Ethan Jenkins

Research Statement

I am an applied microeconomist studying public and urban economics. I am particularly interested in evaluating the impact of social safety net programs on extreme outcomes such as housing security and crime. I rely on restricted-use administrative microdata and employ quasi-experimental research designs to examine the causal effects of public social safety net programs, such as unemployment insurance.

As a researcher with Special Sworn Status through the US Census Bureau, I am well-positioned to pursue a wide portfolio of projects that require restricted-use administrative data. I have deep familiarity with the following restricted-use data sets: 1) The Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), a quarterly employer-employee earnings data; 2) Long-form Decennial Censuses and the American Community Survey; 3) Master Address File-Auxiliary Reference File (MAFARF) which includes the housing unit of residence for the near-universe of adults in the US in each year from 2000 to 2021, which is derived from many sources, including federal tax, health, and housing records; 4) the Criminal Justice Administrative Records System (CJARS), a nationally integrated data repository of criminal justice system administrative data covering arrest, court, and prison records; 5) US Census Bureau Numerical Identification file (Numident), birth and death records for every social security number that has been issued since 1936; and 6) the Longitudinal Business Database (LBD), a firm-level data set containing basic information on establishment size, industry, location and ownership for the universe of all US business establishments with paid employees.

Further, as a fellow at the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI), a research/policy center located in the Office of the Mayor of the City of New York, I work with administrative data covering homeless shelter use, jail bookings, and means-tested benefits such as TANF. This working relationship with CIDI has prepared me to conduct high-quality research using New York City administrative data.

Social Safety Net Programs

Job Market Paper. In my job market paper, "Does Unemployment Insurance Reduce Crime?", I examine the effect of UI eligibility on subsequent criminal justice system involvement. Studies of optimal unemployment design typically weigh the consumption-smoothing benefit of this social insurance program against the distortionary effects on labor supply. This framework fails to capture potential externalities unemployment insurance generates. Crime reduction is an important externality to consider due to crime's high social cost. To determine the effect of UI on crime, I link New York City administrative arrest records to quarterly earnings and UI data from the New York State Department of Labor. I use a regression discontinuity design (RDD) based on New York State's minimum earnings requirements to credibly estimate the impact of UI eligibility. I provide evidence indicating that being barely eligible for UI decreases arrest probability in the short run. A reduction in arrests for assaults and drug crimes drives the overall reduction. The effects are large, although somewhat imprecisely estimated. However, I consistently find a negative relationship between UI eligibility and arrests across many different specifications, and I can generally rule out large positive effects. A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that this crime reduction generates large public benefits approximately equal to the fiscal cost.

To my knowledge, this paper is the first to credibly estimate the impact of UI eligibility on criminal involvement using linked individual-level administrative UI and crime data in the United States. My research examines a large policy-relevant margin affecting millions of Americans. Over a million claims (14 percent) are denied due to insufficient prior earnings or employment each year. Despite this, only a few papers examine the impact of minimum earnings requirements for UI. Further, the population around the edge of UI eligibility is extremely disadvantaged, with earnings well below the federal poverty line. My research suggests expanding UI eligibility to this population could generate large social benefits.

Other Research. In "The Effects of Unemployment Insurance on Housing-Insecure Families," ongoing work with Robert Collinson, we examine the impact of UI eligibility on extreme hardship. In particular, with New York State and New York City administrative data, we estimate the impact of UI eligibility on homelessness using a regression discontinuity design (RDD) that exploits a cutoff based on workers' highest quarterly earnings in the past year. We find that UI eligibility reduces homelessness by nearly 50 percent within three years. Future work will estimate the impact of UI on other measures of extreme hardship, such as evictions, requesting emergency financial assistance, and financial health measured with credit data.

Future Research. In other work, I plan to evaluate the long-run impact of childhood Medicaid eligibility on future criminal involvement. Previous work has shown that childhood access to Medicaid increases human capital measures such as high school completion. Additionally, there is suggestive evidence that childhood access to Medicaid causes recipients to collect less from the earned income tax credit and pay more taxes. This project will examine the long-run impact of childhood Medicaid eligibility on future criminal involvement using the Criminal Justice Administrative Records System (CJARS) data. This paper will estimate the impact of childhood (including in-utero) access to Medicaid with a difference-in-differences strategy exploiting the 1980s expansions of Medicaid. I will also estimate the impact of Medicaid eligibility from ages 8-14 using a regression discontinuity design where children born after September 30, 1983, were eligible for more years of Medicaid than those born before. This exercise extends Arenberg, Neller, and Stripling (2020), who estimate this RDD with incarceration as the outcome variable with Florida data, to more states and more measures of criminal justice involvement.

Other Topics

Current Research. In "A Flows Approach to Neighborhoods: Incorporating Individual Volatility in Neighborhood Research", joint Evan Mast, Andrew Garin, and Bryan Stuart, we use administrative data to answer the following questions: How often do people move in and out of different types of neighborhoods, and what factors drive those moves? Do the people in poor neighborhoods at one point in time spend most of their lives in similar areas? Is concentrated poverty persistent because a consistent set of neighborhood residents are stuck at a low income, or is the story more dynamic? These are important questions given that concentrated poverty and income segregation are defining features of neighborhoods in the United States and the documented adverse outcomes linked to exposure to poor neighborhoods. One policy response is to reduce exposure to disadvantaged neighborhoods by offering housing vouchers or mobility assistance, as in the Moving to Opportunity program. Alternatively, policy could try to improve conditions in impoverished neighborhoods. Our understanding of how to implement these policies and the trade-offs between the two approaches is limited by the paucity of information on how individuals migrate across neighborhoods.

We advance the literature using newly available administrative data that contain an annual panel of neighborhood locations for most U.S. residents. We connect these data to American Community Survey responses and the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics data to provide a comprehensive picture of individual demographics, labor market outcomes, and location choices. We present stylized facts describing the frequency of moves, including moves across very different neighborhoods and earnings volatility across neighborhoods. Further, to estimate the effect of individual earnings growth on neighborhood quality, we use an instrumental variable approach following Rose and Shem-Tov (2023), which uses variation in individual income caused by idiosyncratic, firm-level changes in pay.

The main results of this paper are currently under disclosure review. We expect results to be disclosed imminently and a working paper to be available soon.

Future Research. In joint work with Pietro Pellerito and Tim Spilde, we examine how firms respond

to dual minimum wage laws. Dual minimum wage laws impose a higher minimum wage on larger firms than on smaller firms. We particularly focus on California, where between 2017-2023, firms with 26 or more employees are required to pay a higher minimum wage. First, we will assess whether this law generates bunching below 26. Unlike prior work on bunching, we can estimate this bunching using a difference-in-differences design either using other states or Californian cities with a higher non-dual minimum wage as the control group. We use the Longitudinal Business Database (LBD) from the U.S. Census to measure firm-level employment. Further, with access to firm-level surveys, such as the Census of Manufacturers, we can examine how else firms respond to a higher minimum wage, such as increasing capital expenditures.