

Spencer Cooper

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POSITION

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Connecticut, 2023

EDUCATION

Ph.D.	Economics, University of Arizona, May 2023
M.A.	Economics, University of Arizona, December 2019
B.S.	Economics, Utah State University, May 2018

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Economics of Crime, Labor Economics, Applied Microeconomics

WORKING PAPERS

“The Unintended Consequences of Changing Standard of Proof,” (with Andy Yuan)

We study how increases in the standard of proof affect charging and sentencing outcomes. Exploiting the timing of *Blakely v. Washington*, which required proof beyond a reasonable doubt for sentencing enhancements, we document a sharp decline in enhancement rates. While this change should mechanically reduce average sentence lengths, we instead find that average sentences increase relative to the pre-*Blakely* period. To explain this counterintuitive result, we test for compensatory responses by prosecutors and judges. Across 13 prosecutorial outcomes, we find tight null effects on charging and bargaining behavior. By contrast, we uncover strong heterogeneity among judges: more lenient judges substantially increase sentence lengths post-*Blakely*, while stricter judges reduce them, compressing the overall distribution of sentences. Our findings show that increasing the standard of proof can unintentionally lead to harsher sentencing, driven by judicial—not prosecutorial—compensation.

“Can State Laws Address Discretion-Induced Disparities? Evidence from Traffic Stop Reforms,” (with Jacob Meyer)

Racial disparities persist in the US criminal justice system. The role of legal actor discretion in generating these disparities has received considerable attention. We examine how broad institutional changes intended to mitigate these disparities affect outcomes by studying laws in Oregon and Virginia that restricted police officers' ability to make certain discretionary traffic stops. Using both administrative traffic stop records and automobile accident data in a synthetic difference-in-differences design, we find that both policies significantly reduced stop activity, without increasing accidents. Reductions in stops were similar across non-White and White drivers in both states, though in Virginia non-White drivers experienced slightly larger declines. While Virginia agencies with disproportionately high pre-period equipment stops of non-White motorists experienced larger reductions in stop activity, these reductions did not accrue especially to non-White motorists. These findings suggest that broad institutional changes can curtail discretionary enforcement activity, but may fall short of achieving targeted reductions.

“How Much do Mandatory Minimums Matter?”

I estimate the causal effect of mandatory minimum (MM) eligibility on federal drug sentencing using a regression discontinuity design with extrapolation to disentangle statutory impacts from prosecutorial selection. I find that MM eligibility increases sentence length uniformly across case types by about 10 months (14%). This includes defendants with low criminal history, indicating limited protection for low-level offenders. To assess which types of cases are affected by selection, I compare extrapolated counterfactual sentence lengths against observed sentences. I find evidence that charging manipulation is localized among minority defendants. These results indicate that racial disparities in MM sentencing are driven by prosecutor charging decisions rather than by features of the MM statute.

“Prosecutorial Incentives and Outcome Disparities,” (with Andy Yuan), *R&R at American Law & Economics Review (ALER)*

We examine the causal effects of prosecutors' incentives on racial and gender disparities. *Blakely v. Washington* 542 U.S. 296 (2004) significantly disincentivized state prosecutors from pursuing sentence enhancements by raising their burdens of proof from “preponderance of evidence” to “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Through a regression discontinuity design, we find striking evidence that a higher burden of proof eliminated the entire preexisting gender gap of men being 24% more likely to receive sentence enhancements than women. However, we find no evidence suggesting a racial gap of sentence enhancements both pre and post *Blakely*.

“Prosecutor Tradeoffs and Race: Evidence from a Circuit Split”

I consider whether changing the costs or benefits to prosecutor charging decisions impacts racial disparities in charges. Prosecutors face a tradeoff between expending resources to gather evidence and building a stronger case. I exploit a circuit split in charging rules to observe variation in the cost of evidence requirements. I compare how prosecutors differentially increase charges for racial minorities across each evidence cost regime by utilizing a bunching point in mandatory minimum charging of federal drug crimes. Using a difference-in-differences design, I find that

when evidence costs are lowered, prosecutors disproportionately increase charges for Black defendants compared to White counterparts. I then consider how decreases to the expected sentence length for increased charges affects prosecutor choice and racial disparities using the 2018 First Step Act (FSA). I find that in circuits with high evidence costs, the FSA decreased the race gap in increased charges. But in circuits with low required evidence, the FSA increased this disparity. The results suggest that increasing evidence costs is an effective policy tool for reducing racial disparities in charges.

SELECTED WORKS IN PROGRESS

“Prosecutor Discretion and the Use of Mandatory Minimums,” (with Adam Soliman)

“Untitled Community Courts Project,” (with Mohamad Alkadry and David Mitre Becerril)

“Physical environment and crime: evidence from streetlight modernization,” (resting)

EXTERNAL GRANT FUNDING

Co-Principal Investigator, *Prosecutor Discretion and the Use of Mandatory Minimums* (with Adam Soliman). **Arnold Ventures.** \$259,714 awarded. 2025-2028.

Co-Principal Investigator, *Hartford Community Court Program Evaluation* (with Mohamad Alkadry and David Mitre Becerril). **Bureau of Justice Assistance - CT Division of Criminal Justice.** \$228,930 awarded (sub-award). 2025-2028.

Co-Principal Investigator, *UConn Crime Seminar* (with Bokyung Kim). **Arnold Ventures.** \$8,000 awarded. 2025-2026

CONFERENCE AND SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS (including planned)

2025: American Society of Evidence-Based Policing Conference, CELS

2024: Workshop on the Econ of Crime for Junior Scholars (WEC Jr.), American Law & Economics Association (ALEA), Conference of Empirical Legal Studies (CELS), Moving Beyond Implications

2023: The Department of Justice, University of Connecticut, Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management Conference (APPAM)

2022: Brigham Young University

OTHER SEMINARS OR WORKSHOPS (including planned)

2025: Arnold Ventures BRIDGE Series, Law Institute for Economics Professors

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

UConn:

Instructor, *Economics of Crime* (undergraduate)

- Fall 2025

Instructor, *Econometrics II* (master's and undergraduate hybrid)

- Fall 2023
- Spring & Fall 2024
- Spring & Fall 2025

Instructor, *Labor Economics* (undergraduate)

- Fall 2023
- Fall 2024

University of Arizona:

Instructor, *Labor and Public Policy* (undergraduate)

- Summer 2021
- Summer 2022

Recitation Instructor and Teaching Assistant, *Econometrics I* (master's level)

- Fall 2020, online
- Fall 2021
- Fall 2022

Instructor, *Basic Economic Issues* (undergraduate, online)

- Summer 2020

Teaching Assistant, various economics courses

- 17 total course-semesters from 2018 to 2023.