

Spencer Cooper

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POSITION

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

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

“Prosecutor Tradeoffs and Race: Evidence from a Circuit Split,” 2023

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.

“How Much do Mandatory Minimums Matter?” 2023

Mandatory minimum sentencing is often cited as a primary source of racial disparities in punitive criminal outcomes in the United States. I estimate the actual increase to sentence lengths created by mandatory minimum eligibility for federal drug crimes. I decompose eligibility effects into effects from the law and effects driven by manipulation of cases near the eligibility cutoff. This is done by fitting distributions through non-manipulated cases and extrapolating these distributions into manipulated case areas. I find that without manipulation, mandatory minimum eligibility increases sentence length by around 13 months. This effect is consistent across racial groups with small heterogeneity by drug type. However, by manipulation Black and Hispanic defendants in heroin or cocaine cases receive sentences 20-31 months higher than the counterfactual sentence length. Manipulation has no significant impact on White sentence lengths. Using a unique data set of US Attorneys, I show the race disparity in manipulation effects is tied to prosecutors’ decisions to increase charges for minority defendants more than White counterparts.

“Prosecutorial Incentives and Outcome Disparities,” (with Andy Yuan), *Under Review*, 2022

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*.

SELECTED WORKS IN PROGRESS

“Physical Environment and Crime: Evidence from Streetlight Modernization,” 2021

CONFERENCE AND SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS

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

2022: Brigham Young University

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor, *Econometrics II* (master's and undergraduate hybrid), University of Connecticut, Fall/Spring 2023

Instructor, *Labor Economics* (undergraduate), University of Connecticut, Fall 2023

Instructor, *Labor and Public Policy* (undergraduate), University of Arizona, Summer 2021-2022

Recitation Instructor and Teaching Assistant, *Econometrics I* (master's level), University of Arizona, Fall 2020-2022

Instructor, *Basic Economic Issues* (undergraduate, online), University of Arizona, Summer 2020