

# 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

### **“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?” 2024**

I estimate the causal increase to sentence lengths created by mandatory minimum (MM) eligibility for federal drug crimes. Estimating sentence effects is complicated by case manipulation near the MM eligibility cutoff, which creates a bunching point in case eligibility. I exploit this bunching point to decompose the impacts of MM eligibility into effects driven by the law and effects driven by manipulation. I find that without manipulation, MM eligibility increases sentence length by about 10 months on the intensive margin. This effect is consistent across racial groups with small heterogeneity by drug type and by criminal history. However, through case manipulation, I find that minority defendants receive an additional 5-7 months to their sentence lengths, while manipulation has no significant impact on White sentence lengths. Using a unique data set of US Attorneys, I show that minorities are also disproportionately bunched on the extensive margin. These results imply that race disparities in MM eligibility are driven by legal actors' decisions to manipulate cases.

### **“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**

**“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

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

2022: Brigham Young University

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

### **UConn:**

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

Instructor, *Labor Economics* (undergraduate), Fall 2023

### **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