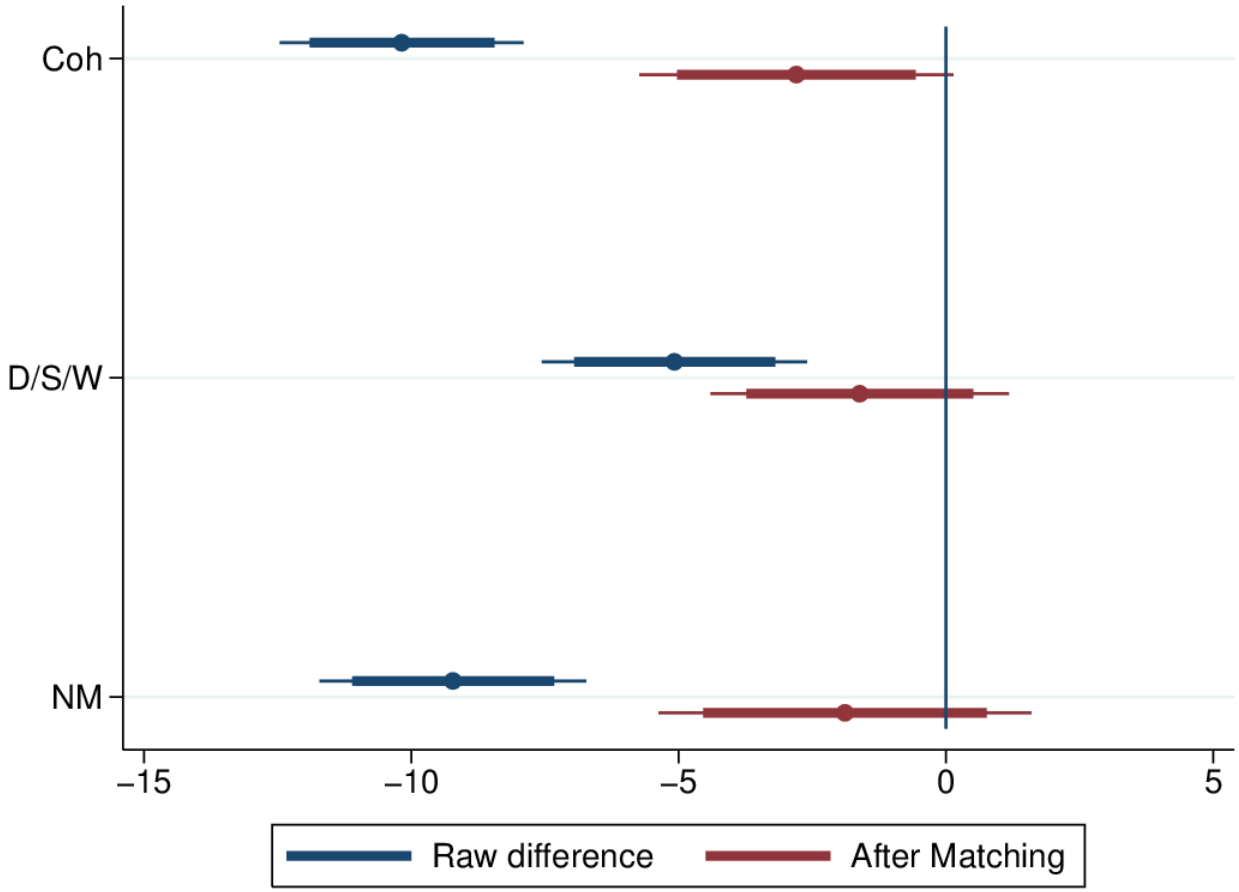
Drumcondra Reading (PCT)



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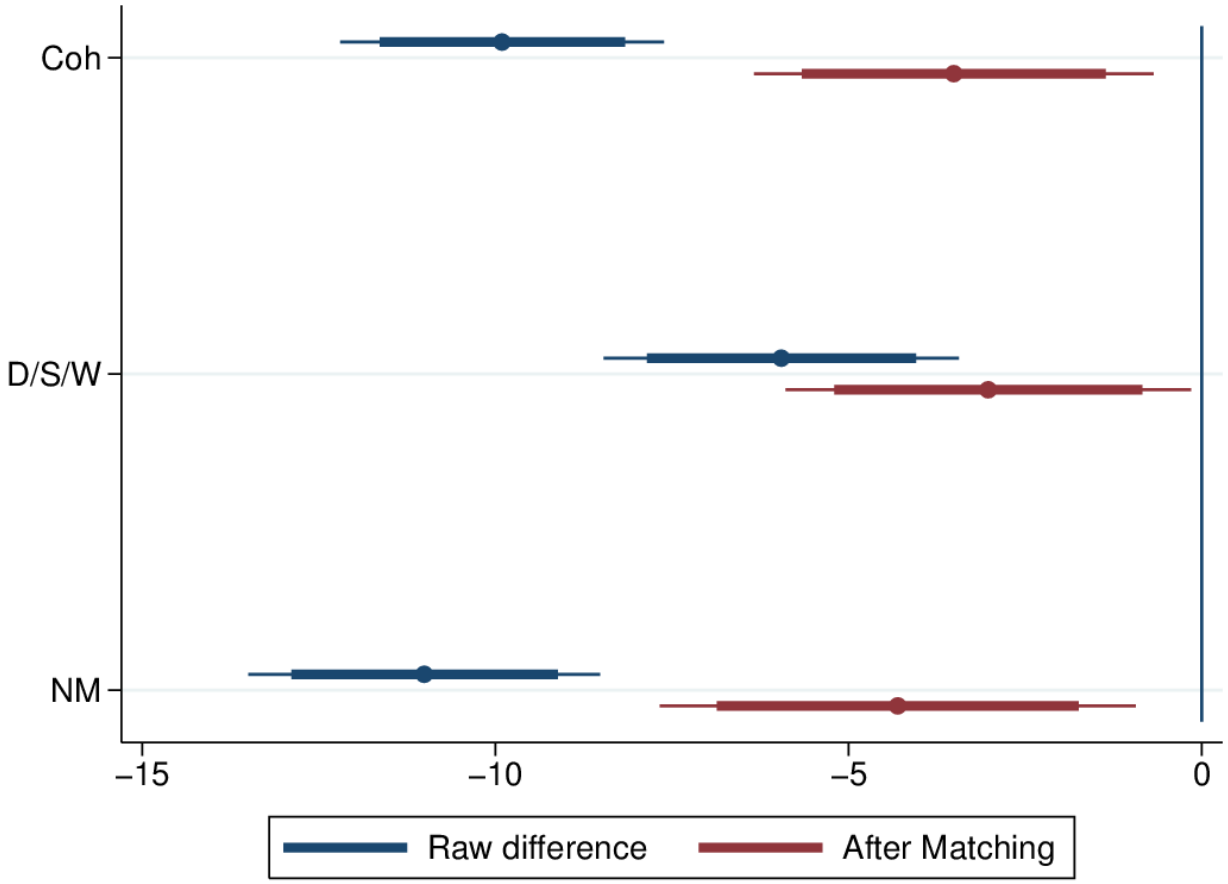
Drumcondra Maths (PCT)



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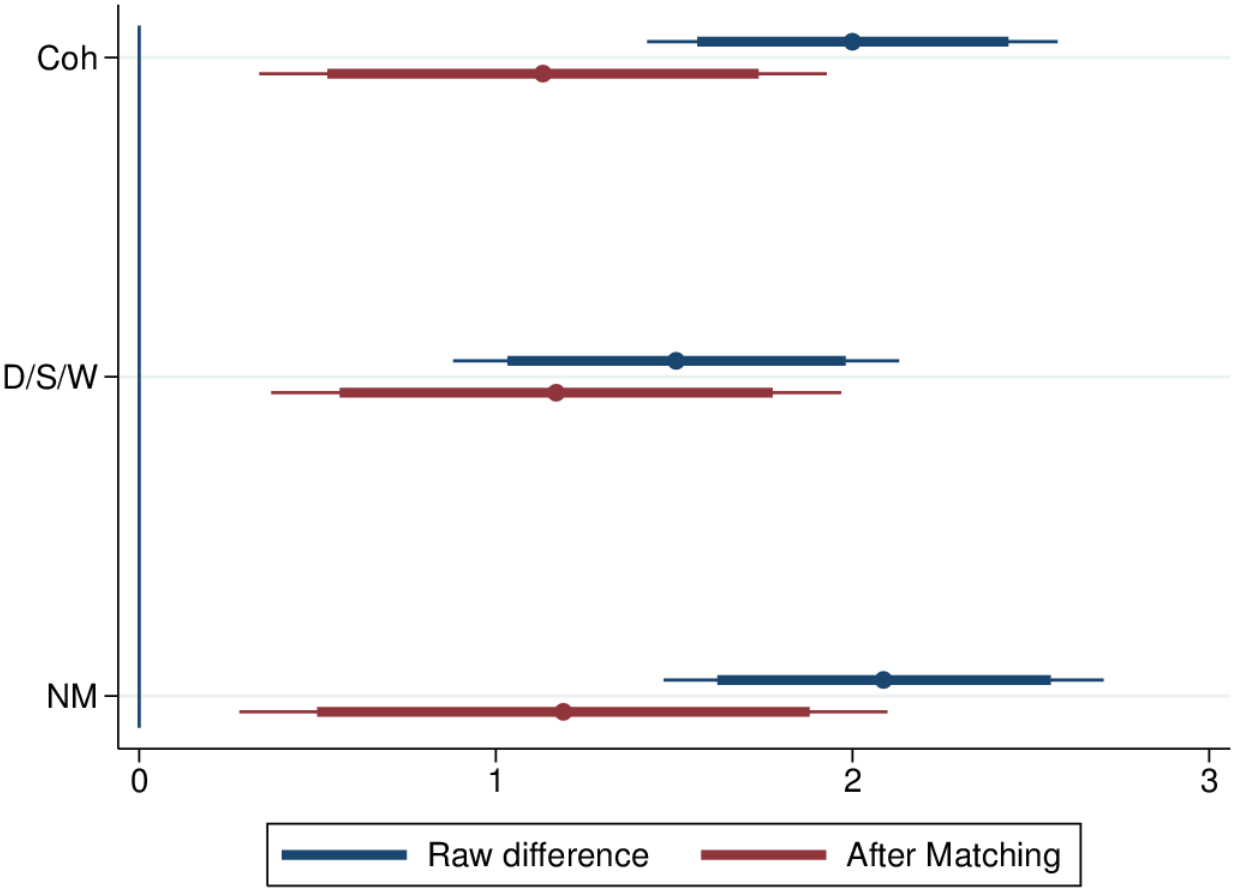
Number days missing from School



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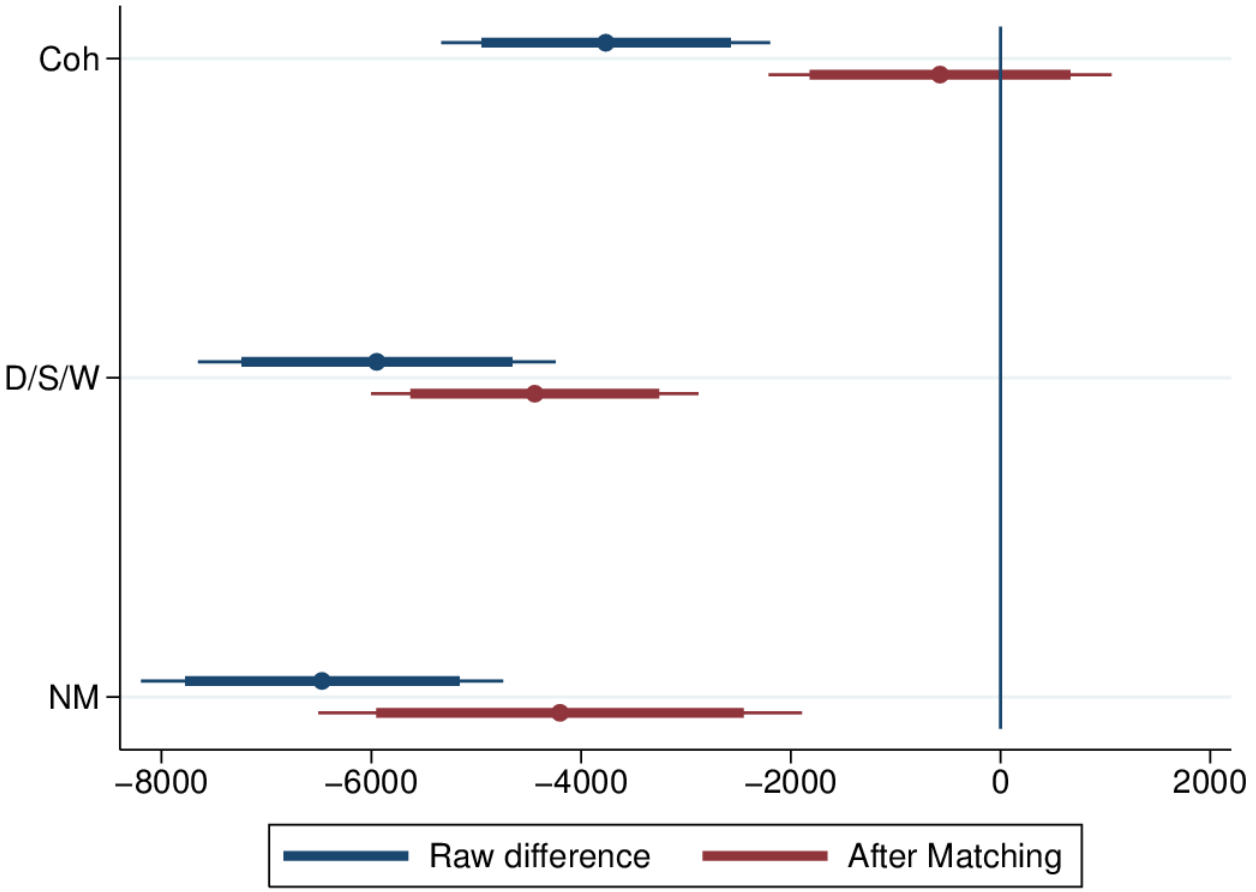
Family Wellbeing: Income



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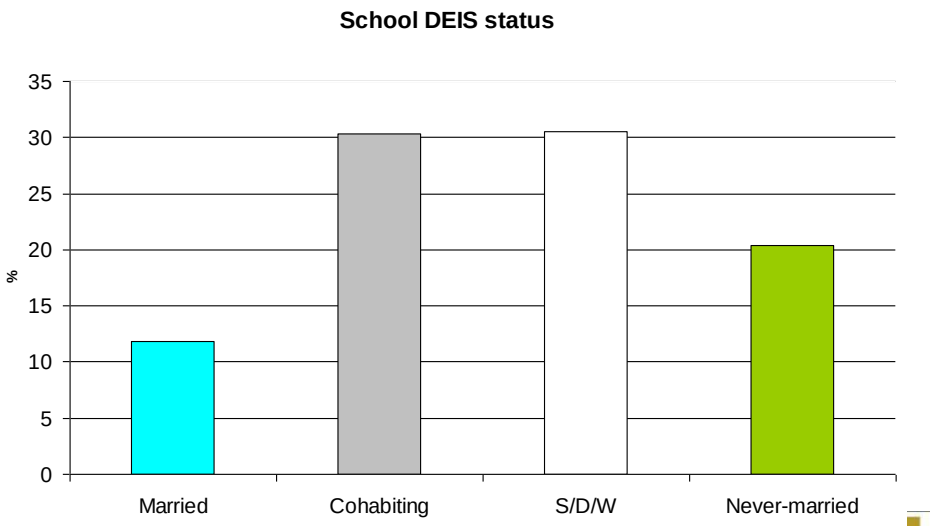
Limitations

School Sampling

- Just over 25% of 9 year olds from one-parent families go to a disadvantaged school compared to 13% in two-parent families.



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Controlling for School Effects

Previous estimates are unbiased but inefficient

Children with cohabiting parents:

Although there are no significant income differences between married versus cohabiting couples once we take account of selection bias and school effects, there are significant differences in children's score and school attendance.

Children who have experience marital breakdown or death of a parent:

Children from these one-parent families perform significantly worse in maths tests but not reading tests (borderline) and have significantly lower rates of school attendance.

Children from never-married one-parent families:

Taking account of school effects, we find significant differences in reading and maths scores, and schools attendance rates are lower for this group when compared to children in a married parental setting.

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Conclusions

- Basic comparisons of child outcomes across one versus two-parent families are misleading.
- Yes, differences in children's development are evident, but once we control for selection bias the size of the effect was reduced.
- There is a complex interplay of factors at work which the data allow us to explore e.g. the interplay between lone-parenthood, poverty, deprived neighbourhoods and school selection.

- This represents a benchmarking exercise as the true potential of the data will be realised once these children are followed over time.
- In terms of PSM, the benefits of the approach were not fulfilled given the limited number of confounding variables available at this stage.

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