



**Life
Course
Centre**

Immigrant Health Assimilation and the Role of Disruptive Events

Rennie Lee and Janeen Baxter

The University of Queensland

Prepared for HILDA Conference, 2026



Introduction

- Nearly 30% of Australia's population is foreign-born
 - Immigrant health outcomes have direct relevance for policymakers and health practitioners
- Immigrants arrive with health advantage relative to native-borns
- The immigrant-native health gap narrows with age, but whether immigrants end up worse off remains unclear

Why Study Immigrant Health Assimilation?

- Existing scholarship emphasises:
 - Positive Selection (Antecol and Bedard 2006)
 - Integration stress (e.g., acculturation, discrimination) (Huang et al. 2023)
 - Unhealthy habits
- The “healthy immigrant paradox” remains unresolved
 - Immigrants arrive healthier but decline over time, with unclear long-term outcomes

Disruptive Events as an Explanation

- Disruptive life events are an underexplored pathway
 - E.g., Jobloss, loss of house, divorce
- Disruptive events alter health trajectories, with effects persisting for years (Lantz et al. 2005; Aquino et al. 2022; Leopold 2018; Loi et al. 2024)
 - Different effects of disruptive event by subgroup populations
- Response to disruptive event as a source of variation

Research Questions

What are the short and long-term effects of experiencing jobloss or housing arrears on health?

Does this differ by nativity and gender?

Disruptive Events and Immigrant Health

- Mixed results about whether immigrants are disadvantaged or advantaged
- Immigrants suffer more from adverse events in Germany (Leopold et al. 2017; Loi et al. 2024)
- Immigrants encounter survival (mortality) advantage in the US (Zheng and Yu 2021)

Immigrant Health in Australia

- Why might immigrant health look different in Australia?
- Universal health insurance
- Selection through immigration policy
 - 67% of immigrants enter through skilled program
 - Selection on human capital can positively influence health
- Australia's skilled migration screening and universal healthcare may buffer against negative effects (Spinks 2010; Clark & Isphording 2017)

Data and Sample

- Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) panel survey, 2001–2024
- Working-age individuals, 18–85 years old
- 111,865 observations from 7,682 households



Methodological Approach

Random-effects Linear Regression

- Account for within-individual change over time
- Estimate group-level differences by nativity and gender
- Capture short- and long-term effects

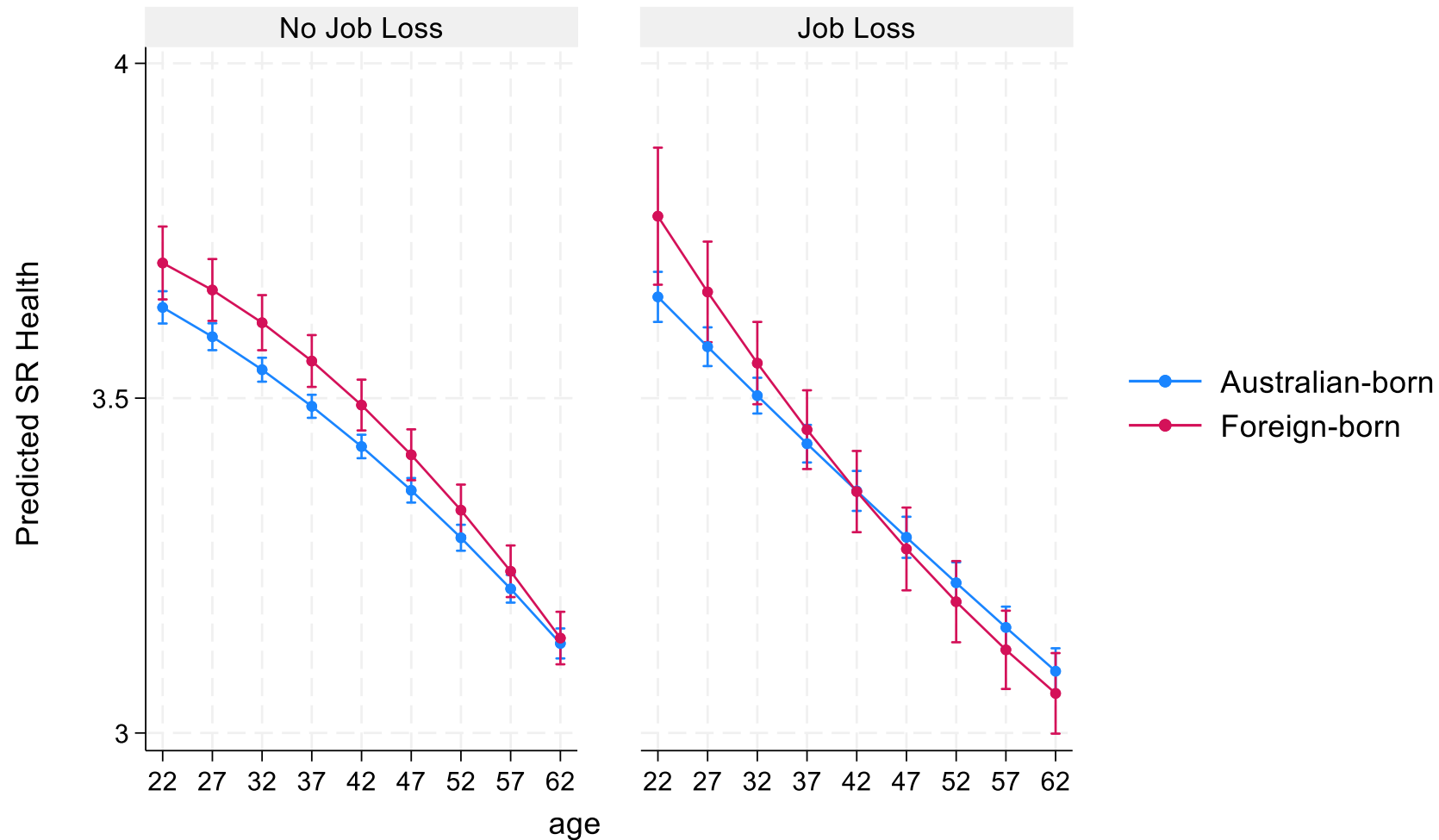
Outcome Variable: Self-Rated Health

- Captured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“poor”) to 5 (“excellent”)
- Higher score indicates greater self-rated health

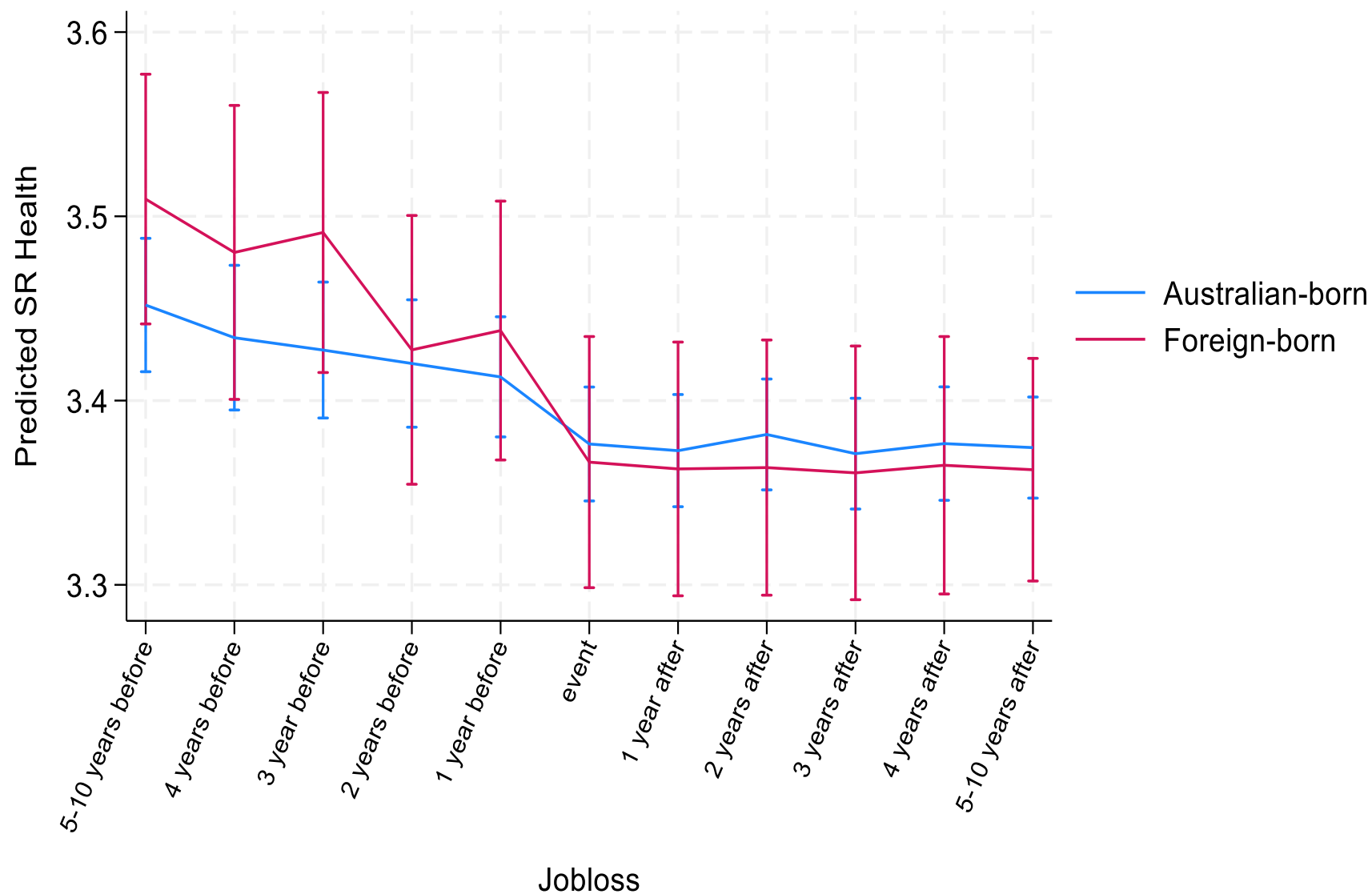
Independent Variables

- Key independent variables
 - Jobloss and housing arrears- whether an individual experienced each event
 - lagged variables capture up to 10 years before and 10 years after
- Control variables
 - Age, education, income, father's education, marital status, state, remoteness, and survey year

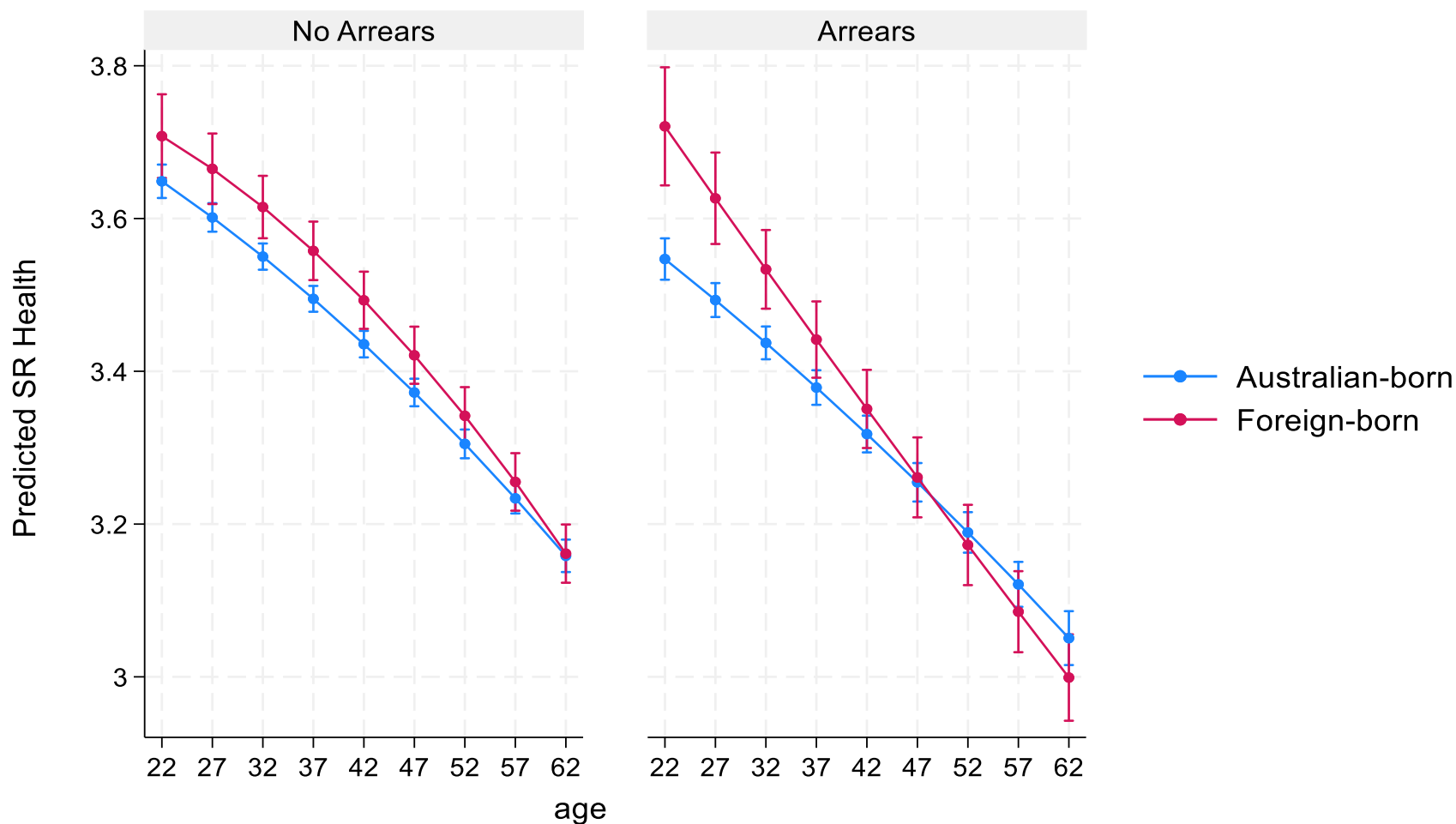
Health Trajectories by Age and Jobloss Experience, Women



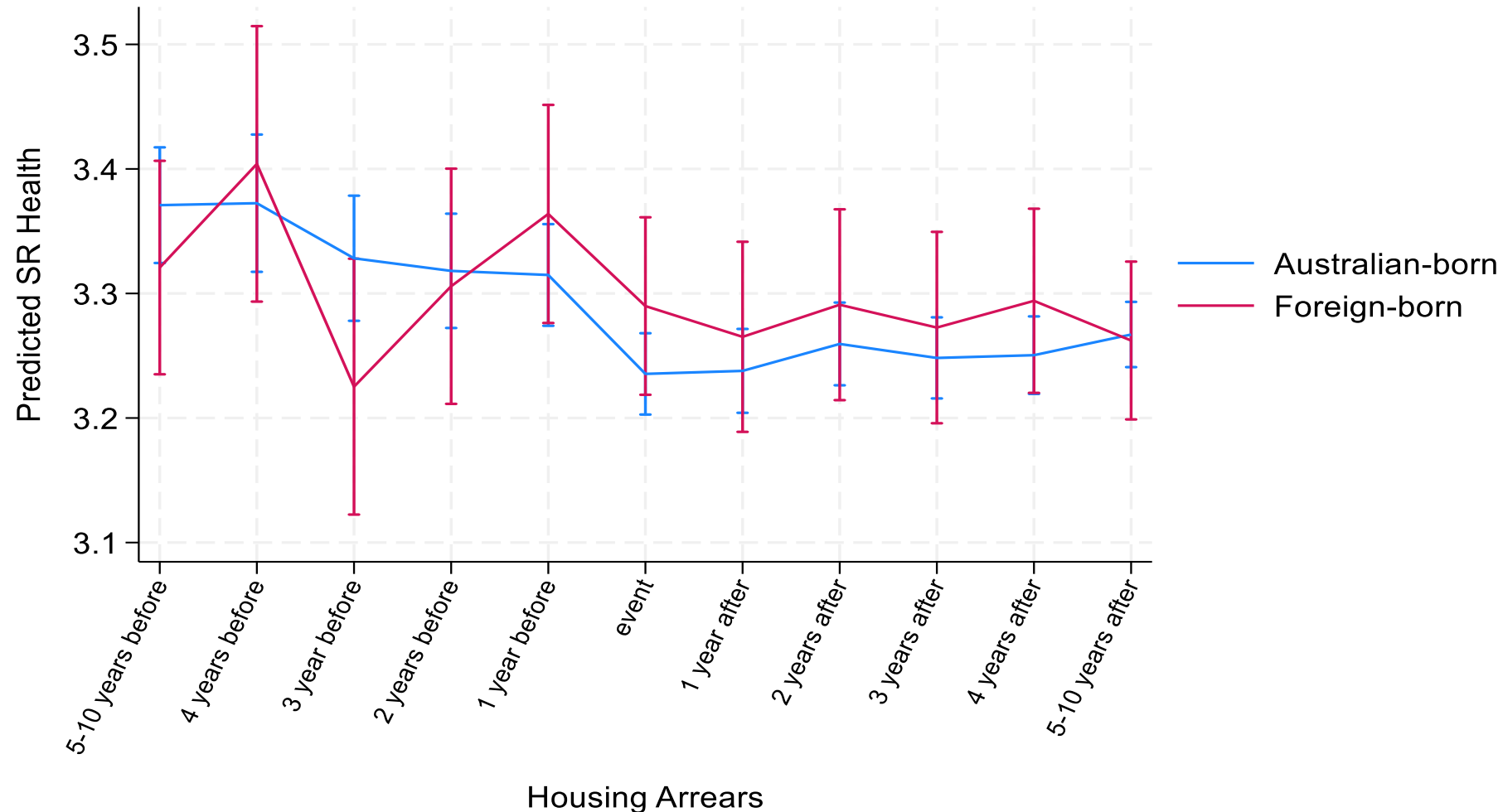
Effects of Jobloss on Predicted Health by Nativity, Women



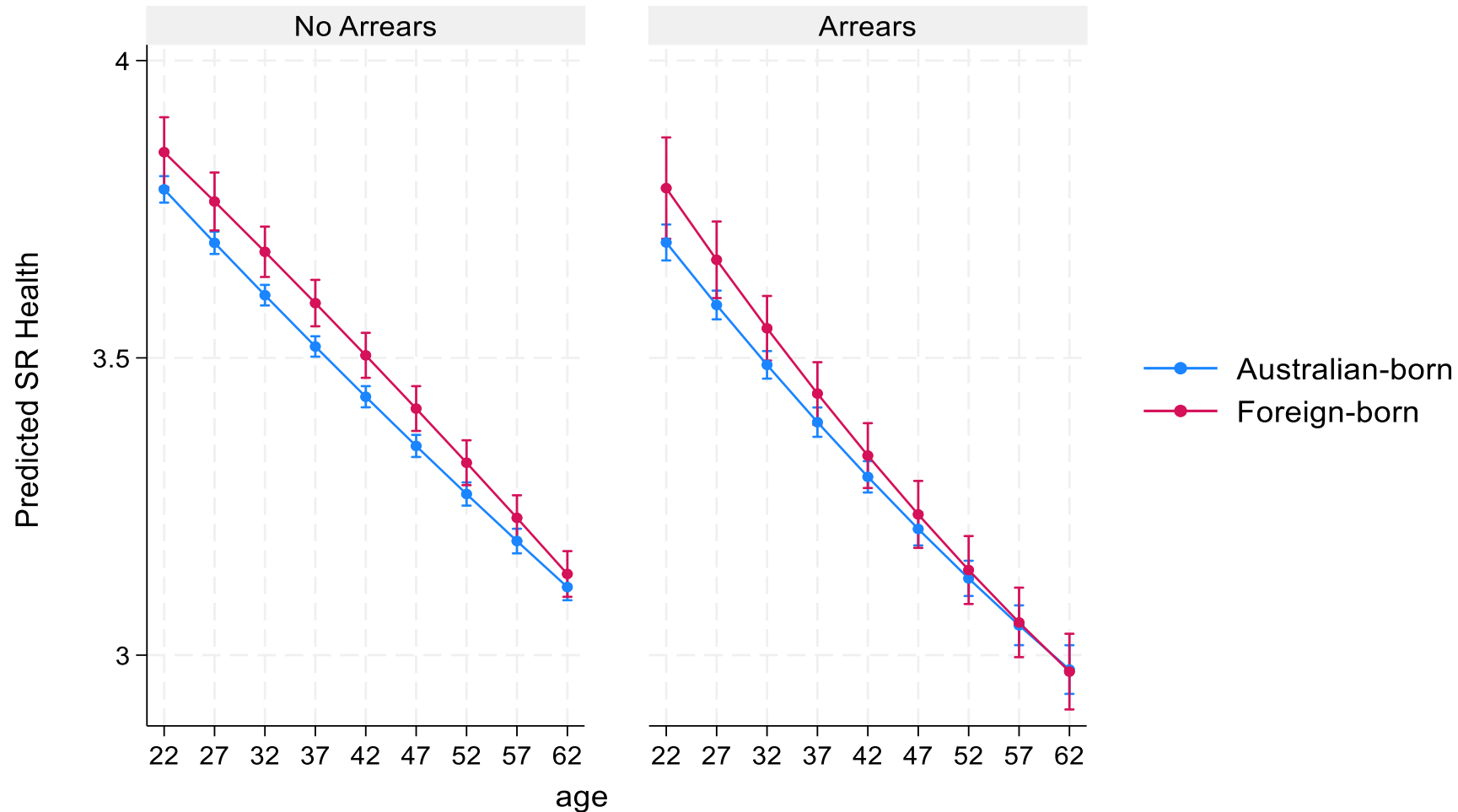
Health Trajectories by Housing Experience, Women



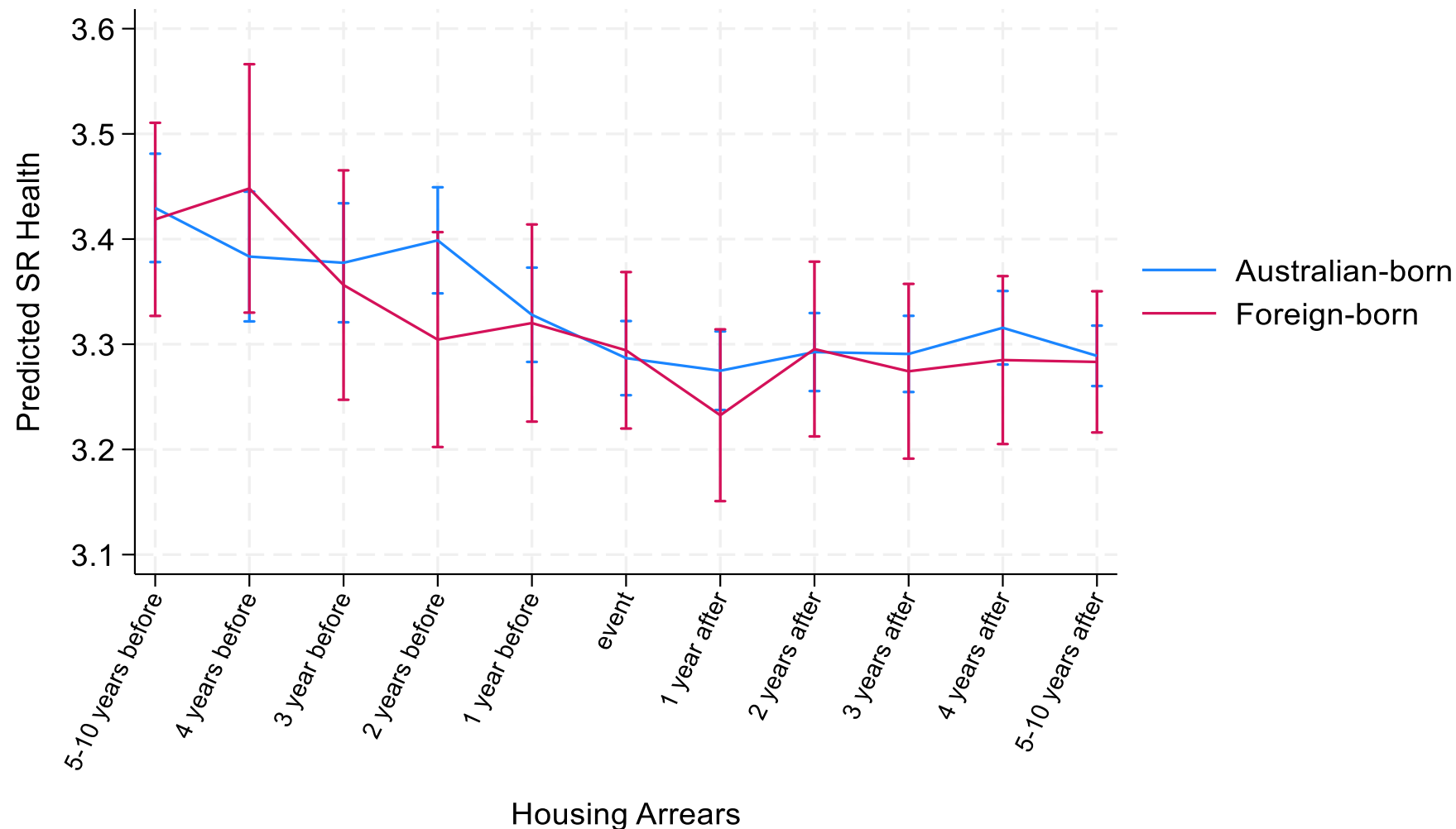
Effects of Housing Arrears on Predicted Health by nativity among women



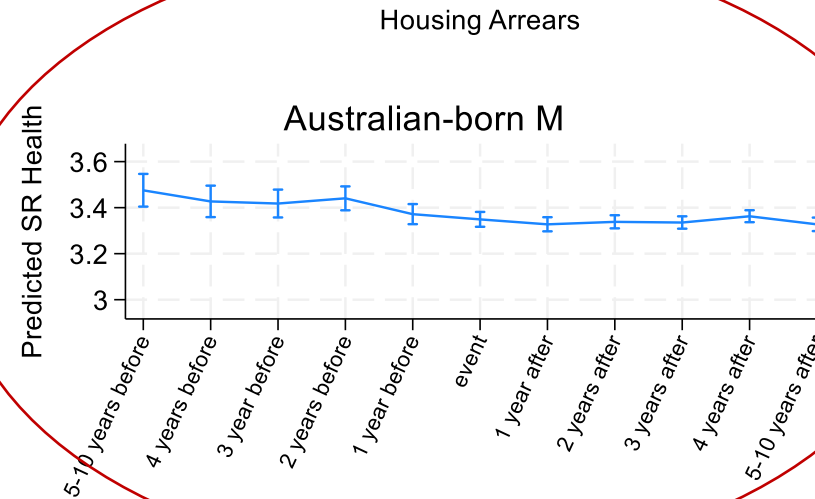
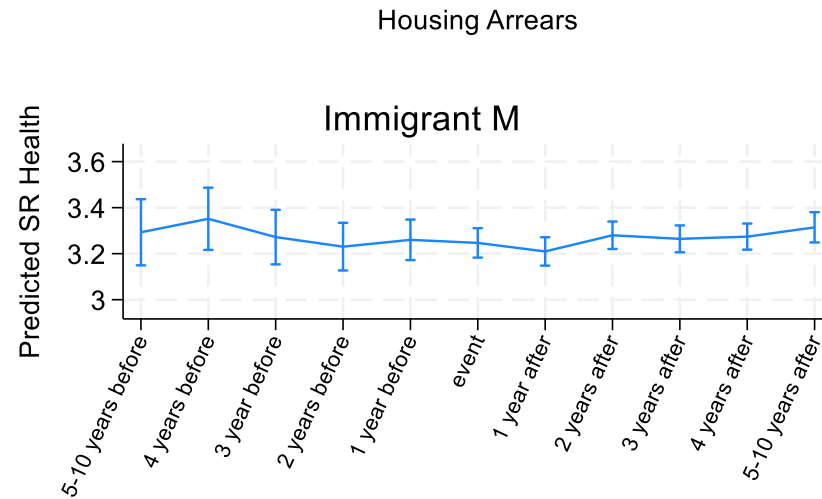
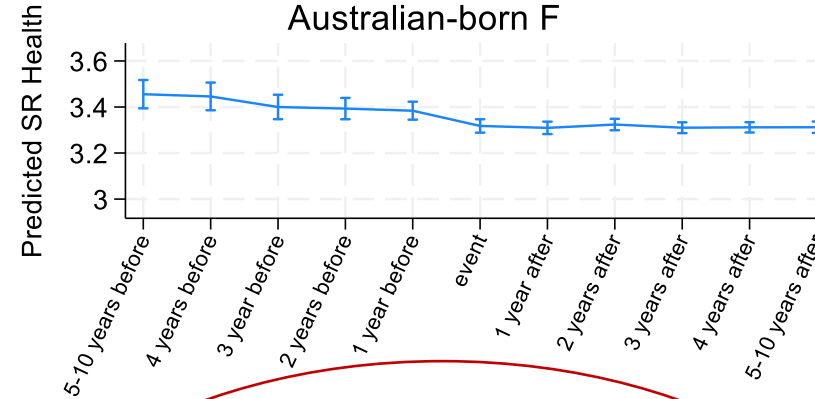
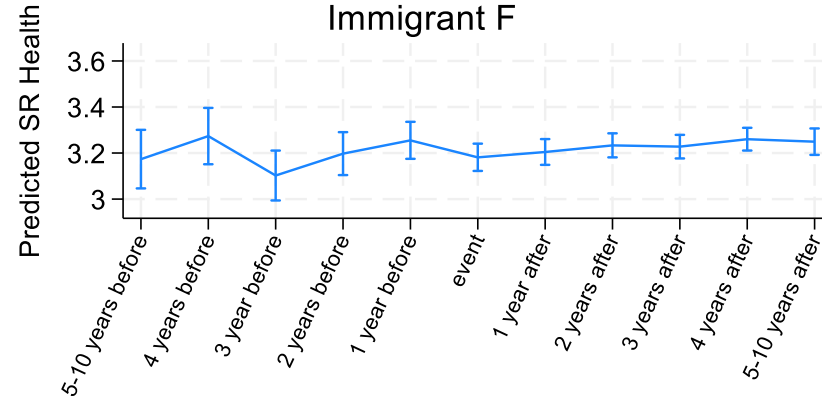
Health Trajectories by Housing Experience, Men



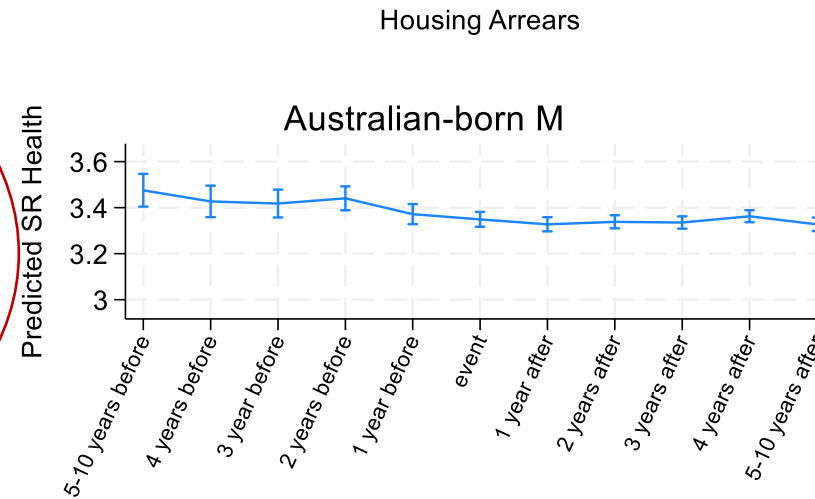
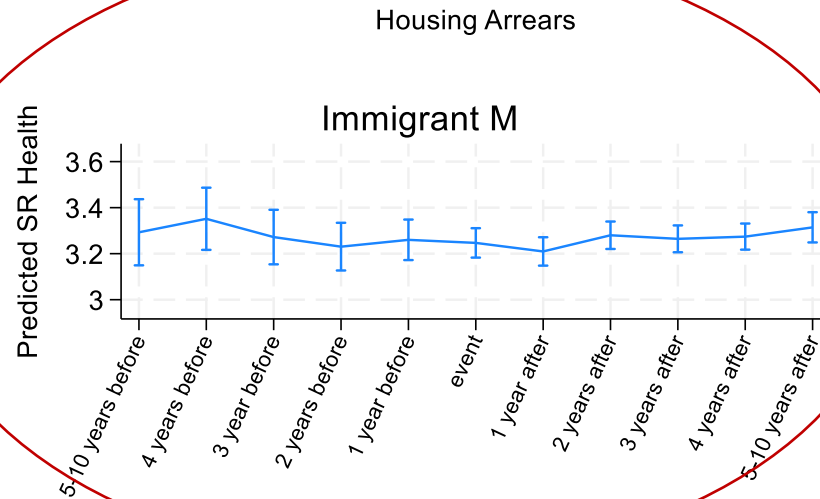
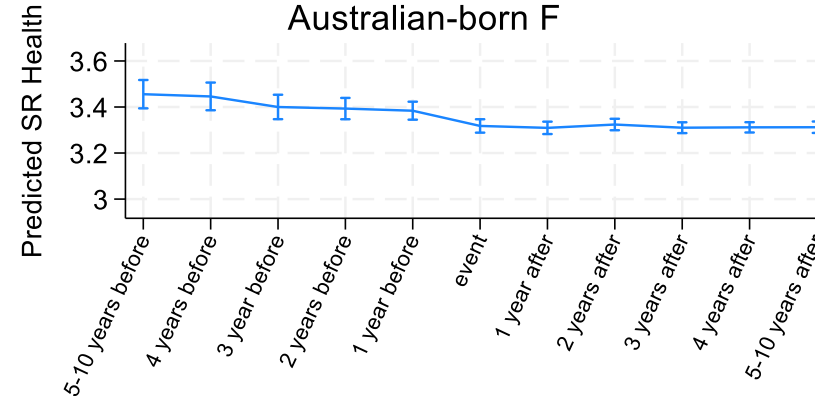
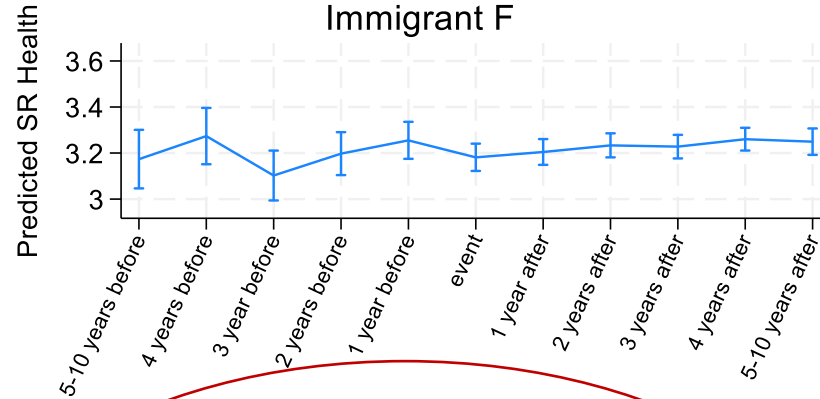
Effects of Housing Arrears on Predicted Health by nativity among men



Effects of Housing Arrears on Health using Fixed Effects Regression by nativity and gender



Effects of Housing Arrears on Health using Fixed Effects Regression by nativity and gender



Key Findings- Job Loss

- **Job Loss: more adverse health effect for immigrant women**
- Immigrant women's labor market challenges
 - Worse outcomes than native-born Australians
 - 31% pay gap vs Australian-born women (SSI 2026)
 - Lower employment, limited networks
 - Devaluation of degrees/skills
 - Limited access to good jobs in primary sector

Key Findings- Housing

- **Housing Arrears: Native-born Vulnerability**
 - Housing arrears severely affects native-born health, but not immigrants
- Housing and Australian cultural identity
 - Homeownership is central to Australian cultural identity and the “Australian Dream” (Colic-Peisker and Johnson 2012)
 - 83% of Australians regard housing as fundamental to mental wellbeing
 - For Australian-born, housing arrears may carry stronger stigma (cf. Nettleton and Burrows 2000).

Thank you!

- Questions or Comments?
- Email: rennie.lee@uq.edu.au
- Further information about the Life Course Centre
www.lifecoursecentre.org.au