

Spencer Cooper

Email: spencer.cooper@uconn.edu
Website: <https://sites.google.com/view/spencercooper>

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

“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?” *Under Review*, 2024

I estimate the causal increase to sentence lengths created by mandatory minimum (MM) eligibility for federal drug crimes. I exploit a bunching point in case density to decompose the impacts of MM eligibility into effects driven by the law and effects driven by legal actor manipulation. I find that without manipulation, MM eligibility increases sentence length uniformly across case types, but that minority defendants receive an additional 5-7 months to their sentence lengths compared to White counterparts due to manipulation. Using a unique data set of US Attorneys, I show that minorities are also disproportionately bunched on the extensive margin.

“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

“Do legal actors compensate? - measuring prosecutor and judicial responses to an exogenous change in charging costs,” (with Andy Yuan) 2024

“Efficacy and equity of reducing traffic stops,” (with Jacob Meyer and Austin Smith) 2024

“Physical environment and crime: evidence from streetlight modernization,” 2021

CONFERENCE AND SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS (including planned)

2024: Workshop on the Econ of Crime for Junior Scholars (WEC Jr.), American Law & Economics Association (ALEA)

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

2022: Brigham Young University

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

UConn:

Instructor, *Econometrics II* (master's and undergraduate hybrid), 2023 - present

Instructor, *Labor Economics* (undergraduate), 2023 - present

University of Arizona:

Instructor, *Labor and Public Policy* (undergraduate), 2021-2022

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

Instructor, *Basic Economic Issues* (undergraduate, online), 2020

Teaching Assistant, various economics courses, 2018-2023