


ARTICLE

# The Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown Policies on Young Fathers: Comparative Insights from the UK and Sweden

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This article explores the impacts of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown policies on young fathers and their families. We present analyses from a larger programme of qualitative longitudinal research examining young fatherhood in the UK and Sweden to develop a unique international comparative and empirical contribution. The views and experiences of young fathers are examined in the context of two ostensibly different policy approaches during the pandemic. Organised thematically to enable comparison, our findings demonstrate myriad impacts, illustrating heightened precarity in young fathers' transitions into and through fatherhood linked to restrictions on their engagement and changes to their education and employment trajectories and relational contexts, especially in the UK. We observe how differences in policy approaches before and during the first wave of the pandemic shaped the experiences of young fathers in the respective countries.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; international comparative research; Sweden; UK; young fatherhood

## Introduction

This article develops comparative analyses of the experiences of young fathers in the UK and Sweden during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It considers the implications of the lockdown policies and the ways in which changes to the provision of welfare, both through family and formal support contexts, impacted on their parenting during the crisis. Existing evidence in the UK suggests that even before the pandemic, the experiences of young fathers were shaped by pre-existing structural and socioeconomic conditions that meant they were more likely to be experiencing disrupted parenting pathways, deprivation, and stigma (Neale, 2016; Donald *et al.*, 2022). Empirical consideration of the experiences of young fathers in Sweden is less established, although Wissö's (2019) study of the timing of young parenthood, in the context of Sweden's family policy system, highlights an expectation and preference that parenthood is timed ideally after individuals have become established in the labour market.

In this article, we extend a burgeoning evidence base addressing the marginalisation of young fathers<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Neale, 2016; Tarrant *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b, 2022; Andreasson *et al.*, 2022; Donald *et al.*, 2022), by exploring the impacts of the early months of the pandemic in context of the two different policy approaches of the UK and Sweden, both in terms of lockdowns and welfare and family policy. In so doing, we contribute to broader debates about the problematisation and governance of young parenthood in different welfare and policy contexts (Duncan, 2010; Andreasson *et al.*,

2022). We explore the dynamic and complex relationship between young fatherhood, family life and policy systems in real time and in the context of a period of major global, socio-historical upheaval and policy change. Organised thematically, our analyses demonstrate how formal and informal support systems for young fathers changed and impacted at key moments in their parenting transitions and journeys. The young fathers in both countries reflected on the adaptations they were required to make as they balanced unanticipated, policy enforced childcare at home, alongside their employment and/or education responsibilities. Our comparative analyses suggest that the existing precarity of young fathers in the UK was heightened in the first wave of the pandemic, in which the mandatory policies and control measures exacerbated problems with an already inadequate system of welfare support. The existing family and gender focused policy of Sweden meant that the young fathers were better equipped and supported to adapt.

### The COVID-19 pandemic, young fatherhood, and disadvantage

Rapid research conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has established its variable and unequal impacts on families and parents across the globe (e.g. Fairclough *et al.*, 2020; Garthwaite *et al.*, 2022), highlighting the exacerbation of existing inequalities along traditional lines of disadvantage including ethnicity, gender, and age. Evidence suggests that while ethnic minorities, men and older people suffered disproportionate adverse physical health effects from the virus, women and younger people experienced impacts on their mental health, employment (present and future) and isolation (Katikireddi *et al.*, 2021). Impacts on the everyday lives, opportunities, and future orientations of young people have also been reported (Henkens *et al.*, 2022; Torbenfeldt Bengtsson *et al.*, 2021), as well as the uneven effects for low-income families. Research in the UK and Sweden has highlighted deepening social inequalities linked to policy and welfare related changes that have pushed more families into financial crisis and impacted on mental health (e.g. Bergnehr *et al.*, 2021; Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021; Garthwaite *et al.*, 2022).

The pandemic has also given rise to renewed questions about the extent to which gendered inequalities have intensified, particularly for women (e.g. Fisher and Ryan, 2021) or, indeed, whether the crisis is an opportunity to catalyse progress towards gender equality by supporting and increasing men's involvements in fatherhood, caregiving, and domestic labour (Fatherhood Institute, 2020; Barker *et al.* 2021; Wojnicka, 2022). Even prior to the pandemic, the international, contemporary fathering landscape was complex, characterised by greater diversity in fathering practices, the practice of family relationships across households, and rapid accompanying cultural, social, and legislative shifts in support of involved fatherhood (Dermott and Miller, 2015; Meah and Jackson, 2016). Yet while well established as a cultural imperative across many major Western countries, achieving engaged fatherhood, or at least being perceived as aligning with the perception of being an engaged or involved father who is nurturing and caring, is often more challenging for those whose identities are shaped by intersecting inequalities due to class, age, and ethnicity.

For disadvantaged young men who become a parent at a young age, achieving and maintaining engaged fatherhood is not an impossibility but it can be difficult to sustain in societies where young parenthood is problematised in policy (Duncan, 2010) and young parents are subject to stigma and rendered responsible for their own poverty and well-being (Neale *et al.*, 2015; Donald *et al.*, 2022). Young fathers' transitions to, and experiences of, fatherhood in the UK are therefore often misrepresented in context of cultural discourses of engaged fatherhood. While there are variations in how young parenthood is framed and enacted in different international contexts, our comparative analyses of young fatherhood suggest that young fathers express a shared commitment to 'be there' for their children regardless of the different policy and structural barriers that they may need to navigate to do so (Andreasson *et al.*, 2022). However, they may find it harder to fulfil their obligations where welfare systems are conditional and/or increase disadvantage for young fathers.

While advances in the qualitative evidence base about young fathers in the UK (Neale *et al.*, 2015; Lau Clayton, 2016; Tarrant, 2021) have not been matched to quite the same extent in other international contexts, including Sweden (although see Wissö, 2019; Reinicke, 2021, (in Denmark); Andreasson *et al.*, 2022), our ongoing empirical research finds that young parenthood is less problematised in policy agendas in Sweden than it is in the UK given differences in welfare provisions for families and young people (Andreasson *et al.*, 2022). As we argue elsewhere, and noted in a wider body of scholarship (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kaufman, 2018), the welfare and family policy systems of the UK and Sweden already differed markedly before the pandemic. Where Sweden's 'dual-earner, dual-carer family policy' (Björnberg, cited in Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021) approach embeds effective state support for working parents through a combination of paid parental leave, accessible public childcare, and paid leave to support care for sick children (Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021), the UK welfare system represents a cluster of countries that adhere to the twin ideologies of reduced government and neoliberalism and individual responsibility/freedom. These differences have implications for young fatherhood, both in terms of the framing of young parenthood and the extent to which young parents can secure the resources they need to support their families (Andreasson *et al.*, 2022).

While the responses of the UK and Swedish governments to the COVID-19 pandemic differed over time, these countries have reportedly had among the worst per-capita COVID-19 mortality rates in Europe (Mishra *et al.*, 2021). Where the UK government first imposed a national lockdown with mandatory measures in March 2020, that placed stringent restrictions on its citizens<sup>2</sup>, Sweden's early policies represented a more *laissez-faire* approach, relying predominantly on individual responsibility, voluntary compliance with government rules, information sharing and an expectation of trust in authorities (Bylund and Packard, 2021; Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021). This placed it 'on the periphery of the global spotlight' (Lindelle, 2021: 75).

In this article, we demonstrate how the differences in the family and welfare policy systems of these countries, both prior to and during the first wave of the pandemic, provide fertile ground for a renewed appraisal of young fathers' transitions into and through parenthood, and their everyday practices, family relationships and institutional engagements, which were subject to change and contestation at a time of global crisis, socioeconomic upheaval and policy change.

### The Following Young Fathers Further study

The findings that are analysed and presented in this article were generated for the first wave of an extended, UK-based, qualitative longitudinal (QL) and multi-strand programme of research, examining the parenting journeys and support needs of young fathers. One of these strands is an international comparative and empirical study of young fatherhood in the UK and Sweden. Following Young Fathers Further (Tarrant, 2020-24, grant ref: MR/S031723/1) commenced just three months before the first lockdown in the UK in March 2020. The study design had therefore already been established and the research team both in the UK and Sweden were preparing to conduct fieldwork.

The interviews were conducted synchronously in the UK and Sweden and included additional questions about the pandemic and policy responses alongside the themes we already intended to explore, albeit with explicit attention to the impacts of the major economic, social and policy shifts wrought by the pandemic, as they unfolded. These questions were designed to elicit the young fathers' views on the approaches taken by their respective governments, in addition to the more immediate impacts of the pandemic on their family and intimate relationships, their education, training and employment journeys, their finances and experiences of welfare, their parenting and childcare arrangements, and their housing trajectories.

The sample of thirty-two comprised twenty-two cases of young fathers in the UK and ten in Sweden. The majority of the interviews in both countries were conducted in the summer of 2020

towards the end of the first UK lockdown. Aged between fifteen and thirty years old and with children whose ages ranged from newborn to fourteen, all participants became a father or experienced a first pregnancy before the age of twenty-five. The extended age range of the sample reflects that some of the UK fathers were older when interviewed. The overall study design includes a strand where we re-accessed a sample of young fathers who had participated in a linked, baseline study (Following Young Fathers, Neale *et al.*, 2012–2015). The young fathers in both countries had a variety of parenting arrangements including those who were cohabiting and sharing parenting, to non-resident fathers who lived in different households and at a distance from their children. The socioeconomic status of the participants also varied within and across the sample and countries. This was predominantly linked to their relationship with the labour market, hours they were working and job security. In the UK sample, seven were employed full-time, of whom two were working from home. Two were working part-time, twelve were not in employment, education, or training (or NEET), and one had a zero-hour contract. At the time of interview, four had been furloughed and one lost his job when the business he was working for went into administration. In Sweden, two were working full time, three had part time work and the remainder were engaging in some form of education or training.

Via a thematic, comparative analysis, we interrogate the impact of these differences in individual circumstances and experiences, in context of the different policy approaches adopted by the UK and Sweden. The effects of these changes and their attendant outcomes were in evidence in their discussions of their transitions into parenthood and reflections on how they navigated their altered responsibilities for employment and childcare, as we explore in the following sections.

### ***Expectant young fathers: transitions to parenthood***

During the first UK lockdown, restrictions were introduced that resulted in the exclusion of expectant fathers and fathers-to-be from ante-natal and health services. These restrictions were imposed to reduce the transmission of the virus but also exemplified what Menzel (2022) describes as a complex ‘welfare trade off’, that resulted in a retreat to traditional gendered parenting roles and men’s exclusion at a key moment in their transition to parenthood. Research conducted prior to the pandemic advocates for greater engagement with fathers via father-specific support as early in the transition to parenthood as possible (Cundy, 2016, Williams, 2020). Yet the pandemic saw the rollback of father-inclusive approaches.

In our study, there were examples where health professionals made clear efforts to involve fathers, albeit as observers rather than participants in the birth of their children (Menzel, 2022). In two cases, the young fathers watched the birth of their children on their phone, which was by no means a replacement for being present to bond with their babies and support their partners. The implications of being excluded from health settings also had a longer reach and affected planning for birth. Liam reported his distress about the lack of clarity, for example, which compounded his concerns about the accessibility of transport. His financial circumstances were also uncertain because of welfare payment changes during the pandemic:

I’m stuck at the minute, I’m not gonna lie cause obviously she’s due again in October and she’s going to the hospital. And obviously we can’t get a bus if she’s gone into labour and we cannae really get a taxi. So obviously I’ve gotta call them but because we’re not, because a’ quarantine we’re having to spend more money on like electric bills and food and that. We’re not left with enough money to pay for me insurance on the car or anything like that really. So we are in a sticky spot there cause obviously if we don’t get the insurance then I can’t take her to the hospital . . . . So everything’s been changed when it’s come to payments, we don’t get enough to last. Even before the quarantine it was still a bit tricky managing your money as it was especially since we’re getting paid monthly cause we’ve gotta try and plan it all out for the month (Liam, aged twenty-one, UK).

While official guidance was later issued in support of the attendance of asymptomatic fathers during labour and birth (Fatherhood Institute, 2021), for young fathers, reduced engagement with healthcare professionals exacerbated their invisibility as parents at a critical time. Developing a critique of how men were absented from health spaces, Menzies (2021) has argued that engaging fathers must remain an essential goal for all health and social care services in the emerging post-pandemic context.

As in the UK, there was also a lack of clarity in the Swedish context. Though most Swedish hospitals did not allow visits in general, fathers were usually excepted from such restrictions. However, the restrictions in Sweden were not universal and changed depending on regional policies implemented to manage the virus. In some hospitals fathers were only allowed to partake virtually, whereas in others they could attend and even spend the night at the hospital with the mother and newborn child. This variability, where general guidelines provided by the Public Health Agency of Sweden were turned into regional policy responses, created a lack of clarity concerning fathers' right to attend during labour and birth (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2021). Johan, for example, was nervous about becoming a father and unclear about whether or not he would be allowed to attend the birth:

I've heard lots of different stories when it comes to the delivery for the dad, when it comes to corona. So, I've been like 'am I even going to be able to be part of it? Am I not going to be able to be a part?' . . . am I going to be sent out?, and am I not going to be able to stay at the hospital, and stuff like that. But it was actually . . . considerably calm, I have to say, it was . . . - they didn't care at all. They didn't even ask anything about it. I got to sleep over without a problem. They even let me go out of the hospital and buy like, warm food and bring it back to the hospital (Johan, aged twenty, Sweden).

Though there were some restrictions in hospital care during delivery, in terms of families staying in their own rooms, largely the care system was still a sustainable support for the young fathers in Sweden and fathers were not relegated as observers in the same way as they were in the UK reflecting a broader commitment to seeing men as parents in Sweden.

Looking more broadly across the parenting trajectories of the participants in both countries, it was further apparent that access to childcare was more challenging in both countries, particularly for those with more precarious employment circumstances, which we explore next.

### ***Employment trajectories and childcare***

Despite shifting gendered ideologies around parenthood the ability to provide financially and materially for children remains an imperative for young men, including for young fathers (Neale and Davies, 2016). The pandemic made it increasingly difficult for the young fathers to fulfil these imperatives, engendering radical changes in the education and employment trajectories of the young men in both countries. The British fathers, and less so the Swedish fathers, described a patchwork of employment circumstances, some of which suggested a downward trajectory in employment fortunes linked directly to the new socio-economic conditions wrought by the pandemic. In some cases, this increased pre-existing precarity, especially for those with zero-hour or agency work. Across the sample there was a mix of home-based working, furlough, and unemployment. Some were classified as key workers (typically stratified in relation to the age of participants, whereby the older fathers were more financially secure) and some were made unemployed. Here Raymond, describes the challenges of trying to navigate the pressures of balancing childcare with the two zero-hour contracts held by him and his partner:

I was supposed to start work at 5pm today. So I can no longer do that so I've had to give [partner] my shift. And then whatever she gets taxed she's gonna have to pay me, me my shift

in cash kinda thing . . . either way there's no winning. I can't win with this at all kinda thing. And then when I work she's gonna have to be home. I'm gonna have to cancel one of my shifts in the week and she's gonna have to cancel two of hers and give them away. So . . . there's nothing really we can do. And this whole furlough business stops on the 31st of October 2020 which doesn't help . . . it's just when like we have to give up our shift at the end of the week only because like this whole COVID thing, we're not getting paid for it at all. Do you know what I mean? We give that up, our hours get reduced. And then we're below contracted hours and then we're in trouble kind of thing . . . as much as we try, we have to take each day at a time. We can't, we just can't do it kind of thing (Raymond, UK, aged twenty-six).

The financial precarity associated with zero-hour contracts increased markedly making it very difficult to negotiate childcare and paid employment, especially without the safety net of adequate social security (Tarrant *et al.*, 2020b).

Sweden's approach as regards restrictions and incentives was not initially as comprehensive as in the UK. In the Spring of 2020 (and onwards), schools and pre-schools remained open (which was unusual compared to other countries), as did restaurants and shops, though with some restrictions to opening hours and number of people allowed in different premises based on their size. Like many other countries in Europe that locked down in 2020, including the UK, Sweden was less unusual in that employers suggested that people should work from home. Most universities also went into distance mode (as they did in the UK) in the spring of 2020 and did not restart campus teaching until the autumn of 2021. Here, student Claes describes how the pandemic impacted on his and his family's daily life:

they had to say yes to study from home like, and then [partners] boss said in conjunction with that to not come into the office and take your work computers home and work from home. So, in spring we got like from, from nothing to almost every hour of the day that we got to work together, and there was one period that was a bit tricky because our son had a cold . . . we didn't want to take him to preschool and they didn't want to have him there, but at the same time neither of us wanted to take VAB<sup>3</sup>, because I didn't want to fall behind in my studies and [partner] didn't want for us to earn less . . . so, we tried to puzzle it together at home. We took it in turns with him, and he thought that was really boring, of course. But it still went well and it . . . for the most part it was really nice, because you got a lot of time together as a family (Claes, aged twenty-five, Sweden).

For Claes and his family, the practicalities around work and studies characterised a more gradual change during the pandemic and were not considered overly challenging or demanding. The pandemic did not significantly impact their financial situation, although the increased awareness of corona-related symptoms involved some extra days in which their son had to stay at home from preschool. Where childcare restrictions were imposed on UK families with much greater potential to impact on the ability of young fathers to meet their obligations to employers, in Sweden, restrictions were limited to when children or parents were ill themselves. None of the UK young fathers were in higher education and those who were employed in precarious or low-paid work were disadvantaged the most by requirements to juggle work and childcare. For those in the UK who had well established, secure employment, this acted as a protective factor.

Dependent on their employment circumstances, some of the Swedish fathers were also more severely affected and described greater instability, demonstrating the unequal impacts on young fathers in both contexts. Like some of the UK young fathers, Jesper and Carl were more disadvantaged by their precarious employment circumstances:

I'm self-employed, so we were very affected by it. As a carpenter, I had four jobs going . . . and all of them disappeared . . . or we had two jobs going and two lined up, all those disappeared in one week. So, it became a bit . . . complicated (Jesper, aged twenty-five, Sweden).

Jobs have closed, especially those that are looking for jobs, especially for me or others, that are like young dads or that have children, that got made redundant, that need work, that can't live on a small number of benefits, because they have maybe two, three, four children. That's things that must come out in society because then the job knows 'okay, now we can, now we can employ more, now we can like come back to the same level we were before'. It's things that are needed (Carl, aged twenty-two, Sweden).

The Swedish state implemented rather comprehensive economic support systems and incentives to keep different key and strategic businesses running, such as health care, policy, energy supply, communications, food supply systems and more. This support, though broadened to include smaller business in 2021, was not accessible to all, and many small businesses and the self-employed were heavily affected by the pandemic. These findings suggest that even despite the different policy approaches of each country, the pandemic increased the precarity and employment instability of young fathers in both countries, especially for those already in precarious economic circumstances. However, the more stringent policy approach of the UK compared to Sweden, compounded by inadequate access to employment and welfare support, reflected a more concerning picture.

### **Relational and socio-spatial change**

Evidence suggests that pandemic policies including the lockdowns, enforced social distancing and closures had severe impacts on people's mental health, particularly parents and families (Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, and the Parent–Infant Foundation, 2020; Menzies, 2021). Our comparative analyses illustrate inequalities in how policy measures because of the pandemic were experienced both in the UK and Sweden. In the UK, where lockdowns were more stringently enforced, impacts on mental health, loneliness and isolation were acutely felt, including by low-income families (Garthwaite *et al.*, 2022) and the young fathers who participated in this study. At a time when welfare support was either inadequate, inaccessible or withdrawn altogether (Tarrant *et al.*, 2022), formal social and relational support networks simultaneously shrank, and families and communities played a more significant role in the distribution of material and emotional resources (Tarrant *et al.*, 2020a). However, this too was constrained by pandemic policies which enforced social distancing. Even when the restrictions were relaxed for some towards the end of the first wave, the young fathers described taking personal responsibility, especially around decisions pertaining to managing the risks of spreading the virus (either to parents, relatives, or their own children). Despite having limited support from schools and families for childcare in the UK, in cases where the young fathers lived locally to their parents and families, grandparents and other relatives played a vital role in supporting young fathers to access resources such as nappies and milk for babies and food for the family (Tarrant *et al.*, 2020a). They also provided emotional support. This was reciprocal and the young fathers also actively supported family members. Overall, though, the social worlds of these young men shrank and became significantly smaller. Many described making a choice to maintain physical distance from family members and relatives to avoid the potential risks of spreading the virus. This isolated participants and their families to their homes and was additionally compounded by park closures and reduced access to green space. This was especially problematic for those living in deprived localities (e.g. Chapman and Phagoora, 2020), as Craig observes:

it has been getting really stressful cause the kids are moaning to go out to parks and that but the parks haven't been open for about three months. It has been a bit hard. It's been tough on

everyone in the house. So . . . [partner's] mental health, she's on anti-depressants now . . . all the kids had to go outside to play in the little garden that we've got. And then they wanted to go up to seeing grandparents and that and it were just like, 'well we can't just in case you catch summat' . . . We completely kept to ourselves unless it were like to go food shopping (Craig, aged twenty-eight, UK).

When asked if everyday life changed during the pandemic, Swedish young father Carl suggested that there were relative freedoms for parenting outside the home, enabled by the accessibility of green space. Use of parks and green space was restricted for extended periods of the lockdowns in the UK. Illustrative of the overall picture for the young fathers in Sweden, Carl describes a more relaxed approach both to intergenerational mixing and enjoying green space:

Everyday life, no (chuckles) if he [son] wants to go out then he goes out . . . comes with me to the supermarket, we were in [park]. We're in [park] quite often. We keep more distance, like it's not the case that I stand next to someone and look at the seals, rather I keep a bit more distance, try to avoid people that cough and sneeze. My dad has triple vessel disease, and he is quite old, if you think about it properly, then he's old. I mean that he's like seventy plus so he's in the risk zone, plus that he has a heart disease. / . . . / Like it hasn't stopped in any way how we have met, we still meet in the same way, and he still has lots of contact with [son], like it's not the case that he keeps his distance (laughs) it's like 'come here you' and then he messes around with him and so it's lots of fun (Carl, aged twenty-two, Sweden).

Craig and Carl's comments demonstrate significant differences in their views and experiences of the pandemic, reflecting the different policy responses of the two countries and the extent to which the strength of the restrictions impacted the social worlds of young fathers and their families. Where in Sweden, the young fathers felt relatively relaxed and enjoyed freedoms that resembled everyday life prior to the pandemic, albeit with some minor accommodations, the existing disadvantage experienced by young fathers in the UK was compounded. Restrictions on their choices and relational networks added to the challenges of being confined by their location in deprived areas, producing poorer mental health outcomes for some. Government responses also impacted upon the extent to which the young fathers considered the virus itself to be risky, affecting their interpretation and management of risk in the context of decisions around seeing family. Adding to the fact that the Swedish fathers could largely benefit from the support of day-care to continue their work and studies, several of the participants still received social support from parents. Marcus, for example, explained that he and his partner continued to spend time with their parents, albeit less frequently. However, familial support was not limited by lockdowns in the same way that it was in the UK, but rather by individual care for others, e.g. when someone was showing symptoms of a cold, as Phillip noted earlier. Participant perspectives on changes to family and relational support provide compelling evidence of the extent to which the policy approaches and welfare contexts of each country either compounded or mitigated against existing precarity experienced by young fathers and their families.

## Conclusion

Our comparative analyses of the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown policies in the UK and Sweden illustrate that the pandemic exacerbated existing precarity and disadvantage for young fathers in both countries, albeit to varying extents and dependent on individual circumstances. Through interrogation of their narratives of their parenting, employment, and education trajectories, and altered familial, socio-spatial, and relational contexts, it has been possible to develop a more complex picture of how, and why, young fathers experienced increased



instability and inequality and how this was shaped by the existing and new welfare and family policy conditions of the respective countries. The young fathers reflected on the adaptations they were required to make as they balanced unanticipated childcare in their home lives, alongside their employment and/or education responsibilities in a renewed context of familial, spatial, and personal interdependencies. A key finding is that the existing welfare, policy and employment contexts of both countries have proven to be significant, wherein the negative and challenging impacts of the pandemic were much more pronounced among disadvantaged young fathers in both countries, but more so in the UK where welfare provisions were already conditional and the mandatory restrictions were initially more stringent.

The health and social support contexts for both the UK and Sweden were also markedly different both before and during the first wave of the pandemic, so that while the Swedish welfare model increasingly reflects a neoliberal approach and shift towards welfare retrenchment (Norberg, 2021), the Swedish young fathers had a comparably stable experience, in which the perceived risks of the pandemic appeared less pronounced. The welfare support landscape of the UK has been shaped by over a decade of austerity, embedding the conditions for a disadvantaged experience of young parenthood prior to the pandemic (e.g. Tarrant, 2021). It was therefore less robust in supporting young fathers to weather the crisis. Where the Swedish young fathers reflected on the challenges of juggling childcare with education and/or employment and making personal decisions about whether and how to reduce the spread of the virus when family members displayed symptoms, the young fathers in the UK had more pressing concerns about navigating precarious employment with limited options for leave, challenges accessing food and nappies and more extreme constraints on their childcare options and use of leisure space.

Support and health services were also in crisis and were withdrawn as they adapted to the new conditions, with many young fathers experiencing reduced access to service support (Tarrant *et al.*, 2022). These services have a vital role in the UK (Neale and Davies, 2016) given gaps in welfare provision and problematic access to employment. By exploring the experiences of young fathers in both countries, from their transitions into parenthood and beyond, we were able to capture critical moments in their parenting journeys at a time where support is most beneficial but problematically lacking. While the Swedish young men reported limited clarity around access to hospitals and antenatal support, they were included and treated as active participants. In the UK, young fathers were often side-lined and treated as observers. We therefore discerned what happens when there are continued gaps in welfare and antenatal provision and how these became more apparent and problematic for young fathers against a backdrop of crisis. While the health of professionals must be protected, the Swedish approach demonstrated both the possibilities and importance of continued promotion of father involvement from pregnancy onwards and the need for father-inclusive and whole family interventions to avoid the longer-term exclusion of young fathers from parenthood.

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**Data access statement.** Data for the study will be archived in the Timescapes Archive, University of Leeds following the conclusion of the Following Young Fathers Further study in January 2024 and embargoed until January 2029.

## Notes

- 1 Defined in policy and research terms as young men who become a father or experience a first pregnancy aged twenty-five or under.
- 2 Except for medical visits, shopping for basic necessities, travelling to and from work where possible, and for one form of time limited exercise per day.
- 3 Paid leave of around 80 per cent of your wage from the social insurance agency to look after a sick child.

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