

BENEDICT GUTTMAN-KENNEY

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Education

The University of Chicago Booth School of Business, 2018 to present
Ph.D. Economics Student

University College London, 2011 to 2012
MSc Economic Policy

University of Warwick, 2008 to 2011
BSc Economics

Research Fields

Household Finance, Behavioral Economics, Applied Microeconomics.

Research Experience and Other Employment

2019-Present Academic advisor to UK Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) on developing a [new measure of poverty](#)

2016-2018 Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), Senior Economist

2012-2016 Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), Economist

2015 Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Seconded National Expert

2010 Bank of England, Summer Intern

Presentations

Boulder Summer Conference On Consumer Financial Decision Making 2020 (cancelled), #Econ-Twitter Virtual Finance + Economics Conference 2020, Making Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) Consumer Research Symposium 2019, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) Research Conference 2019, RAND Behavioral Finance (BeFi) Forum 2019, Advances with Field Experiments Conference 2018, Network for Integrated Behavioral Science (NIBS) Conference 2016, University of Essex Seminar 2016, University of Stirling Behavioral Science Workshop 2016, Federal Reserve Bank of New York (FRBNY) Research Seminar 2015.

Publications

How Do Payday Loans Affect Borrowers? Evidence From the U.K. Market (2019). With John Gathergood and Stefan Hunt. *Review of Financial Studies*, 32 (2): 496-523. Reprinted in [Society for Financial Studies Virtual Issue: Debt](#).

Payday loans are controversial high-cost, short-term lending products, banned in many U.S. states. But debates surrounding their benefits to consumers continue. We analyze the effects of payday loans on consumers by using a unique data set including 99% of loans approved in the United Kingdom over a two-year period matched to credit files. Using a regression discontinuity research design, our results show that payday loans provide short-lived liquidity gains and encourage consumers to take on additional credit. However, in the following months, payday loans cause persistent increases in defaults and cause consumers to exceed their bank overdraft limits.

Tracking and Stress-Testing U.S. Household Leverage (2018). With Andreas Fuster and Andrew Haughwout. *Economic Policy Review* 24 (1): 35-63. ([Updated data](#)).

[Liberty Street Economics blog summary](#)

Borrowers' housing equity is an important component of their wealth and a critical determinant of their vulnerability to shocks. In this paper, we create a unique data set that enables us to provide a comprehensive look at the ratio of housing debt to housing values what we refer to as household leverage at the micro level. An advantage of our data is that we are able to study the evolution of household leverage over time and locations in the United States. We find that leverage was at a very low point just prior to the large declines in house prices that began in 2006, and rose very quickly thereafter, despite reductions in housing debt. As of early 2016, leverage statistics are approaching their pre-crisis levels, as house prices have risen more than 30 percent nationally since 2012. We use our borrower-level leverage measures and another unique feature of our data updated borrower credit scores to conduct 'stress tests': projecting leverage and defaults under various adverse house price scenarios. We find that while the riskiness of the household sector has declined significantly since 2012, it remains vulnerable to very severe house price declines.

Working Papers

The Semblance of Success in Nudging Consumers to Pay Down Credit Card Debt (2020). With Paul Adams, Stefan Hunt, David Laibson and Neil Stewart.

Email for latest draft.

We study how consumer responses to a nudge counteract its intended effect to reduce credit card debt. The nudge shrouds the option to automatically pay only the contractual minimum and increases the salience of a payment option to automatically amortize debt faster. Despite the intervention causing large proximate effects – increasing enrollment to this salient payment option 21 percentage points and reducing the likelihood of paying exactly the minimum by 7 percentage points – it has no distal effects on debt. Results are explained by three offsetting consumer responses: (i) Automatic payment amounts selected often bind at the contractual minimum; (ii) Automatic payment enrollment decreases – increasing missed payments; and (iii) Manual payments decrease.

The English Patient: Evaluating Local Lockdowns Using Real-Time COVID-19 & Consumption Data (2020). With John Gathergood.

[Economics Observatory blog summary.](#)

We find UK “local lockdowns” of cities and sub-regions, focused on limiting contact between households in homes, turn the tide on rising positive COVID-19 cases without the large declines in consumption accompanying the March 2020 national lockdown, which limited all social contact. Our study harnesses a new source of real-time, transaction-level consumption data that we show to be highly correlated with official statistics. The effectiveness of local lockdowns are evaluated applying a difference-in-difference approach which exploits nearby localities not subject to local lockdowns as comparison groups. Our findings indicate that policymakers may be able to contain virus outbreaks *without* killing local economies. However, the ultimate effectiveness of local lockdowns is expected to be highly dependent on co-ordination between regions and testing.

Default and Anchoring Effects of Credit Card Minimum Payments (2020). With Hiro Sakaguchi, Neil Stewart, John Gathergood, Paul Adams, Lucy Hayes and Stefan Hunt.

Journal of Marketing Research, R & R

Credit card holders choose whether to pay manually or set up automatic default repayments in addition to how much to repay. Using credit card transaction data, we show that, when setting minimum automatic repayments, card holders set psychological defaults. Whilst they avoid late payment fees, the automatic repayment locks in their modal minimum repayment behavior and they then neglect to make occasional larger repayments previously made. Consequently, card holders incur considerably more interest than late payment fees avoided: about 12% of all of the interest ever paid. Using an online experiment, we replicate the finding that minimum payment information acts as a psychological anchor, reducing manual repayments. We also show that two new interventions, prompting full repayment and prompting those repaying little to pay more, have large counter effects. The availability of minimum payment information and a minimum automatic repayment option are unexpectedly costly because they act as a psychological anchor and as a psychological default. Obscuring the minimum payment option for automatic and manual repayments would remedy this.

The Conflict Between Consumer Intentions, Beliefs and Actions to Pay Down Credit Card Debt (2018). With Paul Adams, Stefan Hunt, David Laibson and Neil Stewart.

We attempt to increase credit card payments through behaviourally-informed disclosures tested in experiments across 3 UK lenders. The first experiment finds no effect of adding disclosures to credit card statements. The second experiment targets credit card users paying their bills via automatic minimum payments. This group commonly and repeatedly only make minimum payments. Few consumers respond to the intervention. The treatment causes an average reduction in consumers paying only the minimum and a reduction in credit card debt that is not sustained. Adding cost information to the disclosures does not significantly change responses, however, adding a reminder does increase response rates. Effects are primarily driven by the subgroup of consumers with 0% balance transfer debts. The continuing patterns of repeated minimum payments among consumers with automatic minimum payments do not appear to be explained by liquidity constraints. They are also inconsistent with the majority of stated preferences showing intentions for debt reduction. An explanation appears to be that consumers have mistaken beliefs. They under-estimate how long debt will take to amortise whilst only making minimum payments and avoid information telling them otherwise.

Weighing Anchor on Credit Card Debt (2018). With Jesse Leary and Neil Stewart.

We find it is common for consumers who are not in financial distress to make credit card payments at or close to the minimum. This pattern is difficult to reconcile with economic factors but can be explained by minimum payment information presented to consumers acting as an anchor that weighs payments down. Building on Stewart (2009), we conduct a hypothetical credit card payment experiment to test an intervention to de-anchor payment choices. This intervention effectively stops consumers selecting payments at the contractual minimum. It also increases their average payments, as well as shifting the distribution of payments. By de-anchoring choices from the minimum, consumers increasingly choose the full payment amount which potentially seems to act as a target payment for consumers. We innovate by linking the experimental responses to survey responses on financial distress and to actual credit card payment behaviours. We find that the intervention largely increases payments made by less financially-distressed consumers. We are also able to evaluate the potential external validity of our experiment and find that hypothetical responses are closely related to consumers' actual credit card payments.

Relevant Training

2017 Incorporating more realistic psychology into economic analysis
Taught by Matthew Rabin (Harvard).

2016 Bespoke FCA microeconometrics training at University College London
Taught by Frank Windmeijer (Bristol), Jeffrey Wooldridge (Michigan State) & Lars Nesheim (UCL).

2016 John Hopkins University/Coursera Data Science Specialization

2013 Beyond Rationality: Behavioural Economics and the Modern Economy
Taught by Matt Levy & Kristof Madarasz (LSE) at the London School of Economics.

Software Experience

R, STATA, SQL, Git, L^AT_EX