

Matthew Pesner
Curriculum Vitae, January 2021

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Vanderbilt University
Department of Economics
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Education

Vanderbilt University, Department of Economics
Ph.D. in Economics: Expected Completion May 2022
Ph.D. Advancement to Candidacy: February 2020
M.A. in Economics: May 2018

Colorado College, Department of Economics
B.A. in Mathematical Economics: May 2016

Research Fields

Public, Labor, Economic History

References

William Collins: william.collins@vanderbilt.edu
Lesley Turner: lesley.j.turner@vanderbilt.edu
Andrew Goodman-Bacon: andrew@goodman-bacon.com

Working Papers

“Public Pensions and Retirement: Evidence from the Railroad Retirement Act” (Job Market Paper)

Male labor force participation (LFP) 65+ declined by almost 50 percentage points over the 20th century and the share receiving public pensions rose from roughly zero to near universal. Yet, the precise role of public pensions in driving the decline is still an open question. This paper develops the earliest estimates of the effect of Defined Benefit (DB) public pensions on retirement timing by examining the Railroad Retirement Acts (RRA) of the 1930s, which replaced private pensions with a program comparable to Social Security. Leveraging linked Decennial Census records between 1920-1930 and 1930-1940, I examine LFP by worker's industries a decade earlier. Using an age-specific difference in differences research design that exploits variation in industry, time, and cohort, I find the RRA explains at least 8% of the previously unexplained decline ages 65-74. Utilizing the switch to progressive benefits, I estimate the elasticity of elderly nonparticipation with respect to benefits to be roughly 0.2, which is lower than existing pre-1970 estimates but similar to those from Social Security today. Elasticities are heterogeneous by private wealth and follow an inverse U-shaped pattern; they are closer to 0.1 for renters and individuals with home values above the 80th percentile, and are higher in the middle. Estimates suggest Social Security benefit increases explain at most a quarter of LFP declines in the 1950s. Eligibility expansions appear to have been more important in driving historical elderly male LFP declines.

“The Expansion of Social Security and the Decline of Elderly Public Assistance”

(Joint with [Daniel Fetter](#))

The growth of social insurance and transfer programs was among the most consequential changes in the 20th century United States, and a central element of this growth was the change in the level of government that administered and funded transfers. We investigate the expansion of the nationally-administered Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) program – commonly known as Social Security – and its role in the decline of the state-administered, means-tested Old Age Assistance (OAA) program from 1940 through 1955. In the absence of changes in state OAA policies, means-tested OAA programs would shrink as Social Security increased the resources of the elderly, meaning that the net cost of Social Security transfers and the increase in the resources of the elderly would both be smaller than the dollar value of Social Security transfers would suggest. The analysis exploits variation across states in the size of Social Security expansions due to exclusions of certain industries from coverage in the early program. Overall, OAA programs shrank in response to the growth of Social Security, but states also responded to these “savings” by liberalizing eligibility and payment policies. However, there was stark regional variation in states' responses. Most notably, most of the decline in OAA attributable to the expansion of Social Security was driven by Southern states.

Work in Progress

“Two-Parent Targeted Welfare and Family Structure in the Mid-20th Century: Evidence from the Implementation of AFDC-UP”

This paper evaluates the effect of expanding Public Assistance to two-parent families on family structure dynamics. Under the Social Security Amendments of 1961, states were given the option to extend the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program to provide an unemployed parent segment (AFDC-UP) that covered cohabitating parents under specific eligibility criteria. To identify the effects of AFDC-UP on fertility and marital behavior, this paper leverages a difference in differences research design that exploits the staggered adoption of the program across 18 states between 1961 and 1975. The main outcomes are from newly entered data on nonmarital births by state, year, age, and race between 1952 and 1988. Semiparametric event studies show no evidence of pre-trends in nonmarital fertility up to 9 years before adoption, but persistent reductions immediately after for nonwhite women. When adjusted for changes to general fertility, nonwhite women in their 30's experienced the largest decline in the nonmarital share of births. This paper provides evidence that the increase in the share of births outside of marriage beginning in the mid-twentieth century would have been even more pronounced in the absence of expansions in federal Public Assistance to two-parent families.

“Who Benefits from Federal Welfare Spending? Evidence from the Introduction of Progressive Cost Sharing” (Joint with [Andrew Goodman-Bacon](#))

This paper examines whether the federal government can induce states to offer higher benefits through greater generosity in matching funds. We examine the initial switch to progressive federal matching of state public assistance expenditure in 1958 for the four federalized programs Old Age Assistance OAA, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Aid to the Blind (AB), and Aid to the Permanently and Totally disabled (APTD). The formula based funding on how state per capita income related to national per capita income, setting the precursor for Medicaid financing. Our empirical strategy compares higher and lower income states before and after 1958. States could respond by increasing welfare spending, which would constitute evidence of flypaper effects. They could also decrease taxes or increasing other spending. Preliminary evidence suggests progressive cost sharing was not effective in achieving more equitable benefits, but may have increased medical vendor payments, the 1950s public insurance component of welfare.

Additional Research Experience

Vanderbilt University, Research Assistant

Professor William Collins: December, 2017 – May, 2018

Professor Andrew Goodman-Bacon: December, 2017 – May, 2018; Summer, 2020

Professor Michelle Marcus: September, 2018 – May, 2019

Teaching Fields

Public Economics, Labor Economics, Economic History, Microeconomics, Health Economics, Econometrics, Program Evaluation/Causal Methods

Teaching Experience

Vanderbilt University, Teaching Assistant

Urban Economics: Fall 2017

Economic Statistics: Spring 2018

Health Economics: Fall 2018; Spring 2019; Fall 2019; Spring 2020; Fall 2021

Public Finance: Fall 2019; Spring 2020; Spring 2021

Project Evaluation (Masters): Fall 2021

Additional Teaching Experience

Online Tutor, Wyzant.com: 2018-2021 ([personal page](#))

Tutor, Quantitative Reasoning Center (Colorado College): 2014-2016

Honors and Fellowships

Vanderbilt University, Department of Economics

Vanderbilt University Economics Fellowship: Fall 2016 – Present

Kirk Dornbush Dissertation Fellowship: Fall 2020

Kirk Dornbush Summer Research Grant: Summer 2018

Colorado College, Department of Economics

Van-Skilling Award: April, 2015

Conference / Seminar Presentations

2021 (Including scheduled)

Florida State University, Department of Economics
Annual Cliometric Conference (Graduate Student Session)
NBER Summer Institute Development of the American Economy (Poster Session)
Young Economist Symposium (YES)
Economic History Association Annual Meeting (Poster Session)
Southern Economic Association Annual Meeting
Vanderbilt Empirical and Applied Microeconomics Seminar

2020

Vanderbilt Empirical and Applied Microeconomics Seminar

2019

Economic History Association (Poster Session)
Southern Economic Association (Two Presentations)
Vanderbilt Empirical and Applied Microeconomics Seminar

Additional Professional Activities

Referee: Industrial Relations, A Journal of Economy and Society

Professional Affiliations

American Economic Association; Economic History Association

Skills

STATA, LaTeX, ArcGIS, Microsoft Suite