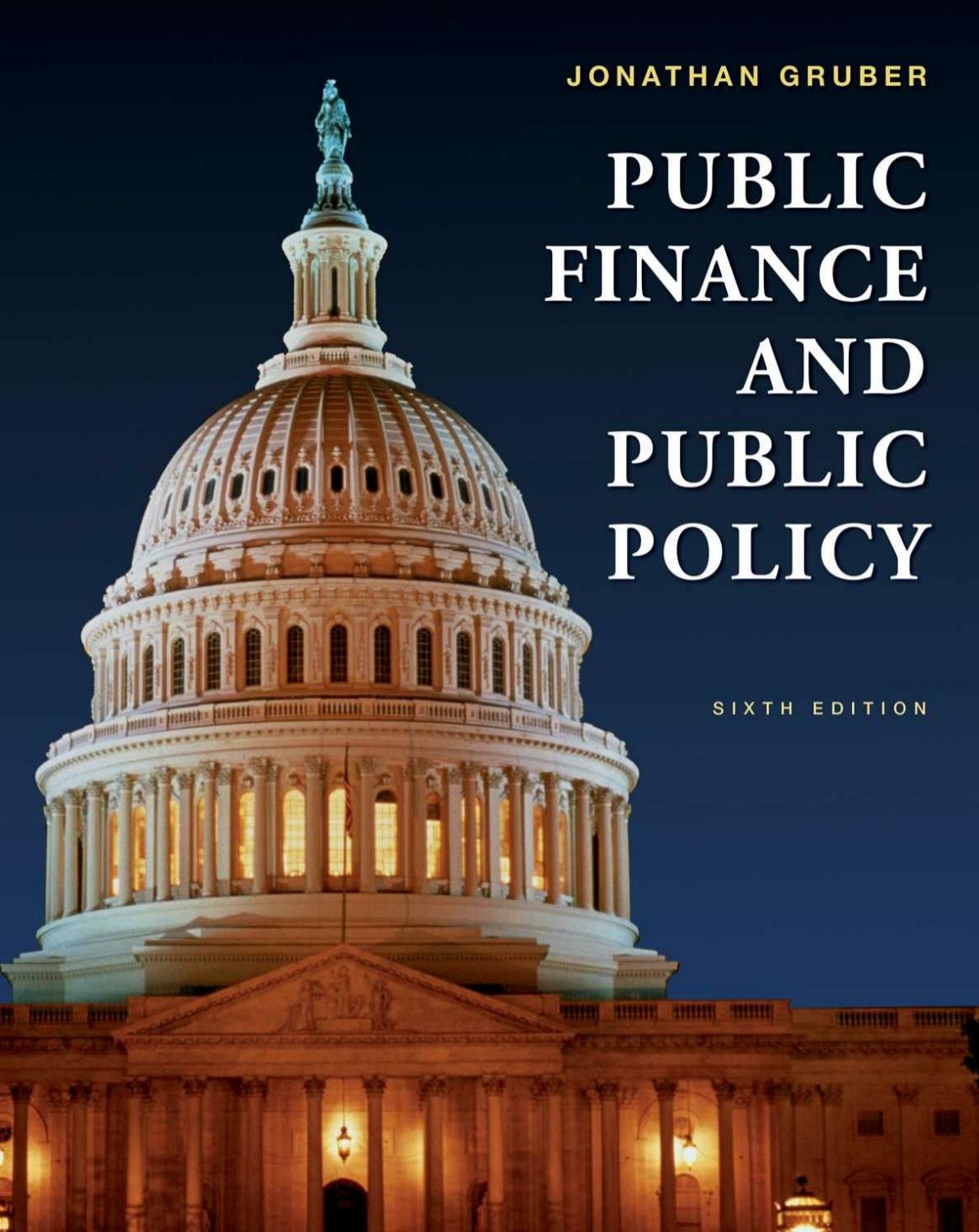


JONATHAN GRUBER

PUBLIC  
FINANCE  
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SIXTH EDITION



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# PUBLIC FINANCE AND PUBLIC POLICY



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SIXTH EDITION

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- *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*



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*To Andrea, Rachel, Jack, and Ava*

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Dr. Jonathan Gruber is a professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he has taught since 1992. He is also the director of the Health Care Program at the National Bureau of Economic Research, where he is a research associate, and former president of the American Society of Health Economists. He is also a member of the Institute of Medicine, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the National Academy of Social Insurance.

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During the 1997–1998 academic year, Dr. Gruber was on leave as deputy assistant secretary for economic policy at the Treasury Department. From 2003 to 2006, he was a key architect of the ambitious health reform effort in Massachusetts and in 2006 became an inaugural member of the Health Connector Board, the main implementing body for that effort. In 2009–2010, he served as a technical consultant to the Obama administration and

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# From the Author

Dear Readers,

We are at a pivotal point in our history. Debates rage about the role of American government. There are fundamental disagreements about the effectiveness and viability of the government policies that have shaped the lives of Americans for generations. The country appears to be intractably divided along political lines. In 2010, the most significant health care reform in decades, the Affordable Care Act, passed with no Republican support; eight years later it has been significantly weakened and is under attack as alternatively too intrusive, and not sufficiently ambitious. In 2017 we saw the passage of an enormous piece of tax legislation, the Tax Cut and Jobs Act, with no Democratic support; a year later it remained highly unpopular and its impacts are unclear and in dispute.

These are just two examples of the debates roiling our state, local, and federal governments about the role and reach of government. Each debate is accompanied by a series of questions, the answers to which will impact our lives. Should the government intervene to combat climate change, and if so how? Should the federal government play a larger role in local education decisions? What should be done about the enormous long-run fiscal costs of social insurance programs such as Medicare and Social Security? And what institutional reforms might be needed to allow government to function more effectively and with fewer policy stalemates?

To begin to answer questions like these, you need a clear understanding of the role of government in the economy. And that is where this book comes in. In each chapter you will encounter the broad range of policy areas addressed by governments in the United States and around the world. Topics range from externalities (such as environmental damage in extensively revised and updated [Chapter 6](#)), to public goods (such as education in [Chapter 11](#)), to social insurance programs (including a rich discussion of the primary driver of the costs of such programs, health care spending, in [Chapters 15 and 16](#)), to taxation (in [Chapters 18 to 25](#), with extensive revisions to reflect recent changes in U.S. tax law). This latest edition includes many of the exciting new topics of public policy debates, such as drug legalization, responses to climate change, congestion pricing, and universal basic income.

Within each area, you will learn about the key policy issues in three ways to ensure the richest possible understanding. The first is through the language of economic theory, using intuitive description, graphs, and mathematics to help you understand how economic tools are used to address critical questions. The second is through examples and applications, using vivid real-world descriptions to show you how these policy issues play out in reality and to clarify the lessons we can learn from that experience. These real-world examples, pulled from past and present, appear at the start of chapters, are fully integrated into them, and also appear in Application boxes, which have been written to reinforce learning and clarify the relevance of policy issues to our lives.

Third and finally, is an emphasis on understanding how public finance economists gather and interpret data. Empirical Evidence boxes have been included to help you connect theory and data to the formulation and outcomes of actual policy. These boxes explain the research process that generates major empirical findings. In my mind, this emphasis on data is key. At no other time has it been so important to know the facts, to distinguish facts from falsehoods, and to think critically about problems and politics. Doing so requires access to scientifically valid evidence on the public policy questions of the day. In the Empirical Evidence boxes and

throughout this book you will learn how experts in the field gather such evidence, and how it gets used to make key decisions.

I hope that you find the conversations and debates covered in this sixth edition as exhilarating as I do!

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## WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION



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The dynamic public policy environment of the past few years required a thorough updating of most aspects of the book. All statistics, data-related tables and figures, and applications have been updated completely to reflect the most recent available data. This has involved the updating of hundreds of facts and figures. In addition, a number of major changes were made throughout the book, including new examples, updating of existing chapter introductions, revisions to the Application and Empirical Evidence boxed features, and a number of new and thoroughly updated text discussions. Some highlights follow.

# Extensive Revisions Reflecting Current Public Policy Debates

Any public finance textbook must pay a great deal of attention to issues of externalities and public goods, taxation, and direct government spending, and this book is no exception. Given their importance to the current political discourse, these seven chapters have undergone the heaviest revisions in this edition: [Chapter 1, “Why Study Public Finance,”](#) [Chapter 6, “Externalities in Action: Environmental and Health Externalities,”](#) [Chapter 9, “Political Economy,”](#) [Chapter 16, “Health Insurance II: Medicare, Medicaid, and Health Care Reform,”](#) [Chapter 17, “Income Distribution and Welfare Programs,”](#) [Chapter 18, “Taxation: How It Works and What It Means,”](#) and [Chapter 24, “Taxation of Business Income.”](#)

Revisions in these chapters include:

- [Chapter 1](#) coverage of the ACA has been updated to reflect recent developments (including the impact of policies under the Trump administration). Includes all-new [Section 1.3: “The Questions of Public Finance Are Front and Center in Health Care Debates.”](#)
- The discussion of environmental policy has been extensively updated and revised in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#). The discussion of Kyoto has shifted to more current coverage of the Paris Agreement, and there is a new overview of the positions upheld by both sides of the global warming debate in [Chapter 5](#). The [Chapter 6](#) opener has been revised to address Trump administration positions on environmental policy (CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in particular) with regard to the EPA and the Obama-era Clean Power Plan (CPP). Other changes to [Chapter 6](#) include a new running example on particulate emissions (which replaces the example on acid rain), and a new section: “The Paris Agreement and the Future,” which covers the impact of that global agreement.
- [Chapter 9](#) now includes an entirely new section, “Increasing Polarization in American Politics,” that documents the dramatic polarization in the U.S. political system and provides a detailed discussion of the leading explanations for this divergence across parties.
- The discussion and data in both of the health care chapters ([Chapters 15](#) and [16](#)) have been thoroughly updated to address recent developments in the U.S. health care system. New coverage of inefficiencies in the U.S. health care system has been added in [Chapter 15](#). In [Chapter 16](#), coverage of the ACA has been updated throughout, and the section on “Early Evidence on the Effects of the ACA” has been thoroughly revamped and updated. And there is a new section: “The ACA Runs Into Trouble.”
- [Chapter 17](#) has been updated to reflect recent debates over redistribution policy in the United States, in particular, an entirely new section on the concept of “Universal Basic Income,” including relevant facts and a new empirical application.
- The [Chapter 18](#) opener has been revised to cover Trump’s 2017 tax reform, and the chapter itself has been revised to include details of the law and an analysis of its impact.
- [Chapter 24](#) has been completely revised to reflect recent debates over the corporate tax. A new opener focuses on the 2017 Trump tax overhaul, while the chapter includes a new Application on “The 2017 Tax Reform and Corporate Tax Wedges” and two new

Empirical Evidence boxes on “Corporate Taxation and Wages” and “Accelerated Depreciation and Investment.”

# Renewed Attention to Real-World Applications and Empirical Evidence

# Applications

The theoretical analysis that is at the core of public finance is most compelling if students can see the real-world applications that are informed by that theory. This book provides a multitude of policy applications and examples to help students appreciate the insights of public finance. Whenever a new topic is discussed, it is placed in the policy environment in the surrounding text. In addition, there are 63 separate policy Application features spread throughout the book and integrated into the text discussion to emphasize the importance of the material. These Applications cover topics such as the difficulties that policy makers face in valuing human life in cost-benefit analysis, the problem of rising health care costs and attempts to address them in the Affordable Care Act, appropriate and inappropriate business deductions under the income tax, and recent efforts by multinational corporations to evade taxation of profits. A third of the Applications are either new or updated. They include the following:



## APPLICATIONS

## New

- The Rise of Randomized Trials in Developing Economies ([Chapter 3, page 68](#))
- Congestion Pricing ([Chapter 5, page 133](#))
- Barriers to Tiebout and the “Great Divergence” ([Chapter 10, page 288](#))
- Addressing Student Loan Debt in the United States ([Chapter 11, page 329](#))
- Early Entitlements: Liquidity Versus Behavioral Biases ([Chapter 13, page 390](#))
- A Tax Break for Olympians? ([Chapter 18, page 578](#))
- Misperceived Taxes ([Chapter 20, page 631](#))
- The 2017 Tax Reform and Corporate Tax Wedges ([Chapter 24, page 762](#))

## Significantly Revised and/or Updated

- Modern Measles Epidemics ([Chapter 1, page 5](#))
- Efforts to Control the Deficit ([Chapter 4, page 94](#))
- The Financial Shenanigans of 2001 and 2018 ([Chapter 4, page 109](#))
- The Montreal Protocol ([Chapter 6, page 159](#))
- Valuing Life ([Chapter 8, page 224](#))
- Flood Insurance and the Samaritan's Dilemma ([Chapter 12, page 349](#))
- The Problems with Assessing Workers' Compensation Injuries ([Chapter 12, page 356](#))
- Mixed Proposals for Social Security Reform ([Chapter 13, page 396](#))
- The Duration of Social Insurance Benefits Around the World ([Chapter 14, page 408](#))
- Problems in Poverty Line Measurement ([Chapter 17, page 518](#))
- What Are Appropriate Business Deductions? ([Chapter 18, page 566](#))
- EITC Reform ([Chapter 21, page 671](#))
- Tax Evasion ([Chapter 25, page 777](#)) ■

# Empirical Evidence

The presentation of theory is greatly enhanced by a careful presentation of the empirical evidence that supports, or does not support, these theoretical models. In this book, empirical evidence is presented in two ways, to provide flexibility for instructors with different tastes for this material. Throughout the text, whenever a major theoretical point is made, there is a discussion of the relevant empirical findings on this same question, as well as the certainty that we have about particular empirical findings. In addition, for those who want to teach a more empirically oriented course, [Chapter 3](#) carefully explains how to interpret empirical results to students of public finance who may not have been exposed to sophisticated empirical methods. And, the text includes 35 Empirical Evidence boxes, which discuss in more detail the studies that underlie the empirical results presented and illustrate for students the process of research and the methods by which empirical economists answer central policy questions. Almost a third of the Empirical Evidence boxes are new or updated. They include the following:

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

## New

- The Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend and Labor Supply ([Chapter 17, page 546](#))
- Corporate Taxation and Wages ([Chapter 24, page 748](#))
- Accelerated Depreciation and Investment ([Chapter 24, page 755](#))
- What Determines Tax Compliance? ([Chapter 25, page 780](#))

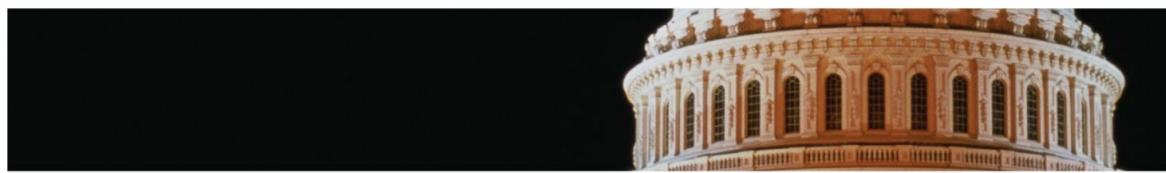
## Significantly Revised and/or Updated

- Estimating the Adverse Health Effects of Particulates ([Chapter 6, page 154](#))
- The Flypaper Effect: Here, Gone, and Back Again? ([Chapter 10, page 297](#))
- Estimating the Effects of Voucher Programs ([Chapter 11, page 319](#))
- Estimating the Return to Education ([Chapter 11, page 323](#))
- Estimating the Effects of School Quality ([Chapter 11, page 325](#))
- The Incidence of Taxation: Real-World Complications ([Chapter 19, page 608](#))

## Revised Collection of End-of-Chapter Problems

The text's end-of-chapter problems have been significantly revised to reflect the extensive updates and new content in this edition. Numerous new problems have been added and others have been updated and improved.

# PRESENTATION AND PEDAGOGY



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As inherently interesting as this material is, student interest in any text critically depends on the exposition and presentation. I have endeavored throughout the text to use an engaging and relatable conversational style that emphasizes the intuition, graphics, and mathematics of theory. Instructors using the book have reported that their students have found *Public Finance and Public Policy* to be an accessible, illuminating, and engaging read. Several features make this book appealing to potential users:

- Questions to Keep in Mind Questions at the start of each chapter alert students to the chapter’s “big ideas.”
- Integrated Applications The Applications allow students to step back and appreciate the policy relevance of the material, and they are integrated so that students understand the importance of applying the material they are learning.
- Empirical Evidence Boxes For instructors who wish to explore in more depth the nature of the empirical findings mentioned in the text, Empirical Evidence boxes are set aside from the main text to explain carefully the research process that generates the major empirical findings in public finance.
- Integration of Relevant Statistics Throughout the text, and in a number of graphs and tables, this text presents the statistics about the role of the government that emphasize the importance of this course. It is much easier to explain to students why they should care about social insurance, for example, when they clearly see graphics that illustrate the rise in that activity as a share of the U.S. government.
- Quick Hints A variety of highlighted Quick Hints emphasize the intuition of key theoretical points that students often find difficult: How does one decide where to draw deadweight loss triangles (see [page 51](#))? Why is the subsidy to employer-provided health insurance a subsidy to employees and not to employers (see [page 445](#))? How can the income effect of higher wages cause lower levels of labor supply (see [page 658](#))?
- Mathematical Appendices The text explains the material primarily through intuition and graphics, with relatively little reliance on mathematics. Nevertheless, many instructors want to use mathematics to make key points about tax incidence, public goods provision, adverse selection in insurance markets, optimal taxation, and other topics. Five appendices develop the mathematics of these topics. Two additional appendices focus on the details of empirical analysis.
- Marginal Definitions Key terms are boldfaced throughout the text, and marginal definitions allow students to focus on the key concepts.
- Full-Color Graphics Full-color graphics allow students to better understand the graphical analysis that can often confuse them.
- Questions and Problems Chapters conclude with an average of 15 questions and problems. Questions on empirical analysis that draw on material in [Chapter 3](#) are

denoted with an  , and there is a careful delineation between basic and more advanced problems.

# INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES



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For instructors, the catalog site [macmillanlearning.com](https://www.macmillanlearning.com) provides the following downloadable resources:

- **Test Bank** The Test Bank, revised this edition by Heather Luea (Kansas State University), provides a range of questions appropriate for assessing your students' comprehension, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis skills. The Test Bank offers multiple-choice and short-answer questions designed for comprehensive coverage of the text concepts. Questions are categorized according to difficulty level (easy, moderate, and difficult), and Bloom's level (Remembering, Understanding, Analyzing, Applying, and Evaluating) and are tagged to their appropriate textbook section.
- **Lecture Slides** A series of lecture slides provides comprehensive coverage of the material in each chapter. The slides are designed to assist with lecture preparation and presentations by incorporating key graphs from the textbook with detailed outlines of key concepts. The slides can be customized to suit instructors' individual needs and serve as a fantastic resource when building a lecture presentation.
- **Images from the Textbook** Instructors have access to every figure and table in the new edition in high-resolution JPEG format and in the form of Power-Point slides.
- **Solutions Manual** Instructors have access to the files for the detailed solutions to the text's end-of-chapter problems.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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# Chapter 1 Why Study Public Finance?



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

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## Questions to keep in mind

- What is public finance, and what are the key questions that the field addresses?
- What are the key facts about the size and growth of government and the distribution of taxes and spending?
- How does the debate over health care reform in the United States reflect the key questions of public finance?

On March 23, 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, commonly known as the ACA. This law proposed to transform the system of health care coverage and financing in the United States.

Under the ACA, the government was projected to spend nearly \$1 trillion on public health insurance and subsidies to private health insurance coverage between 2010 and 2019. This spending would be offset by spending reductions on existing public insurance programs and new taxes on the medical sector and the wealthy.

As a result of the ACA, insurance companies can no longer discriminate against sick patients, and individuals who can afford health insurance must purchase it or pay a penalty. In addition, dozens of new initiatives are being undertaken in an attempt to control runaway health care spending in the United States. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected that, when the ACA was fully implemented in 2017, 26 million more Americans would have health insurance and that the government's deficit would fall by more than \$100 billion from passage in 2010 through 2019. On the other hand, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services projected that the law would, at the same time, raise health care spending in the United States by 1–2% by 2019.<sup>1</sup>

The ACA is likely the most important piece of social policy legislation enacted in the United States in the past 40 years. Yet, despite its passage, the ACA continues to be debated ferociously in Congress, in the states, and in campaigns at all levels of government. Supporters argue that the bill corrects failed insurance markets, reduces the economic burden on the uninsured, and moves to control health care costs in the long run. Representative Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat who was Speaker of the House of Representatives during the initial debates over the ACA in 2009–2010, said the law was

. . . personal for millions of families who've gone into bankruptcy under the weight of rising health care costs. . . . And it's personal for 45,000 Americans and their families who have lost a loved one each year because they didn't and couldn't get health insurance. . . . Today, we have the opportunity to complete the great unfinished business of our society and pass health insurance reform for all Americans that is a right and not a privilege.<sup>2</sup>

President Obama made his argument that

This law will cut costs and make coverage more affordable for families and small businesses. It's reform that brings—that begins to bring down our government's long-term structural deficit. It's reform that finally extends the opportunity to purchase coverage to the millions who currently don't have it—and includes tough new consumer protections to guarantee greater stability, security, and control for the millions who do have health insurance.<sup>3</sup>

Opponents of the legislation viewed the ACA as an unwarranted expansion of government power into the health care sector—and an enormous expansion of government spending at a time of record deficits. Representative John Boehner, a Republican who succeeded Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House, issued a press release entitled “ObamaCare ‘Will Increase Spending, Increase Taxes, & Destroy Jobs in America,’” and said that

Between reports from the Kaiser Family Foundation and the *Seattle Times* indicating that health care costs will skyrocket under ObamaCare, the Democrats’ claims that their government takeover of health care will make health insurance more affordable doesn’t pass the straight-faced test.<sup>4</sup>

After the vote to pass the ACA in 2010, Republican Representative Ron Paul said,

It was truly a sad weekend on the House floor as we witnessed further dismantling of the Constitution, disregard of the will of the people, explosive expansion of the reach of government, unprecedented corporate favoritism, and the impending end of quality healthcare as we know it.<sup>5</sup>

The debate over the ACA did not slow with the implementation of the major provisions of the law in 2014. Significant problems in the roll-out of the federal website that was the public face of the ACA and numerous complaints of disruption among existing insurance relationships led to a further erosion in public support for the law. Premiums rose rapidly in some of the new insurance exchanges established by the ACA. The law had clear successes, with 20 million Americans estimated to have gained insurance, and budgetary costs that were below projections.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, the law remained unpopular, and opposition to the ACA was a key plank of Donald Trump’s successful campaign for the presidency in 2016. Since that election, the Trump administration has unraveled significant components of the ACA, although most of the insurance coverage gains appear to have been maintained.

The controversies over the proper role of the government in dealing with health care coverage and costs raise the fundamental questions addressed by the branch of economics known as *public finance*. The goal of public finance is to *understand the proper role of the government in the economy*. On the expenditures side of public finance, we ask: What kind of services should the government provide, if any? Why should the government be spending hundreds of billions of dollars to provide health insurance to the uninsured (to cite just one example)? More generally, why is the government the primary provider of goods and services such as highways, education, and transfers to the unemployed, while the provision of goods and services such as clothing, entertainment, and property insurance is generally left to the private sector? On the revenue side of public finance, we ask: How much should the government tax its citizens, and how should that amount be related to the economic circumstances of those individuals? What kinds of activities should be taxed or be given tax relief in difficult times? What effect do taxes have on the functioning of the economy?

## 1.1 The Four Questions of Public Finance

In the simplest terms, [public finance](#) is the study of the role of the government in the economy. This is a very broad definition. This study involves answering the [four questions of public finance](#):

- *When* should the government intervene in the economy?
- *How* might the government intervene?
- *What* is the effect of those interventions on economic outcomes?
- *Why* do governments choose to intervene in the way that they do?

### **public finance**

The study of the role of the government in the economy.

### **four questions of public finance**

When should the government intervene in the economy? How might the government intervene? What is the effect of those interventions on economic outcomes? Why do governments choose to intervene in the way that they do?

In this section, we explore these four questions within the context of a specific example: the market for *health insurance*, in which individuals pay a monthly premium to insurance companies, in return for which insurance companies pay the individuals' medical bills if they are ill. This is only one of many markets in which the government is involved, but it is a particularly useful example because health care spending is the single largest and fastest-growing part of the U.S. government's budget.

## When Should the Government Intervene in the Economy?

To understand the reason for government intervention, think of the economy as a series of trades between producers (firms) and consumers. A trade is *efficient* if it makes at least one party better off without making the other party worse off. The total efficiency of the economy is maximized when as many efficient trades as possible are made.

The fundamental lesson of basic microeconomics is that, in most cases, the *competitive market equilibrium is the most efficient outcome for society*—that is, it is the outcome that maximizes the gains from efficient trades. As discussed in much more detail in [Chapter 2](#), the free adjustment of prices guarantees that, in competitive market equilibrium, supply equals demand. When supply equals demand, all trades that are valued by both producers and consumers are being made. Any good that consumers value above its cost of production will be produced and consumed; goods that consumers value at less than their cost of production will not be produced or consumed.

If the competitive market equilibrium is the most efficient outcome for society, why do governments intervene in the operation of some of these markets? There are two reasons governments may want to intervene in market economies: market failures and redistribution.

### Market Failures

The first motivation for government involvement in the economy is the existence of [market failures](#), problems that cause a market economy to deliver an outcome that does not maximize efficiency. Throughout this book, we discuss a host of market failures that impede the operation of the market forces you learned about in basic microeconomics. Here, we briefly explore a failure in the health insurance market that may cause its equilibrium

outcome to be inefficient.

**market failure**

A problem that causes the market economy to deliver an outcome that does not maximize efficiency.

At first glance, the market for health insurance seems to be a standard textbook competitive market. Health insurance is supplied by a large number of insurance companies and demanded by a large number of households. In the market equilibrium where supply equals demand, social efficiency should be maximized: anyone who values health insurance above its cost of production is able to buy insurance.

In 2010, before the Affordable Care Act, there were 49 million people without health insurance in the United States, or 18.5% of the non-elderly population (as we'll discuss in [Chapter 15](#), the elderly are provided universal health coverage in the United States under the Medicare program).<sup>7</sup> The existence of such a large number of uninsured does not, however, imply that the market doesn't work. After all, there are many more Americans who don't have a large-screen TV, or a new car, or a home of their own. That a small minority of the population is uninsured does not by itself prove that there is a problem in the market; it just implies that those without insurance don't value it enough to buy it at existing prices.

Is this equilibrium outcome, which leaves 49 million people without health insurance, the most efficient outcome for society? It may not be, as the following example shows. Suppose that I am uninsured and, as a result, do not get my yearly vaccination for influenza. By not getting my flu shot, I increase my risk of getting the flu and increase the risk of passing it on to all of the students who come into contact with me and have not had flu shots. If these students become ill, their medical costs will rise, and their performance in class will worsen. Thus, the total or *social* value of health insurance is not just the improvement it causes in my health but also the improvement it causes in my students' health, which lowers their medical costs and improves class performance. Thus, I should have insurance if the total social value, both to myself and to others with whom I have contact, exceeds the cost of that insurance.

When I make my insurance decision, however, I don't consider that total social value; I only consider the value to myself. Suppose that I value the insurance at less than its cost because I don't mind getting the flu but that society values the insurance at more than its cost because it is very costly for my students to go to the doctor and to perform poorly in class if they get sick. In this situation, I won't buy insurance, even though society (which includes me and my students) would be better off if I did. In this case, the competitive outcome has not maximized total social efficiency.

This is an example of a *negative externality*, whereby my decision imposes on others costs that I don't bear. As a result of this negative externality, I am underinsuring myself from society's perspective because I don't take into account the full costs that my medical decisions impose on others. We discuss externalities in much more detail in [Chapters 5 and 6](#), but this example illustrates the type of market failure that can cause the competitive equilibrium to deliver a socially inefficient outcome. Later chapters in the book discuss other types of market failure as well.

If the competitive equilibrium does not lead to the efficiency-maximizing outcome, there is the *potential* for efficiency improvement through government intervention. Because the government can take into account not only my costs and benefits but also the costs and benefits to others, the government can compare the social costs with the social benefits more accurately and induce me to buy insurance if the total benefits exceed the total costs. As we emphasize in answering the fourth question, however, the fact that the private market

outcome is not efficiency-maximizing does not imply that government intervention will necessarily improve efficiency.



#### APPLICATION

## Modern Measles Epidemics

One of the illnesses for which all children are supposed to be immunized is measles. Measles is transmitted from person to person by respiratory droplets and is characterized by a high fever and severe rash that lasts five to six days. In the early 1960s, there were thought to be 3–4 million cases annually in the United States, resulting in 500 reported deaths each year. Then, in 1963, a measles vaccine was introduced. Measles vaccination greatly reduces, but does not eliminate, the chance of contracting measles, and the vaccine can wear off over time if you don't get periodic “booster” shots to reactivate the immunity. As a result of the vaccine, measles cases had become relatively rare in the United States by the 1980s, with fewer than 3,000 cases reported per year and very few deaths.

Over the period from 1989 to 1991, however, there was a huge resurgence in measles in the United States, with more than 50,000 cases and 123 deaths from a disease thought to be largely eradicated. This outbreak resulted from very low immunization rates among disadvantaged inner-city youths. One-third of all of the new cases were in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston, and one-half of those children who contracted measles had not been immunized, even though many had regular contact with a physician. These unimmunized children were imposing a negative externality on other children who had received their immunizations but for whom immunization may have worn off. There was a negative externality because the unimmunized children raised the risk that these other children would become sick, without bearing any of the costs of raising this risk.

The federal government responded to this health crisis in the early 1990s, first through publicly encouraging parents to get their children immunized and then through an initiative that paid for the vaccines for low-income families. The result was impressive. Immunization rates, which had never been above 70% before the epidemic, rose to 90% by 1995.<sup>8</sup> And from 2001 to 2011, there were, on average, only 62 cases per year.

But the problem of measles epidemics was back in the news in 2014 as the number of cases reached a level not seen since the early 1990s: 644 cases in 27 states.<sup>9</sup> Most newsworthy was a measles outbreak in Disneyland in Anaheim, California, in the winter of 2014–2015. From December 28, 2014, to March 13, 2015, 145 people from seven states had measles linked to the outbreak at Disneyland.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for that resurgence was the refusal of a large number of parents to immunize their children, despite the expansion of public education and the availability of low-cost immunization. This refusal was often linked to a widely cited (but now completely discredited) relationship between childhood vaccinations and autism, based on a 1998 study in the British journal *The Lancet* that claimed to have found such a relationship. Subsequently, however, study after study has repudiated this finding, and the article was formally retracted in 2010, with *The Lancet* editors announcing that it was “utterly clear, without any ambiguity at all, that the statements in the paper were utterly false.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, a strong “anti-vaccine” movement had taken root, resulting in sizable

pockets of nonimmunized children in some areas. For instance, on Vashon Island, Washington, 17% of kindergartners—greater than nine times the national average<sup>12</sup>—failed to receive their shots in 2013 due to a “personal/philosophical” exemption.<sup>13</sup> And in 2017, the state of Minnesota battled its largest measles outbreak in 30 years. Those cases were concentrated in the Somali-American community, which had been targeted by anti-vaccine advocates. As a result, the vaccine rate in that community fell from above 92% in 2004 to 42% in 2014.<sup>14</sup> Research has confirmed the intuition that outbreaks are far more likely to happen in these areas with lower vaccination rates.<sup>15</sup>

This new rise in measles has raised questions of whether government policy needs to go further. One example is a 2014 law enacted in California following the Disneyland outbreak that required all children to be vaccinated against specific contagious diseases before enrolling in California schools.<sup>16</sup> The effect of this law has been powerful. In 2014, one in three students in California lived in a county with a vaccination rate below 90%; by 2017, virtually none did.<sup>17</sup> Such laws are spreading internationally as well; for example, New South Wales, Australia passed a “no jab, no play” policy that bans unvaccinated kids from preschool and day care and fines the directors of schools that admit such children.<sup>18</sup>

The balance for the government between ensuring public health and respecting individual preferences is one of the more significant policy issues that we discuss throughout this book.

## Redistribution

The second reason for government intervention is **redistribution**, the shifting of resources from some groups in society to others. Think of the economy as a pie, the size of which is determined by the social efficiency of the economy. If there are no market failures, then the private market forces of demand and supply maximize the size of the pie; if there are market failures, there is the potential for the government to increase the size of the pie.

### redistribution

The shifting of resources from some groups in society to others.

The government may care not only about the size of the pie, however, but also its distribution, or the size of each person’s slice. For reasons we discuss in [Chapter 2](#), society may decide that the resource allocations provided by the market economy are unfair; for example, society may view another dollar of consumption by a very rich person as less valuable than another dollar of consumption by a very poor person. The primary way to correct such misallocations is through government interventions that redistribute resources from those groups that society has deemed “too well off” to those groups that society has deemed “not well off enough.” For example, in the United States in 2010, 70% of the uninsured were in families with incomes below \$50,000. Society may feel that it is appropriate to redistribute from those with insurance, who tend to have higher incomes, to those without, who tend to have lower incomes.

In some cases, society can undertake redistributions that change only the distribution of the pieces and not the size of the pie itself. Usually, however, redistributing resources from one group to another will entail *efficiency losses*. These losses occur because the act of redistribution causes individuals to shift their behavior away from the efficiency-maximizing point. For example, if we tax the rich to distribute money to the poor, then this tax may cause the rich to work less hard (because they don’t get to take home as much money from their work) and the poor to work less hard (because they don’t have to work as hard to maintain their living standards). When these groups work less hard, they don’t produce goods that

would be valued by consumers at more than they cost to produce, so social efficiency is reduced.

In general, then, there will be a trade-off between the size of the pie and the distribution of the pie, which we call an *equity–efficiency trade-off*. Societies typically have to choose between pies that are larger and more unequally distributed and pies that are smaller and more equally distributed.

## How Might the Government Intervene?

Having decided whether to intervene, the next question is how the government should do so. There are several different general approaches that the government can take to intervention.

### Tax or Subsidize Private Sale or Purchase

One way that the government can try to address failures in the private market is to use the *price mechanism*, whereby government policy is used to change the price of a good in one of two ways:

1. Through *taxes*, which raise the price for private sales or purchases of goods that are overproduced, or
2. Through *subsidies*, which lower the price for private sales or purchases of goods that are underproduced.

Returning to the example of health insurance, one key element of the ACA is the subsidization of health insurance costs for low-income families, although those subsidies are delivered through the tax code as a tax credit that offsets the cost of insurance.

### Restrict or Mandate Private Sale or Purchase

Alternatively, the government can directly restrict private sale or purchase of goods that are overproduced or mandate private purchase of goods that are underproduced and force individuals to buy that good. The ACA mandates that individuals purchase health insurance or face a tax penalty. Many other nations, such as Germany and Switzerland, mandate that almost all citizens have health insurance coverage.

### Public Provision

Another alternative is to have the government provide the good directly in order to potentially attain the level of consumption that maximizes social welfare. In the United States, more than one-quarter of the population has insurance that is provided to it directly by the government; in Canada and many other developed nations, the entire population of the country has insurance that is provided directly by the government.

### Public Financing of Private Provision

Finally, governments may want to influence the level of consumption but may not want to involve themselves directly in the provision of a good. In such cases, the government can finance private entities to provide the desired level of provision. For example, the 2003 legislation to add a prescription drug benefit to the U.S. Medicare insurance program for the disabled and elderly involves federal government reimbursement of private insurers to provide prescription drug insurance.

As you can see, there is a wide spectrum of policy options. When considering how to intervene, policy makers should evaluate alternative options carefully before deciding which option is best. This evaluation leads naturally to the third question: How can we evaluate

alternative policy options?

## What Is the Effect of Those Interventions on Economic Outcomes?

Answering this third question requires that policy makers understand the implications of each policy option under consideration. This evaluation is the focus of *empirical public finance*, which involves gathering data and developing statistical models to assess how people and firms might respond to policy interventions. We discuss empirical public finance in much more detail in [Chapter 3](#).

In assessing the effects of government interventions, policy makers must keep in mind that any policy has *direct and indirect effects*.

### Direct Effects

The **direct effects** of government interventions are those effects that would be predicted if individuals did not change their behavior in response to the interventions. For example, suppose that in 2010, the government had decided to address the problem of the uninsured by providing free public health care, as is done in the United Kingdom. The government computed that, with 49 million uninsured and an average cost of treating each uninsured person of \$2,500 per year, this intervention would cost about \$125 billion per year. This is a huge amount, but it was much smaller than existing spending on health care by the U.S. government (\$818 billion in 2010). According to this calculation, the government could have covered all of the uninsured for less than 3.5% of the federal budget of \$3.7 trillion.<sup>19</sup>

**direct effects**

The effects of government interventions that would be predicted if individuals did not change their behavior in response to the interventions.

### Indirect Effects

The **indirect effects** of government intervention are effects that arise only because individuals change their behavior in response to the interventions. For example, being uninsured is something that people can change about themselves; it is not a fixed personal characteristic such as being male or African American. By providing free health care to those who are uninsured, the government provides strong incentives for those paying for their own health insurance to drop that insurance and take part in the government's free health care program.

**indirect effects**

The effects of government interventions that arise only because individuals change their behavior in response to the interventions.

Suppose that half of the non-elderly who are privately insured behaved this way. This would add another 88 million persons to the pool using this public source of health care. If each person in this group also costs \$2,500 on average, the government cost of the program would almost triple to \$340 billion per year! On the other hand, if only 10% of the privately insured behaved this way, the government cost of the program would rise to only \$165 billion per year.

The key question for evaluating free public health care for the uninsured is, therefore: How many privately insured will drop their privately purchased coverage to join a free public option? This is an empirical question. The public finance economist needs some means of drawing on data to make the best estimate of the extent of such movement. Throughout this book, we discuss a variety of ways that empirical public finance economists make such estimates and how economists use these to inform their understanding of the effects of

alternative government interventions.



#### APPLICATION

## The CBO: Government Scorekeepers

Empirical economics is not just the plaything of academics. The methods and results derived from empirical economics are central to the development of public policy at all levels of government. A particularly good example of the power of empirical economics is provided by the CBO.

The CBO was created in 1975 with a mission to provide Congress with the objective, timely, nonpartisan analyses needed for economic and budget decisions.<sup>20</sup> The CBO increasingly plays a critical role as a “scorekeeper” for government policy debates. Legislative spending proposals that are to become law must first have their costs estimated by the analysts at the CBO. Given budgetary pressures on the federal government, policy makers have increasingly referred their legislation to the CBO earlier and earlier in the development process. If they know what “score” their spending proposal will receive (i.e., how much the CBO says it will cost), they can tailor the proposal to fit within a given budget target.



*“We don’t use the Congressional Budget Office.”*

Peter Steiner/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

It is not an overstatement to say that the economists who work at the CBO frequently hold the fate of a legislative proposal in their hands. Indeed, the large price tag that the CBO assigned to the Clinton administration’s plan to reform health care in the United States in 1994 is often cited as a key factor in the defeat of that proposal.<sup>21</sup> The CBO played an equally influential role in the 2009–2010 debate over health care reform that led to the ACA—as one reporter wrote, “the 25-page ‘score’ of the legislation was treated as holy writ in Washington.”<sup>22</sup> And when the CBO reported in the spring of 2017 that Republican efforts to repeal the ACA could raise the number of uninsured by more than 30 million Americans, it was viewed as a death knell for repeal efforts.<sup>23</sup> The methods we study in [Chapter 3](#) and many of the results that we learn about throughout this book are central to the internal deliberations of the analysts at the CBO. ■

## Why Do Governments Choose to Intervene in the Way That They Do?

Finally, as students of public policy, we must recognize that we cannot simply model governments as benign actors who intervene only to mitigate market failures or assure the proper distribution of social resources. In practice, the government faces the difficult problem of aggregating the preferences of millions of citizens into a coherent set of policy decisions, raising the fourth question of public finance: Why do governments do what they do? Note the important difference between this question and the second (How should governments intervene?). The second question was a *normative* question, one concerned with how things should be done. This is a *positive* question, one concerned with why things are the way they are.

To answer this question, we turn in [Chapter 9](#) to the tools of **political economy**, the theory of how governments make public policy decisions. Governments face enormous challenges in figuring out what the public wants and how to choose policies that match those wants. In addition, governments may be motivated by much more than simply correcting market failures or redistributing income. Just as there are a host of market failures that can interfere with the welfare-maximizing outcome from the private market, there are a host of *government failures* that can lead to inappropriate government interventions. Politicians must consider a wide variety of viewpoints and pressures, only two of which are the desire to design policies that maximize economic efficiency and redistribute resources in a socially preferred manner.

**political economy**  
The theory of how the political process produces decisions that affect individuals and the economy.

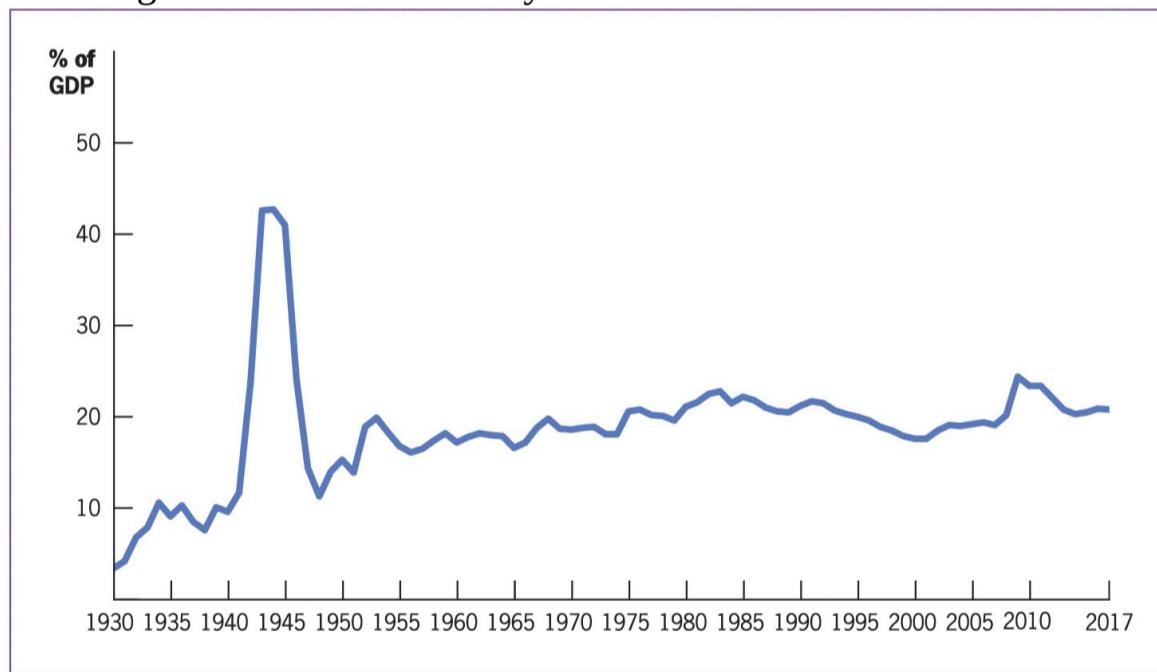
One only needs to look at the wide variety of health insurance policies in very similar countries to see that governments may have more in mind than efficiency or redistribution. Why does the United States rely primarily on private health insurance, while Canada, a similar country bordering the United States, relies on national public health insurance? Why does Germany mandate private health insurance coverage, while the United Kingdom provides free national health care? Coming back to the first question (When should the government intervene?), then, we have an additional concern that must be addressed before recommending government intervention: In practice, will the government actually reduce or solve the problem? Or will government failures cause the problem to grow worse?

# 1.2 Why Study Public Finance? Facts on Government in the United States and Around the World

Thus far, we have clarified what public finance is. But it still may not be clear why you should spend your precious time on this topic. What makes public finance so compelling is the dominant role that governments play in our everyday lives. In this section, we detail that role by walking you through the key facts about government in the United States and other developed nations. In addition, to motivate the study of public finance, we propose some interesting questions that arise from these facts.

## The Size and Growth of Government

[Figure 1-1](#) shows the growth in federal government spending in the United States over the twentieth century. In 1930, the federal government's activity accounted for only about 3.4% of gross domestic product (GDP). Government spending expanded during the Great Depression and grew even more dramatically during World War II, hitting a peak of almost half of GDP in 1944. From the 1950s through the present, the size of government has averaged around 20% of GDP, although it grows during recessions such as those in the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and the early and late 2000s, reaching nearly one-quarter of GDP in 2009 before settling back down at 20.3% by 2014.



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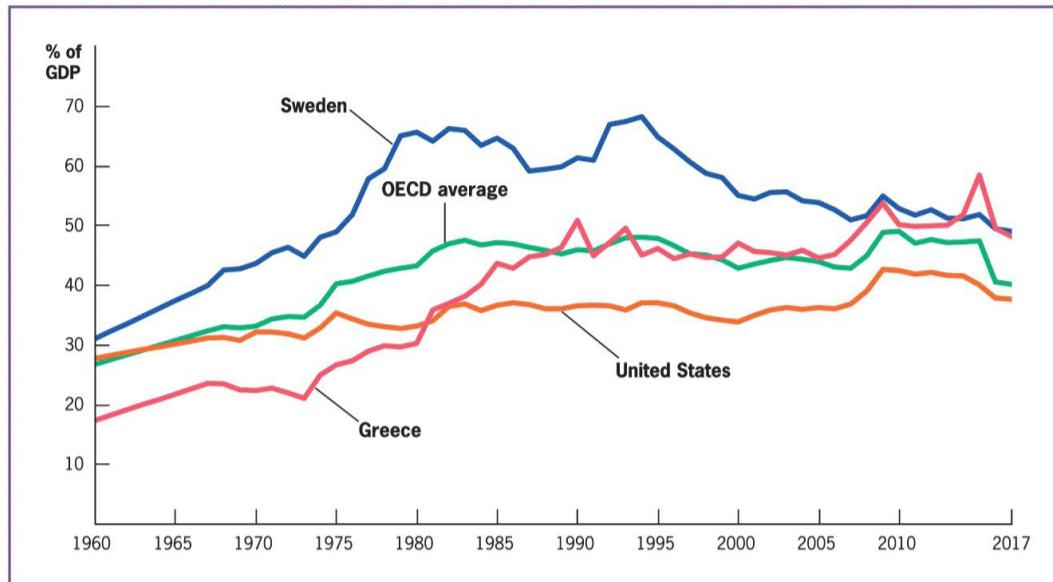
■ FIGURE 1-1

Federal Government Spending as a Percentage of GDP, 1930–2017 • Over the past 90 years, federal government spending (as a share of GDP) has grown from 3% to 20%. The huge spike in spending over the 1941–1948 period was due to the massive increase in defense spending.

Data from: [Office of Management and Budget \(2019\)](#), Table 1.2.

This growth is mirrored in other developed nations, as seen in [Figure 1-2](#). This figure shows the growth of government spending since 1960 in the United States, Sweden, and Greece and the average for the industrialized nations that are part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The patterns are quite interesting. In 1960, the United States was squarely in line with the average of the OECD in terms of the government spending share of GDP.<sup>24</sup> Yet, government growth was much faster in other

OECD nations in the 1960s and 1970s than in the United States, so that by 1980, the U.S. government share was much smaller. Greece started with a government share well below that of the United States in 1960, but government tripled as a share of Greece's GDP so that today its share is much larger than the U.S. government's share.<sup>25</sup> In 1960, Sweden's government's share of GDP was similar to other nations', but this share grew enormously so that by the early 1990s, government spending was about two-thirds of Sweden's GDP. Since then, Sweden's government share has fallen rapidly and now accounts for slightly less than half of GDP, comparable to Greece.<sup>26</sup>



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## ■ FIGURE 1-2

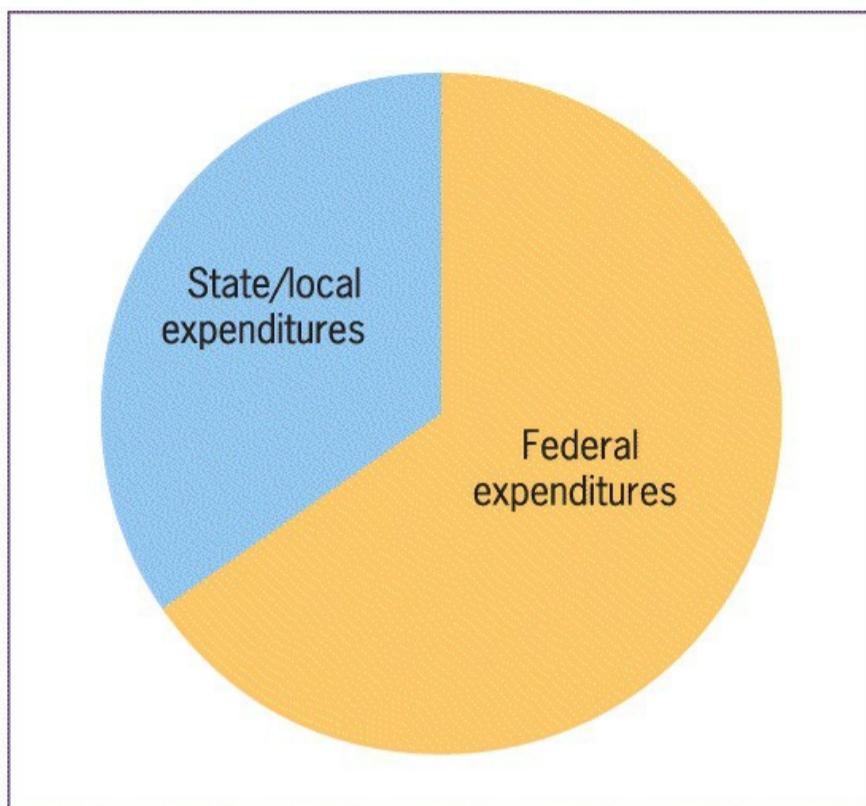
Total Government Spending Across Developed Nations, 1960–2017 • Government spending as a share of GDP has grown throughout the developed world, but the pace of growth has varied. The United States has seen a modest growth in its government share over this period, while government spending in Greece has more than tripled as a share of the economy.

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018\)](#).

- What explains the growth in government spending over the twentieth century?

## Decentralization

A key feature of governments is the degree of *centralization* across local and national government units—that is, the extent to which spending is concentrated at higher (federal) levels or lower (state and local) levels. [Figure 1-3](#) shows government spending in the United States divided into the share of spending by the federal government and the share of spending by other levels of government: state, county, and local governments. The federal government provides the majority of government spending in the United States, but other government spending is quite large as well, amounting to roughly one-third of total government spending and more than 11% of GDP. The level of centralization (the share of spending done by the federal government) varies widely across nations, sometimes rising to almost 100% in countries where the federal government does almost all of the government spending.



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■ FIGURE 1-3

Federal vs. State/Local Government Spending, 2018 • State and local spending today amounts to roughly one-third of total government spending in the United States, at more than 11% of GDP.

Data from: [Office of Management and Budget \(2019\)](#), Table 12.1.

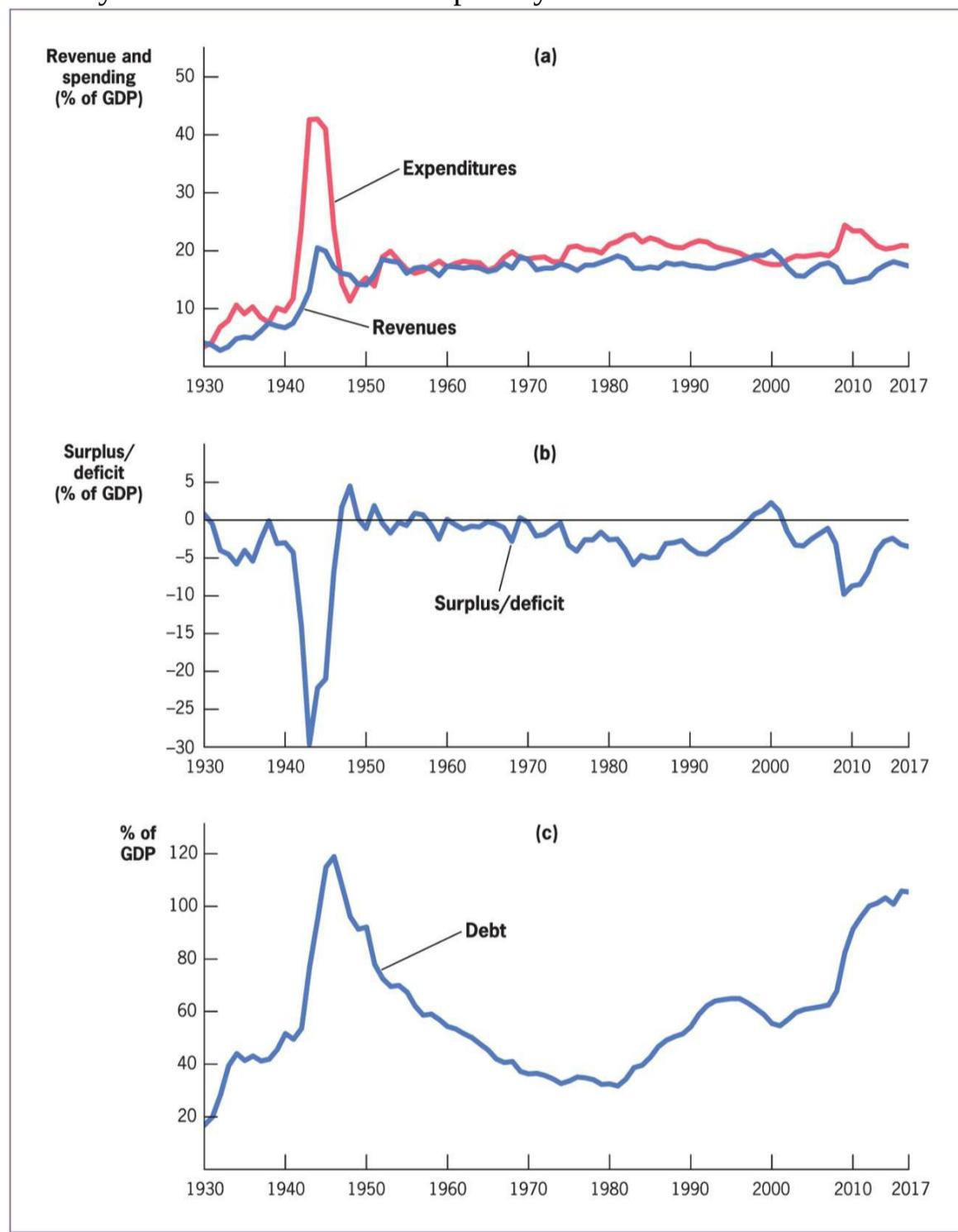
- What is the appropriate extent of centralization and decentralization in government activity?

## Spending, Taxes, Deficits, and Debts

When you run a household, you live on a budget. Outflows of cash for groceries, rent, clothing, entertainment, and other uses must be financed by inflows of cash from work or other sources. Any excess of income over spending is a *cash flow surplus* that can be saved to finance your own spending in future periods or, by way of an inheritance (also referred to as a *bequest*), your children's spending after you die. Any shortfall of income below spending is a *cash flow deficit* and must be financed by past savings or by borrowing from others. Any borrowing results in the buildup of some household *debt*, which must ultimately be repaid from future inflows of cash.

Fundamentally, the finances of the government are no different. Its outflows are government spending and its inflows are tax revenues. If revenues exceed spending, then there is a budget surplus; if revenues fall short of spending, there is a budget deficit. Each dollar of government deficit adds to the stock of government debt. That is, the *deficit* measures the year-to-year shortfall of revenues relative to spending; the *debt* measures the accumulation of past deficits over time. This government debt must be financed by borrowing from either citizens of one's own local or national area, or by borrowing from citizens of other areas or other nations.

The three panels of [Figure 1-4](#) show government spending and revenues, the deficit or surplus, and the level of government debt for the U.S. federal government. As shown in panels (a) and (b), with the exception of an enormous increase in spending unmatched by increased taxation during World War II (1941–1945), the federal government's budget was close to balanced until the late 1960s. From the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s, there was a relatively large deficit that rose to about 5% of GDP. This deficit shrank dramatically in the 1990s and actually turned into a sizeable surplus by the end of the decade.



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#### FIGURE 1-4

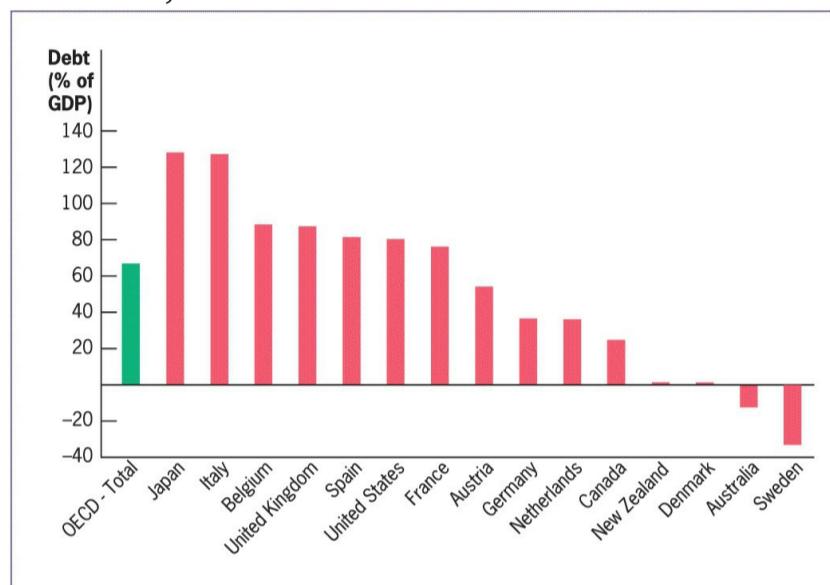
Federal Revenues and Expenditures, Surplus or Deficit, and Debt, 1930–2017 • For most of the twentieth century, except for the World War II period, federal government receipts kept pace with expenditures, leading to a small national debt. But expenditures have exceeded receipts by several percentage points of GDP on average since the 1970s. The resulting federal debt is now at more than 100% of GDP.

Data: [Office of Management and Budget \(2019\)](#), Table 1.2.

But the United States was back in deficit by the early twenty-first century, at levels similar to those in the 1970s. The deficit had become very large in the late 2000s, reaching levels not

seen in the postwar period. By the mid-teens, increases in revenues and decreases in spending brought the deficit back to the level typical of the past 40 years. But expansions in spending and cuts in taxes during the Trump Administration have put the deficit back on an increasing track.

The resulting implications for the federal debt are shown in panel (c) of [Figure 1-4](#). The stock of debt rose sharply in World War II, then fell steadily until large deficits caused it to rise in the 1980s. The debt has risen considerably since, with a brief pause in the mid- to late 1990s, and now is more than 103% of GDP. [Figure 1-5](#) compares the level of U.S. debt with the level of debt of other developed nations. The United States has higher debt levels than most other comparable nations, but its load remains well below others.



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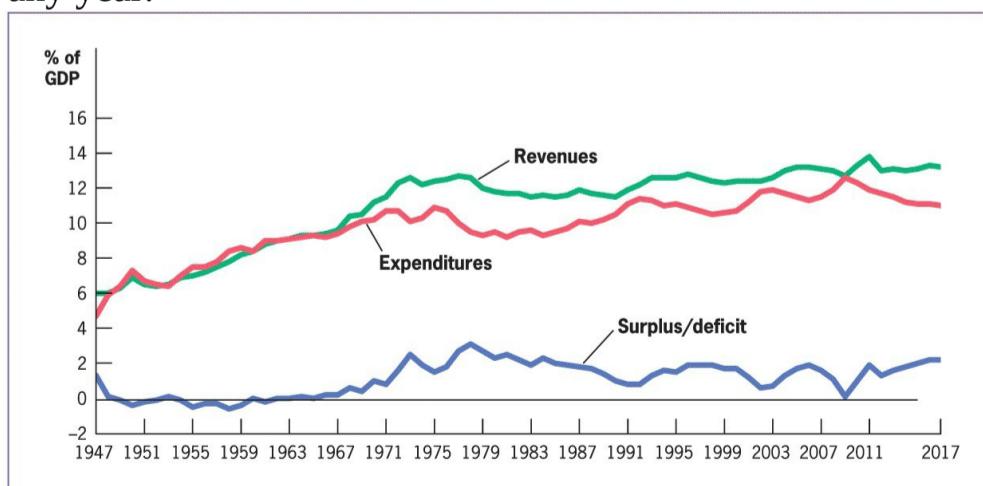
### ■ FIGURE 1-5

Debt Levels of OECD Nations in 2017 • The United States has debt levels somewhat above the OECD average, but there is wide variation across developed nations.

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018\)](#).

- What are the costs of having larger deficits and a larger national debt?

[Figure 1-6](#) shows the spending and revenues of state and local governments over time in the United States. Interestingly, unlike the federal government, state and local governments' budgets are typically in surplus: there is very little deficit overall across the state and local governments in any year.



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## ■ FIGURE 1-6

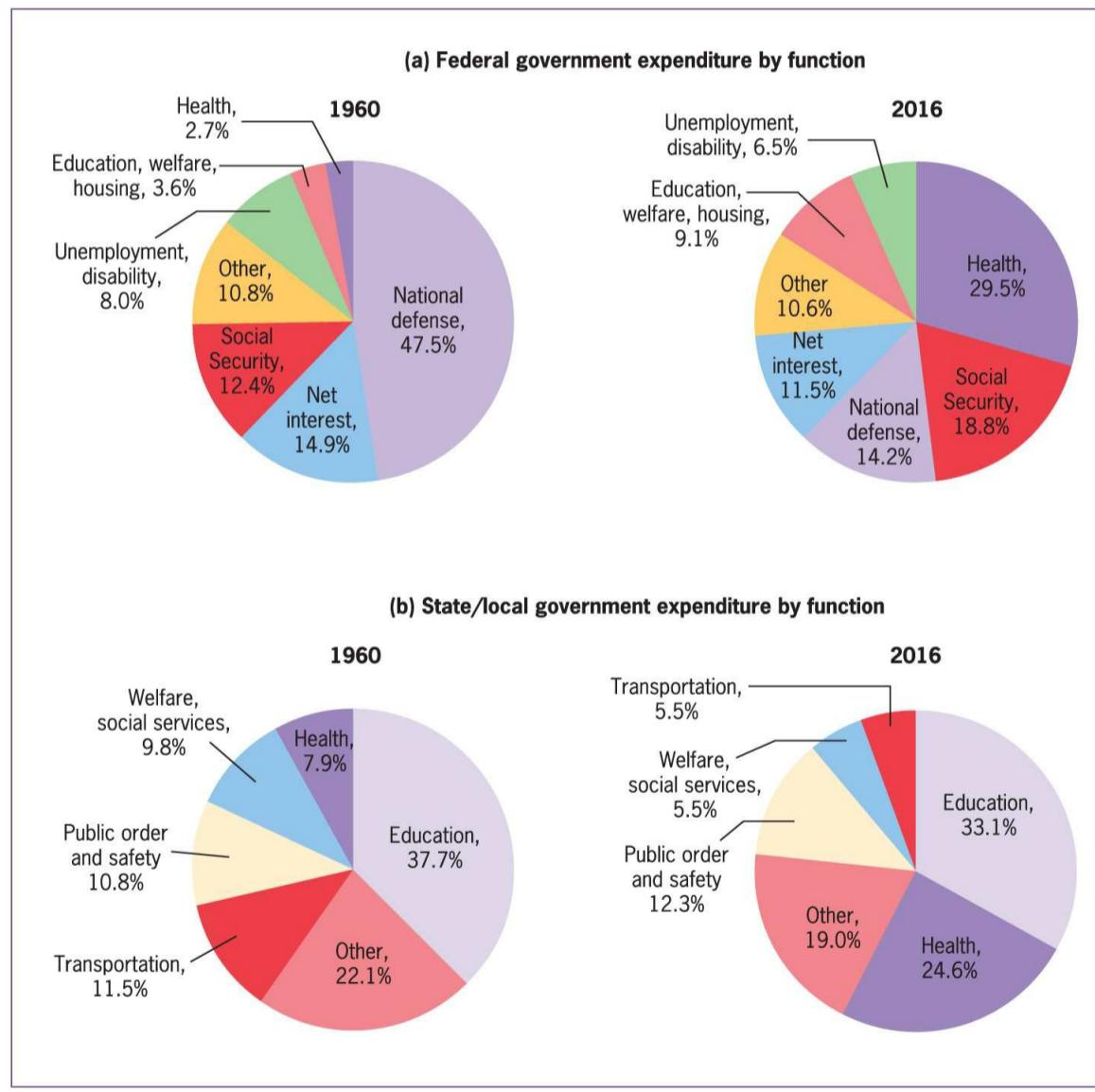
State and Local Government Receipts, Expenditures, and Surplus, 1947–2017 • State and local revenues almost always exceed expenditures.

Data from: [Office of Budget and Management \(2019\)](#), Table 12.1.

- Why are state and local governments able to balance their budgets, while the federal government is not?

## Distribution of Spending

Thus far, we have discussed only the sum total of government spending in the United States and not on what these funds are spent. [Figure 1-7](#) shows the distribution of spending across several broad categories for the federal government and state and local governments in 1960 and 2016. Several conclusions are apparent. First, the composition of federal government spending [panel (a)] has changed dramatically over time. In 1960, nearly half of federal government spending was on national defense, military expenditures either at home or abroad.



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## ■ FIGURE 1-7

The Distribution of Federal and State Expenditures, 1960 and 2016 • This figure shows the changing composition of federal and state spending over time, as a share of total spending. (a) For the federal government, defense spending has fallen and Social Security and health spending have risen. (b) For the states, the growth in health care spending has led to a reduction in education spending.

Data from: [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2017\)](#).

Defense is a classic example of what economists call a **public good**, a good for which the investment of any one individual benefits a larger group of individuals: if I purchased a missile to protect Boston, that would benefit not just me but all of the residents of the city. As we will discuss at length in [Chapter 7](#), the private sector may underprovide such public goods: if I bear the full cost of buying a missile, but it benefits everyone in town, then I probably won't spend the money on that missile. This makes provision of public goods an important job for the government, as reflected in the large share of government spending in this area.

**public goods**

Goods for which the investment of any one individual benefits everyone in a larger group.

Today, however, defense spending has fallen to less than one-sixth of the federal budget. The offsetting spending growth can be found largely in two areas. The first is the Social Security program, which provides income support to the elderly who are retired from their jobs. This is the single largest government program in the United States today, consuming about 18.8% of the entire federal budget. Another large and rapidly growing category is health care programs, a variety of federal government interventions to provide health insurance for the elderly, the poor, and the disabled; these programs consume almost 30% of the budget.<sup>[27](#)</sup>

Programs such as Social Security and government health insurance programs are called **social insurance programs**, programs designed to address failures in private insurance markets. As we discussed earlier, private health insurance markets may not provide the appropriate amount of health insurance to the population. This market failure has motivated the government to intervene in health insurance markets; indeed, almost one-half of all health spending in the United States is done by governments. Similarly, the federal government is concerned that individuals may not plan appropriately for the decline in income they will face when they retire, which motivates the existence of the Social Security program.

**social insurance programs**

Government provision of insurance against adverse events to address failures in the private insurance market.

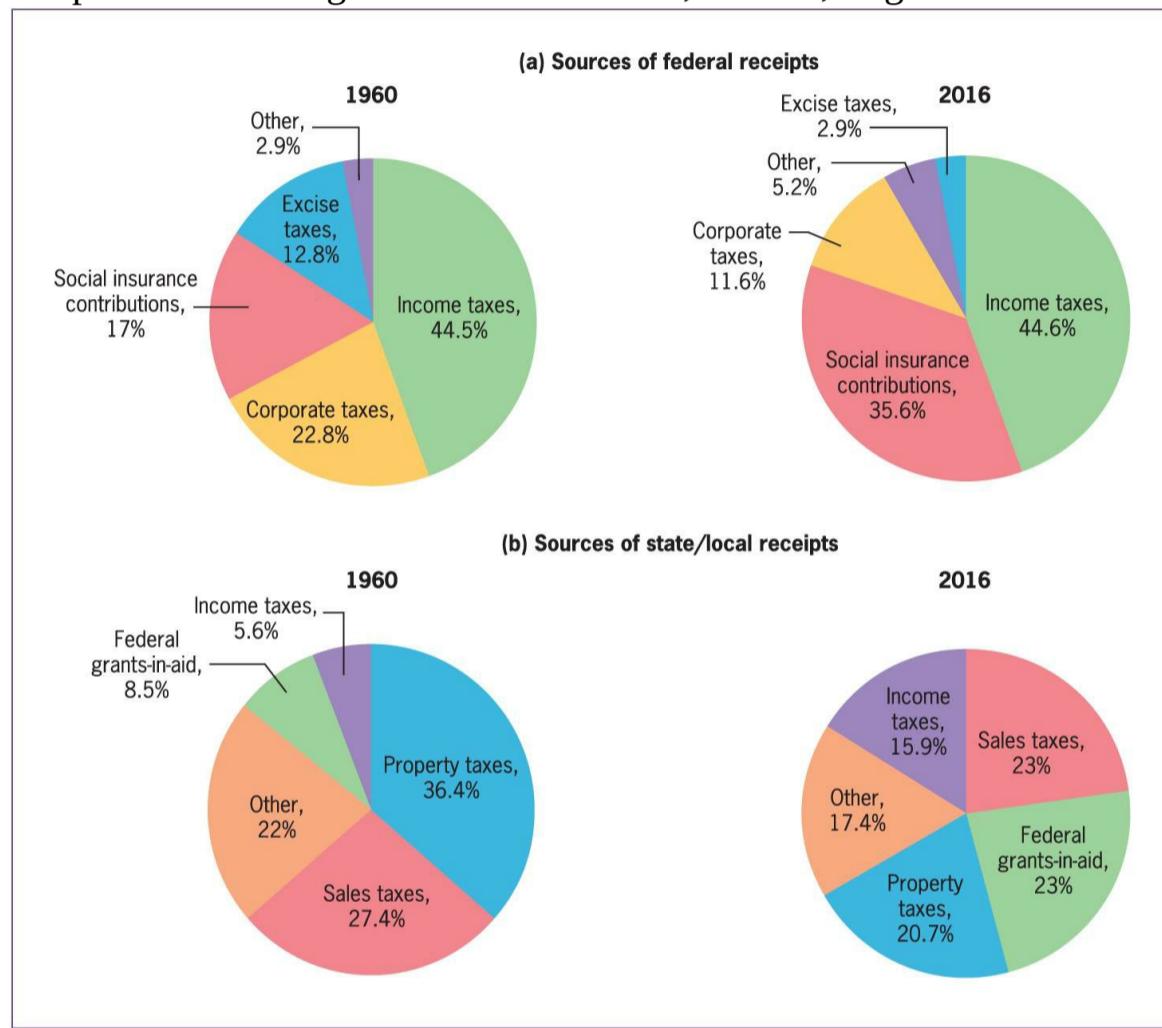
- Are large government interventions in insurance markets warranted, and do they correct or exacerbate market failures?

The distribution of state and local spending [[Figure 1-7](#), panel (b)] is much different. At the state and local levels, education and public safety account for almost half of spending. Less than 10% of federal spending supports these programs. Likewise, there are no Social Security or defense expenditures at the state or local level. The major development over time at the state and local levels has been the enormous growth in health care spending, which has risen from only 8% of state and local spending to almost 25%. Because this increase appears to have been offset by reductions in spending on education, welfare and social services, transportation, and other categories, it raises important issues of whether the more expensive health care system is reducing (or what we will later refer to as "crowding out") other state and local services.

- What is the appropriate type of spending to be done at the federal versus state or local level?

# Distribution of Revenue Sources

Figure 1-8 breaks down the sources of federal and state and local revenue over time. The major source of revenue for the federal government [panel (a)] is the individual *income tax*, a tax levied on the income of U.S. residents. This tax provides somewhat less than half of federal revenues and has remained roughly constant as a share of revenues over time. The major shift over time at the federal level has been the rapid shrinking of corporate tax revenues, the funds raised by taxing the incomes of businesses in the United States. While corporate tax revenues once provided almost 25% of federal government revenue, they now provide only about 12%. There has also been a sizeable reduction in *excise taxes*, taxes levied on the consumption of certain goods such as tobacco, alcohol, or gasoline.



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## FIGURE 1-8

The Distribution of Federal and State Revenues, 1960 and 2016 • This figure shows the changing composition of federal and state revenue sources over time, as a share of total revenues. (a) At the federal level, there has been a large reduction in corporate and excise tax revenues and a rise in payroll tax revenues. (b) For the states, there has been a decline in property taxes and a rise in income taxes and federal grants.

Data from: [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2019\)](#).

The decrease in revenue from these taxes has been largely replaced by the growth of revenue from *payroll taxes*, the taxes on worker earnings that fund social insurance programs. Payroll taxes differ from the income tax in that the income tax includes all sources of income, such as the return on savings, while payroll taxes apply solely to earnings from work. Payroll taxes have grown from one-sixth of federal revenues to well over one-third.

- What are the implications of moving from taxing businesses and consumption to taxing

workers' earnings?

At the state and local levels [[Figure 1-8](#), panel (b)], revenue sources are roughly equally divided between *sales taxes* (including state and local excise taxes on products such as cigarettes and gasoline), federal *grants-in-aid* (redistribution of funds from the federal government to lower levels of government), income taxes, and *property taxes* (taxes on the value of individual properties, mostly homes). Over the past 40 years, the substantial drop in revenue from property taxes has been made up by rising federal grants and income taxes.

- What are the implications of shifting from taxation of property to taxation of income?

## Regulatory Role of the Government

The discussion throughout this section has focused on the government as an entity that exerts influence through its powers of taxation and spending. Another critical role the government plays in all nations is that of *regulating economic and social activities*. Consider some examples of how daily existence is affected by the government in the United States:<sup>28</sup>

- The foods you eat and the medications you take have all been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), an agency that spends less than 0.025% of the government's budget each year, but whose regulatory powers cover \$2.4 trillion worth of goods annually, more than 20% of total consumer expenditures. The FDA regulates the labeling and safety of nearly all food products and bottled water, tests cosmetics to ensure their safety, and approves drugs and medical devices to be sold to the public.
- If you've lost a limb or developed carpal tunnel syndrome because of your work, you might want to contact the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which is charged with regulating the workplace safety of the 130 million Americans employed at more than 8 million job sites. In 2017, the agency sent its 2,100 inspectors on 32,396 visits to workplaces.
- The radio stations in your car and the channels you watch on cable are overseen by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates interstate and international radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable communications. Check any device in your home that emits radiation of communication frequencies (cell phones, remotes, etc.) and you'll find an FCC identification number somewhere on it.
- The air you breathe, the tap water you drink, and the land your home is built upon are all regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is charged with minimizing dangerous pollutants in the air, water, and food supplies.

# 1.3 The Questions of Public Finance Are Front and Center in Health Care Debates

We began this chapter by talking about the Affordable Care Act and its contentious history. The battle over this law is far from over, and current debates accurately reflect exactly the set of key public finance questions that we reviewed earlier.

## When Should the Government Intervene?

The most ferocious aspect of the debate over the ACA is around the fundamental question of whether the government should be playing a more prominent role in health insurance markets. Supporters continue to argue that market failures in health insurance markets make government involvement imperative. Without government regulation, they argue, health insurance will become unaffordable for the sickest members of society. Opponents argue that the interventions of the ACA have driven up premiums and that an unregulated market would best serve the needs of those buying insurance on their own.

And we have just begun the next—and even more contentious—aspect of our debate over health care: how to restrain health care spending. Health care costs amount to more than 17% of our nation’s income and are projected to rise to 20% by 2026.<sup>29</sup> Conservatives argue that these high and rising costs reflect the role of government regulations and restrictions and that a freer market for shopping for health care services can bring costs down. Liberals argue that the free market has failed to control costs in the United States and that we should follow every other major developed nation in regulating prices of health care services.

## How Should the Government Intervene?

The question of how to intervene was crystallized in the debates over the Republican efforts to repeal the ACA in 2017. Republicans argued that the government should end the entitlement of insurance through the Medicaid program, the individual mandate, and government regulations, and instead allow individuals to purchase insurance on their own in a less regulated market. Democrats strongly resisted suggested reductions in the generosity of public insurance and limitations on government regulation of the insurance market, arguing that they would lead to a loss of financial protections for the poorest and sickest Americans.

## What Are the Effects of Interventions?

The Congressional Budget Office, described in the box earlier in this chapter, found itself at the center of a firestorm during debates over both the ACA and its subsequent repeal. The debates revolved around two central projections of the effects of the ACA: on health care costs and on coverage.

During the debate over the passage of the ACA, the CBO estimated that it would not significantly lower health care cost growth. These conclusions were widely criticized by supporters of the ACA on the left, who felt that the CBO was not giving the ACA enough credit for its efforts to “bend the health care cost curve” through cost control initiatives. Then, during debates over ACA repeal, the CBO played a central role by reporting that repeal could cause 30 million or more Americans to lose health insurance. These conclusions were widely criticized by opponents of the ACA on the right, who argued that the CBO was being overly pessimistic given other mechanisms likely to maintain insurance coverage.

Ultimately, it is hard to evaluate the merits of either criticism because the passage of the ACA, and its partial repeal in 2017, did not happen in a vacuum. For example, the economy

was changing at the same time, growing slowly around the time of ACA passage, and more rapidly around the time of partial repeal. As we highlight in [Chapter 3](#), these other changes make it difficult to definitively assign the impact of the ACA on health care costs and coverage. As we review in [Chapter 16](#), even addressing these other factors, it seems likely that the ACA did play a significant role in slowing health care costs—but it also looks like the partial repeal so far has not dampened insurance enrollments.

## Why Governments Do What They Do

The political fight over the ACA represents a fascinating test of many of the tenets of basic political economy—and an apparent rejection of some long-held beliefs. Consider the state-optimal expansion of public insurance under the Medicaid program, which provided primarily federally funded insurance for the poor. Health policy experts assumed that every state would choose to expand their Medicaid programs, since essentially this amounted to having other states in the nation pay to cover that state's lowest-income citizens (since the financing was federal and the spending is local). But, in fact, only about half of the states accepted the expansion initially, and 17 states still have not done so. Why did these state governments decline to accept the expansion? The reasons are unclear but appear to be related to larger political fights about the Obama administration and its legacy.

## 1.4 Conclusion

It is clear from the facts presented in this chapter that the government plays a central role in the lives of all Americans. It is also clear that there is ongoing disagreement about whether that role should expand, stay the same, or contract. The facts and arguments raised in this chapter provide a backdrop for thinking about the set of public finance issues that we explore in the remainder of this book.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- There are four key questions to consider in the study of public finance. The first is: When should the government intervene in the economy? Our baseline presumption is that the competitive equilibrium leads to the outcome that maximizes social efficiency. So government intervention can be justified only on the grounds of market failure (increasing the size of the pie) or redistribution (changing the allocation of the pie).
- Having decided whether to intervene, the government needs to decide how to intervene. There are many policy options that can be pursued to achieve the same goal, such as public provision, mandates for private provision, and subsidies to private provision.
- When deciding how to intervene, the government needs to choose an approach for evaluating the impacts of alternative interventions on the economy. The tools of empirical economics provide one such approach.
- A major question for public finance is: Why do governments choose to pursue the policies that they do? We are particularly concerned about government failure, whereby government intervention can make problems worse, not better.
- Government, which consists of both national (federal) and local units (states, counties, cities, and towns), is large and growing in the United States and throughout the world. The nature of government spending and revenue sources is also evolving over time as governments move away from being providers of traditional public goods (such as defense) to being providers of social insurance (such as Social Security and health insurance).
- Governments also affect our lives through regulatory functions in a wide variety of arenas.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Many states have language in their constitutions that requires the state to provide for an “adequate” level of education spending. What is the economic rationale for such a requirement?
2. How did the composition of federal, state, and local government spending change since 1960? What social and economic factors might have contributed to this change in how governments spend their funds?
3. Read the arguments for and against the passage of the Affordable Care Act presented on [pages 1–3](#), and consider the two economic motivations discussed in this chapter for when the government should intervene in the economy. Do you think President Obama’s arguments were more about *efficiency* or *redistribution*? What about the arguments made by Nancy Pelosi, John Boehner, and Ron Paul?
4. Some goods and services are provided directly by the government, while others are funded publicly but provided privately. What is the difference between these two mechanisms of public financing? Why do you think the same government would use one approach sometimes and the other approach at other times?
5. Why does redistribution cause efficiency losses? Why might society choose to redistribute resources from one group to another when doing so reduces the overall size of the economic pie?
6. Consider the four basic questions of public finance listed in the chapter. Which of these questions are positive—that is, questions that can be proved or disproved—and which are normative—that is, questions of opinion? Explain your answer.
7. One rationale for imposing taxes on alcohol consumption is that people who drink alcohol impose negative spillovers on the rest of society—for example, through loud and unruly behavior or intoxicated driving. If this rationale is correct, in the absence of governmental taxation, will people tend to consume too much, too little, or the right amount of alcohol?
8. What is the role of the Congressional Budget Office (CBO)? Why is independence and impartiality important when conducting empirical analyses?
9. U.S. law prohibits hospitals from denying patients care in an emergency, even if they are unable to pay. Historically, the cost of covering these uninsured patients has been passed on to insured patients and the government. Explain how a law like the Affordable Care Act, which reduces the number of uninsured patients, thus alleviates a market failure.
10. In 2017, partial repeal of the Affordable Care Act was enacted by Congress as a part of a larger tax reform package that made many substantial changes to the tax code. Why does the manner in which it was passed complicate efforts to evaluate the effect of ACA repeal on health care costs, coverage, and the overall economy?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. In the United States, the federal government pays for a considerably larger share of social welfare spending (that is, spending on social insurance programs to help low-income, disabled, or elderly people) than it does for K–12 education spending. Similarly, state and local governments provide a larger share of education spending and a smaller share of welfare spending. Is this a coincidence, or can you think of a reason for why this might be so?
12. Americans are split on the subject of school vouchers, and the controversy especially affects communities with disproportionate numbers of poor families. Some leaders in these communities strongly support the voucher system and the increased school competition it brings, while others oppose it. Why do you think this split exists?
13. Many states have constitutional requirements that their budgets be in balance (or in surplus) in any given year, but this is not true for the U.S. federal government. Why might it make sense to allow for the federal government to have deficits in some years and surpluses in others?
14. Proper hygiene, such as regular hand-washing, can greatly limit the spread of many diseases. How might this suggest a role for public interventions? What kinds of public interventions might be possible? Suggest three distinct types of possible intervention.

# CHAPTER 2 Theoretical Tools of Public Finance



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [2.1 Constrained Utility Maximization](#)
- [2.2 Putting the Tools to Work: TANF and Labor Supply Among Single Mothers](#)
- [2.3 Equilibrium and Social Welfare](#)
- [2.4 Welfare Implications of Benefit Reductions: The TANF Example Continued](#)
- [2.5 Conclusion](#)
- [APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 2](#)
  - [The Mathematics of Utility Maximization](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do individuals choose how much to consume or how hard to work?
- How do firms choose how much to produce?
- What is the theoretical effect of raising cash welfare benefits on economic efficiency?

Life is going well. After graduating at the top of your college class, you have parlayed your knowledge of public finance into an influential job with your state's Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees, among other things, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. This program provides cash payments to single parents whose income is below a specified level.

Your new job thrusts you into the middle of a debate between the state's governor and the head of your department, the HHS secretary. The governor believes that a major problem with the TANF program is that, by only providing income to very low income single mothers, it encourages them to stay at home rather than go to work. To provide incentives for these mothers to work, the governor wants to cut back on these cash benefits. The secretary of the department disagrees. He thinks that single mothers who are home with their children are incapable of finding jobs that pay a wage high enough to encourage them to work. In his view, if the state cuts the cash payments, it will simply penalize those single mothers who are staying home.

The secretary turns to you to inform this debate by assessing the extent to which cutting cash benefits to low-income single mothers will encourage them to work and by evaluating the net welfare implications for the state if these benefits are cut. Such an evaluation will require that you put to work the economics tools that you have learned in your introductory and intermediate courses. These tools come in two flavors. First are the **theoretical tools**. The primary theoretical tools of economists are graphical and mathematical. The graphical tools, such as supply and demand diagrams and indifference curve/budget constraint graphs, are typically all that you need to understand the key points of theory, but mathematical expositions help to illustrate the subtleties of an argument. In the main body of this book, we rely almost exclusively on graphical analysis, with parallel mathematical analysis presented in some chapter appendices.

### theoretical tools

The set of tools designed to understand the mechanics behind economic decision making.

Second, there are **empirical tools**, the set of tools that allows you to analyze data and answer the questions that are raised by theoretical analysis. Most students in this course will have had much less exposure to empirical tools than to theoretical tools. Yet, particularly over the past two decades, empirical tools have become as important as theoretical tools in addressing the problems of public finance, as both the equality of data as well as the ability to carefully analyze that data have improved dramatically. In the next two chapters, you will be introduced to the key theoretical and empirical tools that you need for this course. In each chapter, we first provide a general background on the concepts, and then apply them to our TANF example. The discussion in this chapter is intimately related to the first two of the four questions of public finance we introduced in [Chapter 1](#). The theoretical tools we discuss here are the central means by which economists assess when the government should intervene and how it might intervene.

### empirical tools

The set of tools designed to analyze data and answer questions raised by theoretical analysis.

The remainder of this book relies heavily on the microeconomics concepts reviewed in this chapter. This chapter does not, however, substitute for an introductory or intermediate microeconomics course. The goal here is to refresh your understanding of the important concepts that you need to undertake theoretical public finance, not to teach them to you for the first time. If the material in this chapter is very unfamiliar, you may want to supplement this text with a more detailed microeconomics text.<sup>1</sup>

## 2.1 Constrained Utility Maximization

The core of theoretical analysis in public finance is the assumption that individuals have well-defined **utility functions**, a mathematical mapping of individual choices over goods into their level of well-being. Economists assume that individuals then undertake **constrained utility maximization**, maximizing their well-being (utility) subject to their available resources. Armed with this assumption, economists proceed to develop **models**—mathematical or graphical representations of reality—to show how constrained utility maximization leads people to make the decisions that they make every day. These models have two key components: the individual's *preferences* over all possible choices of goods and her *budget constraint*, the amount of resources with which she can finance her purchases. The strategy of economic modelers is then to ask: Given a budget constraint, what *bundle of goods* makes a consumer best off?

### utility function

A mathematical function representing an individual's set of preferences, which translates her well-being from different consumption bundles into units that can be compared in order to determine choice.

### constrained utility maximization

The process of maximizing the well-being (utility) of an individual, subject to her resources (budget constraint).

### models

Mathematical or graphical representations of reality.

We can illustrate how consumers are presumed to make choices in four steps. First, we discuss how to model preferences graphically. Then, we show how to take this graphical model of preferences and represent it mathematically with a *utility function*. Third, we model the budget constraints that individuals face. Finally, we show how individuals maximize their utility (make themselves as well off as possible) given their budget constraints.

## Preferences and Indifference Curves

In modeling people's preferences, we are not yet imposing any budget constraints; we are simply asking what people prefer, ignoring what they can afford. Later, we impose budget constraints to round out the model.

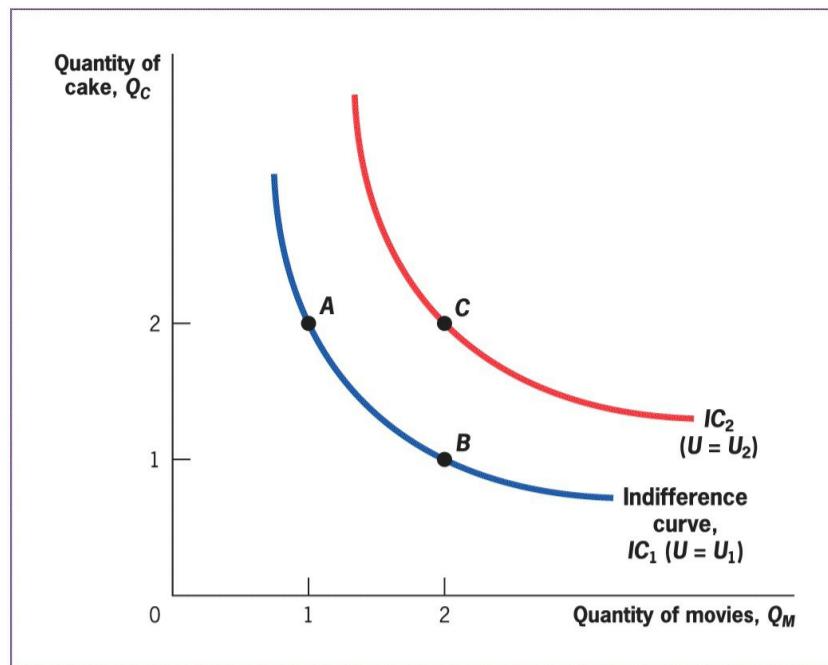
Much of the power of the preferences models we use in this course derives from one simple assumption: *non-satiation*, or “more is better.” Economists assume that more of a good is always better than less. This does not mean that you are equally happy with the tenth pizza as you are with the first; indeed, as we learn later, your happiness increases less with each additional unit of a good you consume. Non-satiation simply implies that having that tenth pizza is better than not having it.

Armed with this central assumption, we can move on to graphically represent a consumer's preferences across different bundles of goods. Suppose, for example, that [Figure 2-1](#) represents Andrea's preferences between two goods, cakes (with quantity  $Q_C$ ) and movies (with quantity  $Q_M$ ). Consider three bundles:

Bundle A: 2 cakes and 1 movie

Bundle B: 1 cake and 2 movies

Bundle C: 2 cakes and 2 movies



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■ FIGURE 2-1

Indifference Curves for Bundles of Cakes and Movies • Andrea is indifferent between consuming 2 cakes and 1 movie (point A) or 1 cake and 2 movies (point B), but she prefers 2 cakes and 2 movies (point C) to both. Utility is the same along a given indifference curve; indifference curves farther from the origin represent higher utility levels.

Let's assume, for now, that Andrea is indifferent between bundles *A* and *B*, but that she prefers *C* to either; she clearly prefers *C* because of the assumption that more is better. Given this assumption, we can map her preferences across the goods. We do so using an **indifference curve**, a curve that shows all combinations of consumption that give the individual the same amount of utility (and so among which the individual is indifferent). In this case, Andrea gets the same utility from bundles *A* and *B*, so they lie on the same indifference curve. Because she gets a higher level of utility from consuming bundle *C* instead of either *A* or *B*, bundle *C* is on a higher indifference curve.

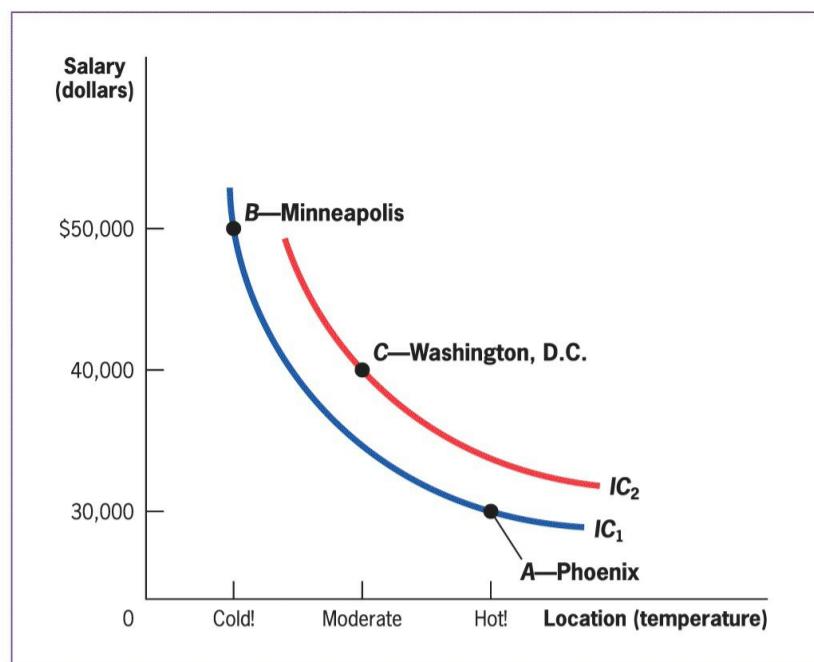
#### indifference curve

A graphical representation of all bundles of goods that make an individual equally well off. Because these bundles have equal utility, an individual is indifferent as to which bundle she consumes.

Indifference curves have two essential properties, both of which follow naturally from the more-is-better assumption:

1. Consumers prefer higher indifference curves. Individuals prefer to consume bundles that are located on indifference curves that are farther out from the origin because they represent bundles that have more of, for example, both cakes *and* movies.
2. Indifference curves always slope downward. Indifference curves cannot slope upward because that would imply that, in this instance, Andrea is indifferent between a given bundle and another bundle that has more of both cakes *and* movies, which violates the more-is-better assumption.

A great example of indifference curve analysis is job choice. Suppose that Sam graduates and is considering two attributes as he searches across jobs: the starting salary and the location of the job. Sam prefers both a higher salary and a location with a higher average temperature because he hates cold weather. We can represent Sam's preferences using [Figure 2-2](#), which shows the trade-off between salary and location (temperature). Sam has three job choices:



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■ FIGURE 2-2

**Indifference Curve Analysis of Job Choice** • In choosing a job, Sam trades off the two things he cares about, salary and location (average temperature). On  $IC_1$ , he is indifferent between a job in Minneapolis, with a high salary and a low average temperature, and one in Phoenix, with a lower salary and a higher average temperature. However, as indicated by its position on  $IC_2$ , he prefers a job in Washington, D.C., with an average salary and an average temperature.

Bundle A: Starting salary of \$30,000 in Phoenix, AZ (hot!)

Bundle B: Starting salary of \$50,000 in Minneapolis, MN (cold!)

Bundle C: Starting salary of \$40,000 in Washington, D.C. (moderate)

Given Sam's preferences, it may be that he is indifferent between bundles A and B—that is, the higher starting salary in Minneapolis is enough to compensate him for the much colder weather. But he may prefer C to either: the salary in Washington is higher than in Phoenix, and the weather is much warmer than in Minneapolis. Compromising on salary and location leaves Sam better off than choosing an extreme of one or the other in this example.

## Utility Mapping of Preferences

Underlying the derivation of indifference curves is the notion that each individual has a well-defined *utility function*. A utility function is a mathematical representation  $U = f(X_1, X_2, X_3, \dots)$ , where  $X_1, X_2, X_3$ , and so on are the goods consumed by the individual and  $f$  is some mathematical function that describes how the consumption of those goods translates to utility. This mathematical representation allows us to compare the well-being associated with different levels of goods consumption.

For example, suppose that Andrea's utility function for cakes and movies is  $U = \sqrt{Q_C \times Q_M}$ . With this function, she would be indifferent between 4 cakes and 1 movie, 2 cakes and 2 movies, and 1 cake and 4 movies because each of these bundles would deliver a utility level of 2. But she would prefer 3 cakes and 3 movies to any of these bundles because this would give her a utility level of 3.

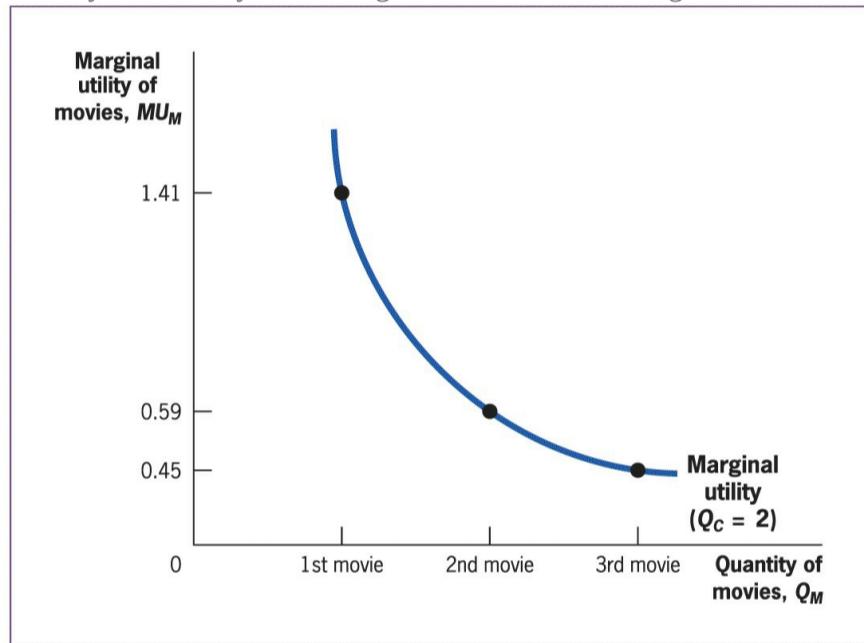
## Marginal Utility

The key concept for understanding consumer preferences is **marginal utility**, or the

additional increment to utility from consuming an additional unit of a good. This described utility function exhibits the important principle of *diminishing marginal utility*: the consumption of each additional unit of a good makes an individual less happy than the consumption of the previous unit. To see this, [Figure 2-3](#) graphs the marginal utility, the increment to utility from each additional movie seen, holding the number of cakes constant at 2. When Andrea moves from seeing 0 movies to seeing 1 movie, her utility rises from 0 to  $\sqrt{2} = 1.41$ . Thus, the marginal utility of that first movie is 1.41. When she moves from seeing one movie to seeing a second movie, her utility rises to  $\sqrt{4} = 2$ . The consumption of the second movie has increased utility by only 0.59, a much smaller increment than 1.41. When she sees a third movie, her utility rises to only  $\sqrt{6} = 2.45$ , for an even smaller increment of 0.45. With each additional movie consumed, utility increases, but by ever smaller amounts.

#### marginal utility

The additional increment to utility obtained by consuming an additional unit of a good.



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■ FIGURE 2-3

Diminishing Marginal Utility • Holding the number of cakes constant at 2, with a utility function of  $U = \sqrt{Q_C \times Q_M}$ , each additional movie consumed raises utility by less and less.

Why does diminishing marginal utility make sense? Consider the example of movies. There is almost always one particular movie that you want to see the most, then one which is next best, and so on. So you get the highest marginal utility from the first movie you see, less from the next, and so on. Similarly, think about slices of pizza: when you are hungry, you get the highest increment to your utility from the first slice; by the fourth or fifth slice, you get much less utility per slice.

### Marginal Rate of Substitution

Armed with the concept of marginal utility, we can now describe more carefully exactly what indifference curves tell us about choices. The slope of the indifference curve is the rate at which a consumer is willing to trade off the good on the vertical axis for the good on the horizontal axis. This rate of trade-off is called the [\*\*marginal rate of substitution \(MRS\)\*\*](#). In this example, the MRS is the rate at which Andrea is willing to trade cakes for movies. As she moves along the indifference curve from more cakes and fewer movies to fewer cakes and

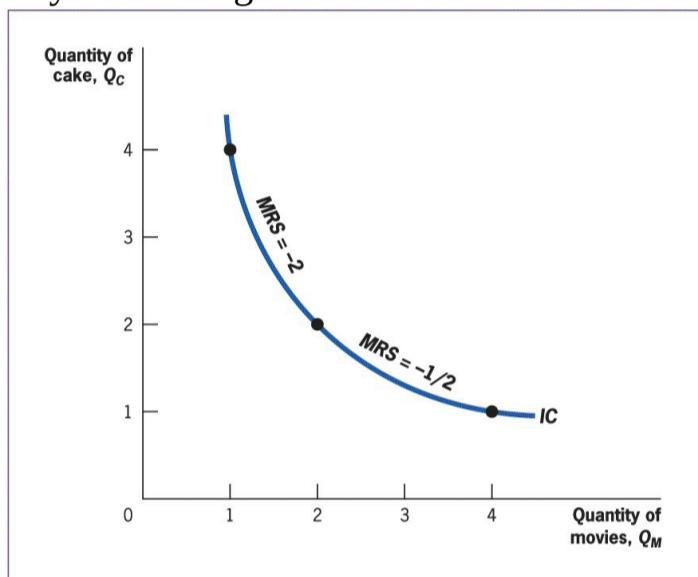
more movies, she is trading cakes for movies. The slope of the curve tells Andrea the rate of trade that leaves her indifferent between various bundles of the two goods.

#### marginal rate of substitution (*MRS*)

The rate at which a consumer is willing to trade one good for another. The *MRS* equals the slope of the indifference curve, the rate at which the consumer will trade the good on the vertical axis for the good on the horizontal axis.

For the utility functions we use in this book, such as Andrea's, the *MRS* is *diminishing*. We can see this by graphing the indifference curves that arise from the assumed utility function

$U = \sqrt{Q_C \times Q_M}$ . As [Figure 2-4](#) shows, Andrea is indifferent between 1 movie and 4 cakes, 2 movies and 2 cakes, and 4 movies and 1 cake. Along any segment of this indifference curve, we can define an *MRS*. For example, moving from 4 cakes and 1 movie to 2 cakes and 2 movies, the *MRS* is  $-2$ ; she is willing to give up 2 cakes to get 1 additional movie. Moving from 2 cakes and 2 movies to 1 cake and 4 movies, however, the *MRS* is  $-1/2$ ; she is willing to give up only 1 cake to get 2 additional movies.



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■ FIGURE 2-4

Marginal Rates of Substitution • With a utility function of  $U = \sqrt{Q_C \times Q_M}$ , *MRS* diminishes as the number of movies consumed increases. At 4 cakes and 1 movie, Andrea is willing to trade 2 cakes to get 1 movie ( $MRS = -2$ ).

At 2 cakes and 2 movies, Andrea is willing to trade 1 cake to get 2 movies

( $MRS = -1/2$ ).

The slope of the indifference curve changes because of diminishing *MRS*. When Andrea is seeing only 1 movie, getting to see her second-choice movie is worth a lot to her, so she is willing to forgo 2 cakes for that movie. But, having seen her second-choice movie, getting to see her third- and fourth-choice movies isn't worth so much, so she will only forgo 1 cake to see them. Thus, the principle of diminishing *MRS* is based on the notion that as Andrea has more and more of good *A*, she is less and less willing to give up some of good *B* to get additional units of *A*.

Because indifference curves are graphical representations of the utility function, there is a direct relationship between the *MRS* and utility: the *MRS* is the ratio of the marginal utility for movies to the marginal utility for cakes:

$$MRS = -MU_M/MU_C$$

That is, the *MRS* shows how the relative marginal utilities evolve over the indifference curve: as Andrea moves down the curve, the *MU* of cakes rises and that of movies falls. Remember that higher quantity implies lower marginal utility, by the principle of diminishing marginal utility. As Andrea moves down the indifference curve, getting more movies and fewer cakes, the marginal utility of cakes rises, and the marginal utility of movies falls, lowering the *MRS*.

## Budget Constraints

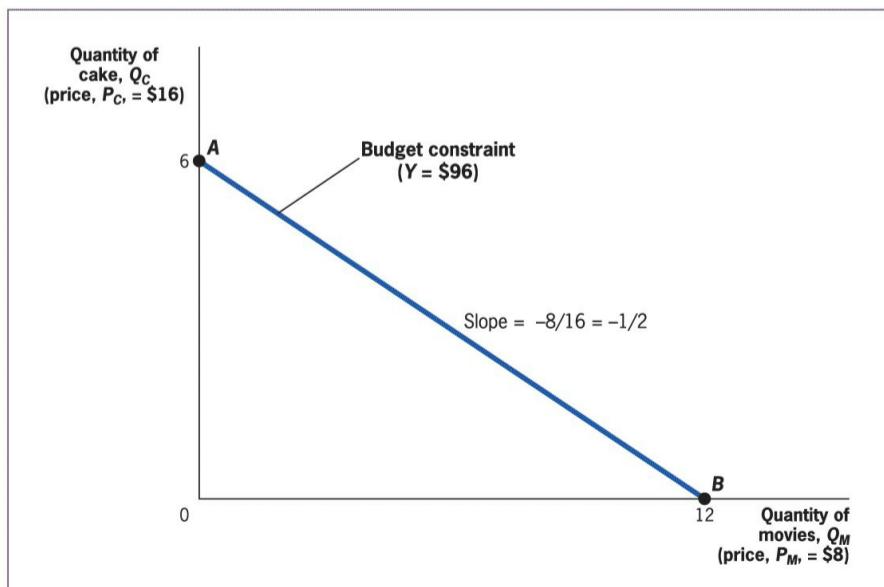
If the fundamental principle of consumer choice is that more is better, what keeps folks from simply bingeing on everything? What stops them is their limited resources, or their **budget constraint**, a mathematical representation of the combination of goods they can afford to buy given their incomes. For the purposes of this discussion, we make the simplifying assumption that consumers spend all their income; there is no savings. In [Chapter 22](#), we discuss the implications of a more realistic model where individuals can save and borrow, but for now we will assume that all income is spent in the period in which it is received. Moreover, for the purposes of this example, let's assume that Andrea spends her entire income on CDs and movies.

**budget constraint**

A mathematical representation of all the combinations of goods an individual can afford to buy if she spends her entire income.

Given these assumptions, Andrea's budget constraint is represented mathematically by  $Y = P_C Q_C + P_M Q_M$ , where  $Y$  is her income,  $P_C$  and  $P_M$  are the prices of cakes and movies, and  $Q_C$  and  $Q_M$  are the quantities of cakes and movies she buys. That is, this expression says that her expenditures on cakes and on movies add up to be her total income.

Graphically, the budget constraint is represented by the line *AB* in [Figure 2-5](#). The horizontal intercept is the number of movies that Andrea can buy if she purchases no cakes, the vertical intercept is the number of cakes she can buy if she goes to no movies, and the slope of the budget constraint is the rate at which the market allows her to trade off cakes for movies. This rate is the negative of the price ratio  $P_M/P_C$ : each extra movie that she buys, holding income constant, must lower the number of cakes that she can buy by  $P_M/P_C$ .



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■ FIGURE 2-5

Budget Constraint • With an income,  $Y$ , of \$96, a price of \$16 per cake, and a price of \$8 per movie, Andrea can trade off 1

cake for 2 movies, up to a total of either 6 cakes or 12 movies. The slope of the budget constraint is therefore  $-1/2$ , indicating the ratio of movie-to-cake-prices.

[Figure 2-5](#) illustrates the budget constraint for the case when  $Y = \$96$ ,  $P_C = \$16$ , and  $P_M = \$8$ . At this income and these prices, Andrea can purchase 12 movies or 6 cakes, and each cake she buys means that she can buy fewer movies. The slope of the budget constraint is the rate at which she can trade cakes for movies in the marketplace,  $P_M/P_C = -8/16 = -1/2$ .

► Quick Hint Our discussion thus far has been couched in terms of “trading cakes for movies” and vice versa. In reality, however, we don’t directly trade one good for another; instead, we trade in a market economy, in which cakes and movies are purchased using dollars. The reason we say “trading cakes for movies” is because of the central economics concept of [opportunity cost](#), which says that the cost of any purchase is the next best alternative use of that money. Thus, given a fixed budget, when a person buys a cake, she forgoes the opportunity to see two movies. In essence, she is trading the cake for two movies, even though, in reality, she accomplishes the trade using money rather than the goods themselves. When a person’s budget is fixed, if she buys one thing, she is, by definition, reducing the money she has to spend on other things. Indirectly, this purchase has the same effect as a direct good-for-good trade.

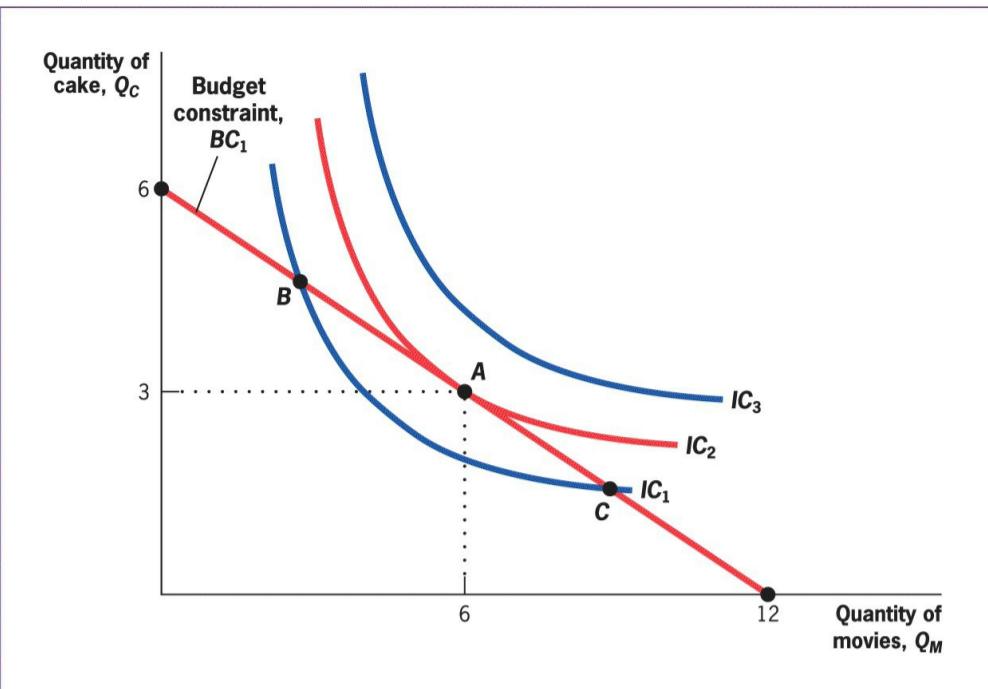
#### opportunity cost

The cost of any purchase is the next best alternative use of that money, or the forgone opportunity.

## Putting It All Together: Constrained Choice

Armed with the notions of utility functions and budget constraints, we can now ask: What is the utility-maximizing bundle that consumers can afford? That is, what bundle of goods makes consumers best off, given their limited resources?

The answer to this question is shown in [Figure 2-6](#). This figure puts together the indifference curves corresponding to the utility function  $U = \sqrt{Q_C \times Q_M}$  shown in [Figure 2-4](#) with the budget constraint shown in [Figure 2-5](#). In this framework, we can rephrase our question: What is the *highest indifference curve that an individual can reach given a budget constraint*? The answer is the indifference curve,  $IC_2$ , that is *tangent* to the budget constraint: this is the farthest-out indifference curve that is attainable, given Andrea’s income and market prices. In this example, Andrea makes herself as well off as possible by choosing to consume 6 movies and 3 cakes (point A). That combination of goods maximizes Andrea’s utility, given her available resources and market prices.



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■ FIGURE 2-6

$$U = \sqrt{Q_C \times Q_M}$$

Constrained Optimization • Given a utility function of cakes and movies of \$16 and \$8, respectively, Andrea's optimal choice is 3 cakes and 6 movies (point A). This represents the highest indifference curve she can reach, given her resources and market prices. She can also afford points such as B and C, but they leave her on a lower indifference curve ( $IC_1$  instead of  $IC_2$ ).

The key to understanding this outcome is the marginal decision Andrea makes to consume the next movie. The benefit to her of consuming another movie is the *marginal rate of substitution*, the rate at which she is willing to trade cakes for movies. The cost to her of making this trade is the *price ratio*, the rate at which the market allows her to trade cakes for movies. Thus, the optimal choice is the one at which:

$$MRS = -MU_M/MU_C = -P_M/P_C$$

At the optimum, the ratio of marginal utilities equals the ratio of prices. The rate at which Andrea is willing to trade off one good for the other is equal to the rate at which the market will let her carry out that trade.

One way to demonstrate that this is the optimal choice is to show that she is worse off with any other choice. Consider point B in Figure 2-6. At that point, the slope of the indifference curve  $IC_1$  is higher than the slope of the budget constraint; that is, the *MRS* is greater than the price ratio. This means that Andrea's marginal utility of movies, relative to cakes, is higher than the ratio of the price of movies to the price of cakes. Because the *MRS* is the rate at which Andrea is willing to trade cakes for movies, and the price ratio is the rate that the market is charging for such a trade, Andrea is willing to give up more cakes for movies than the market requires. She can make herself better off by reducing her cake purchases and increasing her movie purchases, as happens when she moves from B to A.

Now consider point C in Figure 2-6. At this point, the slope of the indifference curve  $IC_1$  is less than the slope of the budget constraint; that is, the *MRS* is lower than the price ratio. Relative to point B, Andrea now cares much less about movies and more about cakes because she is now consuming more movies and fewer cakes, and marginal utility diminishes. At

point  $C$ , in fact, she is willing to give up fewer cakes for movies than the market requires. So she can make herself better off by increasing her cake purchases and reducing her movie purchases, as happens when she moves from  $C$  to  $A$ . Whenever a consumer is at a point where the indifference curve and the budget constraint are not tangent, she can make herself better off by moving to a point of tangency.

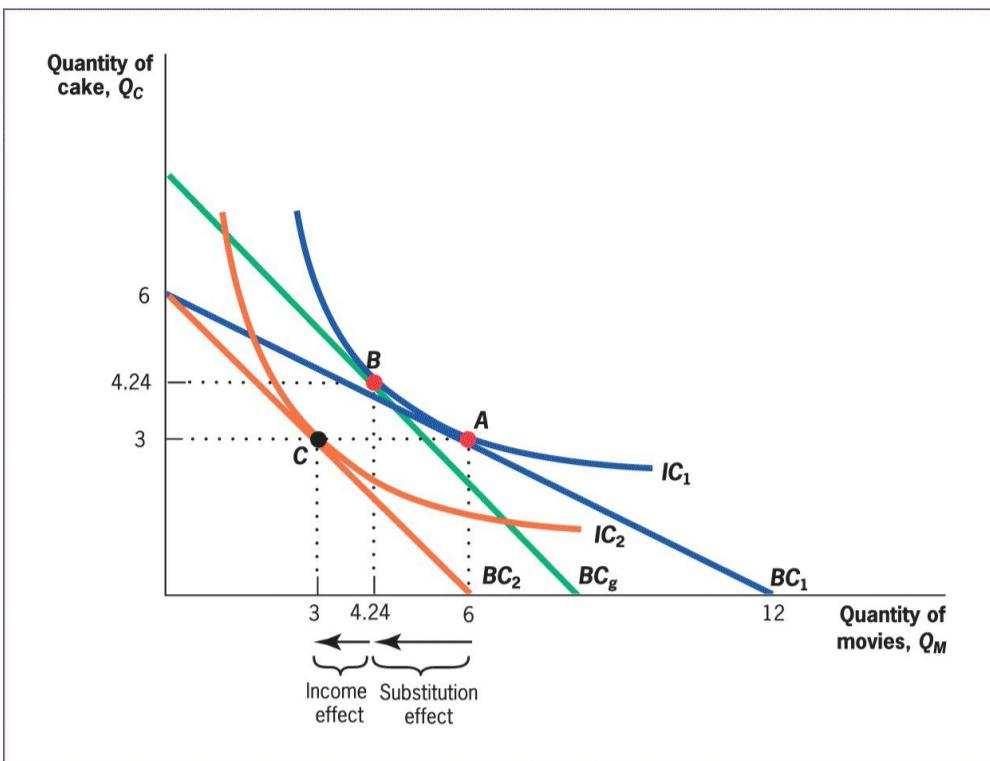
Quick Hint *Marginal analysis*, the consideration of the costs and benefits of an additional unit of consumption or production, is a central concept in modeling an individual's choice of goods and a firm's production decision. All optimization exercises in economics are like climbing a hill on a very foggy day. At any given point, you don't know yet whether you are at the top, but you do know if you are heading up or heading down. If you are heading up, then you must not yet be at the top; but if you are heading down, then you must have passed the top.

It is the same when you are maximizing your utility (or your firm's profits). Consider the mountain as your decision about how many movies to buy and the top as the optimal number of movies given your preferences and budget constraint. Starting from any number of cakes and movies, you consider whether the next movie has a benefit ( $MRS$ ) greater than its cost (price ratio). If the benefit exceeds the cost of that next movie, then the next step is upward, and you buy the movie and continue up the optimization mountain. If the benefit is below the cost, then the next step is downward, and you realize that you need to go backward (buy fewer movies) to get back to the top. Only when the benefit equals the cost of the next unit do you realize you are at the top of the mountain.

## The Effects of Price Changes: Substitution and Income Effects

The key result from the constrained choice analysis is that  $\mathbf{MU_M/MU_C = P_M/P_C}$ : Andrea consumes movies and cakes until the ratio of the marginal utility of movies to cakes equals the ratio of their prices. This result implies that when the relative price of a good, such as movies in our example, rises (i.e.,  $P_M/P_C$  rises), then the relative quantity of that good demanded falls. This is because, for the equality previously described to hold, when  $P_M/P_C$  rises, then  $MU_M/MU_C$  must also rise. For  $MU_M/MU_C$  to rise, the quantity of movies relative to cakes must fall (because the marginal utility of any good falls as the quantity consumed of that good rises).

This point is illustrated graphically in [Figure 2-7](#). We have already shown that, with an income of \$96, and prices of \$16 for cakes and \$8 for movies, Andrea chooses 6 movies and 3 cakes at point  $A$ , the point at which  $BC_1$  and  $IC_1$  are tangent. If the price of movies were to rise to \$16, for example, the budget constraint would become *steeper*; it rotates inward from  $BC_1$  to  $BC_2$ .



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■ FIGURE 2-7

**Substitution and Income Effects** • When the price of movies increases, it has two effects. First, holding utility constant, there is a substitution effect, which causes Andrea to demand fewer movies because they are relatively more expensive (moving from point A to point B). Second, holding relative prices constant, there is an income effect, which causes her to demand fewer movies because she is poorer (moving from point B to point C).

Because the price of cakes hasn't changed, Andrea can still buy 6 cakes with her \$96 income (the vertical intercept of the budget constraint), but because the price of movies has risen to \$16, she can only now buy 6 ( $\$96/\$16$ ) movies (the horizontal intercept). The slope of the budget constraint rises from  $-\frac{1}{2}$  to  $-1$ , as illustrated by  $BC_2$ .

With a steeper budget constraint, Andrea can no longer afford to buy the combination at point A. The optimal combination becomes point C, the point at which  $BC_2$  is tangent to a lower indifference curve,  $IC_2$ . At this point, Andrea can buy 3 cakes, but she can now only buy 3 movies, instead of the 6 she could buy at point A. The quantity of movies she demands has fallen because their price has gone up. She is also now worse off: her budget set, or the set of possible choices she can make given her income, has been restricted (because the budget constraint moved inward from  $BC_1$  to  $BC_2$ ). The quantity of cakes she demands has remained constant, but this is only because of the assumed mathematical form of the utility function; in general, the number of cakes she demands would fall as well.

## Income and Substitution Effects

Imagine that the government could somehow insulate Andrea from the utility she loses when prices rise; that is, suppose the government was somehow able to compensate her enough that she could stay on the *same indifference curve* ( $IC_1$ , in our example), even with the new set of prices. Would this mean that the price change will have no effect on her choices? No, it wouldn't because she would still like to choose a different bundle of cakes and movies at this new set of prices.

[Figure 2-7](#) also illustrates this point. Despite this price change, the government can hold Andrea's utility constant at these new prices by giving her a budget constraint  $BC_g$ , which

is parallel to  $BC_2$  but tangent to the same indifference curve  $IC_1$  that corresponds to her original choice. Graphically, the budget constraint has steepened, but Andrea is on the same indifference curve (the same level of utility). Andrea chooses the bundle represented by point *B*: because movies are relatively more expensive, she chooses to consume fewer movies (4.24) and more cakes (4.24). This effect of a price change is called the **substitution effect**: holding utility constant, a relative rise in the price of a good will always cause a consumer to choose less of that good.

#### substitution effect

Holding utility constant, a relative rise in the price of a good will always cause an individual to choose less of that good.

In the real world, when prices rise, there is no government agency to hold utility constant. This price rise therefore leads to a second effect on demand: Andrea is now effectively poorer because she has to pay higher prices for movies. She is not poorer in an income sense (her income remains at \$96), but she is poorer in a real sense because her \$96 can buy fewer goods (in particular, fewer movies). This is the **income effect** of a price change: a rise in any price will make the consumer effectively poorer, causing her to choose less of all goods.<sup>2</sup> The quantity demanded falls because Andrea can buy fewer goods with her income.

#### income effect

A rise in the price of a good will typically cause an individual to choose less of all goods because her income can purchase less than before.

We can measure this income effect by the change from the government-supported budget constraint  $BC_g$  to the new budget constraint  $BC_2$ . This change represents the restriction in Andrea's opportunity set at the new prices. Because she is poorer, she chooses fewer of all goods, including both movies and cakes, at point *C*. In this case, the income effect reinforces the substitution effect for movies: both cause the quantity of movies she demands to fall.<sup>3</sup> To sum up, when the price of one good increases relative to another, you choose less of that good for two reasons: because it is relatively more expensive (the substitution effect) and because you are effectively poorer (the income effect).

## 2.2 Putting the Tools to Work: TANF and Labor Supply Among Single Mothers

In your new position with the state government, you have now reviewed the theoretical concepts necessary to address the concerns of the secretary and the governor. Having reviewed these theoretical concepts, let's turn to the question posed at the start of the chapter: Will reducing TANF benefits increase the labor supply of single mothers? To answer this question, we can apply the tools of utility maximization to the analysis of the labor supply decision.

The TANF program was created in 1996 by a major overhaul of the *cash welfare* system in the United States. The cash welfare system distributes money from taxpayers to low-income families (as described in much more detail in [Chapter 17](#)). TANF provides a monthly support check to families with incomes below a threshold level that is set by each state. In the state of New Jersey, for example, a single mother with two children and no other source of income will receive a monthly check for \$424.<sup>4</sup> These checks are largely targeted to single-female-headed households with children because these families are viewed as having the worst prospects for making a living on their own.

Suppose that Joelle is a single mother who spends all of her earnings and TANF benefits on food for herself and her children. By working more hours, she can earn more money for food, but there is a cost to work: she has less time at home with her children (or less time to spend on her own leisure). Suppose that she would prefer time at home to time at work; that is, suppose that leisure is a normal good. With these preferences, more work makes Joelle worse off, but it allows her to buy more food.

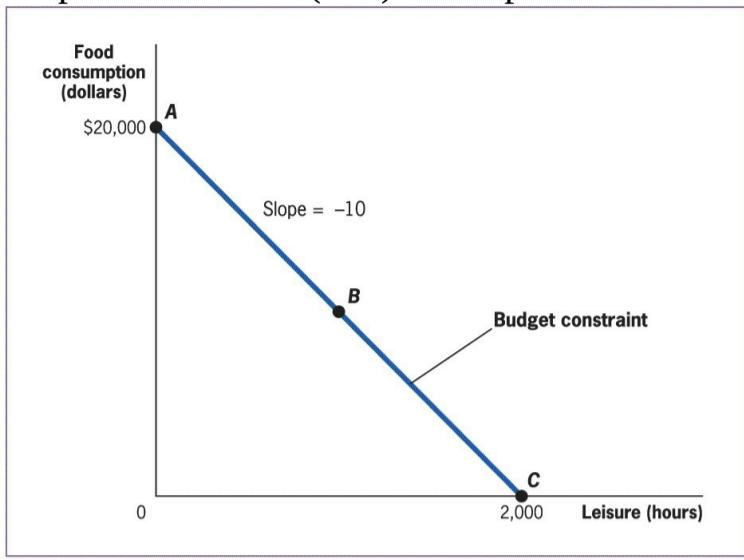
How does Joelle decide on the optimal amount of labor to supply? To answer this question, we return to the utility maximization framework, but with one twist relative to the decision to purchase cakes and movies. In that case, we were considering two goods. Now, the single mother is considering one good (food consumption) and one “bad” (labor, as we assume she would rather be at home than at work). The trick to modeling this decision is to model the demand for *leisure*, the good that is the counterpart of labor. That way, we can model the trade-off between two goods using our existing tools and then compute the amount of labor supplied as total work hours minus hours of leisure.

### Identifying the Budget Constraint

Suppose that Joelle can work up to 2,000 hours per year at a wage of \$10 per hour, that she has no other source of income, and that there is not yet a TANF program in place. By working one less hour in a year, Joelle will lower her consumption by \$10 and increase her leisure time by one hour. Thus, the “*price*” of one hour of leisure time is the hourly wage rate. This fact follows from the principle of opportunity cost: when Joelle opts to take an hour of leisure, her next best alternative activity is to work. Thus, the price of the hour of leisure is \$10, the forgone wage she could have earned if working.

The price of food consumption is given directly by the market; let's say that it is \$1 per unit of food. This means that Joelle faces a trade-off: each hour of work brings her 10 units of food, and each hour off from work (leisure) costs her 10 units of food. If Joelle can work up to 2,000 hours per year, we can now identify her budget constraint as line ABC in [Figure 2-8](#): she can consume a maximum of \$20,000 of food per year, a maximum of 2,000 hours of leisure per year, or any combination in between. The slope of the budget constraint is the

negative of the ratio of the price of leisure (\$10) to the price of consumption (\$1),  $-10$ .



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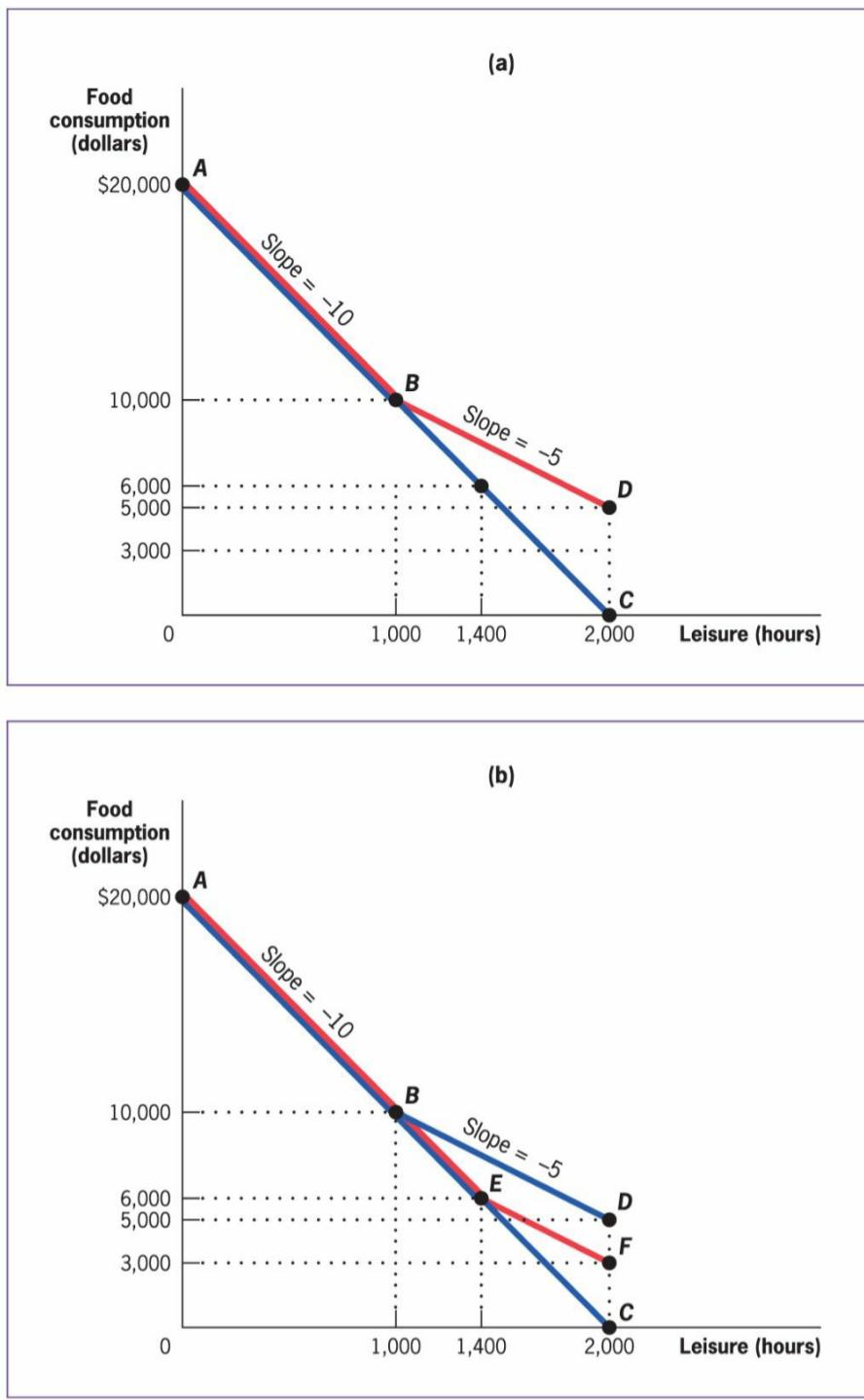
■ FIGURE 2-8

The Consumption–Leisure Trade-off • Joelle has a choice of taking more leisure and consuming less or taking less leisure (working harder) and consuming more. If she takes no leisure, she can have consumption of \$20,000 per year; but if she takes 2,000 hours of leisure, her consumption falls to 0. This is represented by the budget constraint with a slope of **−10**,

## The Effect of TANF on the Budget Constraint

Now, let's introduce a TANF program and illustrate what this does to the budget constraint. Programs such as TANF typically have two key features. The first is a *benefit guarantee*, or the baseline amount of money to which recipients are entitled when they enroll in the program. The second is a *benefit reduction rate*, the rate at which the baseline amount is reduced if recipients have other income. For example, a benefit reduction rate of 100% implies that TANF recipients are entitled to the benefit guarantee if they have no other income, but that they lose a dollar of the benefit guarantee for each dollar of other income they earn. A benefit reduction rate of only 50% implies that TANF recipients once again get the full benefit guarantee if they have no other income, but that they lose \$0.50 of the benefit guarantee for each \$1 they earn. The benefit reduction rate is, in effect, an *implicit tax rate*; it is the rate at which TANF benefits are reduced when recipients earn other income.

We can now add the TANF program to the budget constraint in panel (a) of [Figure 2-9](#). Let's assume the TANF program we're considering has a benefit guarantee of \$5,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 50%. The original budget constraint is the line ABC. If Joelle chooses 1,000 or fewer hours of leisure, earning \$10,000 to \$20,000, the budget constraint does not change, remaining as the segment AB. This is because, with a benefit guarantee of \$5,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 50%, once she earns \$10,000 ( $\$5,000/0.5$ ), she is no longer eligible for TANF, so it doesn't affect her budget constraint.



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FIGURE 2-9

The Budget Constraint with TANF • Joelle's original budget constraint is ABC. With a TANF guarantee of \$5,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 50% in panel (a), the budget constraint becomes ABD. Once she has taken more than 1,000 hours of leisure, the budget constraint flattens, and she now can enjoy \$5,000 of consumption even with 2,000 hours of leisure at point D. When the guarantee falls to \$3,000 in panel (b), the budget constraint (AEF) doesn't flatten until she takes more than 1,400 hours of leisure; now, with 2,000 hours of leisure, her consumption is only \$3,000 at point F.

If Joelle chooses to take more than 1,000 hours of leisure, however, the budget constraint is now flatter. Previously, the price of leisure was \$10 per hour because that was the forgone wage. With the 50% benefit reduction rate, however, if Joelle works another hour, she earns \$10 in wages but loses \$5 in TANF benefits. Under these conditions, the net return to working another hour is now only \$5, so the price of leisure falls to \$5 per hour. The budget constraint is therefore flatter, with a slope of only  $-5$  rather than  $-10$ , because in the range where TANF is available, there is a lower relative price of leisure. Point D marks the end of the new budget constraint and provides a new option for Joelle: she can have 2,000 hours of leisure *and* \$5,000 in food consumption because of the \$5,000 TANF benefit guarantee. Without TANF, if she had chosen to consume 2,000 hours of leisure, she wouldn't have been

working at all, and her family would have had no food (point C ).

## Effects of Changes in Benefit Guarantee

Suppose that your state is considering reducing the income guarantee under TANF from \$5,000 to \$3,000. The effect of this change on the budget constraint is illustrated in panel (b) of [Figure 2-9](#). If Joelle now chooses to take fewer than 1,400 hours of leisure, earning \$6,000 to \$20,000, the budget constraint does not change, remaining as the segment AE. This is because, with the lower benefit guarantee of \$3,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 50%, she is now no longer eligible for TANF once she earns \$6,000. If she takes more than 1,400 hours of leisure, the budget constraint once again flattens: because she earns \$10 in wages but loses \$5 in TANF benefits for each hour of work in this range, the slope of the budget constraint along the segment EF (the net return to an hour of work) is -5. Point F marks the end of the new budget constraint, where Joelle can have 2,000 hours of leisure *and* \$3,000 in food consumption because of the \$3,000 TANF benefit guarantee. How will single mothers react to this policy change?

In answering this question, it is important to return to the concepts of *income and substitution effects* introduced earlier. Suppose, for example, that Joelle earned less than \$6,000 before this benefit change. In that case, there is no substitution effect associated with the policy change from a \$5,000 benefit guarantee to a \$3,000 benefit guarantee. There is no change in the relative price of leisure, which remains at \$5 per hour, so the slope of the budget constraint doesn't change. Whether Joelle gets a \$5,000 or a \$3,000 check from the government has no impact on the return from working an additional hour (\$5 on net), so the price of leisure is unchanged. With relative prices of food and leisure unchanged, there is no desire for substitution across the goods.

There is, however, a clear income effect for Joelle. When the TANF guarantee is reduced, she is poorer. Poorer individuals will reduce their consumption of all normal goods, including leisure. Taking less leisure means working more. In other words, because there is less money available to finance consumption, women will have to work harder. Thus, on net, there is a reduction in leisure from the income effect of reducing the TANF guarantee.

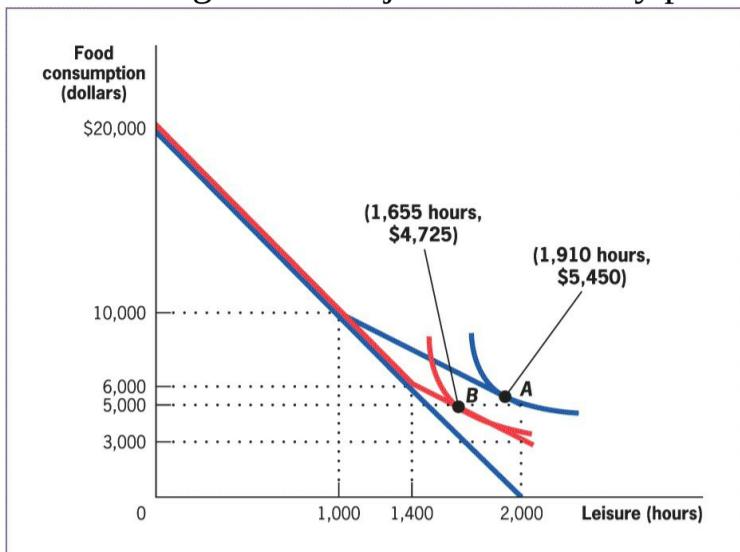
Suppose, instead, that Joelle earned between \$6,000 and \$10,000 before the benefit change. Once again, this benefit change reduces her income, which will cause her to choose less leisure (and more labor). There is also, however, a change in the price of leisure. In this range of earnings, before the benefits change, an hour of work netted Joelle only \$5 per hour, due to the reduction in TANF benefits from additional earnings. Now, because she is no longer eligible for TANF in this income range, an hour of work nets her \$10. This relative increase in the price of leisure (taking leisure used to cost \$5 but now costs \$10 in forgone earnings) will lead to a substitution effect toward less leisure. Thus, in this range, the income and substitution effects work together to reduce leisure.

## How Large Will the Labor Supply Response Be?

This example illustrates the power of economic theory. The constrained maximization model implies that a reduction in the benefit guarantee will lead to less leisure and, therefore, more work among single mothers. The model does not say, however, *how sizeable* this response will be. This depends on how much Joelle earned before the benefit change, and the size of the income and substitution effects on her leisure/labor decision.

To illustrate the different possible magnitudes of the response, [Figures 2-10](#) and [2-11](#) show two different cases. In both cases, we consider utility functions for consumption and leisure, where the utility derived from each is proportional to its *natural logarithm* ( $\ln$ ). This is a

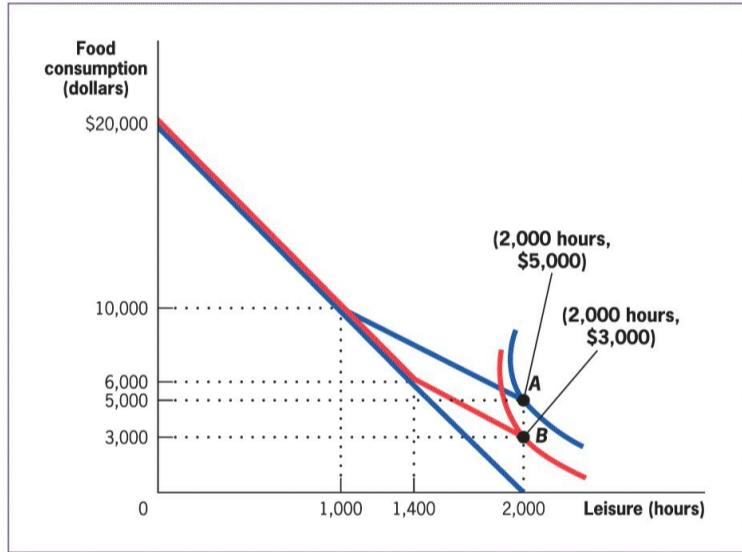
convenient form for utility functions that shares most of the properties of the square root utility function we used for cakes and movies, most notably diminishing marginal utility. As noted earlier, the square root and log forms are just two of many possible forms for utility.



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■ FIGURE 2-10

**Utility Maximization for Sarah** • When the TANF guarantee is \$5,000, the optimal choice for Sarah is to take 1,910 hours of leisure and consume \$5,450 (at point A). When the guarantee falls to \$3,000, she reduces her leisure to 1,655 hours, and her consumption falls to \$4,725 (at point B).



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■ FIGURE 2-11

**Utility Maximization for Naomi** • Because Naomi values leisure more highly relative to consumption than Sarah in [Figure 2-10](#), she chooses 2,000 hours of leisure regardless of the TANF guarantee. The reduction in guarantee therefore lowers Naomi's consumption from \$5,000 (at point A) to \$3,000 (at point B).

The first mother, Sarah, has a utility function of the form  $U = 100 - \ln(C) + 175 - \ln(L)$ , where  $C$  is consumption,  $L$  is leisure, and  $\ln$  is the natural logarithmic function. Sarah values both consumption and leisure, but she values leisure somewhat more. [Figure 2-10](#) shows her indifference curves and budget constraint. When the guarantee is \$5,000, Sarah chooses to consume 1,910 hours of leisure and work 90 hours per year (point A, where her indifference curve is tangent to the budget constraint with a \$5,000 guarantee). At that level of labor supply, her wage earnings are \$900. Because her TANF guarantee is reduced by \$0.50 for each \$1 of earnings, however, her total income is the \$900 in earnings plus a net TANF benefit of  $\$5,000 - 0.5 \times \$900 = \$4,550$ .

So her total consumption expenditures are  $\$900 + \$4,550 = \$5,450$ . (The mathematics of this example is shown in the appendix to this chapter.)

When the TANF guarantee is reduced to \$3,000, Sarah chooses to reduce her leisure because she is now poorer (the income effect), moving to point *B* on the new budget constraint. At that point, she takes only 1,655 hours of leisure per year, works 345 hours, and earns \$3,450. For this mother, the governor is right; the reduction in TANF guarantee has raised her labor supply from 90 hours to 345 hours. Note that because Sarah's TANF benefits are reduced by half her earnings, her TANF benefits are now  $\$3,000 - 0.5 - \$3,450 = \$1,275$ . Thus, her total budget is \$4,725; her consumption has fallen by \$725 from the days of the higher TANF guarantee ( $\$5,450 - \$4,725 = \$725$ ). Her consumption has not fallen by the full \$2,000 cut in the guarantee because she has compensated for the guarantee reduction by working harder.

[Figure 2-11](#) illustrates the case of a different single mother, Naomi, with a utility function  $U = 75 \times \ln(C) + 300 \times \ln(L)$ . Naomi puts a much larger weight on leisure relative to consumption, when compared with Sarah. (Her indifference curves are steeper, indicating that a larger increase in consumption is required to compensate for any reduction in leisure.) For Naomi, the optimal choice when the TANF guarantee is \$5,000 is to not work at all; she consumes 2,000 hours of leisure and \$5,000 of food (point *A*). When the guarantee is reduced to \$3,000, this mother *continues* not to work and just lets her consumption fall to \$3,000. That is, she cares so much more about leisure than about consumption that she won't supplement her TANF guarantee with earnings even at the lower guarantee level. For this mother, the secretary is right; the reduction in TANF guarantee has had no effect on labor supply, it has simply cut her level of food consumption.

Thus, theory alone cannot tell you whether this policy change will increase labor supply or by how much. Theoretically, labor supply could rise, but it might not. To move beyond this uncertainty, you will have to analyze available data on single mother labor supply, and the next chapter presents the empirical methods for doing so. From these various methods, you will conclude that the governor is right: there is strong evidence that cutting TANF benefits will increase labor supply.

## 2.3 Equilibrium and Social Welfare

The disagreement we have been discussing is over whether the labor supply of single mothers will rise or not when TANF benefits are cut. As a good public finance economist, however, you know not to stop there. What really should matter to the governor and to the secretary of your department is not a simple fact about whether the labor supply of single mothers rises or falls. What should matter is the *normative* question (the analysis of what should be): Does this policy change make society as a whole better off or not?

To address this question, we turn to the tools of normative analysis, **welfare economics**. Welfare economics is the study of the determinants of well-being, or welfare, in society. To avoid confusion, it is important to recall that the term “welfare” is also used to refer to cash payments (such as those from the TANF program) to low-income single families. Thus, when referring to cash payments in this chapter, we will use the term TANF; our use of the term “welfare” in this chapter refers to the normative concept of well-being.

### welfare economics

The study of the determinants of well-being, or welfare, in society.

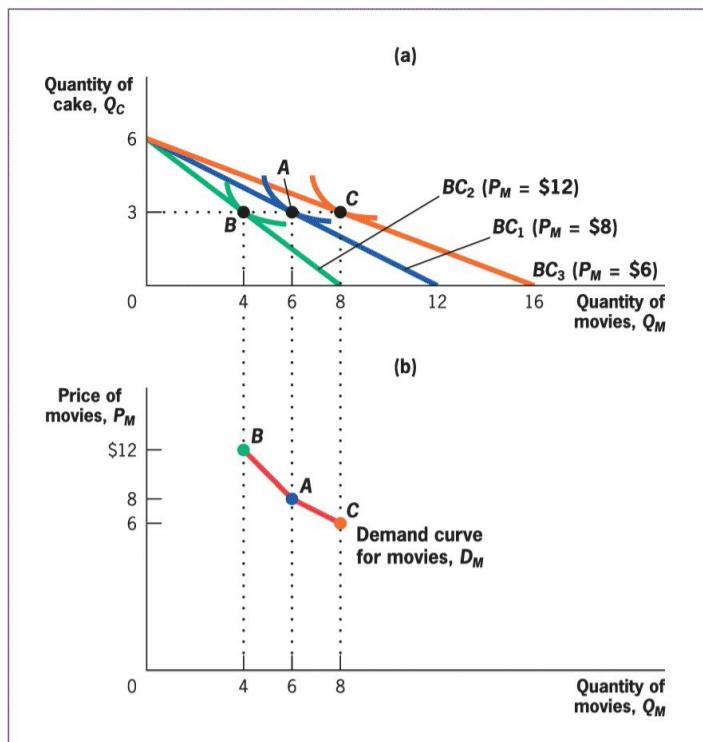
We discuss the determination of welfare in two steps. First, we discuss the determinants of social efficiency, or the size of the economic pie. Social efficiency is determined by the net benefits that consumers and producers receive as a result of their trades of goods and services. We develop the demand and supply curves that measure those net benefits, show how they interact to determine equilibrium, and then discuss why this equilibrium maximizes efficiency. We then turn to a discussion of how to integrate redistribution, or the division of the economic pie, into this analysis so that we can measure the total well-being of society, or *social welfare*. In this section, we discuss these concepts with reference to our earlier example of Andrea choosing between movies and cakes; we then apply these lessons to a discussion of the welfare implications of changes in TANF benefits.

## Demand Curves

Armed with our understanding of how consumers make choices, we can now turn to understanding how these choices underlie the **demand curve**, the relationship between the price of a good or service and the quantity demanded. [Figure 2-12](#) shows how constrained choice outcomes are translated into the demand curve for movies for Andrea. In panel (a), we vary the price of movies, which changes the slope of the budget constraint (which is determined by the ratio of movie to cake prices). For each new budget constraint, Andrea’s optimal choice remains the tangency of that budget constraint with the highest possible indifference curve.

### demand curve

A curve showing the quantity of a good demanded by individuals at each price.



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■ FIGURE 2-12

**Deriving the Demand Curve** • Changes in the price of movies rotate the budget constraint, changing the number of movies demanded by individuals. When the price of movies rises to \$12, then the number of movies demanded falls to 4, and when the price of movies demanded falls to \$6, the number of movies demanded rises to 8. We can use this relationship between the price and utility-maximizing choices to trace out the demand curve for movies,  $D_M$ , as shown in panel (b).

For example, we have already shown that given her income of \$96, at a price of \$16 for cakes and \$8 for movies, Andrea will choose 6 movies and 3 cakes (point A on  $BC_1$ ). An increase in the price of movies to \$12 will steepen the budget constraint, with the slope rising from  $-\frac{1}{2}$  to  $-\frac{3}{4}$ , as illustrated by  $BC_2$ . This increase in price will reduce the quantity of movies demanded so that she chooses 3 cakes and 4 movies (point B on  $BC_2$ ). A decrease in the price of movies to \$6 will flatten the budget constraint, with the slope falling from  $-\frac{1}{2}$  to  $-\frac{3}{8}$ , as illustrated by  $BC_3$ . This decrease in price will increase the quantity of movies demanded, and Andrea will now choose to buy 3 cakes and 8 movies (point C on  $BC_3$ ).

Using this information, we can trace out the demand curve for movies, which shows the quantity of a good or service demanded by individuals at each market price. The demand curve for movies, shown in panel (b), maps the relationship between the price of movies and the quantity of movies demanded.

## Elasticity of Demand

A key feature of demand analysis is the **elasticity of demand**, the percentage change in quantity demanded for each percentage change in prices:

$$\epsilon = \frac{\text{percentage change in quantity demand}}{\text{percentage change in price}} = \frac{\Delta Q/Q}{\Delta P/P}$$

### elasticity of demand

The percentage change in the quantity demanded of a good caused by each 1% change in the price of that good.

For example, when the price of movies rises from \$8 to \$12, the number of movies purchased

falls from 6 to 4. So a 50% rise in price leads to a 33% reduction in quantity purchased, for an elasticity of  $-0.666$ .

There are several key points to make about elasticities of demand:

- They are typically negative because quantity demanded typically falls as price rises.
- They are typically not constant along a demand curve. So, in our previous example, the price elasticity of demand is  $-0.666$  when the price of movies rises but is  $-1.32$  when the price of movies falls (a 25% reduction in price from \$8 to \$6 leads to a 33% increase in demand from 6 to 8 movies).
- A vertical demand curve is one in which the quantity demanded does not change when price rises; in this case, demand is *perfectly inelastic*.
- A horizontal demand curve is one in which quantity demanded changes infinitely for even a very small change in price; in this case, demand is *perfectly elastic*.
- Finally, the example here is a special case in which the demand for cakes doesn't change as the price of movies changes. The effect of one good's price on the demand for another good is the *cross-price elasticity*, and with the particular utility function we are using here, that cross-price elasticity is zero. Typically, however, a change in the price of one good will affect demand for other goods as well.

## Supply Curves

The discussion thus far has focused on consumers and the derivation of demand curves. This tells about only one side of the market, however. The other side of the market is represented by the **supply curve**, which shows the quantity supplied of a good or service at each market price. Just as the demand curve is the outcome of utility maximization by individuals, the supply curve is the outcome of *profit maximization* by firms.

**supply curve**

A curve showing the quantity of a good that firms are willing to supply at each price.

The analysis of firms' profit maximization is similar to that of consumer utility maximization. Just as individuals have a utility function that measures the impact of goods consumption on well-being, firms have a *production function* that measures the impact of firm input use on firm output levels. For ease, we typically assume that firms have only two types of inputs: *labor* (workers) and *capital* (machines, buildings). Consider a firm that

produces movies. This firm's production function may take the form  $q = \sqrt{K \times L}$ , where  $q$  is the quantity of movies produced,  $K$  is units of capital (such as studio sets), and  $L$  is units of labor (such as hours of acting time employed).

The impact of a one-unit change in an input, holding other inputs constant, on the firm's output is the **marginal productivity** of that input. Just as the marginal utility of consumption diminishes with each additional unit of consumption of a good, the marginal productivity of an input diminishes with each additional unit of the input used in production; that is, production generally features *diminishing marginal productivity*. For this production function, for example, holding  $K$  constant, adding additional units of  $L$  raises production by less and less, just as with the utility function (of this same form), holding cakes constant, consuming additional movies raised utility by less and less.<sup>5</sup>

**marginal productivity**

The impact of a one-unit change in any input, holding other inputs constant, on the firm's output.

This production function dictates the cost of producing any given quantity as a function of the prices of inputs and the quantity of inputs used. The total costs of production,  $TC$ , are determined by  $\mathbf{TC = rK + wL}$ , where  $r$  is the price of capital (the rental rate) and  $w$  is the price of labor (the wage rate). For day-to-day decisions by the firm, the amount of capital is fixed, while the amount of labor can be varied. Given this assumption, we can define the **marginal cost**, or the incremental cost to producing one more unit, as the wage rate times the amount of labor needed to produce one more unit.

**marginal cost**

The incremental cost to a firm of producing one more unit of a good.

For example, consider the production function just described, and suppose that the firm is producing movies using 1 unit of capital and 4 units of labor. Now, holding the amount of capital fixed, it wants to produce 3 movies. To do so, it will have to increase its use of labor by 5 units (to 9 total units). If the wage rate is \$1 per unit, then the marginal cost of raising production from 2 to 3 movies is \$5.

The key point of this discussion is that *diminishing marginal productivity generally implies rising marginal costs*. To produce a fourth movie would require an increase in labor of 7 units, at a cost of \$7; to produce a fifth movie would cost \$9. Because each additional unit of production means calling forth labor that is less and less productive, at the same wage rate, the costs of that production are rising.

Recall that the goal of the firm is to maximize its **profit**, the difference between revenues and costs. Profit is maximized when the revenue from the next unit, or the *marginal revenue*, equals the cost of producing that next unit, the *marginal cost*. In a competitive industry, the revenue from any unit is the price the firm obtains in the market. Thus, the firm's profit maximization rule is to *produce until price equals marginal cost*.

**profit**

The difference between a firm's revenues and costs, maximized when marginal revenues equal marginal costs.

We can see this through the type of "hill-climbing" exercise proposed in the Quick Hint on [p. 34](#). Suppose the price of movies in the market is \$8, the cost of capital is \$1 per unit, the cost of labor is \$1 per unit, and the firm has 1 unit of capital. Then, if the firm produces 1 movie, it will need to use 1 unit of labor, so that total costs are \$2. Because revenues on that first unit are \$8, it should clearly produce that first movie. To produce a second movie, the firm will need to use 4 units of labor, or an increase of 3 units of labor. Thus, the marginal cost of that second unit is \$3, but the marginal revenue (price) is \$8, so the second movie should be produced. For the third movie, the marginal cost is \$5, as just noted, which remains below price.

But now imagine the firm is producing 4 movies and is deciding whether to produce a fifth. Producing the fifth movie will require an increase in labor input from 16 to 25 units, or an increase of 9 units. This will cost \$9. But the price that the producer gets for this movie is only \$8. As a result, producing that fifth unit will be a money loser, and the firm will not do it. Thus, profit maximization dictates that the firm produce until its marginal costs (which are rising by assumption of diminishing marginal productivity) reach the price.

Profit maximization is the source of the supply curve, the relationship between the price and how much producers will supply to the market. At any price, we now know that producers will supply a quantity such that the marginal cost equals that price. Thus, the *marginal cost curve is the firm's supply curve*, showing the relationship between price and

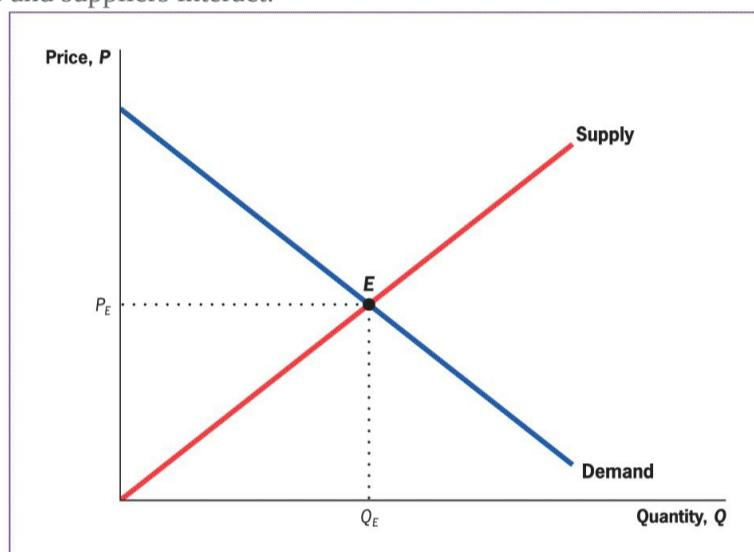
quantity. As quantity rises, and marginal costs rise, the firm will require higher and higher prices to justify producing additional units.

## Equilibrium

We have discussed the source of individual demand curves (utility maximization) and firm supply curves (profit maximization). To undertake welfare analysis, we need to translate these concepts to their counterparts at the level of the **market**, the arena in which demanders and suppliers actually interact (such as the supermarket or a website). To do so, we add up the demands of each individual who is demanding goods in this market, and the supplies of each firm that is supplying goods in this market. We *horizontally sum* these curves. That is, at each price, we add up all the quantities available to be purchased at that price by demanders to obtain market level demand, and all the quantities available to be supplied at that price by suppliers to obtain market-level supply. The result is the market-level supply and demand curves shown in [Figure 2-13](#).

### market

The arena in which demanders and suppliers interact.



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■ FIGURE 2-13

**Market Outcome** • The supply and demand curves for movies intersect at the equilibrium point *E*, where both consumers and suppliers are satisfied with price and quantity.

The market-level supply and demand curves interact to determine the **market equilibrium**, the price and quantity pair that will satisfy both demand and supply. This point occurs at the intersection of the supply and demand curves, such as point *E* in [Figure 2-13](#). Given the equilibrium price  $P_E$ , demanders will demand the equilibrium quantity,  $Q_E$ , and suppliers will be willing to supply that equilibrium quantity. The competitive market equilibrium represents the unique point at which both consumers and suppliers are satisfied with price and quantity.

### market equilibrium

The combination of price and quantity that satisfies both demand and supply, determined by the interaction of the supply and demand curves.

## Social Efficiency

Armed with the analysis thus far, we are now ready to take the final step: to measure *social efficiency*, or the size of the pie. Social efficiency represents the net gains to society from all trades that are made in a particular market, and it consists of two components: consumer and producer surplus.

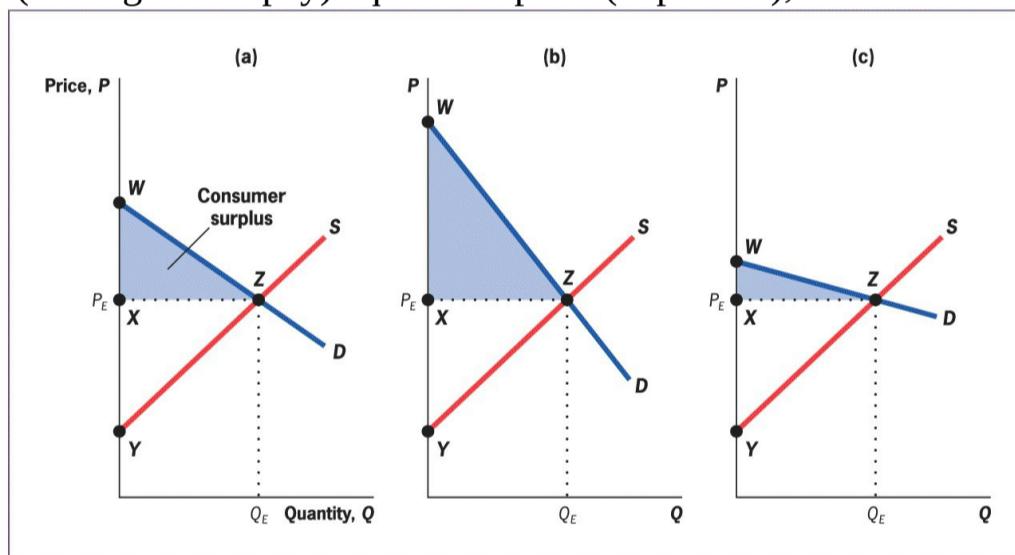
## Consumer Surplus

The gain to consumers from trades in a market for consumer goods is **consumer surplus**, the benefit that consumers derive from consuming a good above and beyond what they paid for the good. Once we know the demand curve, consumer surplus is easy to measure because each point on a demand curve represents *the consumer's willingness to pay for that quantity*. It is important to always keep in mind that willingness to pay is dependent on the consumer's resources; willingness to pay is shorthand for "willingness to pay given available resources."

### consumer surplus

The benefit that consumers derive from consuming a good, above and beyond the price they paid for the good.

Panel (a) of [Figure 2-14](#) shows a graphical representation of consumer surplus in the movie market: the shaded area below the demand curve and above the equilibrium price  $P_E$  (area  $WZX$ ). This area is consumer surplus because these are units where the willingness to pay (represented by the demand curve) is higher than the amount actually paid,  $P_E$ . Consumer surplus is largest on the very first unit because this represents the consumer who most wanted the good. (She is willing to buy the good at a very high price.) For that first unit, consumer surplus equals the distance  $WX$  on the vertical axis. Consumer surplus then falls as additional consumers derive less and less marginal utility from the good. Finally, for the consumer whose demand (willingness to pay) equals the price (at point  $Z$ ), consumer surplus is zero.



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■ FIGURE 2-14

**Consumer Surplus** • The consumer surplus is the area below the demand curve and above the equilibrium market price, the shaded area  $WZX$  in all three panels of this graph. This represents the value to consumers of consuming goods above and beyond the price paid for those goods. As demand becomes more inelastic, consumer surplus rises; as demand becomes more elastic, consumer surplus falls.

Consumer surplus is determined by two factors: the market equilibrium price and the elasticity of demand. Panel (b) of [Figure 2-14](#) shows the case of a good with very inelastic demand (i.e., where quantity demanded is not very sensitive to prices), such as basic foods for a low-income community. In this case, the demand curve is more vertical, so the consumer surplus is a very large area. Consumer surplus is large because inelastic demand arises from a lack of good substitutes, so that consumers get enormous surplus out of consuming that particular good. Panel (c) of [Figure 2-14](#) shows the case of a good with very elastic demand (i.e., where quantity demanded is very sensitive to prices), such as going to the movies. In this case, the demand curve is nearly horizontal, so that consumer surplus is a very small area. This is because elastic demand arises from the availability of very good substitutes. Consumers don't derive very much surplus from consuming a good for which there are close

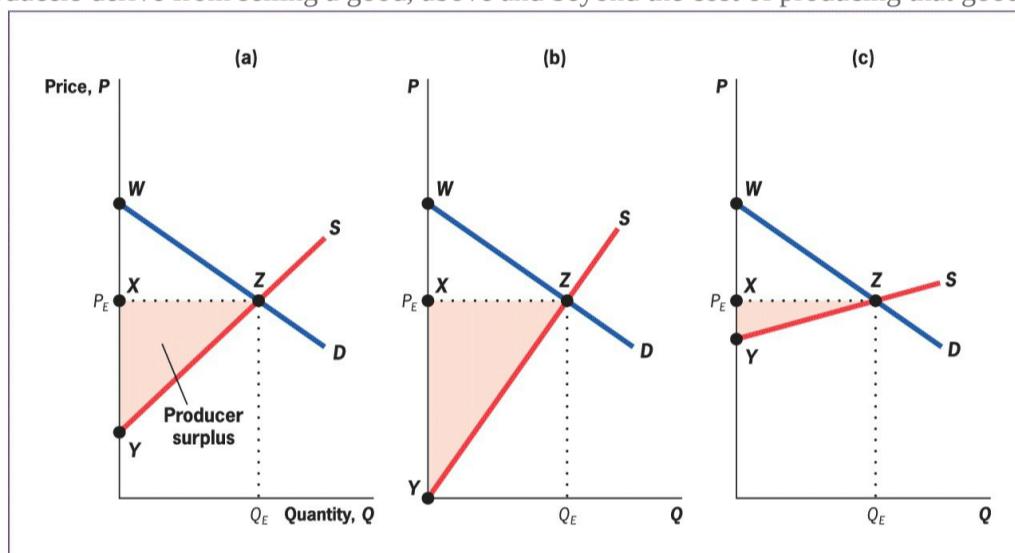
substitutes.

## Producer Surplus

Consumers aren't the only ones who derive a surplus from market transactions. There is also a welfare gain to producers, the **producer surplus**, which is the benefit derived by producers from the sale of a unit above and beyond their cost of producing that unit. Like consumer surplus, producer surplus is easy to measure because every point on the supply curve represents the marginal cost of producing that unit of the good. Thus, producer surplus is represented graphically by the area above the supply (marginal cost) curve and below the equilibrium price  $P_E$ , the shaded area  $XZY$  in [Figure 2-15](#). This area is producer surplus because these are units where the market price is above the willingness to supply (the supply curve). Producer surplus is, in effect, the profits made by the producer.

### producer surplus

The benefit that producers derive from selling a good, above and beyond the cost of producing that good.



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■ FIGURE 2-15

**Producer Surplus** • The producer surplus is the area below the equilibrium market price and above the supply curve, the shaded area  $XZY$  in all three panels of this graph. This represents the profit earned by firms on all units sold at the market price. As supply becomes more inelastic, producer surplus rises; as supply becomes more elastic, producer surplus falls.

Panels (b) and (c) in [Figure 2-15](#) illustrate the impact on producer surplus of varying the *price elasticity of supply*, the percentage change in supply for each percentage change in market prices. When the price elasticity of supply is very low, so that supply is very inelastic, then the supply curve is more vertical and producer surplus is very large, as in panel (b). When the price elasticity of supply is very high so that supply is very elastic, then the supply curve is nearly horizontal and producer surplus is very small, as in panel (c).

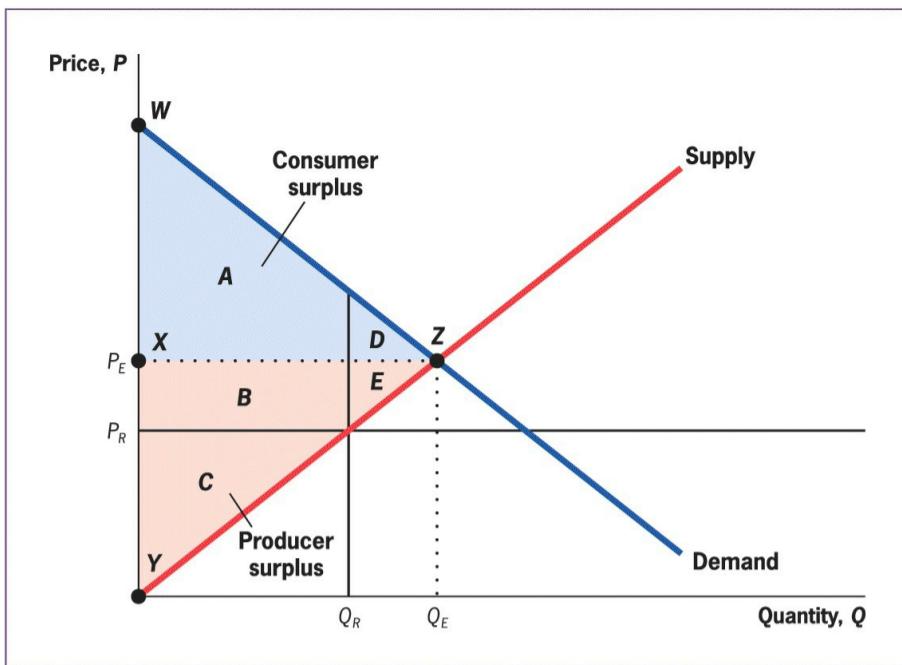
## Social Surplus

**Total social surplus**, also called social efficiency, is the total surplus received by consumers and producers in a market. [Figure 2-16](#) shows the total social surplus for the movie market.

The consumer surplus in this market is the shaded area  $A + D$ , and the producer surplus is the shaded area  $B + C + E$ . Thus, social surplus for this market is the sum of the shaded areas  $A + B + C + D + E$ .

### total social surplus (social efficiency)

The sum of consumer surplus and producer surplus.



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■ FIGURE 2-16

Competitive Equilibrium Maximizes Social Surplus • The sum of consumer surplus (the area below the demand curve and above the price) and producer surplus (the area above the supply curve and below the price) is maximized at the competitive equilibrium. A restriction on price to  $P_R$  lowers quantity supplied to  $Q_R$  and creates a deadweight loss of  $D + E$ .

## Competitive Equilibrium Maximizes Social Efficiency

We can use this social surplus framework to illustrate the point known as the [First Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics](#): the competitive equilibrium, where supply equals demand, maximizes social efficiency. This theorem makes intuitive sense because social efficiency is created whenever a trade occurs that has benefits that exceed its costs.

This is true for every transaction to the left of  $Q_E$  in [Figure 2-16](#): for each of those transactions, the benefits (willingness to pay, or demand) exceed the costs (marginal cost, or supply).

### First Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics

The competitive equilibrium, where supply equals demand, maximizes social efficiency.

Doing anything that lowers the quantity sold in the market below  $Q_E$  reduces social efficiency. For example, suppose that the government, in an effort to help consumers, restricts the price that firms can charge for movies to  $P_R$ , which is below the equilibrium price  $P_E$ . Suppliers react to this restriction by reducing their quantity produced to  $Q_R$ , the quantity at which the new price,  $P_R$ , intersects the supply curve: it is the quantity producers are willing to supply at this price. Producer surplus is now area  $C$ , the area above the supply curve and below price  $P_R$ . Thus, producer surplus falls by area  $B + E$ .

On the consumer side, there are two effects on surplus. On the one hand, because a smaller quantity of movies is supplied, consumers are worse off by the area  $D$ : the movies that are no longer provided between  $Q_R$  and  $Q_E$  were movies for which consumers were willing to pay more than the cost of production to see the movie, so consumer surplus falls. On the other

hand, because consumers pay a lower price for the remaining  $Q_R$  movies that they do see, consumer surplus rises by area  $B$ .

On net, then, society loses surplus equal to the area  $D + E$ . This area is called **deadweight loss**, the reduction in social efficiency from preventing trades for which benefits exceed costs. This part of the social surplus ( $D + E$ ) has vanished because there are *trades that could be made where benefits are greater than costs, but those trades are not being made*. Graphically, then, the social surplus triangle is maximized when quantity is at  $Q_E$ .

**deadweight loss**

The reduction in social efficiency from preventing trades for which benefits exceed costs.

► Quick Hint It is sometimes confusing to know how to draw deadweight loss triangles. The key to doing so is to remember that *deadweight loss triangles point to the social optimum and grow outward from there*. The intuition is that the deadweight loss from over- or underproduction is smallest right near the optimum (producing one unit too few or one too many isn't so costly). As production moves further from this optimum, however, the deadweight loss grows rapidly.

## From Social Efficiency to Social Welfare: The Role of Equity

The discussion thus far has focused entirely on how much surplus there is (social efficiency, the size of the economic pie). Societies usually care about not only how much surplus there is but also how it is distributed among the population. The level of **social welfare**, the level of well-being in a society, is determined both by social efficiency and by the equitable distribution of society's resources.

**social welfare**

The level of well-being in society.

Under certain assumptions, efficiency and equity are two separate issues. In these circumstances, society doesn't have just one socially efficient point but a whole series of socially efficient points from which it can choose. Society can achieve those different points simply by shifting available resources among individuals and letting them trade freely. Indeed, this is the **Second Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics**: society can attain any efficient outcome by a suitable redistribution of resources and free trade.

**Second Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics**

Society can attain any efficient outcome by suitably redistributing resources among individuals and then allowing them to freely trade.

In practice, however, society doesn't typically have this nice choice. Rather, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#), society most often faces an **equity–efficiency trade-off**, the choice between having a bigger economic pie and having a more fairly distributed pie. Resolving this trade-off is harder than determining efficiency-enhancing government interventions. It raises the tricky issue of making interpersonal comparisons, or deciding who should have more and who should have less in society.

**equity–efficiency trade-off**

The choice society must make between the total size of the economic pie and its distribution among individuals.

Typically, we model the government's equity–efficiency decisions in the context of a

**social welfare function (SWF)**. This function maps the set of individual utilities in society into an overall social utility function. In this way, the government can incorporate the equity–efficiency trade-off into its decision making. If a government policy impedes efficiency and shrinks the economic pie, then citizens as a whole are worse off. If, however, that shrinkage in the size of the pie is associated with a redistribution that is valued by society, then this redistribution might compensate for the decrease in efficiency and lead to an overall increase in social welfare.

**social welfare function (SWF)**

A function that combines the utility functions of all individuals into an overall social utility function.

The social welfare function can take one of a number of forms, and which form a society chooses is central to how it resolves the equity–efficiency trade-off. If the social welfare function is such that the government cares solely about efficiency, then the competitive market outcome will not only be the most efficient outcome, it will also be the welfare-maximizing outcome. In other cases where the government cares about the distribution of resources, then the most efficient outcome may not be the one that makes society best off. Two of the most common specifications of the social welfare function are the utilitarian and Rawlsian specifications.

## Utilitarian SWF

With a *utilitarian social welfare function*, society’s goal is to maximize the sum of individual utilities:

$$SWF = U_1 + U_2 + \dots + U_N$$

The utilities of all individuals are given equal weight and summed to get total social welfare. This formulation implies that we should transfer from person 1 to person 2 as long as the utility gain to person 1 is greater than the utility loss to person 2. In other words, this implies that society is indifferent between one *util* (a unit of well-being) for a poor person and one for a rich person.

Is this outcome unfair? No, because the social welfare function is defined in terms of utility, not dollars. With a utilitarian *SWF*, society is *not* indifferent between giving one *dollar* to the poor person and giving one dollar to the rich person; society is indifferent between giving one *util* to the poor person and one util to the rich person. This distinction between dollars and utility is important because of the diminishing marginal utility of income; richer people gain a much smaller marginal utility from an extra dollar than poorer people. With a utilitarian *SWF*, society is not indifferent between a dollar to the rich and the poor; in general, it wants to redistribute that dollar from the rich (who have a low *MU* because they already have high consumption) to the poor (who have a high *MU*). If individuals are identical, and if there is no efficiency cost of redistribution, then the utilitarian *SWF* is maximized with a perfectly equal distribution of income.

## Rawlsian Social Welfare Function

Another popular form of social welfare function is the *Rawlsian SWF*, named for the philosopher John Rawls. He suggested that society’s goal should be to maximize the well-being of its worst-off member.<sup>6</sup> The Rawlsian *SWF* has the form:

$$SW = \min (U_1, U_2, \dots, U_N)$$

Because social welfare is determined by the minimum utility in society, social welfare is maximized by maximizing the well-being of the worst-off person in society.

If individuals are identical, and redistribution does not have efficiency costs, this *SWF* would call for an equal distribution of income, as does the utilitarian *SWF*: only when income is equally distributed is society maximizing the well-being of its worst-off member. On the other hand, the utilitarian and Rawlsian *SWF* do not have the same implications once we recognize that redistribution can entail efficiency costs (and reduce the size of the pie). Suppose that all individuals have identical preferences, and equal incomes of \$40,000 per year, except for two individuals: Donald, who has an income of \$1 million per year, and Joe, who has an income of \$39,999. Now imagine a proposal to tax Donald by \$960,000, take \$1 of that tax revenue and give it to Joe, and throw the rest of the money into the ocean. Under a utilitarian *SWF*, this plan will lower social welfare because Donald's utility will fall more from losing \$960,000 than Joe's utility will rise from gaining \$1. Under a Rawlsian *SWF*, however, this plan will raise social welfare because the utility of the worst-off person has increased, and that is all we care about! Thus, in a world of equity-efficiency trade-offs, a Rawlsian *SWF* will in general suggest more redistribution than will a utilitarian *SWF*.

## Choosing an Equity Criterion

The form of the social welfare function clearly plays an important role in driving government policy. Yet the *SWF* is not handed down from some higher power but determined in some way by the interplay of politicians and the voting public. The mechanisms through which the *SWF* might evolve through the political process are discussed at length in [Chapter 9](#), but it is important to recognize that there are other criteria besides an *SWF* that might lead to redistributive concerns. For example, some policy makers take the [\*\*commodity egalitarianism\*\*](#) view, in which all that matters is that individuals have met a basic level of need for goods such as housing or medical care, and that once they have met this basic level, income distribution is irrelevant. Others argue that all that matters is [\*\*equality of opportunity\*\*](#), whereby individuals are guaranteed an equal chance to succeed, but if some do and others do not, that is not the concern of the government. We discuss these alternative views and their implications for government policy in [Chapter 17](#).

### **commodity egalitarianism**

The principle that society should ensure that individuals meet a set of basic needs, but that beyond that point income distribution is irrelevant.

### **equality of opportunity**

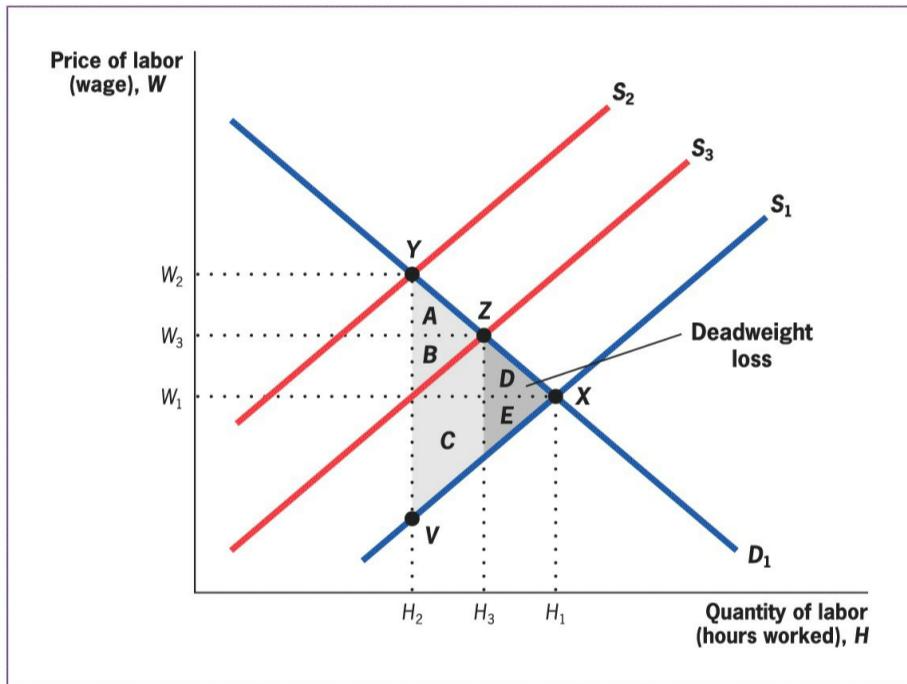
The principle that society should ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities for success but not focus on the outcomes of choices made.

## 2.4 Welfare Implications of Benefit Reductions: The TANF Example Continued

The equilibrium and social welfare tools developed in [Section 2.3](#) can be applied to evaluate the benefits and costs to society of reducing TANF benefits. The benefits are the improvement in *efficiency* from removing a barrier to labor supply by single mothers, raising single mothers' labor supply and raising the size of the social surplus. (Relying on the empirical evidence discussed in the next chapter, we assume that labor supply increases when benefits fall.) The costs are the reductions in *equity* that arise from reducing income support to one of the lowest-income groups in our society. The job of public finance economists is to measure these efficiency and equity consequences. The job of policy makers is to trade the consequences off to decide on appropriate policy choices.

### Efficiency

We can apply the tools of welfare analysis to model the welfare implications of cutting TANF benefits. [Figure 2-17](#) shows the market for labor services by single mothers. The price of labor, the wage ( $W$ ), is on the vertical axis; the amount of hours worked in aggregate in the market ( $H$ ) is on the horizontal axis.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 2-17

Welfare Implications of TANF • Without TANF, the labor market is in competitive equilibrium at point  $X$ , the intersection of  $S_1$  and  $D_1$ . When TANF is introduced, labor supply falls to  $S_2$ , and the market moves to a new equilibrium at point  $Y$ , creating a deadweight loss of  $A + B + C + D + E$ . When TANF benefits are reduced, supply increases to  $S_3$ , and social efficiency rises by  $A + B + C$ .

Unlike [Figure 2-13](#), the *demand* for the good (the single mother's hours of work) comes from firms, and the *supply* comes from individuals. Nevertheless, as in [Figure 2-13](#), the demand curve slopes downward (as wages rise, firms demand fewer hours of work) and the supply curve slopes upward (as wages rise, individuals are willing to supply more hours of work—assuming that substitution effects are larger than income effects).

Suppose that, in the absence of the TANF program, there are no other government

interventions that affect the labor market. In that case, without TANF, labor supply,  $S_1$ , intersects labor demand,  $D_1$ , at point  $X$ , and the market is in competitive equilibrium, maximizing social efficiency at hours of work  $H_1$ .

When TANF is introduced, however, single mothers work fewer hours, reducing the supply of labor at every wage, so that the supply curve shifts left to  $S_2$ . The labor market will reach a new equilibrium at point  $Y$ . Relative to the original equilibrium, the number of hours worked has fallen from  $H_1$  to  $H_2$ . This reduction in hours worked causes a deadweight loss of the area  $A + B + C + D + E$ . The difference between  $H_1$  to  $H_2$  represents hours of work that the single mother would happily provide to the firm, and the firm would happily demand from her, were it not for the TANF program. Social efficiency has thus fallen.

If TANF benefits are cut, the labor supply of single mothers increases and the supply curve shifts out to  $S_3$ . At the new equilibrium  $Z$ , the single mothers supply  $H_3$  hours of labor, and the deadweight loss has been reduced to  $D + E$ . That is, social efficiency has grown by the area  $A + B + C$  due to this reduction in TANF benefits.

We can now quantify the social efficiency gain to lower TANF benefits: area  $A + B + C$  is gained when single mothers increase their supply of labor. If we know the slopes of these demand and supply curves, we can then measure this social efficiency gain. These slopes can be estimated using the types of empirical methods we discuss in [Chapter 3](#).

## Equity

Given this large efficiency gain, why not cut TANF benefits? Indeed, why have the TANF program at all? As just noted, governments have programs such as TANF because their citizens care not only about efficiency but also about *equity*, the fair distribution of resources in society. For many specifications of social welfare, the competitive equilibrium, while being the social *efficiency*-maximizing point, may not be the social *welfare*-maximizing point.

Currently, the share of single mothers living below the *poverty line*, a measure of the minimal income required to live in the United States, is 30.6%, compared with only 11.2% for all families.<sup>7</sup> Cutting TANF benefits would therefore worsen outcomes for a population that is already one of the worst off in society. Cutting TANF benefits could have dramatic equity costs that offset the efficiency gains.

To consider a simple example, imagine that society has a utilitarian *SWF* and that each individual in society has a utility function of the form  $U = \sqrt{C}$ , where  $C = \text{consumption} = \text{income}$ . Imagine further that 10% of citizens are single mothers who have an initial income of \$10,000, and the remaining 90% of citizens have an initial income of \$50,000. Suppose that if we cut TANF benefits, the income of single mothers falls to \$5,000, while the income of everyone else rises to \$51,000. Under this policy, the average level of income in society rises from \$46,000 to \$46,400, so total social efficiency has risen. Yet social welfare has fallen; the average utility level has fallen from 211.2 to 210.3 (computed by averaging across all citizens the square root of income both before and after this change). This is because we are adding small amounts of income to the

high-income majority, who already have a low marginal utility of income, but we are taking large amounts of income away from the low-income minority, who have a very high marginal utility of income. While this policy move raises efficiency, it harms equity even “more” in the context of this *SWF*.

Measuring empirically the cost to society from this reduced equity is quite difficult. Essentially, the analyst must make some assumption about how society values the well-being of different groups, such as single mothers versus other taxpayers.

## 2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown both the power and the limitations of the theoretical tools of economics. On the one hand, by making relatively straightforward assumptions about how individuals and firms behave, we are able to address complicated questions such as how TANF benefits affect the labor supply of single mothers, and the implications of that response for social welfare. On the other hand, while we have answered these questions in a general sense, we have been very imprecise about the potential size of the changes that occur in response to changes in TANF benefits. That is, theoretical models can help point to the likely impacts of policy changes on individual decisions and social welfare, but they cannot tell us the magnitude of those effects. To do so, we have to turn to empirical economics, which we will do in the next chapter.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Policy debates such as that over the appropriate level of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits motivate the need for theoretical modeling of individual and firm decision-making behaviors.
- Modeling the impact of policy changes on individual behavior requires the use of utility-maximization models in which individuals maximize their well-being, subject to market prices and their available resources.
- Individual well-being, or utility, is maximized when individuals choose the bundle of goods that equates the rate at which they want to trade off one good for another (the marginal rate of substitution) with the rate at which the market allows them to trade off one good for another (the price ratio).
- TANF-like programs introduce complicated budget constraints with several possible segments, depending on whether a mother is on or off the program.
- Reducing TANF benefits is likely to increase the labor supply of single mothers, but the size of the increase is unclear and depends on the mothers' preferences for leisure and consumption.
- Social welfare is determined by considering both social efficiency (the size of the pie) and equity (the distribution of the pie).
- Social efficiency is maximized at the competitive equilibrium, where demand (which is derived from underlying utility maximization) equals supply (which is derived from underlying profit maximization).
- Social welfare is maximized by using a social welfare function to incorporate both efficiency and society's preferences for redistribution into policy making.
- Because reducing TANF benefits moves the labor market closer to the competitive equilibrium, it raises total social efficiency, but at a cost of lowering the incomes of a particularly needy group. The net impact on social welfare is unclear.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Assume that the price of a bus trip is \$2.00, and the price of a ride share (e.g., using a company like Uber or Lyft) is \$5.50. What is the relative price of a trip using a ride-share company, in terms of bus trips? What happens when the price of a bus trip rises to \$2.75?
2. Draw the demand curve  $Q = 250 - 10P$ . Calculate the price elasticity of demand at prices of \$5, \$10, and \$15 to show how it changes as you move along this linear demand curve.
3. You have \$100 to spend on food and clothing. The price of food is \$4, and the price of clothing is \$10.
  1. Graph your budget constraint.
  2. Suppose that the government subsidizes clothing such that each unit of clothing is half-price, up to the first five units of clothing. Graph your budget constraint in this circumstance.
4. Use utility theory to explain why people ever leave all-you-can-eat buffets.
5. Explain why a consumer's optimal choice is the point at which her budget constraint is tangent to an indifference curve.
6. Consider the utilitarian social welfare function and the Rawlsian social welfare function, the two social welfare functions described in this chapter.
  1. Which one is more consistent with a government that redistributes from rich to poor? Which is more consistent with a government that does not do any redistribution from rich to poor?
  2. Think about your answer to part (a). Show that government redistribution from rich to poor can still be consistent with either of the two social welfare functions.
7. Because the free market (competitive) equilibrium maximizes social efficiency, why would the government ever intervene in an economy?
8. Consider an income guarantee program with an income guarantee of \$5,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 40%. A person can work up to 2,000 hours per year at \$10 per hour.
  1. Draw the person's budget constraint with the income guarantee.
  2. Suppose that the income guarantee rises to \$7,500 but with a 60% reduction rate. Draw the new budget constraint.
  3. Which of these two income guarantee programs is more likely to discourage work? Explain.
  4. Draw a system of smooth indifference curves that bend the right way but would lead an agent to work more under the program you chose in part (c) than under the other program. Describe what seems extreme about these curves that leads to the unusual behavior.
9. A good is called *normal* if a person consumes more of it when her income rises (e.g., she might see movies in theaters more often as her income rises). It is called *inferior* if a person consumes less of it when her income rises (e.g., she might be less inclined to buy a used car as her income rises). Yin eats out at the local burger joint quite frequently. The burger joint suddenly lowers its prices.
  1. Suppose that, in response to the lower burger prices, Yin goes to the local pizza restaurant less often. Can you tell from this whether or not pizza is an inferior good for Yin?
  2. Suppose instead that, in response to the lower burger prices, Yin goes to the burger joint less often. Explain how this could happen in terms of the income and substitution effects by using the concepts of normal and/or inferior goods.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

10. Consider an income guarantee program with an income guarantee of \$3,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 50%. A person can work up to 2,000 hours per year at \$6 per hour. Mia, Lucas, Thomas, and Deborah work for 100, 333 $\frac{1}{3}$ , 400, and 600 hours, respectively, under this program.

The government is considering altering the program to improve work incentives. Its proposal has two pieces. First, it will lower the guarantee to \$2,000. Second, it will not reduce benefits for the first \$3,000 earned by the workers. After this, it will reduce benefits at a reduction rate of 50%.

1. Draw the budget constraint facing any worker under the original program.
2. Draw the budget constraint facing any worker under the proposed new program.
3. Which of the four workers do you expect to work more under the new program? Who do you expect to work less? Are there any workers for whom you cannot tell if they will work more or less?

11. Consider a free market with demand equal to  $Q = 900 - 10P$  and supply equal to  $Q = 20P$ .

1. What is the value of consumer surplus? What is the value of producer surplus?
2. Now the government imposes a \$15 per unit subsidy on the production of the good. What is the consumer surplus now? The producer surplus? Why is there a deadweight loss associated with the subsidy, and what is the size of this loss?
12. Governments offer both cash assistance and in-kind benefits such as payments that must be spent on food or housing. Will recipients be indifferent between receiving cash versus in-kind benefits with the same monetary values? Use indifference curve analysis to show the circumstances in which individuals would be indifferent, and situations in which the form in which they received the benefit would make a difference to them.
13. The country of Adventureland has two citizens, Bill and Ted. Bill has a private legal business. He earns \$50 per hour. At a tax rate of 0%, Bill works 20 hours per week. At a 25% tax rate he works only 16 hours per week, and at a 40% tax rate he works only 8 hours per week. Ted works a manufacturing job. He works 20 hours per week and earns \$6 per hour, regardless of the tax rate. The government is considering imposing an income tax of either 25% or 40% on Bill and using the revenues to make transfer payments to Ted. The accompanying table summarizes the three possible policies.

### Effects of Redistributive Policies in Adventureland

	0%	25%	40%
Bill's pre-tax income	\$1,000	\$800	\$400
Bill's taxes	0	200	160
Bill's net income	1,000	600	240
Ted's pre-tax income	120	120	120
Ted's transfer payment	0	200	160
Ted's net income	120	320	280

1. Compare the three policies. Are any of the policies obviously less than optimal?

$$U(Y) = Y^{1/2},$$

Now suppose that Bill and Ted have the same utility function where  $Y$  is consumption (which is equal to net income).

2. Rank the three tax policies discussed in part (a) for a Rawlsian social welfare function. Rank the three for a utilitarian social welfare function.

$$U(Y) = Y^{1/5} ?$$

3. How would your answer change if the utility function was instead

4. Suppose that Bill and Ted instead have different utility functions: Bill's utility is given by  $U^B(Y) = 1/4Y^{1/2}$ , and Ted's is given by  $U^T(Y) = Y^{1/2}$ . (This might happen, for example, because Bill has significant disabilities and therefore needs more income to get the same level of utility.) How would a Rawlsian rank the three tax policies now?
14. You have \$4,000 to spend on entertainment this year (lucky you!). The price of a day trip ( $T$ ) is \$40 and the price of a pizza and a movie ( $M$ ) is \$20. Suppose that your utility function is  $U(T, M) = T^{3/4}M^{1/4}$ .
1. What combination of  $T$  and  $M$  will you choose?
  2. Suppose that the price of day trips rises to \$50. How will this change your decision?
15. The idea of a *Universal Basic Income Guarantee* (UBI) has become increasingly popular, and has generated a surprising amount of interest across the political spectrum. Under such a scheme, every citizen would receive a minimum stipend directly from the U.S. government, regardless of their income. Using the theoretical tools of this chapter, explain how such a scheme might affect national consumption and national labor supply. How would your answer change if the government needed to raise taxes to accomplish this scheme, with the result that workers would take home a smaller fraction of their wage for every hour worked?

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 2 The Mathematics of Utility Maximization



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This appendix develops the mathematics behind the utility-maximization example presented on pp. 41–43 and in Figures 2-10 and 2-11. The utility function that underlies the indifference curves in Figure 2-10 is:

$$U = 100 \times \ln(C) + 175 \times \ln(L)$$

where  $C$  is consumption, and  $L$  is leisure.

For this utility function, the marginal rate of substitution is:

$$MRS = MU_L / MU_C = (175/L) / (100/C) = 1.75 \times (C/L)$$

Sarah has a market wage of \$10 per hour, and can work up to 2,000 hours per year. She is also subject to a TANF program that features a benefit guarantee of \$5,000, and a benefit reduction rate of 50%. As a result, the budget constraint has two segments:

$$\begin{aligned} C &= 5,000 + (2,000 - L) \times 10 \times 0.5 && \text{if leisure is more than 1,000 hours (TANF segment)} \\ C &= (2,000 - L) \times 10 && \text{if leisure is less than 1,000 hours (non-TANF segment)} \end{aligned}$$

Given this budget constraint, we can solve for the optimal amount of leisure and consumption for this single mother. We do this by first finding her optimal leisure and consumption bundle on each of the two segments of the budget constraint, and then evaluating which of those choices leads to higher total utility.

On the first (TANF) segment of the budget constraint, we solve the problem:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Maximize } U &= 100 \times \ln(C) + 175 \times \ln(L) \\ \text{subject to } C &= 5,000 + (2,000 - L) \times 10 \times 0.5 \end{aligned}$$

Substituting from the budget constraint into the utility function, we obtain:

$$\text{Maximize } U = 100 \times \ln(5,000 + (2,000 - L) \times 10 \times 0.5) + 175 \times \ln(L)$$

We maximize this by taking the differential of utility with respect to leisure, and setting it equal to zero:

$$(100 \times -5) / (5,000 + (2,000 - L) \times 5) + 175/L = 0$$

Solving this equation, we obtain  $L = 1,910$ . At that level of leisure, consumption is 5,450. This implies a utility of  $100 \times \ln(5,450) + 175 \times \ln(1,910) = 2,182$ .

Now, we can solve the problem again for the second (non-TANF) segment of the budget constraint:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Maximize } U = 100 \times \ln(C) + 175 \times \ln(L) \\ & \text{subject to } C = (2,000 - L) \times 10 \end{aligned}$$

Once again, substituting from the budget constraint into the utility function, we obtain:

$$\text{Maximize } U = 100 \times \ln((2,000 - L) \times 10) + 175 \times \ln(L)$$

Taking the differential of utility with respect to leisure, and setting this to zero, we can solve for an optimal  $L$  of 1,273, and resulting consumption of 7,270. Plugging these values back into the utility function, we get a value for utility from this choice of 2,140. This utility value is lower than 2,182, so the individual will choose point A on the first (TANF) segment of the budget constraint.

What happens when we lower the TANF guarantee to \$3,000? We can solve the same problem, but now with the lower guarantee level. Doing so, we find that the single mother would still choose to be on the TANF segment of the budget constraint, with leisure of 1,655 hours (and work of 345 hours).

The utility function that underlies the indifference curves in [Figure 2-11](#) is:

$$U = 75 \times \ln(C) + 300 \times \ln(L)$$

For this utility function, the marginal rate of substitution is:

$$MRS = MU_L / MU_C = (300/L)(75/C) = 4 \times (C/L)$$

Naomi's budget constraint is the same as that of Sarah's:

$$\begin{aligned} C &= 5,000 + (2,000 - L) \times 10 \times 0.5 && \text{if leisure is more than 1,000 hours (TANF segment)} \\ C &= (2,000 - L) \times 10 && \text{if leisure is less than 1,000 hours (non-TANF segment)} \end{aligned}$$

On the first (TANF) segment of the budget constraint, we solve the problem:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Maximize } U = 75 \times \ln(C) + 300 \times \ln(L) \\ & \text{subject to } C = 5,000 + (2,000 - L) \times 10 \times 0.5 \end{aligned}$$

Doing so, we obtain an optimal value of leisure of 3,200. This value exceeds the maximum possible level of leisure, 2,000. So the mother chooses to take that maximum value, with leisure of 2,000 and consumption of 5,000, for a utility level of 2,919.

This mother will be worse off on the non-TANF segment of the budget constraint because she wants so much leisure. Likewise, solving the problem for the \$3,000 guarantee, we once again find that she chooses the “corner” solution of 2,000 hours of leisure and 3,000 units of consumption.

# CHAPTER 3 Empirical Tools of Public Finance



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [3.1 The Important Distinction Between Correlation and Causality](#)
- [3.2 Measuring Causation with Data We'd Like to Have: Randomized Trials](#)
- [3.3 Estimating Causation with Data We Actually Get: Observational Data](#)
- [3.4 Conclusion](#)
- [APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 3](#)
  - [Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do you estimate the effect of policy changes on individual behavior?
- What are “quasi-experiments,” and how can they be used to obtain behavioral estimates?
- How do changes in welfare benefits affect single-mother labor supply?

Once again, we return to your days as an employee of your state’s Department of Health and Human Services. After doing the careful theoretical analysis outlined in [Chapter 2](#), you are somewhat closer to making a meaningful contribution to the debate between the governor and the secretary of Health and Human Services. You can tell the governor and the secretary that a reduction in TANF benefits is likely, but not certain, to raise labor supply among single mothers and that the implications of this response depend on their concerns about equity versus efficiency. Yet these politicians don’t just want to know that TANF reductions *might* raise labor supply, nor are they interested in the graphical calculations of the social welfare effects of lower benefits. They want numbers.

To provide these numbers, you now turn to the [\*\*empirical tools of public finance\*\*](#), the use of data and statistical methodologies to measure the impact of government policy on individuals and markets. Many of these tools were developed more recently than the classical analyses of utility maximization and market equilibrium that we worked with in [Chapter 2](#). As a result, they are also more imperfect, and there are lively debates about the best way to approach problems such as estimating the labor-supply response of single mothers to TANF benefit changes.

### **empirical tools of public finance**

The use of data and statistical methods to measure the impact of government policy on individuals and markets.

In this chapter, we review these empirical methods and encounter the fundamental issue faced by those doing empirical work in economics: disentangling causality from correlation. We say that two economic variables are [\*\*correlated\*\*](#) if they move together. But this relationship is [\*\*causal\*\*](#) only if one of the variables *causes* the movement in the other. If, instead, there is a third factor that causes both to move together, the correlation is not causal.

### **correlated**

Two economic variables are correlated if they move together.

### **causal**

Two economic variables are causally related if the movement of one causes movement of the other.

This chapter begins with a review of this fundamental problem. We then turn to a discussion of the “gold standard” for measuring the causal effect of an intervention, a *randomized trial*, in which individuals are randomly assigned to receive or not receive the intervention. While such randomized trials are much more common in medicine than in public finance, they provide a benchmark against which other empirical methods can be evaluated. We then discuss the range of other empirical methods used by public finance economists to answer questions such as the causal impact of TANF benefit changes on the labor supply of single mothers. Throughout, we use this TANF example, using real-world data on benefit levels and the single-mother labor supply, to assess the questions raised by the theoretical analysis of [Chapter 2](#).

## 3.1 The Important Distinction Between Correlation and Causality

There was once a cholera epidemic in Russia. The government, in an effort to stem the disease, sent doctors to the worst-affected areas. The peasants of a particular province observed a very high correlation between the number of doctors in a given area and the incidence of cholera in that area. Relying on this fact, they banded together and murdered their doctors.<sup>1</sup>



*"That's the gist of what I want to say...."*

Joe Mirachi/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

The fundamental problem in this example is that the peasants in this town clearly confused *correlation* with *causality*. They correctly observed that there was a positive association between physician presence and the incidence of illness. But they took that as evidence that the presence of physicians *caused* illness to be more prevalent. What they missed, of course, was that the link actually ran the other way: it was a higher incidence of illness that caused more physicians to be present. In statistics, this is called the *identification problem*: Given that sets of data on two variables are correlated, how do you identify whether one variable is causing the pattern seen in the other?

This is not just a problem from ancient times. In September, 2014, a group of aid workers trying to assist communities in Guinea in dealing with an outbreak of Ebola were attacked, and eight were killed. The reason, according to a local leader: "Wherever those people have passed, the communities have been hit by illness."<sup>2</sup>

Uneducated peasants are not the only ones plagued by this problem. In 1988, a Harvard

University dean conducted a series of interviews with Harvard freshmen and found that those who had taken SAT preparation courses (a much less widespread phenomenon in 1988 than today) scored, on average, 63 points lower (out of 1,600, the then-maximum number of points) than those who hadn't. The dean concluded that SAT preparation courses were unhelpful and that "the coaching industry is playing on parental anxiety."<sup>3</sup> This conclusion is another excellent example of confusing correlation with causation. Who was most likely to take SAT preparation courses? Those students who needed the most help with the exam! So all this study found was that students who needed the most help with the SAT did the worst on the exam. The courses did not cause students to do worse on the SATs; rather, students who would likely do worse on the SATs were the ones who took the courses.

Another example comes from the medical evaluation of the benefits of breast-feeding infants. Child-feeding recommendations typically include breast-feeding beyond 12 months, but some medical researchers have documented increased rates of malnutrition in breast-fed toddlers. This has led them to conclude that breast-feeding for too long is nutritionally detrimental. But the misleading nature of this conclusion was illustrated by a study of toddlers in Peru that showed that it was those babies who were already underweight or malnourished who were breast-fed the longest.<sup>4</sup> Increased breast-feeding did not lead to poor growth; children's poor growth and health led to increased breast-feeding.

## The Problem

In all of these examples, the analysis suffered from a common problem: the attempt to interpret a correlation as a causal relationship without sufficient thought to the underlying process generating the data. Noting that those who take SAT preparation courses do worse on SATs, or that those infants who breast-feed longest are the least healthy, is only the first stage in the research process—that of documenting the correlation. Once the data are available on any two measures, it is easy to see whether or not they move together, a characteristic we call being *correlated*.

What is harder to assess is whether the movements in one measure are *causing* the movements in the other. For any correlation between two variables *A* and *B*, there are three possible explanations, one or more of which could result in the correlation:

- *A* causes *B*.
- *B* causes *A*.
- Some third factor causes both.

Consider the previous SAT preparation example. For this sample of Harvard students, those who took an SAT prep course performed worse on their SATs. The interpretation drawn by the Harvard administrator was one of only many possible interpretations:

- SAT prep courses worsen preparation for SATs.
- Those who are of lower test-taking ability take preparation courses to try to catch up.
- Those who are generally nervous people like to take prep courses, and being nervous is associated with doing worse on standardized exams.

The Harvard administrator drew the first conclusion, but the others may be equally valid.

Together, these three interpretations show that this correlation cannot be interpreted as a causal effect of test preparation on test scores without more information or additional assumptions.

Similarly, consider the breast-feeding interpretation. Once again, there are many possible interpretations:

- Longer breast-feeding is bad for children's health.
- Those infants who are in the worst health get breast-fed the longest.
- The lowest-income mothers breast-feed longer because this is the cheapest form of nutrition for children, and low income is associated with poor infant health.

Once again, all of these explanations are consistent with the observed correlation. But, once again, the studies that argued for the negative effect of breast-feeding on health *assumed* the first interpretation while ignoring the others.

The general problem that empirical economists face in trying to use existing data to assess the causal influence of one factor on another is that one cannot immediately go from correlation to causation. This is a problem for policy purposes because what matters most is causation. Policy makers typically want to use the results of empirical studies as a basis for predicting how government interventions will affect behaviors. Knowing that two factors are correlated provides no predictive power; prediction requires understanding the causal links between the factors. For example, the government shouldn't make policy based on the fact that breast-feeding infants are less healthy. Rather, it should assess the true causal effect of breast-feeding on infant health and use that as a basis for making government policy. The next section begins to explore the answer to one of the most important questions in empirical research: How can you draw causal conclusions about the relationships between correlated variables?

## 3.2 Measuring Causation with Data We'd Like to Have: Randomized Trials

One of the most important empirical issues facing society today is understanding how new medical treatments affect the health of medical patients. An excellent example of this issue is the case of estrogen replacement therapy (ERT), a popular treatment for middle-aged and elderly women who have gone through menopause (the end of menstruation).<sup>5</sup> Menopause is associated with many negative side effects, such as rapid changes in body temperature (“hot flashes”), difficulty sleeping, and higher risk of urinary tract infection. ERT reduces those side effects by mimicking the estrogen produced by the woman’s body before the onset of menopause.

Although ERT helped ameliorate the negative side effects of menopause, there was also a concern about ERT. Anecdotal evidence suggested that ERT might raise the risk of heart disease and, in turn, the risk of heart attacks or strokes. A series of studies beginning in the early 1980s investigated this issue by comparing women who did and did not receive ERT after menopause. These studies concluded that those who received ERT were at no higher risk of heart disease than those who did not; indeed, there was some suggestion that ERT actually *lowered* heart disease.

There was concern, however, that such a comparison did not truly reflect the causal impact of ERT on heart disease because women who underwent ERT were more likely to be under a doctor’s care, to lead a healthier lifestyle, and to have higher incomes—all of which are associated with a lower chance of heart disease (an example of the third general explanation discussed earlier: some third factor is correlated with both ERT and heart disease). So it is possible that ERT might have raised the risk of heart disease but that this increase was masked because the women taking the drug were in better health otherwise.

### Randomized Trials as a Solution

How can researchers address this problem? The best solution is through the gold standard of testing for causality: **randomized trials**. Randomized trials involve taking a group of volunteers and *randomly* assigning them to either a **treatment group**, the set of individuals who are subject to an intervention (such as a medical treatment or government benefit) being studied, or a **control group**, who are not given the intervention. Effectively, volunteers are assigned to treatment or control by the flip of a coin.

**randomized trial**

The ideal type of experiment designed to test causality, whereby a group of individuals is randomly divided into a treatment group, which receives the treatment of interest, and a control group, which does not.

**treatment group**

The set of individuals who are subject to an intervention being studied.

**control group**

The set of individuals comparable to the treatment group who are not subject to the intervention being studied.

To see why randomized trials solve our problem, consider what researchers would ideally do in this context: take one set of older women, clone them, and place the originals and the clones in parallel universes. Everything would be the same in these parallel universes except for the use of ERT. Then, researchers could observe the differences in the incidence of heart disease between these two groups of women. Because the women would be precisely the same, we would know by definition that any differences would be causal. Because both sets of women are the same except for the treatment, there would be only one possible reason why the set of women assigned ERT would have higher rates of heart disease.

Unfortunately, we live in the real world and not in some science-fiction story, so we can't do this parallel universe experiment. But, amazingly, we can approximate this alternative reality through the randomized trial. This is because of the definition of *randomization*: assignment to treatment groups and control groups is not determined by anything about the subjects but by the flip of a coin. As a result, the treatment group is identical to the control group in every facet but one: the treatment group gets the treatment (in this case, the ERT).

## The Problem of Bias

We can rephrase all of the studies discussed so far in this chapter in the treatment/control framework. In the SAT example, the people who took preparatory classes were the treatment group, and the people who did not take the classes were the control group. In the breast-feeding example, the infants who breast-fed for more than a year were the treatment group, and the infants who did not were the control group. In the ERT studies that occurred before randomized trials, those who received ERT were the treatment group, and those who did not were the control group. Even in the Russian doctor example, the areas where the doctors were sent were the treatment group, and the areas where the doctors were not sent was the control group. Virtually any empirical problem we discuss in this course can be thought of as a comparison between treatment and control groups.

We can, therefore, always start our analysis of an empirical methodology with a simple question: Do the treatment and control groups differ for any reason other than the treatment? All of the earlier examples involve cases in which the treatment groups differ in consistent ways from those in the control groups: those taking SAT prep courses may be of lower test-taking ability than those not taking the courses; those breast-fed longest may be in worse health than those not breast-fed as long; those taking ERT may be in better health than those not taking ERT. These non-treatment-related differences between treatment and control groups are the fundamental problem in assigning causal interpretations to correlations.

We call these differences **bias**, a term that represents any source of difference between treatment and control groups that is *correlated* with the treatment but is *not due* to the treatment. The estimates of the impact of SAT prep courses on SAT scores, for example, are *biased* by the fact that those who take the prep courses are likely to do worse on the SATs for other reasons. Similarly, the estimates of the impact of breast-feeding past one year on health are *biased* by the fact that those infants in the worst health are the ones likely to be breast-fed the longest. The estimates of the impact of ERT on heart disease are *biased* by the fact that those who take ERT are likely in better health than those who do not. Whenever treatment and control groups consistently differ in a manner that is correlated with, but not due to, the treatment, there can be bias.

### bias

Any source of difference between treatment and control groups that is correlated with the treatment but is not due to the treatment.

By definition, such differences do not exist in a randomized trial because the groups do not differ in any consistent fashion but rather only by the flip of a coin. Thus, randomized treatment and control groups cannot have consistent differences that are correlated with treatment because there are no consistent differences across the groups other than the treatment. As a result, *randomized trials have no bias*, and for this reason, they are the gold standard for empirically estimating causal effects.



Quick Hint The description of randomized trials here relies on those trials having fairly large numbers of treatments and controls (large *sample sizes*). Having large

sample sizes allows researchers to eliminate any consistent differences between the groups by relying on the statistical principle called the *law of large numbers*: the odds of getting the wrong answer approaches zero as the sample size grows.

Suppose that a friend says that he can flip a (fair, not weighted!) coin so that it *always* comes up heads. This is not possible; every time a coin is flipped, there is a 50% chance that it will land tails up. So you give him a quarter and ask him to prove it. If he flips just once, there is a 50% chance he will get heads and claim victory. If he flips twice, there is still a 25% chance that he will get heads both times and continue to be able to claim victory; that is, there is still the possibility of getting a biased answer *by chance* when there is a very small sample.

As he flips more and more times, however, the odds that the coin will come up heads *every time* gets smaller and smaller. After just 10 flips, there is only a 1 in 1,024 chance that he will get all heads. After 20 flips, the odds are 1 in 1,048,576. That is, the higher the number of flips, the lower the odds for a biased answer. Likewise, if randomly assigned groups of individuals are large enough, we can rule out the possibility of bias arising by chance.

## Randomized Trials of ERT

When the National Institutes of Health (NIH) appointed its first female director, Dr. Bernadine Healy, in 1991, one of her priorities was to sponsor a randomized trial of ERTs. This randomized trial tracked more than 16,000 women ages 50–79 who were recruited to participate in the trial by 40 clinical centers in the United States. The study was supposed to last 8.5 years but was stopped after 5.2 years because its conclusion was already clear: ERT did, in fact, raise the risk of heart disease. In particular, women taking ERT were observed to annually have (per 10,000 women) 7 more coronary heart diseases (both fatal and nonfatal), 8 more strokes, and 8 more pulmonary embolisms (blood clots in the lungs). In addition, the study found that women taking ERT had 8 more invasive breast cancers. Thus, the randomized trial revealed that the earlier ERT studies were biased by differences between these groups. These new findings led some doctors to question their decisions to recommend ERTs for postmenopausal women.<sup>6</sup>

## Randomized Trials in the TANF Context

Measuring the health impacts of new medicines is not the only place where randomized trials are useful; they can be equally useful in the context of public policy. Suppose that we want to measure the causal impact of TANF on labor supply. To begin, we gather a large (e.g., 5,000-person) group of single mothers who are now receiving a \$5,000 benefit guarantee. One by one, we take each single mother into a separate room and flip a coin. If it is heads, they continue to receive a benefit guarantee of \$5,000; these mothers are the *control group* whose benefits do not change. If it is tails, then the guarantee is cut to \$3,000; these mothers are the *treatment group* who receive the experimental reduction in their benefits. After we have assigned a guarantee to all of these mothers, we follow them for a period of time and observe their labor-supply differences. Any labor-supply differences would have to be *caused* by the change in benefit guarantee because nothing else differs in a consistent way across these groups.

There is a real-world randomized trial available that can help us learn about the impact of cash welfare benefits on the labor supply of single mothers. Under its Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program (the precursor to TANF) in 1992, California had one of

the most generous benefit guarantees in the United States, \$663 per month (\$7,956 per year) for a family of three. The state wanted to assess the implications of reducing its AFDC benefit levels to reduce costs. It conducted an experiment, randomly assigning one-third of the families receiving AFDC in each of four counties to the existing AFDC program, and assigning the other two-thirds to an experimental program. The experimental program had 15% lower maximum benefits, and several other provisions that encouraged recipients to work. The experiment lasted until 1998, at which point all families became subject to the 15% lower benefit.

Hotz et al. (2002) studied the effects of these benefit changes on the employment of recipients. They found that the experiment increased the employment rate of those families assigned to the experimental treatment to 49%, relative to an employment rate for the control group of 44.5%. The difference, 4.5%, is about 10% of the employment rate of the control group. It is often convenient to represent the relationship between economic variables in *elasticity* form, which in this case means computing the percentage change in employment for each percentage change in benefits. The estimated elasticity of employment with respect to benefits here is about  $-0.67$ ; that is, a 15% reduction in the benefit guarantee resulted in a 10% increase in employment in the treatment group relative to that of the control group.



## APPLICATION

### The Rise of Randomized Trials in Developing Economies

The past decade has seen an enormous surge in the use of randomized trials to address some of the most important issues in developing economies. This has been driven in large part of the efforts of the MIT Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL).<sup>7</sup> J-PAL was founded at the Department of Economics at MIT in 2003 by professors Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Sendhil Mullainathan. The objective of the center is to support the use of randomized evaluations to test and improve social programs, to train others in rigorous evaluation methods, and to encourage policy changes informed by the results of randomized evaluations. Since 2003, J-PAL has grown to a network of 161 affiliated professors at over 50 universities and seven offices conducting randomized evaluations to test and improve the effectiveness of social programs. J-PAL's affiliated professors have over 900 completed and ongoing randomized controlled trials in 79 countries that they are conducting in collaboration with governments, NGOs, firms, and research organizations. J-PAL-affiliated professors and staff work with governments, NGOs, development organizations, and donors to scale up programs found to be effective and to promote evidence-informed policy. Since J-PAL's founding in 2003, over 300 million people have been reached by these scale-ups around the world.

One example of an influential J-PAL study is research by professors Abhijit Banerjee, Rema Hanna, and Benjamin Olken of the Indonesian Raskin program, which provides subsidized rice to households in the bottom 25% of the income distribution. As we will highlight in [Chapter 17](#), one key difficulty with programs for the poor is targeting the benefits to those that need them the most. This was a major problem with the Raskin program, with only one-third of eligible households receiving the amount of rice that they were entitled to—while those who were not eligible also received much of the rice. Some proposed that the problem was one of information: households did not really know if they were eligible, and even if they did, they couldn't prove it to those distributing the rice. This suggests a natural and low-cost solution: provide a card to households to clearly identify their eligibility. But

could such a seemingly small intervention really matter?

This study aimed to find out. The authors randomly selected 378 villages to receive identification cards that informed low-income households of their eligibility and the quantity of rice that they were entitled to. Meanwhile, 194 villages were randomly selected as controls that did not get such cards. By comparing the rate of receipt of the subsidized rice by the treatment villages, compared with the control villages, the authors can assess whether the identification card made a difference.

In fact, the intervention worked. Villagers that received the card saw a sizeable increase in the quantity of rice they received through the program, compared with the control villages where the card was not distributed. At the same time, rice delivered to ineligible families did not go up. So the program was able to deliver more of the food to the needy families in a more efficient (targeted) fashion. The government of Indonesia was so impressed with this result that in June 2013, it scaled up the ID cards to all eligible households nationwide to access Raskin and two other national cash transfer programs, reaching 15.5 million low-income households (65.67 million people).<sup>8</sup> ■

## Why We Need to Go Beyond Randomized Trials

It would be wonderful if we could run randomized trials to assess the causal relationships that underlie any interesting correlation. For most questions of interest, however, randomized trials are not available. Such trials can be enormously expensive, take a very long time to plan and execute, and often raise difficult ethical issues. On the last point, consider the example of a 2001 trial for a treatment for Parkinson's disease, a debilitating neurological disorder. The proposed treatment involved injecting fetal pig cells directly into patients' brains. To have a comparable control group, the researchers drilled holes in the heads of all 18 subjects but put the pig cells in only 10 of the subjects.<sup>9</sup> As you can imagine, there was substantial criticism about drilling holes in 8 heads for no legitimate medical purpose.

Moreover, even the gold standard of randomized trials has some potential problems.<sup>10</sup> First, the results are only valid for the sample of individuals who volunteer to be either treatments or controls, and this sample may be different from the population at large. For example, those in a randomized trial sample may be less averse to risk, or they may be more desperately ill. Thus, the answer we obtain from a randomized trial, while correct for this sample, may not be valid for the average person in the population.

A second problem with randomized trials is that of **attrition**: individuals may leave the experiment before it is complete. This is not a problem if individuals leave randomly because the sample will remain random. Suppose, however, that the experiment had positive effects on half the treatment group and negative effects on the other half, and, as a result, the half with negative effects left the experiment before it was done. If we focused only on the remaining half, we would wrongly conclude that the treatment had overall positive impacts.

### attrition

Reduction in the size of samples over time, which, if not random, can lead to biased estimates.

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss several approaches taken by economists to try to assess causal relationships in empirical research. We will do so through the use of the TANF example. The general lesson from this discussion is that there is no way to consistently achieve the ideal of the randomized trial; bias is a pervasive problem that is not easily remedied. There are, however, methods available that can allow us to approach the gold standard of randomized trials.

## 3.3 Estimating Causation with Data We Actually Get: Observational Data

In the previous section, we showed how a randomized trial can be used to measure the impacts of an intervention such as ERT or lower TANF benefits on outcomes such as heart attacks or labor supply. As we highlighted, however, data from such randomized trials are not always available when important empirical questions need to be answered. Typically, the analyst has **observational data** instead, which are data generated from individual behavior observed in the real world. For example, instead of information on a randomized trial of a new medicine, we may simply have data on who took the medicine and what their outcomes were (the source of the original conclusions on ERT). Several well-developed methods can be used by analysts to address the problem of bias with observational data, and the use of these tools often closely approximates the gold standard of randomized trials.

### **observational data**

Data generated by individual behavior observed in the real world, not in the context of deliberately designed experiments.

This section explores how researchers can use observational data to estimate causal effects instead of just correlations. We do so within the context of the TANF example. It is useful throughout to refer to the empirical framework established in the previous section: those with higher TANF benefits are the control group, those with lower TANF benefits are the treatment group, and our concern is to remove any sources of bias between the two groups (i.e., any differences between them that might affect their labor supply, other than TANF benefits differences). Thus, the major concern throughout this section is how to overcome any potential bias so that we can measure the causal relationship (if there is one) between TANF benefits and labor supply.

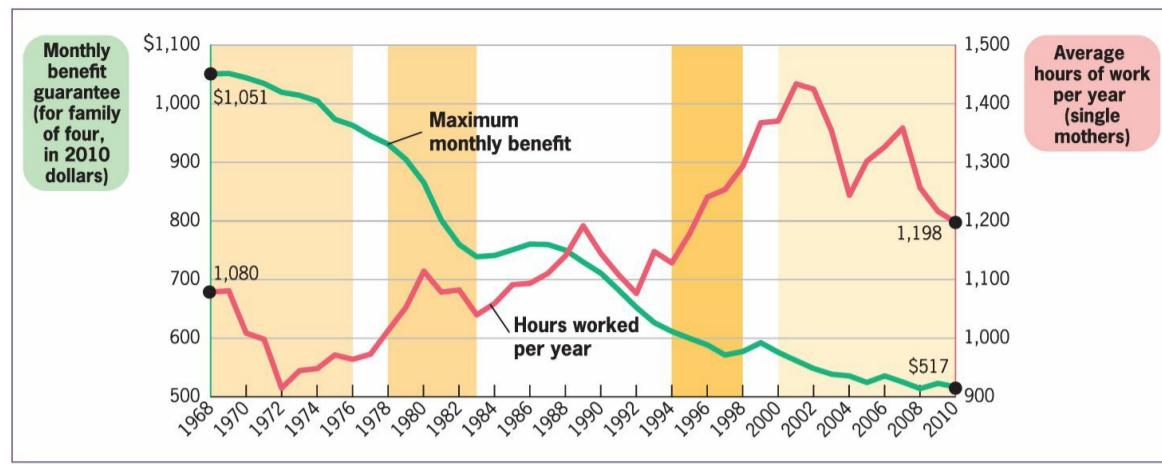
## Time Series Analysis

One common approach to measuring causal effects with observational data is **time series analysis**, documenting the correlation between the variables of interest over time. In the context of TANF, for example, we can gather data over time on the benefit guarantee in each year and compare these data with the amount of labor supply delivered by single mothers in those same years.

### **time series analysis**

Analysis of the comovement of two series over time.

[Figure 3-1](#) shows such a time series analysis of data for the period 1968 through 2010. On the horizontal axis are the years. The left-hand vertical axis charts the average real monthly benefit guarantee for a single mother with three children (controlled for inflation by expressing income in constant 2010 dollars) available in the United States over this period. Benefits declined dramatically from \$1,051 in 1968 to \$517 in 2010, falling by half in real terms because benefit levels have not kept up with inflation. The right-hand vertical axis charts the average hours of work per year for single mothers (including zeros for those mothers who do not work). The hours worked have risen, from below 1,100 hours per year in 1968 to almost 1,200 hours per year in 2010. Thus, there appears to be a negative relationship between benefit guarantees and labor supply: falling benefit guarantees are associated with higher levels of labor supply by single mothers.



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FIGURE 3-1

Average Benefit Guarantee and Single Mother Labor Supply, 1968–2010 • The left-hand vertical axis shows the monthly benefit guarantee under cash welfare, which falls from \$1,051 in 1968 to \$517 in 2010. The right-hand vertical axis shows average hours of work per year for single mothers, which rises from 1,080 in 1968 to 1,198 in 2010. Over this entire 42-year period, there is a strong negative correlation between the average benefit guarantee and the level of labor supply of single mothers, but there is not a very strong relationship within subperiods of this overall time span.

Data from: Calculations based on data from the Current Population Survey's annual March supplements (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>).

## Problems with Time Series Analysis

Although this time series correlation is striking, it does not necessarily demonstrate a causal effect of TANF benefits on labor supply. When there is a slow-moving trend in one variable through time, as is true for the general decline in income guarantees over this period, it is very difficult to infer its causal effects on another variable. There could be many reasons why single mothers work more now than they did in 1968: greater acceptance of women in the workplace; better and more options for child care; even more social pressures on mothers to work. The simple fact that labor supply is higher today than it was 30 years ago does not prove that this increase has been caused by the steep decline in income guarantees.

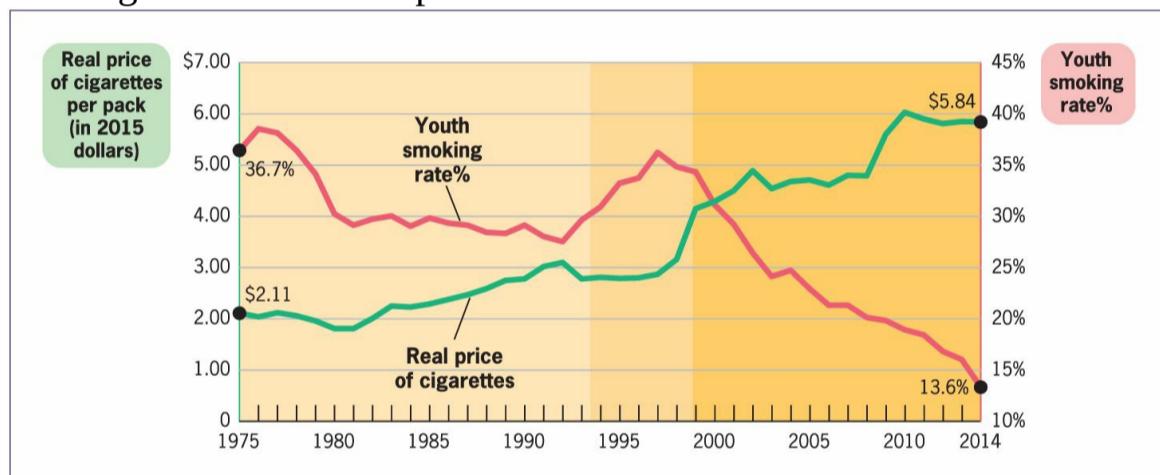
This problem is highlighted by examining subperiods of this overall time span. From 1968 through 1976, benefits fell by about 10% (from \$990 to \$890 per month), yet hours of work also fell by about 10% (from 1,070 hours to 960 hours), whereas a causal effect of benefits would imply a rise in hours of work. From 1978 through 1983, the period of steepest benefits decline, benefits fell by almost one-quarter in real terms (from \$858 to \$669 per month), yet labor supply first increased, then decreased, with a total increase over this period of only 2%. The subperiods, therefore, give a very different impression of the relationship between benefits and labor supply than does the overall time series.

A particularly instructive example about the limitations of time series analysis is the experience of the 1993–1998 period. In this subperiod, there is both a sharp fall in benefits (falling by about 10%, from \$562 to \$515 per month) and a sharp rise in labor supply of single mothers (rising by about 13%, from 1,148 hours per year to 1,294 hours per year). The data from this subperiod seem to support the notion that lower benefits cause rising labor supply. Yet during this period, the economy was experiencing dramatic growth, with the general unemployment rate falling from 7.3% in January 1993 to 4.4% in December 1998. It was also a period that saw an enormous expansion in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a federal wage subsidy that has been shown to be effective in increasing the labor supply of single mothers. Contrast that period with the time from 2000 to 2010. Benefits were falling at roughly the same rate in both periods, yet from 1993 to 1998 (during an economic boom), hours of work rose whereas during 2000–2010 (worse economic times), hours of work fell.

Therefore, it is likely that other factors, not falling benefits, caused the increased labor supply of single mothers. So once again, other factors get in the way of a causal interpretation of this correlation over time; factors such as economic growth and a more generous EITC can cause bias in this time series analysis because they are also correlated with the outcome of interest.

## When Is Time Series Analysis Useful?

All time series analysis is not necessarily useless, however. In some cases, there may be sharp breaks in the time series that are not related to third factors that can cause bias. A classic example is shown in [Figure 3-2](#). This figure shows the price of a pack of cigarettes (in constant 2015 dollars) on the left vertical axis and the *youth smoking rate*, the percentage of high school seniors who smoke at least once a month, on the right vertical axis. These data are shown for the time period from 1980 to 2014. From 1980 to 1992, there was a steady increase in the real price of cigarettes (from \$1.81 to \$3.10 per pack) and a steady decline in the youth smoking rate (from 30.5 to 27.8%). As previously noted, these changes over time need not be causally related. Smoking was falling for all groups over this time period due to an increased appreciation of the health risks of smoking, and prices may simply have been rising due to rising costs of tobacco production.



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■ FIGURE 3-2

Real Cigarette Prices and Youth Smoking, 1975–2014 • The left-hand vertical axis shows the real price of cigarettes per pack, which rises from \$2.11 in 1975 to \$5.84 in 2014. The right-hand vertical axis shows the youth smoking rate (the share of high school seniors who smoke at least once a month), which fell from 1980 to 1992, rose sharply to 1997, and has fallen thereafter. There is a striking negative correspondence between price and youth smoking within subperiods of this era.

Data from: Calculations based on [Monitoring the Future \(2018\)](#).

Then, in April 1993, there was a “price war” in the tobacco industry, leading to a sharp drop in real cigarette prices from \$2.95 to \$2.64 per pack.<sup>11</sup> At that exact time, youth smoking began to rise. This striking simultaneous reversal in both series is more compelling evidence of a causal relationship than is the long, slow-moving correlation over the 1980–1992 period. But it doesn’t prove a causal relationship because other things were changing in 1993 as well. It was, for example, the beginning of an important period of economic growth, which could have led to more youth smoking. Moreover, the rise in youth smoking seems too large to be explained solely by the price decrease.

Fortunately, in this case, there is another abrupt change in this time series. In 1998 and thereafter, prices rose steeply when the tobacco industry settled a series of expensive lawsuits with many states (and some private parties) and passed the costs on to cigarette consumers. At that exact time, youth smoking began to fall again. This type of pattern seems to strongly suggest a causal effect, even given the limitations of time series data. That is, it seems

unlikely that there is a factor correlated with youth smoking that moved up until 1992, then down until 1997, then back up again, as did price. That youth smoking follows the opposite pattern as cigarette prices suggests that price is causing these movements. Thus, while time series correlations are not very useful when there are long-moving trends in the data, they are more useful when there are sharp breaks in trends over a relatively narrow period of time.

## Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis

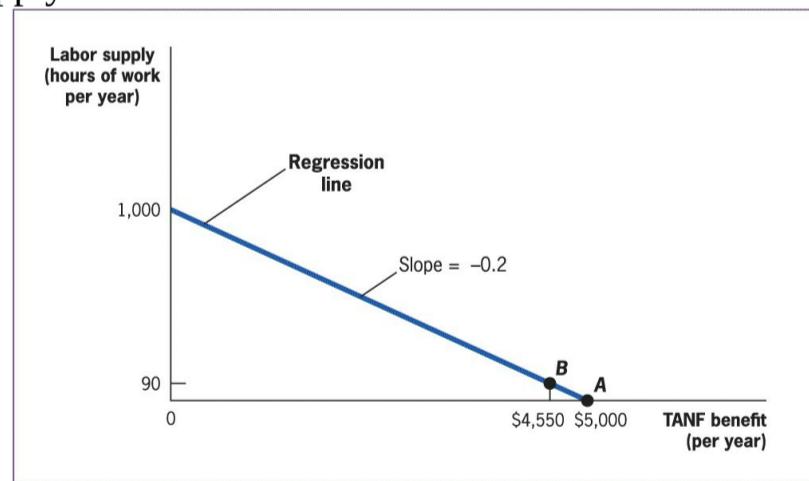
A second approach to identifying causal effects is **cross-sectional regression analysis**, a statistical method for assessing the relationship between two variables while holding other factors constant. *Cross-sectional* means comparing many individuals at one point in time, rather than comparing outcomes over time as in a time series analysis.

### **cross-sectional regression analysis**

Statistical analysis of the relationship between two or more variables exhibited by many individuals at one point in time.

In its simplest form, called a *bivariate regression*, cross-sectional regression analysis is a means of formalizing correlation analysis—that is, of quantifying the extent to which two series are correlated. Returning to the example in [Chapter 2](#), suppose that there are two types of single mothers, with preferences over leisure and food consumption represented by [Figures 2-10](#) and [2-11](#). Before there is any change in TANF benefits, the mother who has a lower preference for leisure (Sarah in [Figure 2-10](#)) has both lower TANF benefits and a higher labor supply than the mother who has a greater preference for leisure (Naomi in [Figure 2-11](#)). If we took these two mothers and correlated TANF benefits to labor supply, we would find that higher TANF benefits are associated with lower labor supply.

This correlation is illustrated graphically in [Figure 3-3](#). We graph the two data points when the benefit guarantee is \$5,000. One data point, point A, corresponds to Naomi from [Figure 2-11](#) and represents labor supply of 0 hours and an income guarantee of \$5,000. The other data point, point B, corresponds to Sarah in [Figure 2-10](#) and represents a labor supply of 90 hours per year and TANF benefits of \$4,550. The downward-sloping line makes clear the *negative correlation* between TANF benefits and labor supply; the mother with lower TANF benefits has a higher labor supply.



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■ FIGURE 3-3

TANF Benefits and Labor Supply in Theoretical Example • If we plot the data from the theoretical example of [Chapter 2](#), we find a modest negative relationship between TANF benefits and the labor supply of single mothers.

Regression analysis takes this correlation one step further by quantifying the relationship between TANF benefits and labor supply. Regression analysis does so by finding the line that best fits this relationship and then measuring the slope of that line.<sup>12</sup> This is illustrated in [Figure 3-3](#). The line that connects these two points has a slope of  $-0.2$ . That is, this bivariate

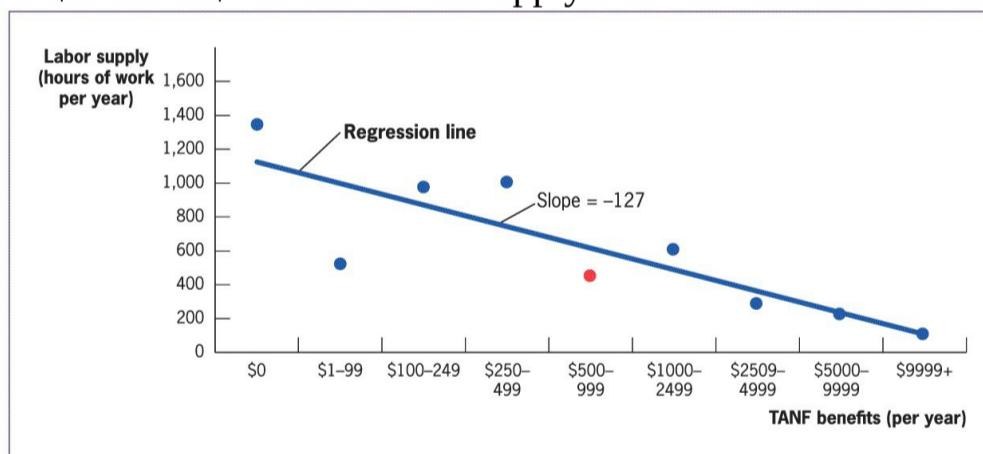
regression indicates that each \$1 reduction in TANF benefits per month leads to a 0.2-hour-per-year increase in labor supply. Regression analysis describes the relationship between the variable that you would like to explain (the *dependent variable*, which is labor supply in this example) and the set of variables that you think might do the explaining (the *independent variables*, in this example, the TANF benefit).

## Example with Real-World Data

The example in [Figure 3-3](#) is made up, but we can replicate this exercise using real data from one of the most popular sources of cross-sectional data for those doing applied research in public finance: the Current Population Survey (CPS).

The CPS collects information every month from individuals throughout the United States on a variety of economic and demographic issues. For example, this survey is the source of the unemployment rate statistics that you frequently hear cited in the news. Every year, in March, a special supplement to this survey asks respondents about their sources of income and hours of work in the previous year. So, we can take a sample of single mothers from this survey and ask the following: What is the relationship between the TANF benefits and hours of labor supply in this cross-sectional sample?

[Figure 3-4](#) graphs the hours of labor supply per year (vertical axis) against dollars of TANF benefits per year (horizontal axis) for all of the single mothers in the CPS data set. To make the graph easier to interpret, we divide the data into ranges of TANF income (\$0 in TANF benefits, \$1–\$99 of benefits, \$100–\$250 of benefits, etc.). Each range represents (roughly) a doubling of the previous range (a logarithmic scale). For each range, we show the average hours of labor supply in the group. For example, as the red point shows, single mothers receiving between \$500 and \$999 in benefits supply about 450 hours of labor per year.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 3-4

TANF Benefit Income and Labor Supply of Single Mothers, Using CPS Data • Using data from the CPS, we group single mothers by the amount of TANF income they have. Those who are receiving the lowest level of TANF income are the ones providing the highest number of work hours.

Data from: Calculations based on data from the Current Population Survey's 2011 March supplement (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>).

It is immediately clear from this graph that there is a *negative relationship* between TANF benefits and hours of labor supply. The single mothers at the left of the graph, where benefits are lowest, have much higher labor supply on average than those at the right of the graph, where TANF benefits are the highest. The line in [Figure 3-4](#) formalizes this eyeball impression. This linear [regression line](#) shows the *best* linear approximation to the relationship between TANF benefits and labor supply that is represented by these points. Unlike the made-up example in [Figure 3-3](#), there is no single line that fits perfectly through

this set of data points; real-world data are never that neat! The linear regression finds the line that comes closest to fitting through the cluster of data points.<sup>13</sup>

#### regression line

The line that measures the best linear approximation to the relationship between any two variables.

This line has a slope of  $-127$ , which indicates that each doubling of TANF benefits reduces work by 127 hours per year (remember that each segment on the horizontal axis represents a doubling of benefits). Once again, it is convenient to represent the relationship between economic variables in elasticity form. Based on these CPS data, the mean (average number of) hours of work in the sample is 1,274 hours. So we know that each 100% rise in TANF benefits reduces hours of work by 10% (127 is 10% of 1,274), for an elasticity of  $-0.1$ . This is a fairly *inelastic* response; there is a relatively modest reduction in hours (10%) when TANF benefits rise (by 100%).

## Problems with Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis

The result summarized in [Figure 3-4](#) seems to indicate strongly that mothers who receive the largest TANF benefits work the fewest hours. Once again, however, there are several possible interpretations of this correlation. One interpretation is that higher TANF benefits are causing an increase in leisure. Another possible interpretation is that some mothers have a high taste for leisure and wouldn't work much even if TANF benefits weren't available. Because TANF benefits fall as the recipient works more, mothers who take more leisure automatically get higher levels of benefits. As a result, there may be a correlation between benefits and leisure (and therefore labor supply) because more leisure is causing higher TANF benefits, not because higher TANF benefits are causing more leisure. Thus, varying tastes for leisure cause a bias in our attempt to causally interpret the relationship between TANF benefits and labor supply. Differences in tastes for leisure are one reason those with high and low TANF benefits are not exactly comparable; these differences in taste cause a consistent difference (bias) in labor supply among mothers with high and low TANF benefits.

This problem is most clearly illustrated in [Figure 3-3](#) because we actually know the utility functions underlying the labor-supply decisions of the two mothers represented by points A and B. The mother who works less does so because she has a higher taste for leisure and not because her TANF benefits are higher. In fact, her higher taste for leisure is what drives her TANF benefits to be higher because TANF benefits increase as leisure increases and hours worked decrease. Thus, the negative relationship depicted in [Figure 3-3](#) is *not causal*; it reflects, instead, differences in the taste for leisure between the two mothers we are analyzing that are correlated with their benefit levels (bias). In other words, we haven't taken two identical mothers and assigned them different benefits, which causal analysis demands. Rather, we took two very different mothers and compared their benefits and labor supply, which introduced bias into the analysis.

This problem is less obvious in [Figure 3-4](#) because we don't know the utility functions of the single mothers in the CPS. But the same problematic potential exists: maybe the mothers with low TANF income are simply those who have the lowest preference for leisure. If this is true, we can't say that each doubling of TANF income *causes* a 10% reduction in labor supply. Rather, all we can say is that each doubling of TANF income *is associated with* a 10% reduction in labor supply. Other consistent differences between these low- and high-benefit groups (such as different tastes for leisure) could be biasing the relationship.

## Control Variables

Regression analysis has one potential advantage over correlation analysis in dealing with the problem of bias: the ability to include [control variables](#). Suppose that the CPS had a variable

included in the data set called “taste for leisure” that accurately reflected each individual’s taste for leisure. Suppose that this variable came in two categorical values—“prefers leisure” and “prefers work”—and that everyone within each of these categorical values had identical tastes for leisure and work. That is, there is no bias within these groups, only across them; within each group, individuals are identical in terms of their preferences toward work and leisure.

#### control variables

Variables that are included in cross-sectional regression models to account for differences between treatment and control groups that can lead to bias.

If we had this information, we could divide our sample into two groups according to this leisure variable and redo the analysis within each group. Within each group, different tastes for leisure cannot be the source of the relationship between TANF benefits and labor supply because tastes for leisure are identical within each group. This “taste for leisure” control variable will allow us to get rid of the bias in our comparison because we no longer have a systematic difference in tastes for leisure within each group that is correlated with benefits. Control variables in regression analysis play this role: they try to control for (take into account) other differences across individuals in a sample, so that any remaining correlation between the dependent variable (e.g., labor supply) and independent variable (e.g., TANF benefits) can be interpreted as a causal effect of benefits on work.

In reality, control variables are unlikely to ever solve this problem completely because the key variables we want, such as the intrinsic taste for leisure in this example, are impossible to measure in data sets. Usually, we have to approximate the variables we really want, such as taste for leisure, with what is available, such as age, education, or work experience. These are imperfect proxies, however, so they don’t fully allow us to control for differences in taste for leisure across the population (e.g., even within age, education, or work experience groups, there will be individuals with very different tastes for leisure). It is hard to totally get rid of bias with control variables because they only represent in a limited way the underlying differences between treatment and control groups. We discuss this point in the appendix to this chapter.



Quick Hint For many empirical analyses, there will be one clear treatment group and one clear control group, as in the ERT case. For other analyses, such as our cross-sectional TANF analysis, there are many groups to be compared with one another. A cross-sectional regression essentially compares each point in [Figure 3-4](#) with the other points to estimate the relationship between TANF benefits and labor supply.

Even though the treatment/control analogy is no longer exact, the general intuition remains. It is essential in all empirical work to ensure that there are no factors that cause consistent differences in behavior (labor supply) across two groups and are also correlated with the independent variable (TANF benefits). When there are more than two groups, the concern is the same: to ensure that there is no consistent factor that causes groups with higher benefits to supply less labor than groups with lower benefits, other than the benefit differences themselves.

## Quasi-Experiments

As noted earlier, public finance researchers cannot set up randomized trials and run experiments for every important behavior that matters for public policy. We have examined alternatives to randomized trials such as time series and cross-sectional regression analysis

but have also seen that these research methods have many shortcomings that make it hard for them to eliminate the bias problem. Is there any way to accurately assess causal influences without using a randomized trial? Is there an alternative to the use of control variables for purging empirical models of bias?

Over the past two decades, empirical research in public finance has become increasingly focused on one potential middle-ground solution: the [\*\*quasi-experiment\*\*](#), a situation that arises naturally when changes in the economic environment (such as a policy change) create nearly identical treatment and control groups that can be used to study the effect of that policy change. In a quasi-experiment, outside forces (such as those instituting the policy change) do the randomization for us.

#### **quasi-experiments**

Changes in the economic environment that create nearly identical treatment and control groups for studying the effect of that environmental change, allowing public finance economists to take advantage of randomization created by external forces.

We can illustrate this point most readily with a fabricated example. Suppose that we have a sample with a large number of single mothers in the neighboring states of Arkansas and Louisiana, for two years, 2007 and 2009. Suppose further that, in 2008, the state of Arkansas raised its benefit guarantee by 20%, while Louisiana's benefits remained unchanged. In principle, this alteration in the states' policies has essentially performed our randomization for us. The women in Arkansas who experienced the increase in benefits are the treatment group, and the women in Louisiana whose benefits did not change are the control. By computing the change in labor supply across these groups, and then examining the difference between treatment (Arkansas) and control (Louisiana), we can obtain an estimate of the impact of benefits on labor supply that is free of bias.

In principle, of course, we could learn about the effect of this policy change simply by studying the experience of single mothers in Arkansas. If nothing differed between the set of single mothers in the state in 2007 and the set of single mothers in the state in 2009, other than the benefits increase, then any change in labor supply would reflect only the change in benefits, and the results would be free of bias. In practice, such a comparison typically runs into the problems we associate with time series analysis. For example, the period from 2007 through 2009 was the largest recession of the past 70 years, with many fewer job openings for low-skilled workers, which could have led single mothers to join TANF and reduce their earnings regardless of any benefits change. Thus, it is quite possible that single mothers in Arkansas may have reduced their labor supply because of the recession, not because benefits were increasing.

Because other factors may have changed that affected the labor supply decisions of single mothers in Arkansas, the quasi-experimental approach includes the extra step of comparing the treatment group for whom the policy changed with a control group for whom it did not. The state of Louisiana did not change its TANF guarantee between 2007 and 2009, but single mothers in Louisiana suffered from the same national economic crisis as did those in Arkansas. If the reduction in labor supply among single mothers in Arkansas is driven by economic conditions, then we should see the same reduction in labor supply among single mothers in Louisiana; if the reduction in labor supply among single mothers in Arkansas is driven by higher TANF benefits, then we would see no change among single mothers in Louisiana. The bias introduced into our comparison of single mothers in Arkansas in 2007 with single mothers in Arkansas in 2009 by the deterioration in economic conditions across the nation is *also* present when we do a similar comparison within Louisiana. In Louisiana, however, the treatment effect of a higher TANF benefit is *not* present. In this comparison, we

can say that:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{hours (Arkansas, 2009)} - \text{hours (Arkansas, 2007)} &= \text{treatment effect} \\ &\quad + \text{bias from economic crisis} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{hours (Louisiana, 2009)} - \text{hours (Louisiana, 2007)} &= \underline{\text{bias from economic crisis}} \\ \text{difference} &= \text{treatment effect} \end{aligned}$$

By subtracting the change in hours of work in Louisiana (the control group) from the change in hours of work in Arkansas (the treatment group), we control for the bias caused by the economic crisis and obtain a causal estimate of the effect of TANF benefits on hours of work.

[Table 3-1](#) provides an illustrative but hypothetical set of numbers that we can use to analyze the results of this fabricated quasi-experiment. Suppose that the welfare guarantee was raised from \$5,000 to \$6,000 in Arkansas between 2007 and 2009. Over the same period, hours of work per year among single mothers in the state fell from 1,000 to 800. The time series estimate using the experience of Arkansas alone would be that the \$1,000 benefit increase (20%) reduced hours of work by 200 (20%). This outcome implies an elasticity of total hours with respect to benefits of 21 (a 20% benefit cut led to a 20% labor supply rise). Notice that this estimate is considerably larger than the -0.67 elasticity found in the randomized trial in California (our gold standard).

TABLE 3-1 Using Quasi-Experimental Variation

Arkansas	1996	1998	Difference
Benefit guarantee	\$5,000	\$4,000	-\$1,000
Hours of work per year	1,000	1,200	200
Louisiana	1996	1998	Difference
Benefit guarantee	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$0
Hours of work per year	1,050	1,100	50

In Arkansas, there is a cut in the TANF guarantee between 1996 and 1998 and a corresponding rise in labor supply, so if everything is the same for single mothers in both years, this is a causal effect. If everything is not the same, we can perhaps use the experience of a neighboring state that did not decrease its benefits, Louisiana, to capture any bias to the estimates.

Consider now the bottom panel of [Table 3-1](#). This panel shows that, between 2007 and 2009, there was no change in welfare benefits in Louisiana, but hours of work fell by 50 hours per year. Thus, it appears that the economic crisis did play a role in the reduction in hours worked by single mothers. By looking only at time series data from Arkansas, we ignore the effect of the economic crisis. If we don't take this effect into account in our study, our conclusions about the effect of TANF benefits on labor supply will be biased.

A simple solution to this problem, as we have seen, is to examine the difference between the change in Arkansas and the change in Louisiana. That is, Arkansas had both a rise in welfare benefits and an economic crisis, and hours of labor supply fell by 200; Louisiana had only the economic crisis, and hours of labor supply fell by 50. These results suggest that the welfare benefit rise in Arkansas caused a 150-hour reduction in labor supply, net of the economic changes. Once we've eliminated the bias caused by the deterioration in overall economic conditions, the implied elasticity of hours with respect to welfare benefits is -0.75,

very similar to that found in the California experiment. This technique is called a [\*\*difference-in-difference estimator\*\*](#): take the difference between the labor supply changes in the treatment group that experiences the change (in this case, single mothers in Arkansas) and the labor supply changes in the control group that does not experience the change but is otherwise identical to the treatment group (in this case, single mothers in Louisiana). In this way, we can estimate a causal effect of TANF benefits changes on labor supply.

#### **difference-in-difference estimator**

The difference between the changes in outcomes for the treatment group that experiences an intervention and the control group that does not.

Difference-in-difference estimators try to combine time series and cross-sectional analyses to address the problems with each. By comparing the change in Arkansas with the change in Louisiana, the estimator controls for other time series factors that bias the time series analysis within Arkansas. Likewise, by comparing the change within each state, rather than just comparing the two states at a point in time, the estimator controls for omitted factors that bias cross-sectional analysis across the two states.

The cross-sectional estimate in this context would contrast Arkansas and Louisiana in 2009, when their benefits differed. In 2009, Arkansas had TANF benefits that were \$1,000 higher than Louisiana, and single mothers in Arkansas worked 100 fewer hours more per year. Cross-sectional analysis would therefore conclude that each \$1,000 increase in welfare benefits leads to a 100-hour decrease in work, rather than the 150-hour decrease that we get from difference-in-difference analysis (and that we know is true from the randomized trial).

This cross-sectional estimate is biased by the fact that single mothers tend to work fewer hours in Louisiana regardless of the level of TANF benefits. This is illustrated by the fact that, when TANF benefits were identical in the two states in 2007, hours of work were lower in Louisiana. In principle, we might find control variables to account for the lower hours of work in Louisiana, but in practice that is difficult. The difference-in-difference estimator suggests the best possible control: the hours of work in the *same state* before there was a benefits change. That is, by comparing the change within a state with the change within another state, the difference-in-difference estimator controls for cross-sectional differences across states that might bias the comparison.

## **Problems with Quasi-Experimental Analysis**

As well as the difference-in-difference quasi-experimental approach works to control for bias, it is still less than ideal. Suppose, for example, that the economic crisis of this period affected Arkansas in a different way than it affected Louisiana (perhaps because Louisiana relied more on industries, like housing, that were negatively affected by the recession). If this were true, then the “bias from economic crisis” terms in the previous comparison would not be equal, and we would be unable to isolate the treatment effect of higher TANF benefits by simple subtraction. Instead, we get a new bias term: the difference in the impact of the economic crisis in Arkansas and Louisiana. That is, when we compute our difference-in-difference estimator, we obtain:

hours (Arkansas, 2009) – hours (Arkansas, 2007) = *AR* bias from economic crisis + treatment

hours (Louisiana, 2009) – hours (Louisiana, 2007) = *LA* bias from economic crisis

difference = treatment effect +  
(*AR* bias – *LA* bias)

Because *AR* and *LA* biases are not equal, the estimator will not identify the true treatment effect.

With quasi-experimental studies, unlike true experiments, we can never be completely certain that we have purged all bias from the treatment–control comparison. Quasi-experimental studies use two approaches to try to make the argument that they have obtained a causal estimate. The first is intuitive: trying to argue that, given the treatment and control groups, it seems very likely that bias has been removed. The second is statistical: to continue to use alternative or additional control groups to confirm that the bias has been removed. In the [appendix to Chapter 14](#), we discuss how alternative or additional control groups can be used to confirm the conclusions of quasi-experimental analysis.

## Structural Modeling

The randomized trials and quasi-experimental approaches have the distinct advantage that, if applied appropriately, they can address the difficult problem of distinguishing causality from correlation. Yet they also have two important limitations. First, they only provide an estimate of the causal impact of a *particular treatment*. That is, the California experiment found that cutting benefits by 15% raised employment rates by 4.5 percentage points. This is the best estimate of the impact of cutting benefits by 15%, but it may not tell us much about the impact of cutting benefits by 30% or of raising benefits by 15%. That is, we can't necessarily *extrapolate* from a particular change in the environment to model all possible changes in the environment. These approaches give us a precise answer to a specific question but don't necessarily provide a general conclusion about how different changes in benefits might affect behavior.

The second limitation is that these approaches can tell us *how* outcomes change when there is an intervention but often cannot tell us *why*. Consider the behavior of mothers with income between \$6,000 and \$10,000 in our example from [Chapter 2](#) and how the mothers react to a cut in benefits under TANF. For these mothers, as we noted, there is both an income effect and a substitution effect leading to more work; both mothers are poorer because benefits have fallen, and they have a higher net wage because the implicit tax rate has fallen. An experimental or quasi-experimental study of the responses of these women to the benefits reduction might show us the total effect of the reduction on their labor supply, but it would tell us very little about the relative importance of these income and substitution effects.

Yet, as we discuss later in this book, we often care about the **structural estimates** of labor-supply responses, which are the estimates that tell us about features of utility that drive individual decisions, such as substitution and income effects. Randomized or quasi-experimental estimates provide **reduced form estimates** only. Reduced form estimates show

the impact of one particular change on overall labor-supply responses. This second disadvantage of randomized or quasi-experiments is thus related to the first: if we understood the underlying structure of labor-supply responses, it might be possible to say more about how labor supply would respond to different types of policy interventions.

**structural estimates**

Estimates of the features that drive individual decisions, such as income and substitution effects or utility parameters.

**reduced form estimates**

Measures of the total impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable, without decomposing the source of that behavior response in terms of underlying utility functions.

These issues have led to the vibrant field of *structural estimation*. Using this research approach, empirical economists attempt to estimate not just reduced form responses to the environment but the actual underlying features of utility functions. They do so by more closely employing the theory outlined in the previous chapter to develop an empirical framework that not only estimates overall responses but also decomposes these responses into, for example, substitution and income effects.

Structural models potentially provide a very useful complement to experimental or quasi-experimental analyses. Yet structural models are often more difficult to estimate than reduced form models because both use the same amount of information, yet structural models are used to try to learn much more from that information. Consider the TANF example. The earlier analysis showed you how to derive a reduced form estimate of the impact of a change in TANF benefits. Using this same information to decompose that response into income and substitution effects is not possible employing the same simple approach. Rather, that decomposition is only possible if the researcher assumes a particular form for the utility function, as we did in [Chapter 2](#), and then employs that assumption to decompose the overall response into its two components. If the assumption for the form of the utility function is correct, then this approach provides more information. If it is incorrect, however, then the response derived from this approach might lead to incorrectly estimated income and substitution effects.

From the perspective of this text, reduced form estimation has one other advantage (which may be obvious after reading this section!): it is much easier to think about and explain. Thus, for the remainder of the text, we largely rely on reduced form modeling and evidence when discussing empirical results in public finance. Yet the promise of structural modeling should not be discounted; it is a topic of fruitful future study for those of you who want to go on in economics. The lessons about empirical work learned in this book are universal for all types of studies; they provide a basis that you can take forward to more sophisticated empirical approaches such as structural modeling.

## 3.4 Conclusion

The central issue for any policy question is establishing a causal relationship between the policy in question and the outcome of interest. Do lower welfare benefits *cause* higher labor supply among single mothers? Does more pollution in the air *cause* worse health outcomes? Do larger benefits for unemployment insurance *cause* individuals to stay unemployed longer? These are the types of questions that we address in this book using the empirical methods described here.

In this chapter, we discussed several approaches to distinguish causality from correlation. The gold standard for doing so is the randomized trial, which removes bias through randomly assigning treatment and control groups. Unfortunately, however, such trials are not available for every question we want to address in empirical public finance. As a result, we turn to alternative methods such as time series analysis, cross-sectional regression analysis, and quasi-experimental analysis. Each of these alternatives has weaknesses, but careful consideration of the problem at hand can often lead to a sensible solution to the bias problem that plagues empirical analysis.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- A primary goal of empirical work is to document the causal effects of one economic factor on another, for example, the causal effect of raising TANF benefits on the labor supply of single mothers.
- The difficulty with this goal is that it requires treatment groups (those who are affected by policy) and control groups (those not affected) who are identical except for the policy intervention.
- If these groups are not identical, there can be bias—that is, other consistent differences across treatment/control groups that are correlated with, but not due to, the treatment itself.
- Randomized trials are the gold standard to surmount this problem. Treatments and controls are identical by definition, so there is no bias, and any differences across the groups are a causal effect.
- Time series analysis is unlikely to provide a convincing estimate of causal effects because so many other factors change through time.
- Cross-sectional regression analysis also suffers from bias problems because similar people make different choices for reasons that can't be observed, leading once again to bias. Including control variables offers the potential to address this bias.
- Quasi-experimental methods have the potential to approximate randomized trials, but control groups must be selected carefully to avoid biased comparisons.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Suppose you are running a randomized experiment and you randomly assign study participants into control and treatment groups. After making the assignments, you study the characteristics of the two groups and find that the treatment group has a lower average age than the control group. How could this arise?
2. Why is a randomized trial the “gold standard” for solving the identification problem?
3. What do we mean when we say that correlation does not imply causality? What are some of the ways in which an empirical analyst attempts to disentangle the two?
4. A researcher conducted a cross-sectional analysis of children and found that the average test performance of children with divorced parents was lower than the average test performance of children of intact families. This researcher then concluded that divorce is bad for children’s test outcomes. What is wrong with this analysis?
5. A study in the *Annals of Improbable Research* once reported that counties with large numbers of mobile-home parks had higher rates of tornadoes than did the rest of the population. The authors conclude that mobile home parks cause tornado occurrences. What is an alternative explanation for this fact?
6. What are some of the concerns with conducting randomized trials? How can quasi-experiments potentially help here?
7. You are hired by the government to evaluate the impact of a policy change that affects one group of individuals but not another. Suppose that before the policy change, members of a group affected by the policy averaged \$17,000 in earnings, and members of a group unaffected by the policy averaged \$16,400. After the policy change, members of the affected group averaged \$18,200 in earnings while members of the unaffected group averaged \$17,700 in earnings.
  1. How can you estimate the impact of the policy change? What is the name for this type of estimation?
  2. What are the assumptions you have to make for this to be a valid estimate of the impact of the policy change?
8. Consider the example presented in the appendix to this chapter. Which coefficient estimates would be considered “statistically significant” or distinct from zero?
9. A researcher wants to investigate the effects of education spending on housing prices, but she only has cross-sectional data. When performing regression analysis, she controls for average January and July temperatures. Why is she doing this? What other variables would you control for, and why?
10. It is commonly taught in introductory microeconomics courses that minimum wages cause unemployment. The federally mandated minimum wage is \$7.25, but more than half the states have higher state-mandated minimum wages. Why can’t you test the “minimum wages cause unemployment” theory by simply comparing unemployment rates across states with different minimum wages? Can you think of a better way to test it?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. Suppose that your friend Oscar has collected data and determined that towns with newly constructed high schools tend to have higher SAT scores than other towns. He tells you that he has proved that new high schools cause higher SAT scores. When you object that “correlation does not imply causation,” he is ready with more data. He shows you convincing evidence that SAT scores tend to increase shortly after towns build new high schools, but that there is no tendency for new high schools to be built in towns that have recently seen large increases in SAT scores. Is this enough evidence to prove that new high schools cause higher SAT scores, or can you think of an alternative explanation for Oscar’s data?
12. Researchers often use *panel data* (multiple observations over time of the same people) to conduct regression analysis. With these data, researchers are able to compare the same person over time in order to assess the impacts of policies on individual behavior. How could this provide an improvement over cross-sectional regression analysis of the type described in the text?
13. Suppose that your state announced that it would provide free tuition to high-achieving students graduating from high school starting in 2018. You decide to see whether this new program induces families with high-achieving children graduating in 2018 or later to purchase new cars. To test your findings, you use a “falsification exercise”: you observe the new-car-purchasing behavior of families with children graduating in 2017. Why is this a useful exercise?
14. Your state introduced a tax cut in the year 2017. You are interested in seeing whether this tax cut has led to increases in personal consumption within the state. You observe the following information:

Year	Consumption in Your State
2012	330
2014	350
2016	370
2018	430

1. Your friend argues that the best estimate of the effect of the tax cut is an increase in consumption of 60 units, but you think that the true effect is smaller because consumption was trending upward prior to the tax cut. What do you think is a better estimate?
2. Suppose that you find information on a neighboring state that did not change its tax policy during this time period. You observe the following information in that state:

Year	Consumption in Neighboring State
2012	300
2014	320
2016	340
2018	350

Given this information, what is your best estimate of the effect of the tax cut on consumption? What assumptions are required for that to be the right estimate of the effect of the tax cut? Explain.

15. A health study in England<sup>14</sup> surveyed people from 1972 to 1974 and then followed up on them 20 years later. In the original sample, 44% of women were smokers, but only 19% of women over the age of 65 were smokers. At the end of the study, it was found that 24% of the smokers had died while 31% of the nonsmokers had died. Does this mean that smoking is good for you? What would be a better way to look at the effect of smoking on mortality?
16. More than 100 observational studies have found a link between moderate drinking and improved cardiovascular health. In these studies, moderate drinking has been shown to be associated with reduced risk of heart attack, stroke, and deaths from all cardiovascular causes. The studies find a remarkably consistent effect, with a 25 to 40% reduction in risk observed across an array of countries, in both men and women, and across all age groups. A review of this research can be found here: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-drinks/drinks-to-consume-in-moderation/alcohol-full-story/>. Suppose that you are a physician reviewing this evidence. Will you recommend to your patients who are infrequent drinkers or abstainers that they should increase their consumption of alcohol?

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 3 Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

In the text, we presented a cursory discussion of cross-sectional regression analysis and the role of control variables. In this appendix, we provide a more detailed presentation of this approach within our TANF example.

## Data

For this analysis, we use data from the March 2011 Current Population Survey (CPS). From that survey, we selected all women who reported that they were unmarried and had a child younger than age 19. The total sample is 8,024 single mothers.

For this sample, we have gathered data on the following variables for each woman:

- *TANF*: Total cash TANF benefits in the previous year (in thousands of dollars).
- *Hours*: Total hours of work in the previous year, computed as reported weeks of work times usual hours per week.
- *Race*: We divide reported race into white, black, and other.
- *Age*: Age in years.
- *Education*: We use reported education to divide individuals into four groups: high school dropouts; high school graduates with no college; those with some college; and college graduates.
- *Urbanicity*: We use information on residential location to divide individuals into four groups: central city; other urban; rural; and unclear (the CPS doesn't identify location for some mothers for survey confidentiality reasons).

## Regression

Using these data, we can estimate a regression of the impact of welfare on hours of work of the form:

$$(1) \text{HOURS}_i = \alpha + \beta \text{TANF}_i + \epsilon_i$$

where there is one observation for each mother  $i$ . This is the counterpart of the regression analysis shown in [Figure 3-4](#), but now we are using each individual data point, rather than grouping the data into categories for convenience.

In this regression,  $\alpha$ , the constant term, represents the estimated number of hours worked if welfare benefits are zero.  $\beta$  is the slope coefficient, which represents the change in hours worked per dollar of welfare benefits.  $\epsilon$  is the error term, which represents the difference for each observation between its actual value and its predicted value based on the model.

The results of estimating this regression model are presented in the first column of the appendix table. The first row shows the constant term  $a$ , which is 1,325: this measures the predicted hours of labor supply delivered at zero welfare benefits. The second row shows the coefficient  $b$ , which is -167: each \$1,000 of welfare benefits lowers hours worked by 167. This is somewhat higher to the estimate from the grouped data of -127 discussed in the text. Thus, for a mother with no welfare benefits, predicted hours of work are 1,325; for a mother with \$5,000 in welfare benefits, predicted hours of work are  $1,325 - 5 \times 167 = 490$ .

### APPENDIX 3 TABLE Cross-Sectional Regression Analysis

	Equation (1)	Equation (2)
Constant	1,325 (11)	1,165 (71)
TANF benefits	-167 (8)	-133 (8)
White		-12 (39)
Black		-88 (42)
High school dropout		-638 (33)
High school graduate		-324 (27)
Some college		-252 (29)
Age		14 (1)
Central city		-44 (28)
Other urban		-15 (39)
Rural		-88 (27)
$R^2$	0.054	0.135

Underneath this estimate in parentheses is the estimate's *standard error*. This figure

captures the precision with which these coefficients are estimated and reminds us that we have here only a statistical representation of the relationship between welfare benefits and hours worked. Roughly speaking, we cannot statistically distinguish values of  $b$  that are two standard errors below or above the estimated coefficient. In our context, with a standard error of 7.9 hours, the results show that our best estimate is that each thousand dollars of welfare lowers hours worked by 107, but we can't rule out that the effect is only 151.2 ( $167 - 2 \times 7.9$ ) or that it is 182.8 ( $167 + 2 \times 7.9$ ).

In the context of empirical economics, this is a *very* precise estimate. Typically, as long as the estimate is more than twice the size of its standard error, we say that it is *statistically significant*.

The final row of the table shows the  $R^2$  of the regression. This is a measure of how well the statistical regression model is fitting the underlying data. An  $R^2$  of 1 would mean that the data are perfectly explained by the model so that all data points lie directly on the regression line; an  $R^2$  of 0 means that the data are not at all explained. The value of 0.054 here says that less than 10% of the variation in the data is explained by this regression model.

As discussed in the text, however, this regression model suffers from serious bias problems since those mothers who have a high taste for leisure will have both low hours of work and high welfare payments. One approach to addressing this problem suggested in the text was to include control variables. We don't have the ideal control variable, which is taste for leisure. We do, however, have other variables that might be correlated with tastes for leisure or other factors that determine labor supply: race, education, age, and urbanicity. So we can estimate regression models of the form:

$$(2) \text{ HOURS}_i = \alpha + \beta \text{TANF}_i + \delta \text{CONTROL}_i + \epsilon_i$$

where CONTROL is the set of control variables for individual  $i$ .

In the second column of the appendix table, we show the impact of including these other variables. When we have a categorical variable such as race (categorized into white, black, and other), we include *indicator variables* that take on a value of 1 if the individual is of that race, and 0 otherwise. Note that when we have  $N$  categories for any variable (e.g., 3 categories for race), we only include  $N - 1$  indicator variables, so that all estimates are relative to the excluded category (e.g., the coefficient on the indicator for "black" shows the impact of being black on welfare income, relative to the omitted group of Hispanics).

Adding these control variables does indeed lower the estimated impact of welfare benefits on labor supply. The coefficient falls to  $-133$  but remains highly significant; interestingly, once we add controls, we get an estimate that is almost identical to the estimate from using the grouped data in [Figure 3-4](#). The  $R^2$  more than doubles but still indicates that we are explaining less than 15% of the variation in the data.

The control variables are themselves also of interest:

- *Race*: Whites are estimated to work 12 hours less year more than non-whites/blacks (the omitted group), but this estimate is smaller than its standard error, so we do not call this a statistically significant difference. Blacks are estimated to work 88 hours per year less than the omitted group.

- *Education:* Hours of work clearly rise with education. High school dropouts work 638 fewer hours per year than do college graduates (the omitted group); high school graduates work 324 fewer hours per year; and those with some college work 252 fewer hours per year than those who graduate from college. All of these estimates are very precise (the coefficients are very large relative to the standard errors beneath them in parentheses).
- *Age:* Hours worked decline with age, with each year of age leading to 13.5 fewer hours of work; this is a very precise estimate as well.
- *Location:* Relative to those with unidentified urbanicity, people in cities, suburbs, and rural areas work less, but only the estimate for rural areas is statistically precise.

Do these control variables eliminate bias in the estimated relationship between TANF benefits and labor supply? There is no way to know for sure, but it seems unlikely. The fact that this large set of controls explains only 9% more of the variation in labor supply across individuals suggests that it is unlikely to capture all of the factors correlated with both labor supply and TANF benefits.

# Chapter 4 Budget Analysis and Deficit Financing



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [4.1 Government Budgeting](#)
- [4.2 Measuring the Budgetary Position of the Government: Alternative Approaches](#)
- [4.3 Do Current Debts and Deficits Mean Anything? A Long-Run Perspective](#)
- [4.4 Why Do We Care About the Government's Fiscal Position?](#)
- [4.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- What has happened to the U.S. budget deficit over time?
- What is the right way to measure the long-run budget deficit?
- What is the effect of higher budget deficits on the economy?

*“We will continue along the path toward a balanced budget in a balanced economy.”*

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS (JANUARY 4, 1965)

Deficit in first year in office (1964): 0.9% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (1968): 2.9% of GDP

*“We must balance our federal budget so that American families will have a better chance to balance their family budgets.”*

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS (JANUARY 22, 1970)

Deficit in first year in office (1969): -0.3% of GDP (surplus)

Deficit in last year in office (1974): 0.4% of GDP

*“We can achieve a balanced budget by 1979 if we have the courage and the wisdom to continue to reduce the growth of federal spending.”*

PRESIDENT GERALD FORD, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS (JANUARY 15, 1975)

Deficit in first year in office (1975): 3.4% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (1976): 4.2% of GDP

*“With careful planning, efficient management, and proper restraint on spending, we can move rapidly toward a balanced budget, and we will.”*

PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS (JANUARY 29, 1978)

Deficit in first year in office (1977): 2.7% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (1980): 2.7% of GDP

*“[This budget plan] will ensure a steady decline in deficits, aiming toward a balanced budget by the end of the decade.”*

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS (JANUARY 25, 1983)

Deficit in first year in office (1981): 2.6% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (1988): 3.1% of GDP

*“[This budget plan] brings the deficit down further and balances the budget by 1993.”*

PRESIDENT GEORGE H. W. BUSH, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS  
(JANUARY 31, 1990)

Deficit in first year in office (1989): 2.8% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (1992): 4.7% of GDP

*“[This budget plan] puts in place one of the biggest deficit reductions . . . in the history of this country.”*

PRESIDENT WILLIAM CLINTON, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS  
(FEBRUARY 17, 1993)

Deficit in first year in office (1993): 3.9% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (2000): -2.4% of GDP (surplus)

*“Unrestrained government spending is a dangerous road to deficits, so we must take a different path.”*

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH, STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS (FEBRUARY 27, 2001)

Deficit in first year in office (2001): -1.3% of GDP (surplus)

Deficit in last year in office (2008): 3.2% of GDP

*“This budget builds on these reforms . . . it’s a step we must take if we hope to bring down our deficit in the years to come.”*

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA, ADDRESS TO THE JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS (FEBRUARY 24, 2009)

Deficit in first year in office (2009): 9.8% of GDP

Deficit in last year in office (2016): 3.2% of GDP

*“We can do so much more with the money we spend. With \$20 trillion in debt. . . the government must learn to tighten its belt, something families all over the country have had to learn to do.”*

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION (FEBRUARY 27, 2017)

Deficit in first year in office (2017): 3.5% of GDP

Deficit in most recent year in office (2018, projected): 4.2% of GDP

Each of the presidents of the United States, from Lyndon Johnson on, has vowed in his State

of the Union address to balance the federal budget, or at least to reduce the deficit or debt. Yet all but two have dramatically failed to achieve these goals. Under five presidents, the deficit increased; under two, surpluses became deficits, and only under Presidents Clinton and Obama did the deficit actually shrink (becoming a surplus under Clinton).

Why is it so difficult to balance the federal budget? Conservatives often blame the deficit on the growth in spending by the federal government, while liberals counter that an insufficiently progressive tax system fails to raise revenues needed for valuable government programs. The generally persistent budget deficits could thus be due to a clash between conservatives who oppose raising taxes and liberals who oppose cutting government programs. Or it could be something deeper, a structural problem within the very nature of the U.S. budgeting process.



*“Gee, Dave, a proposal to balance the budget wasn’t . . .”*

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Dealing with budgetary issues is a problem familiar to most U.S. households that periodically consider how to match their outflows of expenditures with their inflows of income. In a similar process, budgetary considerations are foremost in many decisions that are made by government policy makers. It is, therefore, critical that we understand how governments budget and the implications of budget imbalances for the economy.

Budgeting for the government is far more complicated than it is for a household, however. A household has inflows from a small number of income sources and outflows to a relatively small number of expenditure items. The federal government has hundreds of revenue-raising tools and thousands of programs on which to spend this revenue.

The budgetary process at the federal level is complicated further by the dynamic nature of budgeting. Many federal programs have implications not only for this year, but for many years to come. The difficulty of incorporating the long-run consequences of government policy into policy evaluation has bedeviled policy makers and budgetary analysts alike.

In this chapter, we delve into the complexity of budgetary issues that arise as governments consider their revenue and expenditure policies. We begin with a description of the federal budgeting process and of efforts to limit the federal deficit. We then discuss the set of issues involved in appropriately measuring the size of the budget and the budget deficit. After looking at how to model the long-run budgetary consequences of government interventions, we discuss why we should care about reducing the budget deficit as a goal of public policy.

## 4.1 Government Budgeting

In this section, we discuss the issues involved in appropriately measuring the national deficit and the national debt. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), government **debt** is the amount that a government owes to others who have loaned it money. Government debt is a *stock*: the debt is an amount that is owed at any point in time. The government's **deficit**, in contrast, is the amount by which its spending has exceeded its revenues in any given year. The government's deficit is a *flow*: the deficit is the amount each year by which expenditures exceed revenues. Each year's deficit flow is added to the previous year's debt stock to produce a new stock of debt owed.

### debt

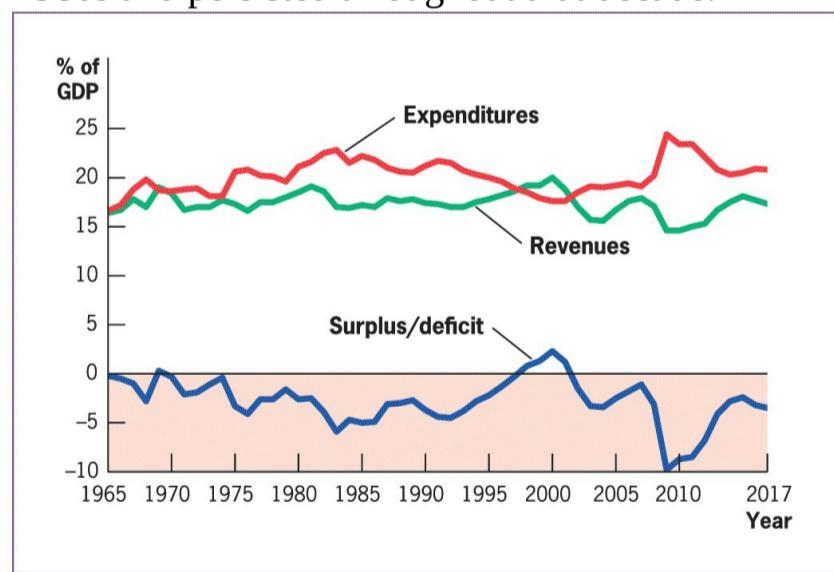
The amount that a government owes to those who have loaned it money.

### deficit

The amount by which a government's spending exceeds its revenues in a given year.

## The Budget Deficit in Recent Years

[Figure 4-1](#) graphs the level of federal government revenue, spending, and surplus/deficit from 1965 to the present. As [Figure 1-4](#) from [Chapter 1](#) shows, the late 1960s marked the end of an era of post–World War II balanced budgets in the United States. The period from the late 1960s through 1992 was marked by a fairly steady upward march in government expenditures due to the introduction and expansion of the nation's largest social insurance programs. Tax revenues did not keep pace, however, due to a series of tax reductions during this period, the most significant of which were the sharp tax cuts in the early 1980s. While government spending was rising from 16.6% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1965 to 22.5% by 1982, taxes were roughly constant as a share of GDP at 18%. The result was a large deficit that emerged in the early 1980s and persisted throughout that decade.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 4-1

Federal Taxes, Spending, and the Deficit Through Time in the United States • Federal government spending rose fairly steadily from 1965 through the mid-1980s, but tax revenues did not keep pace, leading to a large deficit. This deficit was eroded and turned to a surplus in the 1990s, but by 2001, the United States was back in deficit again. This deficit grew to very large levels during the Great Recession. It then returned to levels similar to the 1980s before expanding again.

Data from: [Office of Management and Budget \(2019\)](#), Table 1.2.

The fiscal picture reversed dramatically in the 1990s. By the end of that decade, spending had fallen back to under 20% of GDP, due to reductions in military spending and a slowdown in the historically rapid growth in medical costs (a major driver of government expenditures through the nation's public health insurance programs). Tax collections rose significantly as

well due to a tax increase on the highest income groups enacted in 1993 and a very rapid rise in asset values relative to GDP (which led to a large increase in *capital income taxes*, the taxes collected on asset returns).

The fiscal picture reversed itself again in the early twenty-first century, however, as a recession, growing medical costs, and a growing military budget caused government spending to rise to 20.2% of GDP in 2008. At the same time, falling asset values, tax cuts, and slow earnings growth led government tax receipts to fall back below 18% of GDP. The budget deficit rose in the first half of this decade, peaking at 3.4% of GDP in 2004, before shrinking again through 2007. The Great Recession that began at the end of 2007 raised the deficit again, to 3.1% of GDP (\$459 billion) in 2008. The deficit ballooned to 9.8% of GDP (\$1.4 trillion) in 2009, before falling again in subsequent years; by 2014, the deficit as a share of GDP was at roughly its typical level over the past four decades. Over the past few years, however, the deficit has begun to expand again.

## The Budget Process

The budget process begins with the President's submission to Congress of a budget on or before the first Monday in February. The President's budget, compiled from input by various federal agencies, is a detailed outline of the administration's policy and funding priorities and a presentation of the coming year's economic outlook. The House and Senate then work out that year's Congressional Budget Resolution, a blueprint for the budget activities in the coming fiscal year and at least five years into the future. The resolution, which must be ready by April 15, does not require a presidential signature but must be agreed to by the House and Senate before the legislative processing of the budget begins.

The budget process distinguishes between two types of federal spending. **Entitlement spending** refers to funds for programs for which funding levels are automatically set by the rules set by Congress and by the number of eligible recipients. The most important federal entitlement programs are *Social Security*, which provides income support to the elderly, and *Medicare*, which provides health insurance to the elderly. Each person eligible for benefits through entitlement programs receives them unless Congress changes the eligibility criteria (e.g., all citizens and permanent residents of the United States age 65 and over who have worked for at least 10 years are eligible for coverage of their hospital expenditures under the Medicare program). **Discretionary spending** refers to spending set by annual *appropriation levels* that are determined by Congress (such as spending on highways or national defense). This spending is optional, in contrast to entitlement programs, for which funding is mandatory. Congress's budget resolution includes levels of discretionary spending, projections about the deficit, and instructions for changing entitlement programs and tax policy.

### **entitlement spending**

Mandatory funds for programs for which funding levels are set automatically by the number of eligible recipients, not by the discretion of Congress.

### **discretionary spending**

Optional spending set by appropriation levels each year, at Congress's discretion.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees each take the total amount of discretionary spending available (according to the budget resolution) and divide it into 12 suballocations for each of their 12 subcommittees. The subcommittees each develop a spending bill for their areas of government, working off of the President's budget, the previous year's spending bills, and new priorities they wish to incorporate. The 12 bills must eventually be approved by the full Appropriations Committee; differences between the House and Senate versions are worked out in conference, and each of the 12 appropriations bills

must be passed by both Houses of Congress no later than June 30. The bills are then sent to the President who may sign them, veto them, or allow them to become law without his signature (after 10 days).

The budget process sets discretionary spending only, not entitlement spending. If Congress wishes to change entitlement programs, it must include in its budget resolution “reconciliation instructions” that direct committees with jurisdiction over entitlement and tax policies to achieve a specified level of savings as they see fit. In a process similar to the appropriations process, reconciliation bills must be worked out within and between the House and Senate and are then submitted to the President by June 15. The President then has the same options as described in the appropriations process.



## APPLICATION

### Efforts to Control the Deficit

In the 35 years since the U.S. budget deficit began to rise in the early 1980s, Congress has made a wide variety of efforts to restrain the government’s ability to spend beyond its means. In late 1985, with the government running increasing federal deficits, popular and political pressure pushed the Balanced Budget and Emergency Control Act (also known as the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Deficit Reduction Act, or GRH) through Congress and onto President Reagan’s desk, where he signed the bill on December 12, 1985. GRH set mandatory annual targets for the federal deficit starting at \$180 billion in 1986 and decreasing in \$36 billion increments until the budget would be balanced in 1991.

GRH also included a trigger provision that initiated automatic spending cuts once the budget deficit started missing the specified targets. In reality, the trigger was avoided by all sorts of gimmicks, for which no penalties were incurred by lawmakers. For example, when it became clear that the target for 1988 would not be met, the deficit targets were reset with a new aim to hit zero deficit by 1993 (instead of the original 1991). The divergence between projected deficits and actual ones grew larger and the projections thus became much less credible.

The continuing failure to meet GRH deficit targets led to the 1990 adoption of the Budget Enforcement Act (BEA): rather than trying to target a deficit *level*, the BEA simply aimed to restrain government *growth*. The BEA set specific caps on discretionary spending in future years that were sufficiently low that discretionary spending would have to fall over time in real terms. It also created the pay-as-you-go process (PAYGO) for revenues and entitlements, which prohibited any policy changes from increasing the *estimated* deficit in any year in the next six-year period [the current fiscal year and the five years of forecasts done by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO)]. If deficits increase, the President must issue a *sequestration requirement*, which reduces direct spending by a fixed percentage in order to offset the deficit increase.

The BEA appears to have been a successful restraint on government growth in the 1990s, contributing to the nation’s move from deficit to surplus. From 1990 through 1998, discretionary government spending declined by 10% in real terms—mostly driven by declining military spending—and there were no cost-increasing changes made to mandatory spending programs (although some cost-saving changes were made to offset tax cuts in 1997). The arrival of a balanced budget in 1998, however, appears to have removed

Congress's willingness to stomach the tight restraints of the BEA.

Discretionary spending grew by more than 8% per year in real terms from 1998 to 2005 (when discretionary spending reached \$969 billion), far in excess of the caps for those years.<sup>1</sup> The BEA spending caps were mostly avoided by taking advantage of a loophole in the law that allowed for uncapped “emergency spending.” Some of this spending was for legitimate emergencies (Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq war, natural disasters), but much was not. A 2006 emergency spending bill ostensibly dedicated to paying for the war and hurricane recovery also included farm-program provisions totaling \$4 billion; \$700 million to relocate a rail line in Mississippi; and \$1.1 billion for fishery projects, including a \$15 million “seafood promotion strategy.”<sup>2</sup> During the 1990s, Congress and the administration averaged only \$22 billion in emergency spending per year; by the mid-2000s, however, that number had climbed to more than \$100 billion per year.

More recent fights over the deficit have introduced a new tool: the debt ceiling. This was a traditionally obscure provision that limited how much the federal government could borrow, and it was typically raised when necessary with little fanfare. This changed during debates over the 2011 federal budget, when the Republicans controlling the House of Representatives would not agree to raise the debt ceiling without large cuts in government spending. The resulting compromise was the Budget Control Act of 2011, which capped the budget authority for each fiscal year at a fixed level from 2012 to 2021 in an attempt to reduce the deficit by \$22 billion for the first year, with a reduction of \$917 billion in total over the decade.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it would cut discretionary spending by \$1.2 trillion over the decade, with a specific cap for each year. For instance, from fiscal year (FY) 2012–2013, the cap for discretionary spending was set to \$1.050 trillion. If, at any point, spending exceeded the cap, there would be an automatic sequester, or budget cut, of all nondefense discretionary spending.<sup>4</sup> While Republicans claimed the bill didn’t cut government spending enough, Democrats worried that making spending cuts while the economy was still fragile from the Great Recession could potentially hurt the economy more.

The fight continued into 2012. The parties were not very far apart on deficit reduction but differed enormously on how to get there: President Obama proposed more than \$1 trillion in tax increases over a decade, focused on upper-income earners, while Republicans proposed \$5.8 trillion in spending cuts over the same period, offset by \$4.2 trillion in tax cuts. In the end, the sides could not agree, and the previous budget plan stayed in place; as a result, discretionary spending was cut for the second year in a row, the first time in modern history.<sup>5</sup>

Things got worse in 2013, with Republicans refusing to sign any spending bill that did not defund the Affordable Care Act. Without a budget, the government shut down for 16 days. During that time, federal employees were furloughed for a total of 6.6 million days, costing the country roughly \$2.0 billion in lost productivity. The government paid additional interest on late payments, and overall consumer and business confidence decreased.<sup>6</sup> When the shutdown ended, Congress faced enormous cuts coming from the sequestration provisions of 2011. As a result, Congress passed the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, which continued to cut spending, but not by as much as under sequestration.

Budget deals in 2014 and 2015 have largely repeated this stalemate. The net result of recent debates has been a large reduction in nondefense discretionary spending, which fell by 15% from 2010 to 2014 to its lowest level on record. This has had real consequences for the delivery of government services. In 2013, for example, 57,000 slots were cut from the Head Start preschool program for low-income children, with 18,000 employees losing jobs or

having their pay reduced.<sup>7</sup> The budget of the Environmental Budget Agency fell by 18% from 2010–2012, leading to a reduction by half of contaminants removed from U.S. waters and reduced removal of hazardous waste of 7.4 billion pounds.<sup>8</sup> And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cut more than \$285 million from its budget in 2013, reducing the number of oral polio vaccines by 40 million doses and leading to 175,000 fewer HIV tests.<sup>9</sup>

The focus on deficit reduction after 2010 has been abandoned in recent years, however. In 2016, spending in every part of the budget increased and the federal deficit as a percent of GDP increased for the first time since 2009. In mid-2017, Congress avoided a shutdown by further broad increases in spending on both defense and nondefense discretionary programs, raising the deficit to 3.5% of GDP. Then, in 2018, there was a massive tax overhaul that significantly decreased taxes for individuals and corporations, as well as further increased in spending; by the end of fiscal year 2018, the budget deficit is projected to be almost double that of 2015 and rise to 4.2% of GDP. ■

## State and International Deficit Rules

The federal government's inability to control its deficit for any long period of time contrasts greatly with state governments'. As shown in [Chapter 1](#), state government budgets are almost always in balance, with no net deficit at the state level in most years. Why is this?

Most likely because every state in the union, except Vermont, has a [\*\*balanced budget requirement \(BBR\)\*\*](#) that forces it to balance its budget each year. Many states adopted these requirements after the deficit-induced banking crises of the 1840s. Newer states generally adopted BBRs soon after admission into the Union. As a result, all existing BBRs have been in place since at least 1970.

**balanced budget requirement (BBR)**

A law forcing a given government to balance its budget each year (spending = revenue).

BBRs are not the same in all states, however. Roughly two-thirds of the states have [\*\*ex post BBRs\*\*](#), meaning that the budget must be balanced at the end of a given fiscal year. One-third have [\*\*ex ante BBRs\*\*](#), meaning that either the governor must submit (what is supposed to be) a balanced budget, the legislature must pass a balanced budget, or both. A number of studies have found that only ex post BBRs are fully effective in restraining states from running deficits; ex ante BBRs are easier to evade, for example, through rosy predictions about the budget situation at the start of the year. These studies find that when states are subject to negative shocks to their budgets (such as a recession that causes a state's tax revenues to fall), the states with the stronger ex post BBRs are much more likely to meet those shocks by cutting spending than are states with the weaker ex ante BBRs.

**ex post BBR**

A law forcing a given government to balance its budget by the end of each fiscal year.

**ex ante BBR**

A law forcing either the governor to submit a balanced budget or the legislature to pass a balanced budget at the start of each fiscal year, or both.

Fiscal rules matter in other nations as well. This is demonstrated in a study by [Grebbi et al. \(2016\)](#), which looks at the impact of a rule introduced in Italy in 1999 that restricts the rate at which municipal (city or town) deficits can grow over time (to between 0 and 3% per year). In 2001, the Italian government relaxed these rules for the smallest municipalities (those with fewer than 5000 residents). The study finds that when these municipalities were not subject to these fiscal restraints, their taxes went down and deficits went up.

## 4.2 Measuring the Budgetary Position of the Government: Alternative Approaches

The figures for the size of the budget deficit presented earlier represent the most common measure of government deficits that are used in public debate. Yet there are a number of alternative ways of representing the budgetary position of the federal government that are important for policy makers to consider.

### Real Versus Nominal

The first alternative way to represent the deficit is to take into account the beneficial effects of inflation for the government as a debt holder. An important distinction that we will draw throughout this text is the one between **real prices** and **nominal prices**. Nominal prices are those stated in today's dollars: the price of a cup of coffee today is \$3. This means that consuming a cup of coffee today requires forgoing \$3 consumption of other goods today. Real prices are those stated in some constant year's dollars: the cost of today's cup of coffee in 1982 dollars would be \$0.97. That is, buying this same cup of coffee in 1982 required forgoing \$0.97 of consumption of other goods in 1982. Using real prices allows analysts to assess how any value has changed over time, relative to the overall price level, and thus how much more consumption of other goods you must give up to purchase that good. The overall price level is measured by the **Consumer Price Index (CPI)**, an index that captures the change over time in the cost of purchasing a "typical" bundle of goods.

**real prices**

Prices stated in some constant year's dollars.

**nominal prices**

Prices stated in today's dollars.

**Consumer Price Index (CPI)**

An index that captures the change over time in the cost of purchasing a "typical" bundle of goods.

From 1982 through 2018, the CPI rose by 154%; that is, there was a 154% *inflation* in the price of the typical bundle of goods. So any good whose price rose by less than 154% would be said to have a *falling real price*: the cost of that good relative to other goods in the economy is falling. That is, the amount of other consumption that you would have to forgo to buy that good is lower today than it was in 1982. Similarly, a good whose price rose by more than 154% would have a *rising real price*. For example, the cost of a typical bundle of medical care in the United States rose by 330% from 1982 through 2018. So, in real terms, the cost of medical care rose by  $330\% - 154\%$ , or 176%. Thus, in 2018, individuals had to sacrifice 176% more consumption to buy medical care than they did in 1982.

Government debts and deficit are both typically stated in nominal values (in today's dollars). This practice can be misleading, however, because inflation typically lessens the burden of the national debt, as long as that debt is a nominal obligation to borrowers.

This point is easiest to illustrate with an example. Suppose that you owe the bank \$100 in interest on your student loans. Suppose further that you like to buy as many bags of Skittles candy as possible with your income, and Skittles cost \$1 per bag. If you pay the bank the \$100 of interest, you are forgoing 100 bags of Skittles each year.

Now suppose that the price level doubles for all goods so that a bag of Skittles now costs \$2. Now, when you pay the bank \$100 for interest, you only need to forgo the purchase of 50 bags of Skittles. In real terms, the cost of your interest payments has fallen by half; the consumption you have to give up in order to pay the interest is half as large as it was at the lower price level. From the bank's perspective, however, the price level increase is not a good

thing. They used to be able to buy 100 bags of Skittles with your interest payments; now they can only buy 50. They are worse off, and you are better off, because the price level rose.

A similar logic applies to the national debt. When price levels rise, the consumption that the nation has to forgo to pay the national debt falls. The interest payments the government makes are in nominal dollars, which are worth less at the higher price level, so when prices rise, the real deficit falls. This outcome is called an *inflation tax* on the holders of federal debt (although it isn't really a tax). Due to rising prices, federal debt holders are receiving interest payments that are worth much less in real terms (like the bank in the previous paragraph).

This inflation tax can be sizeable, even in the low-inflation environment of the early twenty-first century. In 2017, the national debt was \$20.2 trillion and the inflation rate was 1.8%.<sup>10</sup> The “inflation tax” in that year, therefore, was  $0.018 \times 20.2$ , or \$364 billion. The conventionally measured deficit in 2017 (government expenditure minus government revenue) was \$665.4 billion, but if we add these inflation tax revenues to the deficit, the deficit falls to \$301 billion. Thus, taking account of the effects of inflation on eroding the value of the national debt reduces the measured deficit.

## Economic Conditions

A second alternative way to represent the deficit is to recognize the distinction between short-run factors that affect government spending and revenue and longer-run trends in the government's fiscal position. In particular, the government can account for the fiscal role of **automatic stabilizers**, automatic reductions in revenues and increases in outlays when GDP is falling relative to potential GDP. Both of these factors tend to increase the deficit in the short run, but over the long run, they should be balanced by the rise in receipts and the decline in spending that occurs during periods of economic growth.

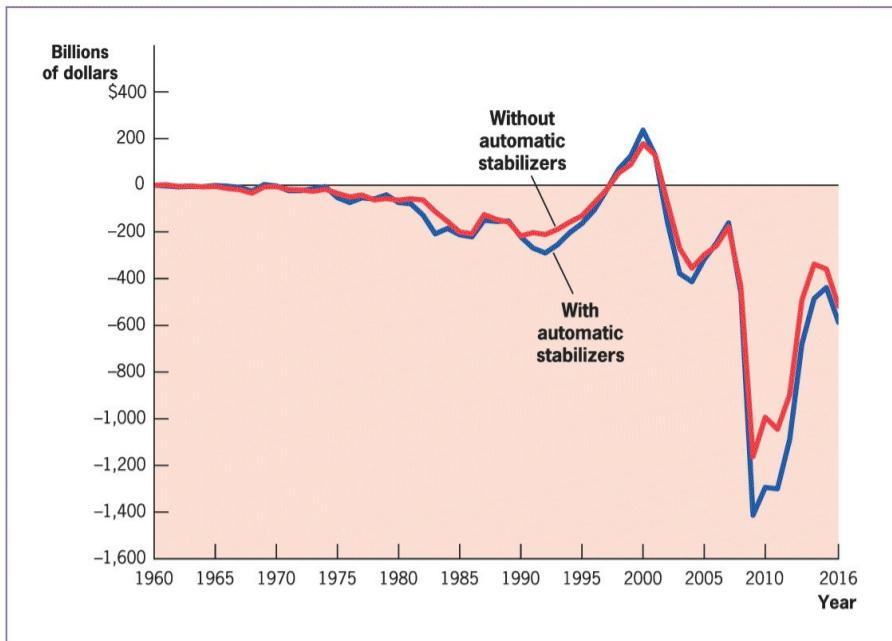
### automatic stabilizers

Automatic reductions in revenues and increases in outlays when the economy shrinks relative to its potential.

To account for these factors, the CBO computes a **cyclically adjusted budget deficit**. The CBO starts with its baseline projection of revenues and outlays, which captures business cycle effects and other factors. It then estimates how much revenue loss and spending increase are due to the economy's deviation from its full potential GDP, the economy's output if all resources were employed as fully as possible. The result of this adjustment for automatic stabilizers is shown in [Figure 4-2](#). As expected, this figure shows that in periods of economic expansion (e.g., the late 1990s), the cyclically adjusted deficit is actually higher than the reported deficit. On the other hand, when the economy is underperforming—such as in the early 1990s, the early 2000s, and especially in recent years—the cyclically adjusted deficit is significantly lower than the reported deficit.

### cyclically adjusted budget deficit

A measure of the government's fiscal position if the economy were operating at full potential GDP.



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■ FIGURE 4-2

**Economic Adjustment to Measuring the Budget Deficit** • The cyclically adjusted budget deficit controls for the impacts of economic activity on the budget. In periods of economic expansion (e.g., the late 1990s), the cyclically adjusted deficit is actually higher than the reported deficit. On the other hand, when the economy is underperforming—such as in the early 1990s, the early 2000s, and especially in recent years—the cyclically adjusted deficit is significantly lower than the reported deficit.

Data from: [Congressional Budget Office \(2019\)](#).

## Cash Versus Capital Accounting

Suppose that the government borrows \$2 million and spends it on two activities. One is a big party to celebrate the President's birthday, which costs \$1 million. The second is a new office building for government executives, which also costs \$1 million. When the government produces its budget at the end of the year, both of these expenditures will be reported identically, and the deficit will be \$2 million bigger if there is no corresponding rise in taxes. Yet these expenditures are clearly not the same. In one case, the expenditure financed a fleeting pleasure. In the other, it financed a lasting *capital asset*, an investment with value not just for today but for the future.

This example points out a general concern with the government's use of **cash accounting**, a method of assessing the government's budgetary position that measures the deficit solely as the difference between current spending and current revenues. Some argue that, instead, the appropriate means of assessing the government's budgetary position is to use **capital accounting**, which takes into account the change in the value of the government's net asset holdings. Under capital accounting, the government would set up a capital account that tracks investment expenditures (funds spent on long-term assets such as buildings and highways) separately from current consumption expenditures (funds spent on short-term items such as transfers to the unemployed). Within the capital account, the government would subtract investment expenditures and add the value of the asset purchased with this investment. For example, if the building built with the second \$1 million had a market value of \$1 million, then this expenditure would not change the government's capital account because the government would have simply shifted its assets from \$1 million in cash to \$1 million in buildings.

### **cash accounting**

A method of measuring the government's fiscal position as the difference between current spending and current revenues.

### **capital accounting**

A method of measuring the government's fiscal position that accounts for changes in the value of the government's net asset holdings.

holdings.

The absence of capital accounting gives a misleading picture of the government's financial position. In 1997, for example, the Clinton administration trumpeted its victory in proposing a balanced budget for the first time in 28 years. Little recognized in this fanfare was that \$36 billion of the revenues that would be raised to balance this budget came from one-time sales of a government asset, broadcast spectrum licenses (which allow the provision of wireless services such as cell phones). The government was gaining the revenues from this sale, but at the same time, it was selling off a valuable asset—the spectrum licenses. So the fiscal budget was balanced, but at the expense of lowering the value of the government's asset holdings.

## Problems with Capital Budgeting

While adding a capital budget seems like a very good idea, there are enormous practical difficulties with implementing such a budget because it is very hard to distinguish government consumption from investment spending. For example, is the purchase of a missile a capital investment or current period consumption? Does its classification depend on how soon the missile is used? Are investments in education capital expenditures because they build up the abilities of a future generation of workers? And if these are capital expenditures, how can we value them? For example, without selling the spectrum licenses in 1997, how could the government appropriately assess the value of this intangible asset? In [Chapter 8](#), we discuss the difficulties of appropriately valuing these types of investments. These difficulties might make it easier for politicians to misstate the government's budgetary position with a capital budget than without one.

As a result of these difficulties, while some states use capital budgets, they have not been implemented at the federal level. The international experience with capital budgeting at the national level is mixed.

New Zealand was the first country to fully implement capital budgeting in 1989, and it still continues to use this method.<sup>11</sup> Other countries (such as Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands) have used this method in the past as well but have stopped doing so because of the problematic issues discussed earlier. Britain implemented capital budgeting in 2001. In its 2013 proposal, *Investing in Britain's Future*, Britain not only set a capital budget for each department of the government, but also outlined investment plans to grow each department's capital budget year by year. For example, Britain plans to increase science investment by making a long-term commitment to science infrastructure investments until 2021.<sup>12</sup>

## Static Versus Dynamic Scoring

Another important source of current debate over budget measurement is the debate between *static* and *dynamic scoring*. When budget estimators assess the impact of policies on the government budget, they account for many behavioral effects of these policies. For example, people spend more on child care when the government subsidizes child care expenditures. Similarly, people are more likely to sell assets to realize a capital gain if the capital gains tax rate on such asset sales is reduced. While budget estimators take into account these types of effects of policies on individual and firm behavior in computing the overall effect of legislation, they do *not* take into account that a tax policy might affect the size of the economy as well. That is, budget modelers use [\*\*static scoring\*\*](#), which assumes that the size of the economic pie is fixed and that government policy serves only to change the relative size of the slices of the pie.

### **static scoring**

A method used by budget modelers that assumes that government policy changes only the distribution of total resources, not the amount of total resources.

The static assumption has been strongly criticized by those who believe that government policy affects not only the distribution of resources within the economy but the size of the economy itself. These analysts advocate [\*\*dynamic scoring\*\*](#), an approach to budget modeling that includes not only a policy's effects on resource distribution, but also its effects on the size of the economy. For example, lowering taxes on economic activity (such as labor income taxes) may increase the amount of that activity (hours worked), increasing the production of society. This larger economic pie in turn produces more tax revenues for a given tax rate, offsetting to some extent the revenue losses from the tax reduction. Ignoring this reaction can lead the government to overstate the revenue loss from cutting taxes.

**dynamic scoring**

A method used by budget modelers that attempts to model the effect of government policy on both the distribution of total resources and the amount of total resources.

Budget estimators have resisted the dynamic approach largely because the impact of government policy on the economy is not well understood. Nevertheless, as proponents of dynamic scoring point out, it is not clear why policy makers and budget estimators should assume there are zero effects. The CBO took its first step toward dynamic scoring in its 2003 evaluation of the budget proposed by President Bush, which included sizeable tax cuts and increased defense spending. The CBO used five different models to evaluate the long-run impacts of the administration's budget on the economy, including feedback effects on tax revenues and government spending. The message that the CBO delivered was fairly consistent: unless the 2003 budget proposals were accompanied by tax increases within a decade, dynamic effects would increase its budgetary costs.<sup>13</sup> This is because the budgetary changes, on net, increased the deficit. As we discuss in [Section 4.4](#), the government borrowing to finance the increased deficit that would occur as a result would crowd out private savings, decrease investment, and ultimately decrease economic growth. Slower economic growth in the long run would cause a fall in future tax revenues, raising the deficit further.

In 2011, the CBO used dynamic scoring to consider the short- and long-run impacts of “stimulus spending” to offset the Great Recession, such as increases in unemployment insurance benefits or providing refundable tax credits. It found that such policies would increase GDP over the 2012–2013 period by 0.1 to 1.9% of GDP, depending on the policy and its generosity. At the same time, its dynamic model suggests that such policies would cause a very slight long-run reduction in GDP due to increased government borrowing and, therefore, reduced investment; GDP in 2021 would be 0 to \$0.10 lower for each dollar of stimulus spending today.<sup>14</sup> While imprecise, these estimates highlight the trade-off between short-run stimulus to a recessionary economy and long-run deficit increases that may slow growth.

In 2015, the CBO was required to start using dynamic scoring to analyze major legislation, and it began incorporating macroeconomic effects and changes in behavior into its projections. An early report doing so from the CBO found that the Affordable Care Act would reduce the deficit by less than originally estimated because one of the impacts of the law would be to lower labor supply and, therefore, reduce GDP. This report was immediately controversial because the analysis incorporated reduced economic output but not the benefits to those who no longer had to work to get their health insurance (as discussed in [Chapter 15](#)).<sup>15</sup>

Dynamic scoring was also used to create the CBO’s 2017 Budget and Economic Outlook. The CBO projected that over 10 years, the economy would grow at an average rate of 1.9%

per year, constrained by slow growth of the labor market. They used this to conclude that increases in spending on interest and large government programs would largely outpace the increase in revenues generated, increasing the federal deficit.

## 4.3 Do Current Debts and Deficits Mean Anything? A Long-Run Perspective

Suppose that the government initiates two new policies this year. One provides a transfer of \$1 million to poor individuals in the current year. The other promises a transfer of \$1 million to poor individuals *next year*. From the perspective of this year's budget deficit, the former policy costs \$1 million, while the latter policy is free. This view is clearly incorrect: the latter policy is almost as expensive; it is only slightly cheaper because the promise is in the future, rather than today.

Governments in the United States and around the world are always making such **implicit obligations** to the future. Whenever Congress passes a law that entitles individuals to receipts in the future, it creates an implicit obligation that is not recognized in the annual budgetary process. In this section, we discuss the implications of implicit obligations for measuring the long-run budgetary position of the government.

**implicit obligation**

Financial obligations that the government has in the future that are not recognized in the annual budgetary process.

### Background: Present Discounted Value

To understand implicit obligations, it is important to review the concept of *present discounted value*. Suppose that I ask to borrow \$1,000 from you this year and promise to pay you back \$1,000 next year. You should refuse this deal because the \$1,000 that you will get back next year is worth less than the \$1,000 that you are giving up this year. If instead you take that \$1,000 and put it in the bank, you will earn interest on it and have more than \$1,000 next year. To compare the value of money in different periods, one must compare the **present discounted value (PDV)**: the value of each period's payment in today's terms. Receiving a dollar in the future is worth less than receiving a dollar today because you have forgone the opportunity to earn interest on the money. Because dollars received in different periods are worth different amounts, we cannot simply add them up; we must first put them on the same basis. This is what PDV does: it takes all future payments and values them in today's terms.

**present discounted value (PDV)**

The value of each period's dollar amount in today's terms.

To compute the present value of any stream of payments, we *discount* payments in a future period by the interest rate that could be earned between the present and that future period. So if you can invest your money at 10%, then a dollar received seven years from now is only worth 51.3¢ today because you can invest that 51.3¢ at 10% today and have a dollar in seven years. A dollar received one year from now is only worth 91¢ today because you can invest 91¢ at 10% today and have a dollar one year from now.

Mathematically, if the interest rate is  $r$ , and the payments in each future period are  $F_1, F_2, \dots$ , and so on, then the *PDV* is computed as:

$$PDV = \frac{F_1}{(1+r)} + \frac{F_2}{(1+r)^2} + \frac{F_3}{(1+r)^3} \dots$$

A convenient mathematical shorthand to remember is that if payments are a constant amount for a very long time into the future (e.g., 50 years or more), then the  $PDV = F/r$ , where  $F$  is the constant payment and  $r$  is the interest rate.



## APPLICATION

### Present Discounted Value and Interpreting Sports Contracts

On January 19, 2015, it was reported that the Washington Nationals would sign pitcher Max Scherzer to a seven-year, \$210 million contract. This contract for Scherzer, one of the best pitchers in baseball, would represent one of the largest financial commitments in history for a professional sports franchise in the United States. Scherzer's contract total ranked eleventh overall in baseball history and was the second highest ever for a pitcher.<sup>16</sup>

But all was not what it initially seemed. It was soon revealed that Scherzer's contract had an unusual provision: the \$210 million total was paid not in \$30 million installments for each of the seven years Scherzer would play for the Nationals but rather in \$15 million installments over 14 years, including seven years after Scherzer's on-the-field commitment was over. Based on the principle of present discounted value, we can compute that this means the contract was worth a lot less than it seems: money paid out in years 8–14 is worth a lot less than money received in years 1–7 because Scherzer could have invested the latter and earned interest.

Using as a discount rate the 4.7% long-run projection from the Congressional Budget Office,<sup>17</sup> the PDV of Scherzer's contract is “only” \$166 million. This would place him 20th overall in baseball history and fourth among pitchers. The money Scherzer receives in the final year of his deal, 2029, will be worth only 73% as much as if he had gotten it in the seventh year of his contract.<sup>18</sup> While Max Scherzer will clearly be well compensated, his relative ranking in baseball history is much lower than it seems without accounting for present discounted value. ■

### Why Current Labels May Be Meaningless

Policy debates have traditionally focused on the extent to which this year's governmental spending exceeds this year's governmental revenues. The existence of implicit obligations in the future, however, suggests that these debates may be misplaced. This concept is nicely illustrated by an example in [Gokhale and Smetters \(2003\)](#). Suppose that the government offers you the following deal when you are 20 years old. When you retire, the government will pay you \$1 less in Social Security benefits. In return, the government will reduce the payroll tax that you pay today to finance the Social Security program by 8.7¢, the present value of that \$1.<sup>19</sup> In terms of the government's net obligations throughout the future, this policy has no impact; it is lowering current tax revenues and lowering future expenditures by the same present discounted value amount. From today's perspective, however, this policy increases the deficit because it lowers current tax revenues but does not lower current expenditures. As a result, the current deficit will rise, leading to higher national debt for the next 50 years until this payroll tax reduction is repaid through lower benefits.

This example is even more striking if we consider the following alternative: the government offers to pay you \$1 less in Social Security benefits, in return for which the government will reduce your payroll tax today by only *half of* the present value of that \$1. For example, if the *PDV* of \$1 of Social Security benefits to a 20-year-old is 8.7¢ the government will reduce the payroll tax by 4.35¢ in return for cutting benefits by \$1 when the 20-year-old retires. Such a deal would clearly be a net winner for the government: in *PDV*

terms, the government is reducing current taxes by less than it is reducing future expenditures. Yet, from today's perspective, it is still cutting current taxes and not reducing current expenditures, so the deficit and the debt are rising. Just as in the case of capital budgeting, such a problem can lead to biased government policy making that favors policies that look good in terms of current budgets, even if they have bad long-term consequences for the fiscal position of the government.

## Measuring Long-Run Government Budgets

Over the past two decades, researchers have begun to consider alternative measures of government budgets that include implicit obligations. The basic idea of these alternative measures is to correctly measure the [\*\*government's intertemporal budget constraint\*\*](#), comparing the total present discounted value of the government's obligations (explicit and implicit) with the total present discounted value of its revenues.

**government's intertemporal budget constraint**

An equation relating the present discounted value of the government's obligations to the present discounted value of its revenues.

Measures of the intertemporal budget constraint began with work by Jagdish [Gokhale and Kent Smetters in 2003](#).<sup>20</sup> They computed what the government will spend, and what it will collect in taxes, in each year into the future. They then took the present discounted value of these expenditures and taxes and subtracted expenditures from taxes to get a *PDV* of the government's *fiscal imbalance*, how much more the government has promised in spending than it will collect in taxes.

Gokhale and Smetters highlighted in their work that the entire long-run fiscal imbalance of the federal government arises solely from the major entitlement programs for the elderly, Social Security and Medicare: there is little fiscal imbalance in the remainder of government. More recently, this approach was adopted by the Trustees of the Medicare and Social Security Funds, who, in 2012, released data on the long-run fiscal imbalance of the Social Security and Medicare programs. The results are stunning: from the perspective of 2012, the fiscal imbalance of these two programs is \$64.8 trillion. That is, if government policy does not change, the government has promised to pay out \$64.8 trillion more in benefits than it will collect in taxes. Most of the fiscal imbalance (\$54.4 trillion) comes from the Medicare program. The large imbalance caused by this program reflects the fact that the government has not funded in advance the large benefits that it will have to pay out as society ages. In the case of Medicare, this aging trend is compounded by the rapid rise in medical care costs.

Moreover, while the figures have not been updated, they are likely much larger today. As Gokhale points out, his estimate is based on a perhaps unrealistic assumption that the entire government other than Medicare and Social Security will actually shrink over time. Under a more realistic assumption that these programs grow in the future, the fiscal imbalance rises to \$91 billion. And this does not incorporate the recent large reduction in individual and corporate taxes passed at the end of 2017.

It is worth putting this number in perspective. This figure suggests that the implicit debt of the U.S. government (i.e., the extent to which future benefit obligations exceed future tax collections) is three to four times as large as its existing outstanding debt. To achieve intertemporal budget balance would require a tax increase of about 12% of payroll. This would mean *almost doubling* the existing payroll tax that finances the government's social insurance programs.<sup>21</sup>

The U.S. government today is like a family that has many small children and a \$15,000

balance on their credit card. The balance on the credit card is a major problem, and it is causing large interest payments. But it is a trivial problem relative to the enormous fiscal burden that this family will face when its children need to go to college!

## Problems with Long-Run Measures

The facts presented in this section are sobering, yet they are typically taken with a grain of salt by policy makers. This casual attitude reflects, in part, the short-run focus of policy makers most interested in winning the next election (as discussed in more detail in [Chapter 9](#)). This casualness also reflects the fairly tenuous nature of all these computations, which depend critically on a wide variety of assumptions about future growth rates in costs and incomes, as well as assumptions about the interest rate used to discount future taxes and spending.



*“These projected figures are a figment of our imagination . . .”*

Robert Weber/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

For example, these fiscal imbalance calculations assume an interest rate of 3.2%. At that interest rate, the payroll tax increase required to address the long run fiscal deficit is 11.7%. If the interest rate is raised to 4%, which is well within the forecast error for this variable, then the imbalance falls by almost 10%, to 10.7% of payroll.

There is no reason, however, to think that these estimates are biased one way or another, either always too low or always too high. If the interest rate were to fall to 2.4%, then the imbalance rises by more than 10 to 13.4% of payroll. Thus, while the assumption of an interest rate of 3.2% is a sensible central guess, there is a wide range of uncertainty around it.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, not only do these calculations require potentially heroic assumptions about interest rates, costs, and incomes in the very distant future, they also assume that government

policy remains unchanged. Even relatively small changes in government policy, such as a small cut in Social Security benefits, could have large implications for these estimates. This is not necessarily a problem with these measures, so long as the observer is clear that the measures are based on today's set of policies.

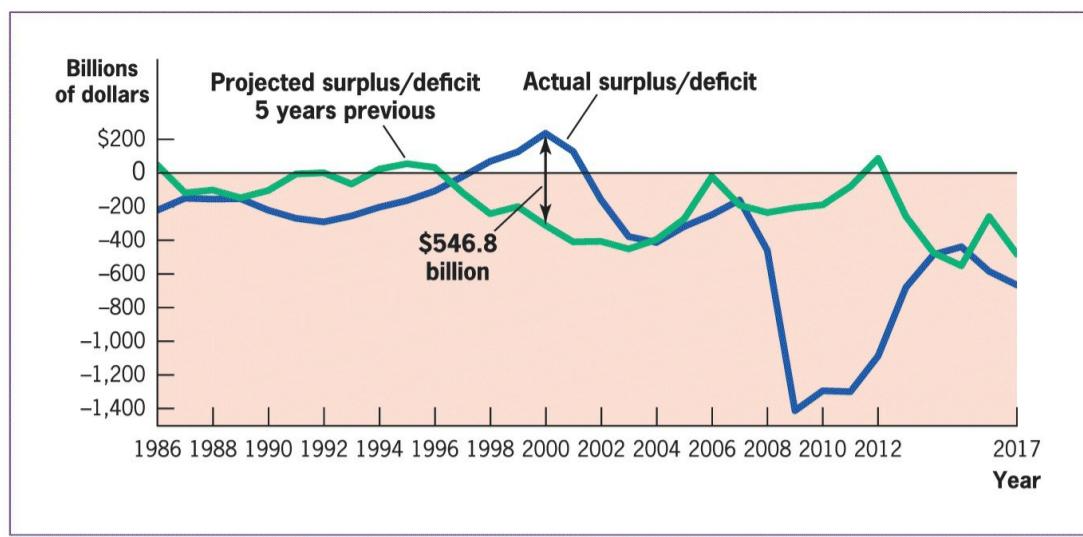
Another problem with these long-run imbalance measures is that they only consider the pattern over time of transfer programs and not of other investments and government policies. Suppose that the government borrowed \$1 billion today and invested it in cleaning up the environment. This would look like an increase in the fiscal imbalance of the federal government, eventually requiring higher taxes on future generations to meet the government's intertemporal budget constraint. But this conclusion would not take into account that future generations not only pay the tax bill but also benefit from the improved environment. So a true generational or long-run fiscal accounting should include not only future taxes and transfers but also the benefits to future generations of investments made today.

## What Does the U.S. Government Do?

While not adopting these types of very-long-run measures, the U.S. government has moved to consider somewhat longer-run measures of policy impacts. Until the mid-1990s, the budgetary impacts of most policies were considered over a one- or five-year window. This approach was viewed as having the important limitation of promoting policies that had their greatest costs outside of that window. For example, a policy that cut taxes starting in six years was viewed as having no budgetary cost, but the implicit obligation implied by this policy change could be quite large.

In 1996, the government moved to evaluating most policy options over a ten-year window to try to avoid these types of problems. In principle, this should help promote policies that are more fiscally balanced over the long run. In practice, however, moving to a ten-year window added a new problem: it worsened the forecast error inherent in projecting the implications of government programs. The further the time frame moves from the present, the more difficult it is for the CBO to forecast the government's budget position. This approach leaves policy makers dealing with very uncertain numbers when assessing the ten-year impact of a tax or spending policy.

This problem is illustrated in [Figure 4-3](#), which shows the evolution of actual and projected budget deficits over the 1986–2017 period. The blue line in the figure shows the actual budget deficits or surpluses in each year. The green line shows what the deficits and surpluses for those years *had been projected to be* five years earlier.<sup>23</sup> In July 1981, for example, the CBO projected that in 1986, the federal government would have a \$48 billion surplus. Instead, by 1986, there was a \$211 billion deficit. The CBO's 1983 predictions for 1988 were much closer, only understating the deficit by \$50 billion. The errors then got very large, reaching a peak with the 1987 projections that the government would have a balanced budget in 1992, when in reality, it ended up almost \$300 billion in deficit.



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■ FIGURE 4-3

**Projected Versus Actual Surplus/Deficit** • CBO projections of the budget surplus/deficit five years ahead have deviated significantly from the actual surplus/deficit, particularly during the high-deficit years of the early 1990s and the high-surplus years of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century.

Data from: [Congressional Budget Office \(2015a\)](#). Projected surplus figures are taken from the CBO's Uncertainty Data (link in A1) through 2007, after which they are taken from the CBO's annual [Budget and Economic Outlook \(2015a\)](#). [Congressional Budget Office \(2017b\)](#). Projected figures from [Congressional Budget Office \(2016, 2017a, 2018\)](#).

These errors are not one-sided, however. Beginning in 1992, the CBO began to dramatically *overstate* the deficit so that, as shown in [Figure 4-3](#), the CBO was projecting a larger deficit for 1997 than the government actually had. By 1995, the five-year prediction for 2000 was for a deficit of more than \$311 billion. In reality, the government ran a surplus of \$236 billion by the year 2000—for an error of \$547 billion!

The problems that such forecast errors can cause became apparent in 2001. By the time President George W. Bush was inaugurated in January 2001, the CBO was using a ten-year projection window. At that time, the CBO projected a surplus that would amount to almost \$6 trillion over the next ten years. Indeed, at that point, the concern was that the government might pay down its debt and be left with so much money that it would need to start purchasing private assets with its budget surpluses. As Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan said in his January 25, 2001, testimony before the Senate Budget Committee, “. . . the continuing unified budget surpluses currently projected imply a major accumulation of private assets by the federal government. . . . It would be exceptionally difficult to insulate the government’s investment decisions from political pressures. Thus, over time, having the federal government hold significant amounts of private assets would risk suboptimal performance by our capital markets, diminished economic efficiency, and lower overall standards of living than would be achieved otherwise.”<sup>24</sup>

These projections led both candidates—Al Gore and George W. Bush—to propose major tax cuts during the 2000 presidential campaign, and President Bush delivered on his promise with a major tax bill in June 2001. This bill had an estimated ten-year cost of \$1.35 trillion (although the likely cost is much higher, as discussed in the policy application that follows). Nevertheless, this seemed a small share of the nearly \$6 trillion in future surpluses to deliver back to the American taxpayer.

The problem, as we now know, is that the \$6 trillion surplus never appeared. The combination of the 2001 (and subsequent) tax cuts, a recession, and the economic shocks of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks had a sharply negative effect on the budget picture.

By 2002, the government was already back in deficit. The CBO's forecasts for the mid-2000s were fairly accurate, but then the forecasts became wildly optimistic when the Great Recession hit because it was not anticipated five years earlier and it was stronger and longer lasting than the CBO forecasted. A reduction in the CBO forecasts and a return to economic growth have brought their forecast back into line in recent years.<sup>25</sup>

This discussion should not be taken as a condemnation of the CBO, which does an excellent job of projecting government revenues and outlays given the available information. Rather, the problem is that forecasting five or ten years into the future is a highly uncertain exercise. While moving to the ten-year budget window may have helped reduce trickery designed to push tax cuts outside the budget window, it also introduced more forecast error into the process.

This reduction in forecast accuracy may have been a price worth paying if the move to a ten-year window had imposed more long-term fiscal discipline on the federal government. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case, as the following policy application discusses.



## APPLICATION

### The Financial Shenanigans of 2001 and 2018<sup>26</sup>

The tax reduction enacted in June 2001 was one of the largest tax cuts in our nation's history, with a revenue cost of 1.7% of GDP over the subsequent decade. The tax cut consisted of an extraordinarily convoluted set of phase-ins and phaseouts of various tax cuts in order to comply with a congressional budget plan limiting the 11-year cost (through 2011) of the cuts to \$1.35 trillion. Perhaps most extreme was an infamous *sunset provision*, by which all of the tax cuts suddenly disappeared on December 31, 2010, thus reducing the 2011 cost of the tax cut to zero. (The Senate originally had the sunset on December 31, 2011, but legislators realized that this would push the cost beyond the \$1.35 trillion limit.)

The bill itself contained numerous tax cuts operating on erratic schedules. Many of the cuts would phase in over periods longer than in any prior American legislation, backloading most of the fiscal impact toward 2010. After gradual phase-ins, many of the cuts would be fully enacted for only a short time before expiring because of the sunset provision. For example, the estate tax, which was levied on bequests over (roughly) \$2 million, would be phased out entirely by 2010 and then reintroduced in 2011. This schedule led economist and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman to point out that children may want to make sure their parents die in 2010 rather than 2011, labeling this the "Throw Momma from the Train" Act! Similar tricks were played with expansions of tax credits and other tax reductions; for example, full reductions in upper-income tax rates would start only in 2006 and then expire in 2010.

Such convoluted scheduling allowed legislators to claim that action had been taken on a wide range of issues, while delaying the fiscal consequences associated with these actions. Though the Joint Committee on Taxation estimated the bill's final cost at \$1.349 trillion (just under the limit!), other estimates were significantly higher. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), for example, noted that the cost rose to \$1.8 trillion once measures certain to pass in the near future were accounted for. The CBPP then calculated the cost of increased interest payments due to rising debt caused by the tax cuts, and it found the true cost of the bill through 2011 to be \$2.3 trillion. Assuming the sunset provision was ultimately

eliminated, the tax cut's cost would grow in the decade from 2012 to 2021 to \$4.1 trillion, without even including the additional costs of interest payments. Indeed, over the next 75 years, these tax cuts were estimated to cost 1.7% of the GNP, which is more than twice the size of the much debated Social Security deficit over this same time period.

The concerns about this financial trickery were realized in 2010, when President Obama and the Congress extended the tax cuts for another two years, raising the cost of the tax cuts by \$858 billion.<sup>27</sup> The reduced tax rates for those making under \$400,000 were permanently extended in the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012, while the rate for higher earners rose.<sup>28</sup>

Despite this outcome, financial trickery was once again used to help meet deficit targets under the most recent round of tax cuts in 2018. This law imposed large reductions in individual taxes, but these individual tax cuts are set to sunset in 2025.<sup>29</sup> And a one-time multinational tax on existing foreign profits will be used to make the overall set of cuts fit within the deficit target.<sup>30</sup> ■■■

## 4.4 Why Do We Care About the Government's Fiscal Position?

Now that we understand the complexities involved in defining the federal deficit and debt, we turn to another question: Why do we care? Continuing a theme from [Chapter 1](#), there are two reasons we might care: efficiency and (intergenerational) equity.

### Short-Run Versus Long-Run Effects of the Government on the Macroeconomy

One reason to care about budget deficits has to do with [short-run stabilization issues](#)—that is, the role of government policies in combating the peaks and troughs of the business cycle. Short-run stabilization is accomplished on two fronts. [Automatic stabilization](#) occurs through policies that automatically cut taxes or increase spending when the economy is in a downturn in order to offset recession-induced declines in household consumption levels. Such automatic stabilization is provided by, for example, the unemployment insurance program, which pays benefits to unemployed workers to offset their income losses. [Discretionary stabilization](#) occurs through policy actions undertaken by the government to offset a particular instance of an underperforming or overperforming economy, for example, a tax cut legislated during a recession.

#### **short-run stabilization issues**

The role of the government in combating the peaks and troughs of the business cycle.

#### **automatic stabilization**

Policies that automatically alter taxes or spending in response to economic fluctuations in order to offset changes in household consumption levels.

#### **discretionary stabilization**

Policy actions taken by the government in response to particular instances of an underperforming or overperforming economy.

There are a number of interesting questions about the stabilization role of the government. These questions have not, however, been the focus of the field of public finance for more than two decades. This lack of attention perhaps reflects the conclusion in the 1970s that the tax and spending tools of the government are not well equipped to fight recessions, given the long and variable lags between when changes are proposed and when laws become effective.

The Great Recession inspired a resurgence of interest in this area, although most of the debate is largely carried out in the field of macroeconomics, and courses in that field are the place where one can learn about recessions and the role of government in combating them. A number of studies over the past decade have shown convincingly that fiscal policies such as spending and tax cuts can play an important role in stabilizing the macroeconomy.<sup>31</sup> But public finance courses are typically more concerned with the longer-run impacts of government budget deficits on economic growth.

### Background: Savings and Economic Growth

The field of economic growth is a vast and rapidly growing area of academic study. There are a host of exciting issues being investigated about what drives countries to grow faster or slower, but perhaps the most long-standing issue raised by this literature is the impact of savings on economic growth. The earliest economic growth models emphasized a central role for savings as an engine of growth, and this insight remains important for growth economics today.

### More Capital, More Growth

The intuition behind the important role of savings in growth can be seen by returning to the production function ([Chapter 2](#)), which translates labor and capital inputs into output. Recall that for a short-run production function, the marginal productivity of labor falls as more labor is applied to a fixed level of capital. In the long run, however, capital need not be fixed. Over time, the level of capital can be increased: new plants can be built and machines can be purchased and employed for production. Employing more capital then raises the marginal productivity of labor; that is, workers are more productive if they have more and better buildings and machines with which to work.

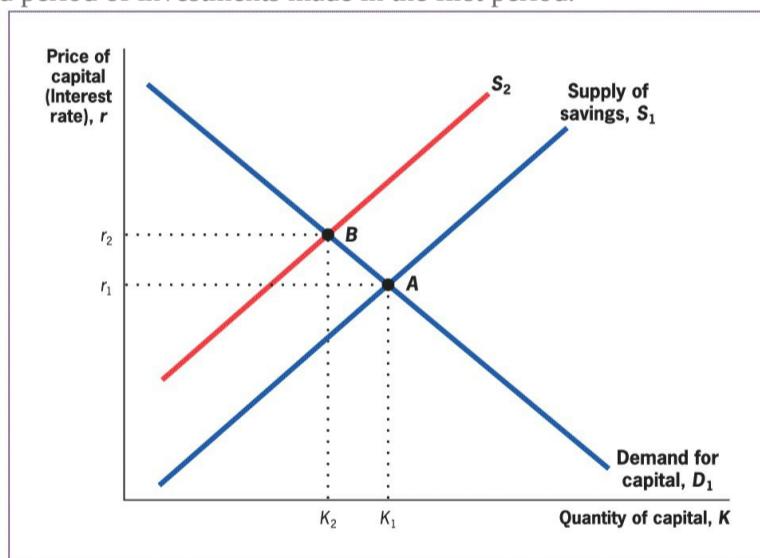
This same type of production function analysis can be applied to the production level of an economy. As there is more capital in an economy, each worker is more productive, and total social product rises. A larger capital stock means more total output for any level of labor supply. Thus, the size of the capital stock is a primary driver of growth.

## More Savings, More Capital

The determination of the size of the capital stock is shown in [Figure 4-4](#). On the horizontal axis is the size of the capital stock,  $K$ . On the vertical axis is the price of capital, which is the interest rate  $r$ . The [interest rate](#) is the rate of return in the second period on investments made in the first period. So, if the interest rate is 10%, that means that for each dollar invested in the first period, individuals receive that dollar plus ten extra cents in the second period. Firms pay the interest rate to investors to obtain the financing they need to build machines, so it is the price for their capital.

**interest rate**

The rate of return in the second period of investments made in the first period.



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■ FIGURE 4-4

**Capital Market Equilibrium** • The equilibrium in the capital market is determined by the interaction of the demand for capital by firms ( $D_1$ ) and the supply of savings by individual savers ( $S_1$ ). When the government demands more savings to finance its deficits, this lowers the supply of savings available to private capital markets to  $S_2$ , raising interest rates to  $r_2$  and reducing capital accumulation to  $K_2$ . This reduction ultimately reduces economic growth.

The demand for capital is driven by firms' investment demands. This demand curve is downward sloping because firms are less willing to pay high interest rates to finance their machines; the higher the interest rate, the more that firms must pay investors to obtain money to invest, so the less attractive investment becomes. The supply curve represents the savings decisions of individuals. Individuals face a decision about whether to consume their income today or save some of it for tomorrow. As the interest rate rises, each dollar of delayed consumption yields more consumption tomorrow. Because individuals are more willing to

save their money and lend it out to firms at higher interest rates (rather than consuming it today), the supply curve slopes upward. That is, just as a higher wage causes individuals to take less leisure (more work) and have more consumption, a higher interest rate causes individuals to consume less and save more today in order to have more consumption in the future.<sup>32</sup>

In a competitive capital market, the equilibrium amount of capital is determined by the intersection of these demand and supply curves. This level of capital then enters the production function, along with the level of labor derived from the type of labor market analysis discussed in [Chapter 2](#). The result is the equilibrium level of output for society.

## The Federal Budget, Interest Rates, and Economic Growth

Now, let's introduce a federal government into this scenario. Suppose that, as in most years in recent history, there is a federal deficit, and the government must borrow to finance the difference between its revenues and its expenditures. The key concern about federal deficits is that the federal government's borrowing might compete with the borrowing of private firms. That is, if a fixed supply of savings is used to finance both the capital of private firms and the borrowing of the government, then the government's borrowing may *crowd out* the borrowing of the private sector and lead to a lower level of capital accumulation.

[Figure 4-4](#) illustrates this crowd-out mechanism. Adding government borrowing into the capital market reduces the supply of saved funds available to the private capital market because the government is using some of that supply of savings to finance its deficit. Thus, government borrowing to finance a deficit causes the supply of savings to the private capital market to decrease, so the supply shifts inward from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  in [Figure 4-4](#). This inward shift in supply leads to a higher interest rate ( $r_2$ ), which in turn leads to a lower quantity of capital demanded by firms ( $K_2$ ). Subsequently, this lower level of capital may lower economic growth, by making each unit of labor less productive. Thus, when the government competes with the private sector for limited private savings, the private sector ends up with fewer resources to finance the capital investments that drive growth.

This is a very simple model of how government financing affects interest rates and growth. In reality, there are a number of complications.

### International Capital Markets

In [Figure 4-4](#), the reason that government deficits reduce capital expenditures by firms is that they drive up the interest rate. But suppose that the pool of savings is not limited by interest rates, as implied by [Figure 4-4](#), but is essentially unlimited and unaffected by interest rates. That is, suppose that the pool of savings available to finance both private investment and public borrowing was close to perfectly elastic so that even small rises in interest rates would call forth additional savings. In that case, federal deficits would cause only small interest rate rises, and there would be little crowding out of private capital accumulation by government borrowing.

Such would be the case if there were perfectly integrated international capital markets. While the U.S. government's deficit may be large relative to the pool of available savings in the United States, it is very small relative to the entire global pool of available savings. If the federal government can borrow not only domestically but also from abroad to finance its

deficit, then there may not be negative implications for capital accumulation and growth. And, in fact, more than one-third of the U.S. federal government debt is held by foreigners owning U.S. government bonds.

There is a large body of economics literature that has investigated the integration of international capital markets. It has generally concluded that while integration is present (and perhaps growing), it is far from perfect. As a result, the supply of capital to the United States may not be perfectly elastic, and government deficits could crowd out private savings.

That U.S. debt is held to some extent internationally, however, raises another issue about growing federal debt. At this time, it seems inconceivable that the United States could possibly default on (not repay) its federal debt, but if the debt gets large enough, then default could become a risk. At that point, international investors might be wary of buying U.S. government bonds. This reduction in demand from abroad would mean that more debt must be held domestically, further raising interest rates and crowding out domestic savings. No one knows how large “large enough” is, but the confidence of foreign investors that we will repay our debts is an important benchmark to consider as the federal debt grows.

## Expectations

A particularly important simplification that we make in [Figure 4-4](#) is that we consider only a two-period world, in which savings done today is rewarded with interest payments that are spent tomorrow. In reality, we live in a world in which businesses need to think many years ahead. As a result, there are both short-term (e.g., 30-day) and long-term (e.g., ten-year) interest rates. Short-term rates reflect the current economic environment, while long-term rates also reflect expectations about the future. If the government has a surplus today, this surplus will reduce the total supply of savings and lower short-term interest rates. If the government is expected to run a deficit starting next year, this will put upward pressure on long-term interest rates. Because businesses tend to make long-standing capital investments, they focus more on these longer-term rates. As a result, the entire future path of government surpluses and deficits matters for capital accumulation, not just the surplus or deficit today.

## Evidence

Theory, therefore, tells us that higher deficits lead to higher interest rates and less capital investment, but it does not tell us how much higher and how much less. The existing empirical literature on this question is somewhat inconclusive, although past evidence suggests that projected long-term deficits do appear to be reflected to some extent in long-term interest rates. In recent years, however, large increases in public indebtedness have not resulted in higher interest rates, which remain very low. This situation has led to substantial support for a “new view” of macroeconomic policy that suggests that the United States can absorb quite large increases in debt without interest rates rising. This may be because we have entered an era of “secular stagnation,” where future growth is expected to be so low that investors don’t have better alternatives to continuing to hold U.S. debt. Or it could be because the United States continues to be the safest place to invest money internationally, so that the supply of capital is very flat.<sup>33</sup>

## Intergenerational Equity

The other reason that we might be concerned with debts and deficits is [intergenerational equity](#), or the treatment of future generations relative to current generations. Just as society may care more about its worse-off than its better-off members, it may care more about its worse-off than its better-off *generations*. If the types of calculations we have discussed are accurate, then current government policy has the feature of burdening future generations for

the benefit of current generations, making future generations much worse off in the process. It may therefore be deemed socially worthwhile to equalize these burdens.

#### **intergenerational equity**

The treatment of future generations relative to current generations.

Is this an accurate way to look at the question of intergenerational equity? Throughout the postindustrial era in the United States, on average, every generation of citizens has enjoyed a better standard of living over its entire adulthood than did its parents. Today, most of you are living a much better life than did your grandparents. While they typed out their papers laboriously by hand, you whip them out on a computer; while they spent hours poring over encyclopedias to learn facts, you just look them up in a few minutes on the Internet while they spent days in the hospital if they hurt their knee, you have outpatient surgery in two hours and are back on your feet in a week or so; and so on. The continual increase in productivity around the world means that every generation has more resources at its disposal than the last.

Thus, while future generations will face larger debts, they will also benefit from a better standard of living. In considering intergenerational equity, we may want to consider not just the absolute burden of debt but that burden relative to the standard of living.<sup>34</sup>

## 4.5 Conclusion

Most of this text will focus on fiscal policy actions taken by the government through spending or taxation.<sup>35</sup> Every such action has implications for the federal budget deficit. The deficit has been a constant source of policy interest and political debate over the past decades, as the government has moved from severe deficit to large surplus and back to severe deficit again. The existing deficit is quite large, but what is more worrisome than this cash flow deficit is the long-run implicit debt that is owed to the nation's seniors through the Social Security and Medicare programs. This long-term debt is many multiples of current cash debt and could have major negative effects on both economic efficiency (by crowding out private savings and, ultimately, national growth) and intergenerational equity (by placing the enormous burden of balancing the government's obligations on future generations).

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The U.S. government's budget has generally been in deficit since the 1960s, despite many attempts to legislate balanced budgets.
- Defining the government's budget position appropriately raises a number of difficult issues, such as using real versus nominal budgets and cash versus capital accounting. A more important issue is the short-run versus long-run debt of the U.S. government. Adding up the total net present value of the government's promised taxes and spending shows that the U.S. government faces a major fiscal imbalance.
- The U.S. government tries to focus on longer-term issues by using a ten-year budget window, but this approach raises problems with forecasting and does not seem to end politicians' willingness to play games with the timing of taxes and expenditures to avoid budget restrictions.
- The major problem with budget deficits is that they are likely to crowd out private capital accumulation, leading to lower long-term growth, although recent years have not been supportive of that view.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Every year, the Office of Management and Budget publishes historical tables describing the composition of federal receipts and outlays. Navigate to <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/historical-tables/> to view them. You can see that these detailed tables cover the federal budget's history from 1940 to present (and in some cases, all the way back to 1789!). These tables also display projections for the federal budget up to four years into the future. Using [Table 6.1](#), "Composition of Outlays," discuss how the main categories of federal outlays have changed from 1940 to the present. Where are the biggest projected changes looking four years into the future?
2. We say that a variable is *cyclical* if it increases with economic booms and declines with economic recessions. We say that a variable is *countercyclical* if the opposite is true. Which elements of the U.S. federal budget are cyclical, and which are countercyclical? (To get a sense of the main elements of the budget, visit the Office of Management and Budget's website, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/historical-tables/>, to view historical tables describing the federal budget.)
3. How have the major federal laws to promote balanced budgets lost their effectiveness over time?
4. Suggest one way in which generational imbalances might be understated, and one way in which they might be overstated.
5. From 1962 to 1964, federal spending on nondefense-related education and training rose from \$1.31 billion to \$1.61 billion, while from 2012 to 2014, it rose from \$96.9 billion to \$99.5 billion.<sup>36</sup> Given that the CPI (in January) was 30.0 in 1962, 30.9 in 1964, 226.7 in 2012, and 233.9 in 2014, which was the larger increase in education and training spending?
6. Why does the CBO construct a cyclically adjusted budget deficit for the purposes of monitoring federal income and outlays?
7. The federal government is considering selling tracts of federally owned land to private developers and using the revenues to provide aid to victims of an earthquake in a foreign country. How would this policy affect the levels of federal revenues, expenditures, and deficits under a cash accounting system? What would be different under a capital accounting system?
8. A government is considering paving a highway with a newly developed "wear-proof" material. Paving the highway would cost \$4 billion today, but it would save \$400 million in maintenance costs for each of the next ten years. Use the concept of present value to determine whether the project is worth undertaking if the government can borrow at an interest rate of 4%. Is it worth it if the interest rate is 0%? 8%? A politician says to you, "I don't care what the interest rate is. The project is clearly a good investment: it more than pays for itself in only eight years, and all the rest is money in the bank." What's wrong with this argument, and why does the interest rate matter?
9. Is it necessarily inequitable for future generations to face higher taxes as a result of benefits that accrue to those living today? Explain.
10. Consider a one-year project that costs \$126,000, provides an income of \$70,000 a year for five years, and costs \$225,000 to dispose of at the very end of the fifth year. Assume that the first payment comes at the start of the year after the project is undertaken. Should the project be undertaken at a 0% discount rate? How about 2%? 5%? 10%?
11. The 2018 tax overhaul cut taxes for both individuals and corporations. But it includes a provision to sunset the individual tax cuts in the year 2025. Why does the bill include this provision? What do you think supporters of the law expect will happen in 2025? How might political considerations surrounding sunset provisions increase the final cost of the law, compared with the original estimates by the CBO?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

12. What is meant by dynamic scoring of the budget? Why does dynamic scoring potentially lead to more realistic estimates of the “true” effective size of a budget deficit? What are some methodological issues involved in dynamic scoring? (Note that you can read more about the move to dynamic budget scoring on the CBO’s website. Informative presentations by CBO economists can be found at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/50919> and <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/50803>.)
13. In 2015, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated the impact of repealing the Affordable Care Act (ACA) using both traditional and dynamic scoring practices. Under traditional scoring, they found full repeal of the ACA would increase the federal deficit by \$353 billion, while under dynamic scoring it would increase the federal deficit by less—\$137 billion. Why would dynamic scoring reduce the budgetary impact of repealing the law?
14. Several public interest watchdog groups point out “pork” in the federal budget—spending that they claim would have little or no national benefit but would benefit a small number of people in a geographically concentrated area. Why are these types of spending more likely to occur in the federal budgeting process than they would if they were each voted on individually?
15. How do you think population growth affects the degree of “generational balance” in government finance?
16. How might large federal deficits affect future economic growth? How would your answer change if foreign confidence in the ability of the United States to repay its debts erodes?
17. Consider the same highway paving project from question 8. A second politician says to you, “At an interest rate of 4%, the project is a bad idea. Over ten years, the project reduces maintenance costs by a total of \$4 billion. But borrowing \$4 billion for ten years at a 4% interest rate means paying \$1.44 billion in interest. The total cost of the project over ten years is therefore \$5.44 billion!” What’s wrong with the second politician’s argument?
18. The BEA of 1990 created a PAYGO system prohibiting any policy changes that increased the estimated deficit in any year in the subsequent six-year period. Another type of possible PAYGO system would prohibit any policy changes that increase the present value of the deficit over the entire six-year period. Discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of these “annual” and “cumulative” PAYGO systems.

# CHAPTER 5 Externalities: Problems and Solutions



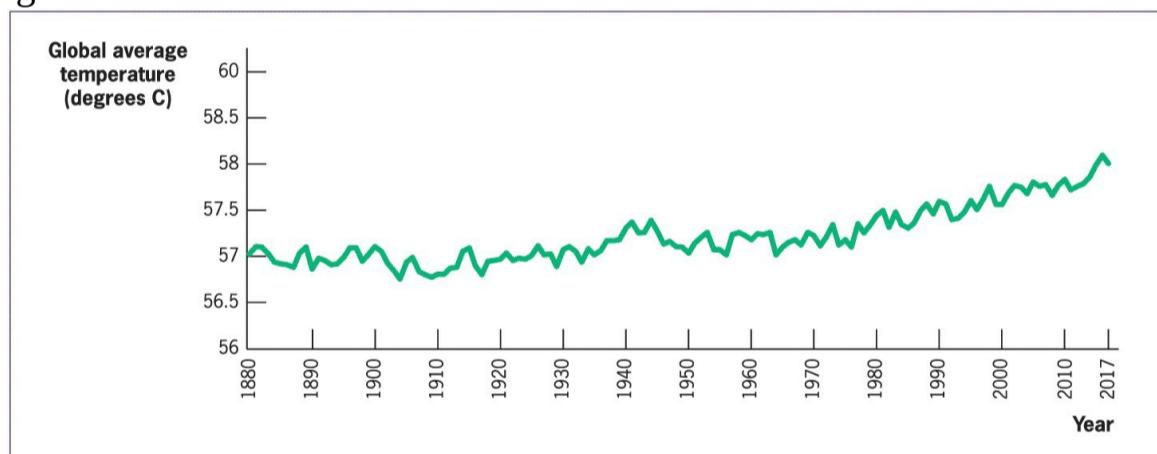
NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [5.1 Externality Theory](#)
- [5.2 Private-Sector Solutions to Negative Externalities](#)
- [5.3 Public-Sector Remedies for Externalities](#)
- [5.4 Distinctions Between Price and Quantity Approaches to Addressing Externalities](#)
- [5.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- What is an externality, and why does it cause a market failure?
- When can the private market solve the problem of externalities?
- What are possible public-sector solutions to the problem of externalities, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

In December 2015, representatives from 195 nations met in Paris, France, to attempt one of the most ambitious international negotiations ever: an international pact to limit temperature rise around the world, and prepare to deal with its consequences. The motivation for this international gathering was increasing concern over the problem of climate change. As [Figure 5-1](#) shows, there has been a steady rise in global temperatures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Significant scientific consensus suggests that the cause of this warming trend is human activity—in particular, the use of fossil fuels. The burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, natural gas, and gasoline produces carbon dioxide, which in turn traps the heat from the sun in the Earth’s atmosphere. Many scientists predict that, over the next century, global temperatures could rise by as much as 11.5 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>1</sup> The global sea level could rise by almost four feet, increasing risks of flooding and submersion of low-lying coastal areas. Some scientists project, for example, that 20 to 40% of the entire country of Bangladesh will be flooded due to climate change over the next century, with much of this nation being under more than five feet of water!<sup>2</sup>



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### FIGURE 5-1

Average Global Temperature, 1880–2017 • There was a steady upward trend in global temperature throughout the twentieth century, which has continued into the twenty-first century.

Data from: Figure adapted from NASA’s [Goddard Institute for Space Studies \(2018\)](#).

Despite this dire forecast, the nations gathered in Paris faced a daunting task. The cost of reducing the use of fossil fuels, particularly in the major industrialized nations, is enormous. Fossil fuels are central to heating our homes, transporting us to our jobs, and lighting our places of work. Replacing these fossil fuels with alternatives would significantly raise the costs of living in developed countries. To end the problem of climate change, some predict that we will have to reduce our use of fossil fuels to nineteenth-century (preindustrial) levels.

That is not a demand that any country was willing to meet, but most countries, including the United States, committed to sizable reductions. The United States pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26 to 28% below 2005 levels.<sup>3</sup> In order to fulfill these

commitments, the Obama administration created a Climate Action Plan (see [Chapter 6](#) for details). Supporters of the deal hailed it as a turning point for the planet. Joe Romm, founder of the blog *Climate Progress*, called the agreement “a literally world changing deal.”<sup>4</sup> Advocates argued that jobs lost to fossil fuel would be replaced in the green energy sector, such as wind and solar energy.

Critics focused on other predictions. They cited slower economic growth and an unfair burden on the United States as reasons to disregard the deal. In 2017, President Trump announced plans to leave the Paris deal. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell lauded the Paris withdrawal as “protecting middle class families across the country and workers throughout coal country from higher energy prices and potential job loss.”<sup>5</sup>

Climate change due to emissions of fossil fuels is a classic example of what economists call an [externality](#). An externality occurs whenever the actions of one party make another party worse or better off, yet the first party neither bears the costs nor receives the benefits of doing so. Thus, when we drive cars in the United States, we increase emissions of carbon dioxide, raise world temperatures, and thereby increase the likelihood that Bangladesh will be flooded out of existence in 100 years. Did you know this when you drove to class today? Not unless you are a very interested student of environmental policy. Your enjoyment of your driving experience is in no way diminished by the damage that your emissions are causing. Externalities occur in many everyday interactions. Sometimes they are localized and small, such as the impact on your roommate if you play your stereo too loudly or the impact on your neighbors if your dog uses their garden as a bathroom. Externalities also exist on a much larger scale, such as in the case of climate change or particulate emissions. When utilities in the Midwest produce electricity using coal, a by-product of that production is the emission of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides into the atmosphere, where they form sulfuric and nitric acids. These acids may fall back to Earth hundreds of miles away, in the process destroying trees, causing billions of dollars of property damage, and increasing respiratory problems in the population. Without government intervention, the utilities in the Midwest bear none of the cost for the polluting effects of their production activities. But due to government regulations that we discuss in [Chapter 6](#), there has been an enormous reduction in this type of pollution.

#### externality

Externalities arise whenever the actions of one party make another party worse or better off, yet the first party neither bears the costs nor receives the benefits of doing so.

Externalities are a classic example of the type of [market failures](#) discussed in [Chapter 1](#). Recall that the most important of our four questions of public finance is, when is it appropriate for the government to intervene? As we show in this chapter, externalities present a classic justification for government intervention. Indeed, 176,950 federal employees, or about 6.4% of the federal workforce, are ostensibly charged with dealing with environmental externalities in agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of the Interior.<sup>6</sup> This chapter begins with a discussion of the nature of externalities. Throughout the chapter, we focus primarily on environmental externalities, although we briefly discuss other applications as well. We then ask whether government intervention is necessary to combat externalities and under what conditions the private market may be able to solve the problem. We discuss the set of government tools available to address externalities, comparing their costs and benefits under various assumptions about the markets in which the government is intervening. In the next chapter, we apply these theories to the study of some of the most important externality issues facing the United States and other nations today: the cases of particulates, climate change, and smoking.

#### market failure

A problem that causes the market economy to deliver an outcome that does not maximize efficiency.

## 5.1 Externality Theory

In this section, we develop the basic theory of externalities. As we emphasize next, externalities can arise either from the production of goods or from their consumption and can be negative (as in the examples discussed earlier) or positive. We begin with the classic case of a negative production externality.

### Economics of Negative Production Externalities

Somewhere in the United States, there is a steel plant located next to a river. This plant produces steel products, but it also produces “sludge,” a by-product useless to the plant owners. To get rid of this unwanted by-product, the owners build a pipe out the back of the plant and dump the sludge into the river. The sludge produced is directly proportional to the production of steel; each additional unit of steel creates one more unit of sludge as well.

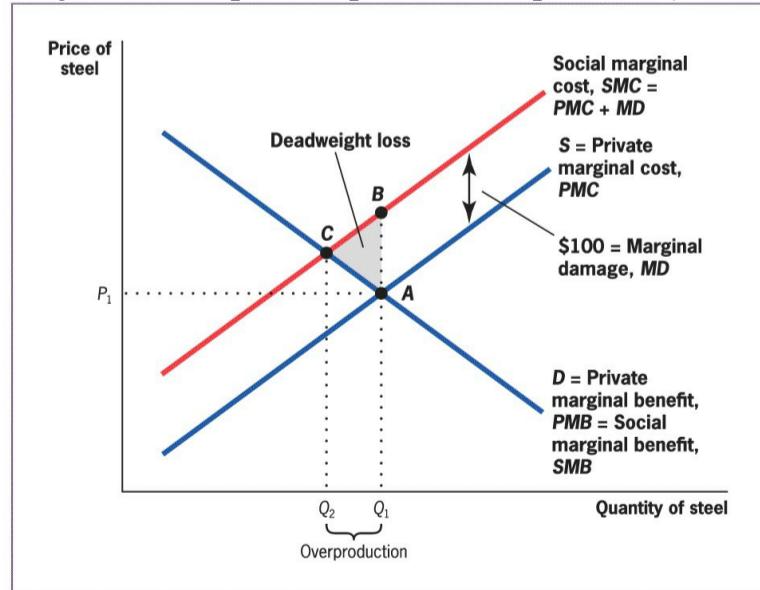
The steel plant is not the only producer using the river, however. Farther downstream is a traditional fishing area where fishermen catch fish for sale to local restaurants. Since the steel plant has begun dumping sludge into the river, the fishing has become much less profitable because there are many fewer fish left alive to catch.

This scenario is a classic example of what we mean by an externality. The steel plant is exerting a **negative production externality** on the fishermen because its production adversely affects the well-being of the fishermen, but the plant does not compensate the fishermen for their loss.

**negative production externality**

When a firm's production reduces the well-being of others who are not compensated by the firm.

One way to see this externality is to graph the market for the steel produced by this plant ([Figure 5-2](#)) and compare the private benefits and costs of production to the social benefits and costs. Private benefits and costs are the benefits and costs borne directly by the actors in the steel market (the producers and consumers of the steel products). Social benefits and costs are the private benefits and costs plus the benefits and costs to any actors outside this steel market who are affected by the steel plant's production process (the fishermen).



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■ FIGURE 5-2

Market Failure due to Negative Production Externalities in the Steel Market • A negative production externality of \$100 per unit of steel produced (marginal damage,  $MD$ ) leads to a social marginal cost that is above the private marginal cost and a social optimum quantity ( $Q_2$ ) that is lower than the competitive market equilibrium quantity ( $Q_1$ ). There is

overproduction of  $Q_1 - Q_2$ , with an associated deadweight loss of area  $BCA$ .

Recall from [Chapter 2](#) that each point on the market supply curve for a good (steel, in our example) represents the market's marginal cost of producing that unit of the good—that is, the **private marginal cost (PMC)** of that unit of steel. What determines the welfare consequences of production, however, is the **social marginal cost (SMC)**, which equals the private marginal cost to the producers of producing that next unit of a good plus any costs associated with the production of that good that are imposed on others. This distinction was not made in [Chapter 2](#) because without market failures, the social costs of producing steel are equal to the costs to steel producers,  $SMC = PMC$ . Thus, when we computed social welfare in [Chapter 2](#), we did so with reference to the supply curve.

**private marginal cost (PMC)**

The direct cost to producers of producing an additional unit of a good.

**social marginal cost (SMC)**

The private marginal cost to producers plus any costs associated with the production of the good that are imposed on others.

This approach is not correct in the presence of externalities, however. When there are externalities,  $SMC = PMC + MD$ , where  $MD$  is the marginal damage done to others, such as the fishermen, from each unit of production (marginal because it is the damage associated with that particular unit of production, not total production). Suppose, for example, that each unit of steel production creates sludge that kills \$100 worth of fish. In [Figure 5-2](#), the  $SMC$  curve is therefore the  $PMC$  (supply) curve, shifted upward by the marginal damage of \$100.<sup>7</sup> That is, at  $Q_1$  units of production (point  $A$ ), the social marginal cost is the private marginal cost at that point (which is equal to  $P_1$ ), plus \$100 (point  $B$ ). For every level of production, social costs are \$100 higher than private costs because each unit of production imposes \$100 of costs on the fishermen for which they are not compensated.

Recall also from [Chapter 2](#) that each point on the market demand curve for steel represents the sum of individual willingnesses to pay for that unit of steel, or the **private marginal benefit (PMB)** of that unit of steel. Once again, however, the welfare consequences of consumption are defined relative to the **social marginal benefit (SMB)**, which equals the private marginal benefit to the consumers minus any costs associated with the consumption of the good that are imposed on others. In our example, there are no such costs imposed by the consumption of steel, so  $SMB = PMB$  in [Figure 5-2](#).

**private marginal benefit (PMB)**

The direct benefit to consumers of consuming an additional unit of a good by the consumer.

**social marginal benefit (SMB)**

The private marginal benefit to consumers minus any costs associated with the consumption of the good that are imposed on others.

In [Chapter 2](#), we showed that the private market competitive equilibrium is at point  $A$  in [Figure 5-2](#), with a level of production  $Q_1$  and a price of  $P_1$ . We also showed that this was the social-efficiency-maximizing level of consumption for the private market. In the presence of externalities, this relationship no longer holds true. Social efficiency is defined relative to social marginal benefit and cost curves, not to private marginal benefit and cost curves. Because of the negative externality of sludge dumping, the social curves ( $SMB$  and  $SMC$ ) intersect at point  $C$ , with a level of consumption  $Q_2$ . Because the steel plant owner doesn't account for the fact that each unit of steel production kills fish downstream, the supply curve understates the costs of producing  $Q_1$  to be at point  $A$ , rather than at point  $B$ . As a result, too

much steel is produced ( $Q_1 > Q_2$ ), and the private market equilibrium no longer maximizes social efficiency.

When we move away from the social-efficiency-maximizing quantity, we create a deadweight loss for society because units are produced and consumed for which the cost to society (summarized by curve  $SMC$ ) exceeds the social benefits (summarized by curve  $D = SMB$ ). In our example, the deadweight loss is equal to the area  $BCA$ . The width of the deadweight loss triangle is determined by the number of units for which social costs exceed social benefits ( $Q_1 - Q_2$ ).

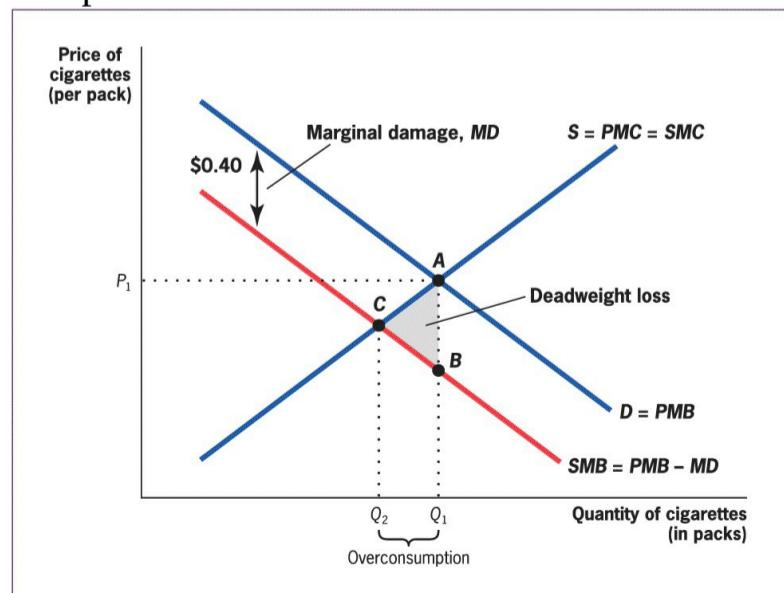
## Negative Consumption Externalities

It is important to note that externalities do not arise solely from the production side of a market. Consider the case of cigarette smoke. In a restaurant that allows smoking, your consumption of cigarettes may have a negative effect on my enjoyment of a restaurant meal. Yet you do not in any way pay for this negative effect on me. This is an example of a **negative consumption externality**, whereby consumption of a good reduces the well-being of others, a loss for which they are not compensated. When there is a negative consumption externality,  $SMB = PMB - MD$ , where  $MD$  is the marginal damage done to others by your consumption of that unit. For example, if  $MD$  is 40¢ a pack, the marginal damage done to others by your smoking is 40¢ for every pack you smoke.

**negative consumption externality**

When an individual's consumption reduces the well-being of others who are not compensated by the individual.

[Figure 5-3](#) shows supply and demand in the market for cigarettes. The supply and demand curves represent the  $PMC$  and  $PMB$ . The private equilibrium is at point  $A$ , where supply ( $PMC$ ) equals demand ( $PMB$ ), with cigarette consumption of  $Q_1$  and price of  $P_1$ . The  $SMC$  equals the  $PMC$  because there are no externalities associated with the production of cigarettes in this example. Note, however, that the  $SMB$  is now below the  $PMB$  by 40¢ per pack; every pack consumed has a social benefit that is 40¢ below its private benefit. That is, at  $Q_1$  units of production (point  $A$ ), the social marginal benefit is the private marginal benefit at that point (which is equal to  $P_1$ ), minus 40¢ (point  $B$ ). For each pack of cigarettes, social benefits are 40¢ lower than private benefits because each pack consumed imposes 40¢ of costs on others for which they are not compensated.



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### ■ FIGURE 5-3

Market Failure due to Negative Consumption Externalities in the Cigarette Market • A negative consumption externality of 40¢ per pack of cigarettes consumed leads to a social marginal benefit that is below the private marginal benefit and a social optimum quantity ( $Q_2$ ) that is lower than the competitive market equilibrium quantity ( $Q_1$ ). There is overconsumption  $Q_1 - Q_2$ , with an associated deadweight loss of area ACB.

The social-welfare-maximizing level of consumption,  $Q_2$ , is identified by point *C*, the point at which  $SMB = SMC$ . There is overconsumption of cigarettes by  $Q_1 - Q_2$ : the social costs (point *A* on the *SMC* curve) exceed social benefits (on the *SMB* curve) for all units between  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$ . As a result, there is a deadweight loss (area *ACB*) in the market for cigarettes.



### APPLICATION

## The Externality of SUVs<sup>8</sup>

In 1985, the typical driver sat behind the wheel of a car that weighed about 3,200 pounds, and the largest cars on the road weighed 4,600 pounds. In 2016, the typical driver was in a car that weighed about 4,045 pounds, and the largest cars on the road could weigh 6,200 pounds. The major culprits in this evolution of car size are sport utility vehicles (SUVs). The term *SUV* was originally reserved for large vehicles intended for off-road driving, but it now refers to any large passenger vehicle marketed as an SUV, even if it lacks off-road capabilities. SUVs, with an average weight of 4,656 pounds, represented only 6.4% of vehicle sales as recently as 1988, but 26 years later, in 2017, they accounted for 52% of the new vehicles sold that year.

The consumption of large cars such as SUVs produces three types of negative externalities:

### Environmental Externalities

The contribution of driving to climate change is directly proportional to the amount of fossil fuel a vehicle requires to travel a mile. The typical compact or mid-size car gets roughly 28.5 miles to the gallon, but the typical SUV gets only 21.2 miles per gallon. This means that SUV drivers use more gas to go to work or run errands, increasing fossil fuel emissions. This increased environmental cost is a negative consumption externality that is not paid by those who drive SUVs.

### Wear and Tear on Roads

In 2014, federal, state, and local governments in the United States spent \$143 billion repairing our roadways. Damage to roadways comes from many sources, but a major culprit is the passenger vehicle, and the damage it does to the roads is proportional to vehicle weight. When individuals drive SUVs, they increase the cost to government of repairing the roads. SUV drivers bear some of these costs through gasoline taxes (which fund highway repair) because the SUV uses more gas, but it is unclear if these extra taxes are enough to compensate for the extra damage done to roads.

### Safety Externalities

One major appeal of SUVs is that they provide a feeling of security because they are so much larger than other cars on the road. Offsetting this feeling of security is the added *insecurity*

imposed on other cars on the road. For a car of average weight, the odds of having a fatal accident rise by four times if the accident is with a typical SUV and not with a car of the same size. Thus, SUV drivers impose a negative externality on other drivers because they don't compensate those other drivers for the increased risk of a dangerous accident. ■

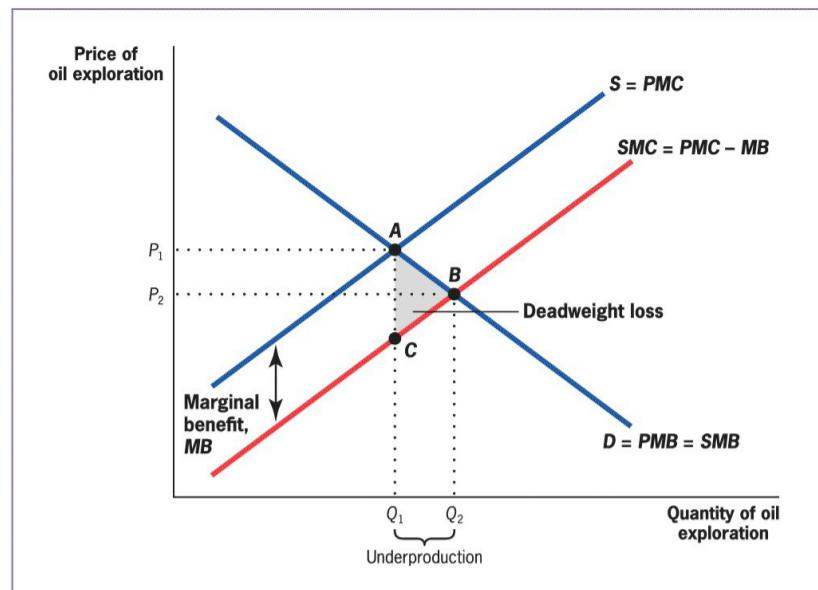
## Positive Externalities

When economists think about externalities, they tend to focus on negative externalities, but not all externalities are bad. There may also be **positive production externalities** associated with a market, whereby production benefits parties other than the producer and yet the producer is not compensated. Imagine the following scenario: There is public land beneath which there might be valuable oil reserves. The government allows any oil developer to drill in those public lands, as long as the government gets some royalties on any oil reserves found. Each dollar the oil developer spends on exploration increases the chances of finding oil reserves. Once found, however, the oil reserves can be tapped by other companies; the initial driller only has the advantage of getting there first. Thus, exploration for oil by one company exerts a positive production externality on other companies: each dollar spent on exploration by the first company raises the chance that other companies will have a chance to make money from new oil found on this land.

### positive production externality

When a firm's production increases the well-being of others but the firm is not compensated by those others.

[Figure 5-4](#) shows the market for oil exploration to illustrate the positive externality to exploration: the social marginal cost of exploration is actually lower than the private marginal cost because exploration has a positive effect on the future profits of other companies. Assume that the marginal benefit of each dollar of exploration by one company, in terms of raising the expected profits of other companies who drill the same land, is a constant amount  $MB$ . As a result, the  $SMC$  is below the  $PMC$  by the amount  $MB$ . Thus, the private equilibrium in the exploration market (point  $A$ , quantity  $Q_1$ ) leads to underproduction relative to the socially optimal level (point  $B$ , quantity  $Q_2$ ) because the initial oil company is not compensated for the benefits it confers on other oil producers.<sup>9</sup> Note also that there can be **positive consumption externalities**. Imagine, for example, that my neighbor is considering improving the landscaping around his house. The improved landscaping will cost him \$1,000, but it is only worth \$800 to him. My bedroom faces his house, and I would like to have nicer landscaping to look at. This better view would be worth \$300 to me. That is, the total social marginal benefit of the improved landscaping is \$1,100, even though the private marginal benefit to my neighbor is only \$800. Because this social marginal benefit (\$1,100) is larger than the social marginal costs (\$1,000), it would be socially efficient for my neighbor to do the landscaping. My neighbor won't do the landscaping, however, because his private costs (\$1,000) exceed his private benefits. His landscaping improvements would have a positive effect on me, for which he will not be compensated, thus leading to an underconsumption of landscaping.



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■ FIGURE 5-4

Market Failure due to Positive Production Externality in the Oil Exploration Market • Expenditures on oil exploration by any company have a positive externality because they offer more profitable opportunities for other companies. This leads to a social marginal cost that is below the private marginal cost and a social optimum quantity ( $Q_2$ ) that is greater than the competitive market equilibrium quantity ( $Q_1$ ). There is underproduction of  $Q_2 - Q_1$ , with an associated deadweight loss of area ABC.

#### positive consumption externality

When an individual's consumption increases the well-being of others, but the individual is not compensated by those others.

► Quick Hint One confusing aspect of the graphical analysis of externalities is knowing which curve to shift and in which direction. To review, there are four possibilities:

- Negative production externality:  $SMC$  curve lies above  $PMC$  curve.
- Positive production externality:  $SMC$  curve lies below  $PMC$  curve.
- Negative consumption externality:  $SMB$  curve lies below  $PMB$  curve.
- Positive consumption externality:  $SMB$  curve lies above  $PMB$  curve.

Armed with these facts, the key is to assess which category a particular example fits into. This assessment is done in two steps. First, you must assess whether the externality is associated with producing a good or with consuming a good. Then, you must assess whether the externality is positive or negative.

The steel plant example is a negative production externality because the externality is associated with the production of steel, not its consumption; the sludge doesn't come from using steel but rather from making it. Likewise, our cigarette example is a negative consumption externality because the externality is associated with the consumption of cigarettes; secondhand smoke doesn't come from making cigarettes, it comes from smoking them.

## 5.2 Private-Sector Solutions to Negative Externalities

In microeconomics, the market is innocent until proven guilty. An excellent application of this principle can be found in a classic work by Ronald Coase, a professor at the Law School at the University of Chicago, who asked in 1960: Why won't the market simply compensate the affected parties for externalities?<sup>10</sup>

### The Solution

To see how a market might compensate those affected by the externality, let's look at what would happen if the fishermen owned the river in the steel plant example. They would march up to the steel plant and demand an end to the sludge dumping that was hurting their livelihood. They would have the right to do so because they have property rights over the river; their ownership confers to them the ability to control the use of the river.

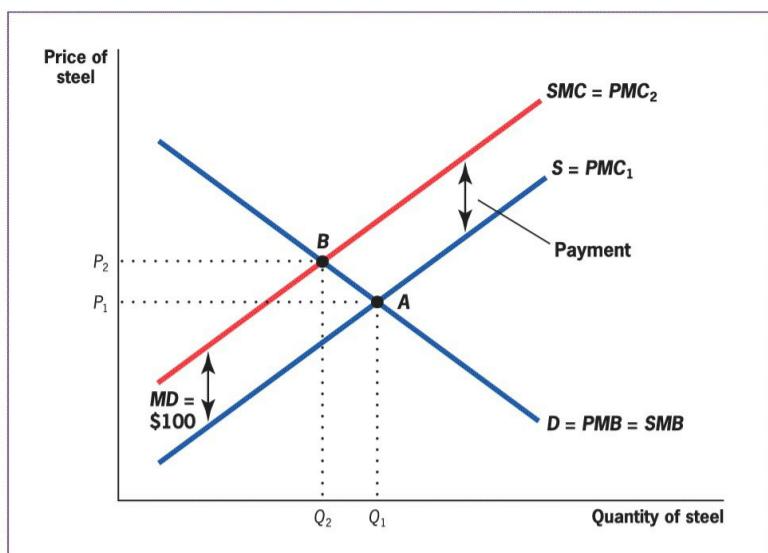
Suppose for the moment that when this conversation takes place, there is no pollution-control technology to reduce the sludge damage; the only way to reduce sludge is to reduce production. So ending sludge dumping would mean shutting down the steel plant. In this case, the steel plant owner might propose a compromise: she would pay the fishermen \$100 for each unit of steel produced, so that they were fully compensated for the damage to their fishing grounds. As long as the steel plant can make a profit with this extra \$100 payment per unit, then this is a better deal for the plant than shutting down, and the fishermen are fully compensated for the damage done to them.

This type of resolution is called **internalizing the externality**. Because the fishermen now have property rights to the river, they have used the market to obtain compensation from the steel plant for its pollution. The fishermen have implicitly created a market for pollution by pricing the bad behavior of the steel plant. From the steel plant's perspective, the damage to the fish becomes just another input cost that the plant has to pay it in order to produce.

**internalizing the externality**

When either private negotiations or government actions lead the price to the party to reflect fully the external costs or benefits of that party's actions.

This point is illustrated in [Figure 5-5](#). Initially, the steel market is in equilibrium at point A, with quantity  $Q_1$  and price  $P_1$ , where  $\mathbf{PMB} = \mathbf{PMC}_1$ . The socially optimal level of steel production is at point B, with quantity  $Q_2$  and price  $P_2$ , where  $\mathbf{SMB} = \mathbf{SMC} = \mathbf{PMC}_1 = \mathbf{MD}$ . Because the marginal cost of producing each unit of steel has increased by \$100 (the payment to the fishermen), the private marginal cost curve shifts upward from  $\mathbf{PMC}_1$  to  $\mathbf{PMC}_2$ , which equals  $SMC$ . That is, social marginal costs are private marginal costs plus \$100, so by adding \$100 to the private marginal costs, we raise the  $PMC$  to equal the  $SMC$ . There is no longer overproduction because the social marginal costs and benefits of each unit of production are equalized. This example illustrates **Part I of the Coase theorem**: when there are well-defined property rights and costless bargaining, then negotiations between the party creating the externality and the party affected by the externality can bring about the socially optimal market quantity. This theorem states that externalities do not necessarily create market failures because negotiations between the parties can lead the offending producers (or consumers) to internalize the externality, or account for the external effects in their production (or consumption).



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■ FIGURE 5-5

A Coasian Solution to Negative Production Externalities in the Steel Market • If the fishermen charge the steel plant \$100 per unit of steel produced, this increases the plant's private marginal cost curve from  $PMC_1$  to  $PMC_2$ , which coincides with the  $SMC$  curve. The quantity produced falls from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ , the socially optimal level of production. The charge internalizes the externality and removes the inefficiency of the negative externality.

#### Coase theorem (Part I)

When there are well-defined property rights and costless bargaining, then negotiations between the party creating the externality and the party affected by the externality can bring about the socially optimal market quantity.

The Coase theorem suggests a very particular and limited role for the government in dealing with externalities: establishing property rights. In Coase's view, the fundamental limitation to implementing private-sector solutions to externalities is poorly established property rights. If the government can establish and enforce those property rights, then the private market will do the rest.

The Coase theorem also has an important [Part II](#): the efficient solution to an externality does not depend on which party is assigned the property rights, as long as someone is assigned those rights. We can illustrate the intuition behind Part II using the steel plant example. Suppose that the steel plant, rather than the fishermen, owned the river. In this case, the fishermen would have no right to make the plant owner pay a \$100 compensation fee for each unit of steel produced. The fishermen, however, would find it in their interest to pay the steel plant to produce less. If the fishermen promised the steel plant owner a payment of \$100 for each unit she did not produce, then the steel plant owner would rationally consider there to be an extra \$100 cost to each unit she did produce. Remember that in economics, opportunity costs are included in a firm's calculation of costs; thus, forgoing a payment from the fishermen of \$100 for each unit of steel not produced has the same effect on production decisions as being forced to pay \$100 extra for each unit of steel produced. Once again, the private marginal cost curve would incorporate this extra (opportunity) cost and shift out to the social marginal cost curve, and there would no longer be overproduction of steel.

#### Coase theorem (Part II)

The efficient solution to an externality does not depend on which party is assigned the property rights, as long as someone is assigned those rights.



**Quick Hint** You may wonder why the fishermen would ever engage in either of these transactions: They receive \$100 for each \$100 of damage to fish, or pay \$100 for each \$100 reduction in damage to fish. So what is in it for them? The answer is that this is a convenient shorthand that economics modelers use for saying, “The fishermen

would charge at least \$100 for sludge dumping” or “The fishermen would pay up to \$100 to remove sludge dumping.” By assuming that the payments are exactly \$100, we can conveniently model private and social marginal costs as equal. It may be useful for you to think of the payment to the fishermen as \$101 and the payment from the fishermen as \$99, so that the fishermen make some money and private and social costs are approximately equal. In reality, the payments to or from the fishermen will depend on the negotiating power and skill of both parties in this transaction, highlighting the importance of the issues raised next.

## The Problems with Coasian Solutions

This elegant theory would appear to rescue the standard competitive model from important causes of market failures and make government intervention unnecessary (other than to ensure property rights). In practice, however, the Coase theorem is unlikely to solve many of the types of externalities that cause market failures. We can see this by considering realistically the problems involved in achieving a “Coasian solution” to the problem of river pollution.

### The Assignment Problem

The first problem involves assigning blame. Rivers can be very long, and there may be other pollution sources along the way that are doing some of the damage to the fish. The fish may also be dwindling for natural reasons, such as disease or a rise in natural predators. In many cases, it is impossible to assign blame for externalities to one specific entity.

Assigning damage is another side to the assignment problem. We have assumed that the damage was a fixed dollar amount, \$100. Where does this figure come from in practice? Can we trust the fishermen to tell us the right amount of damage that they suffer? It would be in their interest in any Coasian negotiation to overstate the damage in order to ensure the largest possible payment. And how will the payment be distributed among the fishermen? When a number of individuals are fishing the same area, it is difficult to say whose catch is most affected by the reduction in the stock of available fish.

The significance of the assignment problem as a barrier to internalizing the externality depends on the nature of the externality. If my loud music disturbs your studying, then assignment of blame and damages is clear. In the case of climate change, however, how can we assign blame clearly when carbon emissions from any source in the world contribute to this problem? And how can we assign damages clearly when some individuals would like the world to be hotter, while others would not? Because of assignment problems, Coasian solutions are likely to be more effective for small, localized externalities than for larger, more global externalities.

### The Holdout Problem

Imagine that we have surmounted the assignment problem and that by careful scientific analysis, we have determined that each unit of sludge from the steel plant kills \$1 worth of fish for each of 100 fishermen, for a total damage of \$100 per unit of steel produced.

Now, suppose that the fishermen have property rights to the river, and the steel plant can’t produce unless all 100 fishermen say it can. The Coasian solution is that each of the 100 fishermen gets paid \$1 per unit of steel production, and the plant continues to produce steel. Each fisherman walks up to the plant and collects his check for \$1 per unit. As the last fisherman is walking up, he realizes that he suddenly has been imbued with incredible power: the steel plant cannot produce without his permission because he is a part owner of the river.

So, why should he settle for only \$1 per unit? Having already paid out \$99 per unit, the steel plant would probably be willing to pay more than \$1 per unit to remove this last obstacle to their production. Why not ask for \$2 per unit? Or even more?

This is an illustration of the **holdout problem**, which can arise when the property rights in question are held by more than one party: the shared property rights give each owner power over all others. If the other fishermen are thinking ahead, they will realize this might be a problem, and they will all try to be the last one to go to the plant. The result could very well be a breakdown of the negotiations and an inability to negotiate a Coasian solution. As with the assignment problem, the holdout problem would be amplified with a huge externality such as climate change, where billions of persons are potentially damaged.

#### holdout problem

Shared ownership of property rights gives each owner power over all the others.

## The Free Rider Problem

Can we solve the holdout problem by simply assigning the property rights to the side with only one negotiator, in this case the steel plant? Unfortunately, doing so creates a new problem.

Suppose that the steel plant has property rights to the river, and it agrees to reduce production by 1 unit for each \$100 received from fishermen. Then the Coasian solution would be for the fishermen to pay \$100, and for the plant to then move to the optimal level of production. Suppose that the optimal reduction in steel production (where social marginal benefits and costs are equal) is 100 units, so that each fisherman pays \$100 for a total of \$10,000, and the plant reduces production by 100 units.

Suppose, once again, that you are the last fisherman to pay. The plant has already received \$9,900 to reduce its production, and will reduce its production as a result by 99 units. The 99 units will benefit all fishermen equally because they all share the river. Thus, as a result, if you don't pay your \$100, you will still be almost as well off in terms of fishing as if you do. That is, the damage avoided by that last unit of reduction will be shared equally among all 100 fishermen who use the river, yet you will pay the full \$100 to buy that last unit of reduction. Thought of that way, why would you pay? This is an example of the **free rider problem**: when an investment has a personal cost but a common benefit, individuals will underinvest. Understanding this incentive, your fellow fishermen will also not pay their \$100, and the externality will remain unsolved; if the other fishermen realize that someone is going to grab a free ride, they have little incentive to pay in the first place.

#### free rider problem

When an investment has a personal cost but a common benefit, individuals will underinvest.

## Transaction Costs and Negotiating Problems

Finally, the Coasian approach ignores the fundamental problem that it is hard to negotiate when there are large numbers of individuals on one or both sides of the negotiation. How can the 100 fishermen effectively get together and figure out how much to charge or pay the steel plant? This problem is amplified for an externality such as climate change, where the potentially divergent interests of billions of parties on one side must be somehow aggregated for a negotiation.

Moreover, these problems can be significant even for the small-scale, localized externalities for which Coase's theory seems best designed. In theory, my neighbor and I can work out an appropriate compensation for my loud music disturbing his studying. In practice, this may be a socially awkward conversation that is more likely to result in tension than in a financial payment. Similarly, if the person next to me in the restaurant is smoking, it would

be far outside the norm, and probably considered insulting, to lean over and offer him \$5 to stop smoking. Alas, the world does not always operate in the rational way economists wish it would!

## Bottom Line

Ronald Coase's insight that externalities can sometimes be internalized was a brilliant one. It provides the competitive market model with a defense against the onslaught of market failures that we will bring to bear on it throughout this course. It is also an excellent reason to suspect that the market may be able to internalize some small-scale, localized externalities. Where it won't help, as we've seen, is with large-scale, global externalities that are the focus of, for example, environmental policy in the United States. The government may, therefore, have a role to play in addressing larger externalities.

## 5.3 Public-Sector Remedies for Externalities

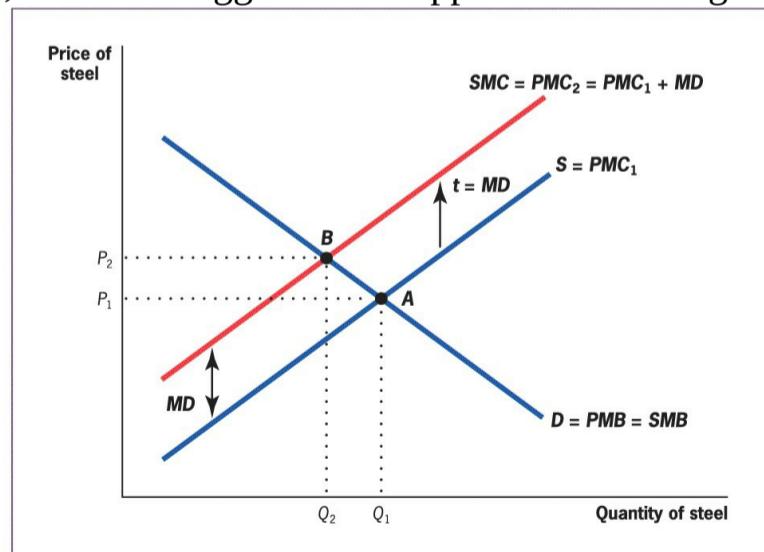
In the United States, public policy makers do not think that Coasian solutions are sufficient to deal with large-scale externalities. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), was formed in 1970 to provide public-sector solutions to the problems of externalities in the environment. The agency regulates a wide variety of environmental issues, in areas ranging from clean air to clean water to land management.<sup>11</sup>

Public policy makers employ three types of remedies to resolve the problems associated with negative externalities.

### Corrective Taxation

We have seen that the Coasian goal of “internalizing the externality” may be difficult to achieve in practice in the private market. The government can achieve this same outcome in a straightforward way, however, by taxing the steel producer an amount  $MD$  (for the marginal damage of the pollution) for each unit of steel produced.

Figure 5-6 illustrates the impact of such a tax. The steel market is initially in equilibrium at point A, where supply ( $= PMC_1$ ) equals demand ( $= PMB = SMB$ ), and  $Q_1$  units of steel are produced at price  $P_1$ . Given the externality with a cost of  $MD$ , the socially optimal production is at point B, where social marginal costs and benefits are equal. Suppose that the government levies a tax per unit of steel produced at an amount  $t = MD$ . This tax would act as another input cost for the steel producer, and would shift its private marginal cost up by  $MD$  for each unit produced. This will result in a new  $PMC$  curve,  $PMC_2$ , which is identical to the  $SMC$  curve. As a result, the tax effectively internalizes the externality and leads to the socially optimal outcome (point B, quantity  $Q_2$ ). The government per-unit tax on steel production acts in the same way as if the fishermen owned the river. This type of corrective taxation is often called “Pigouvian taxation,” after the economist A. C. Pigou, who first suggested this approach to solving externalities.<sup>12</sup>



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■ FIGURE 5-6

Taxation as a Solution to Negative Production Externalities in the Steel Market • A tax of \$100 per unit (equal to the marginal damage of pollution) increases the firm's private marginal cost curve from  $PMC_1$  to  $PMC_2$ , which coincides with the  $SMC$  curve. The quantity produced falls from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ , the socially optimal level of production. Just as with the Coasian payment, this tax internalizes the externality and removes the inefficiency of the negative externality.



## APPLICATION

### Congestion Pricing

Traffic jams are expensive. In 2017, a study found that over the next decade traffic could cost the United States economy \$2.2 trillion in lost time, wasted fuel, and carbon emissions. New York City drivers alone could lose \$64 billion.<sup>13</sup> Yet traffic is a classic negative externality: each driver does not account for the fact that adding her car to the road increases wait times and degrades the environment for others in the area.

Economists preferred solution to these externalities is corrective taxation, and in the particular case of traffic externalities, this is often called “congestion pricing,” which is catching on around the world. London, England, was one of the first to create a congestion tax, in 2003. There is a flat fee of about \$16.20 per day for entrance into a 13 square mile congestion zone between 7 am and 6 pm on weekdays. Residents, commercial vehicles, and disabled people are exempt. Since the introduction of this policy, the number of private cars that enter the city during enforced hours decreased by 39%.<sup>14</sup> One positive consequence of the policy is a 40% drop in automotive accidents over 10 years.<sup>15</sup>

In Stockholm, Sweden, the congestion price has a maximum of \$12.50, but it varies depending on when and where you enter the zone, as well as how long you stay, in order to try to impose the highest prices on the trips with the largest externalities.<sup>16</sup> Putting the tax into effect created an opportunity to examine the health effects of reduced car pollution. Researchers found that in the long run, visits by children to health care providers for acute asthma decreased by as much as 15% per unit of traffic pollution reduced.<sup>17</sup> Other benefits include a 5% increase in sales, 22% less traffic, and a 14% decrease in greenhouse gases within the taxed radius between 2006 and 2010.<sup>18</sup>

A critical factor for the success of congestion pricing is creating alternatives for those who need to travel in the congested zones. London added 300 extra buses the day that congestion pricing took effect,<sup>19</sup> and bicycle trips in the city increased by 210% between 2000 and 2016.

Nevertheless, congestion pricing can be a really hard sell politically, so as of 2018, no U.S. city has created a congestion tax. Since 2008, New York politicians and congestion pricing advocates have been fighting for a policy in New York City. Part of the problem is that advocates argue for the funds raised from congestion taxes to be used to improve public transit (as in London), but evidence suggests that New York City does not have a strong history of using public transportation funds efficiently.<sup>20</sup> ■■■

### Subsidies

As noted earlier, not all externalities are negative; in cases such as oil exploration or nice landscaping by your neighbors, externalities can be positive.

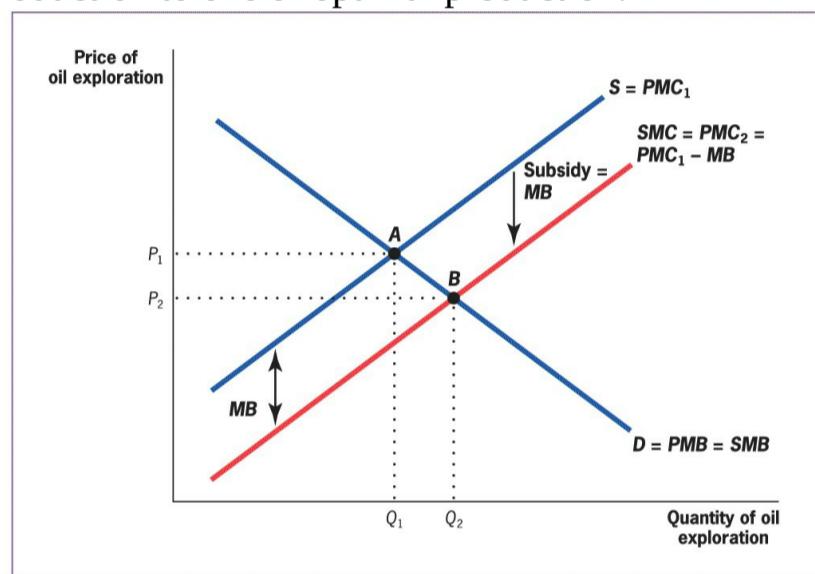
The Coasian solution to cases such as oil exploration would be for the other oil producers to take up a collection to pay the initial driller to search for more oil reserves (thus giving them the chance to make more money from any oil that is found). But, as we discussed, this may not be feasible. The government can achieve the same outcome by making a payment, or a **subsidy**, to the initial driller to search for more oil. The amount of this subsidy would

exactly equal the benefit to the other oil companies and would cause the initial driller to search for more oil because his cost per barrel has been lowered.

#### subsidy

Government payment to an individual or firm that lowers the cost of consumption or production, respectively.

The impact of such a subsidy is illustrated in [Figure 5-7](#), which shows once again the market for oil exploration. The market is initially in equilibrium at point A, where  $\mathbf{PMC}_1$  equals  $PMB$ , and  $Q_1$  barrels of oil are produced at price  $P_1$ . Given the positive externality with a benefit of  $MB$ , the socially optimal production is at point B, where social marginal costs and benefits are equal. Suppose that the government pays a subsidy per barrel of oil produced of  $S = MB$ . The subsidy would lower the private marginal cost of oil production, shifting the private marginal cost curve down by  $MB$  for each unit produced. This will result in a new  $PMC$  curve,  $\mathbf{PMC}_2$ , which is identical to the  $SMC$  curve. The subsidy has caused the initial driller to internalize the positive externality, and the market moves from a situation of underproduction to one of optimal production.



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■ FIGURE 5-7

Subsidies as a Solution to Positive Production Externalities in the Market for Oil Exploration • A subsidy that equals the marginal benefit from oil exploration reduces the oil producer's marginal cost curve from  $\mathbf{PMC}_1$  to  $\mathbf{PMC}_2$ , which coincides with the  $SMC$  curve. The quantity produced rises from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ , the socially optimal level of production.

Policy makers often use subsidization not just to promote positive externalities but to combat negative externalities as well, by subsidizing alternatives to the externality-producing activity. The most common form of such policies are tax credits or other benefits for producers of renewable energies (such as solar or wind power) that produce fewer environmental externalities than traditional energy sources (such as fossil fuels). Such policies are generally inferior to taxing the negative externality-producing activity because they require government to raise revenues rather than provide revenues (as we show in [Chapters 18–20](#), as you raise the government revenue-raising requirement, you likely reduce economic efficiency). Moreover, subsidization may be much riskier: we know that taxing carbon will reduce its use, whereas subsidizing unknown alternatives may or may not provide a plausible long-run substitute.<sup>21</sup>

## Regulation

Throughout this discussion, you may have been asking yourself: Why this fascination with prices, taxes, and subsidies? If the government knows where the socially optimal level of production is, why doesn't it just mandate that production take place at that level and forget about trying to give private actors incentives to produce at the optimal point? Using [Figure 5-6](#) as an example, why not just mandate a level of steel production of  $Q_2$  and be done with it?

In an ideal world, Pigouvian taxation and regulation would be identical. Because regulation appears much more straightforward, however, it has been the traditional choice for addressing environmental externalities in the United States and around the world. When the U.S. government wanted to reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide ( $\text{SO}_2$ ) in the 1970s, for example, it did so by putting a limit or cap on the amount of sulfur dioxide that producers could emit, not by a tax on emissions. In 1987, when the nations of the world wanted to phase out the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which were damaging the ozone layer, they banned the use of CFCs rather than impose a large tax on products that used CFCs.

Given this governmental preference for quantity regulation, why are economists so keen on taxes and subsidies? In practice, there are complications that may make taxes a more effective means of addressing externalities. In the next section, we discuss two of the most important complications. In doing so, we illustrate the reasons that policy makers might prefer regulation, or the “quantity approach,” in some situations and taxation, or the “price approach,” in others.

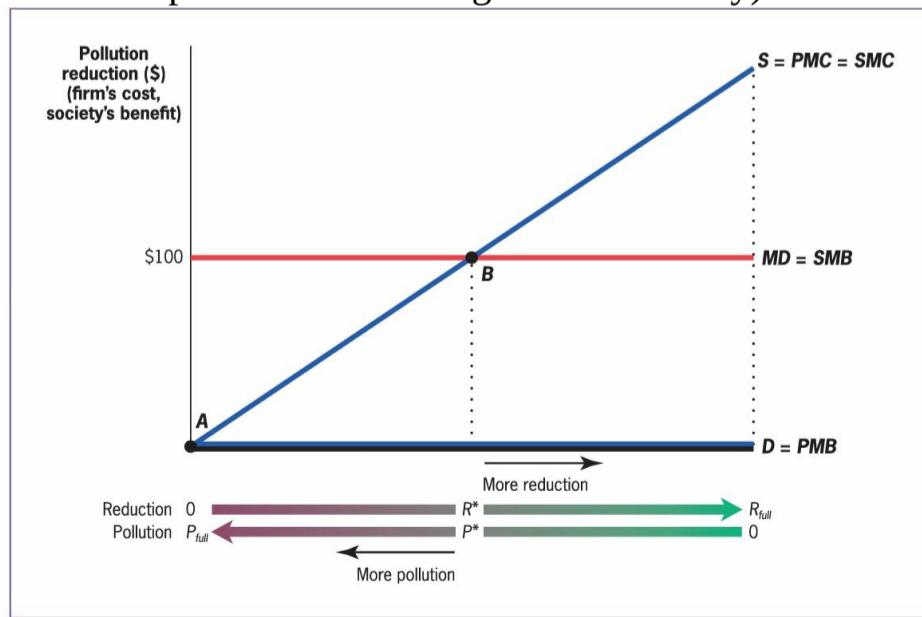
## 5.4 Distinctions Between Price and Quantity Approaches to Addressing Externalities

In this section, we compare price (taxation) and quantity (regulation) approaches to addressing externalities, using more complicated models in which the social efficiency implications of intervention might differ between the two approaches. The goal in comparing these approaches is to find the most efficient path to environmental targets. That is, for any reduction in pollution, the goal is to find the lowest-cost means of achieving that reduction.<sup>22</sup>

### Basic Model

To illustrate the important differences between the price and quantity approaches, we have to add one additional complication to the basic competitive market that we have worked with thus far. In that model, the only way to reduce pollution was to cut back on production. In reality, there are many other technologies available for reducing pollution besides simply scaling back production. For example, to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions from coal-fired power plants, utilities can install smokestack scrubbers that remove  $\text{SO}_2$  from the emissions and sequester it, often in the form of liquid or solid sludge that can be disposed of safely. Passenger cars can also be made less polluting by installing “catalytic converters,” which turn dangerous nitrogen oxide into compounds that are not harmful to public health.

To understand the differences between price and quantity approaches to pollution reduction, it is useful to shift our focus from the market for a good (e.g., steel) to the “market” for pollution reduction, as illustrated in [Figure 5-8](#). In this diagram, the horizontal axis measures the extent of pollution reduction undertaken by a plant; a value of zero indicates that the plant is not engaging in any pollution reduction. Thus, the horizontal axis also measures the amount of pollution: as you move to the right, there is more pollution reduction and less pollution. We show this by denoting more reduction as you move to the right on the horizontal axis;  $R_{full}$  indicates that pollution has been reduced to zero. More pollution is indicated as you move to the left on the horizontal axis; at  $P_{full}$ , the maximum amount of pollution is being produced. The vertical axis represents the cost of pollution reduction to the plant, or the benefit of pollution reduction to society (i.e., the benefit to other producers and consumers who are not compensated for the negative externality).



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FIGURE 5-8

$$(PMC = SMC)$$

The Market for Pollution Reduction • The marginal cost of pollution reduction is a rising function, while the marginal benefit of pollution reduction (*SMB*) is (by assumption) a flat marginal damage curve. Moving from left to right, the amount of pollution reduction increases, while the amount of pollution falls. The optimal level of pollution reduction is  $R^*$ , the point at which these curves intersect. Because pollution is the complement of reduction, the optimal amount of pollution is  $P^*$ .

The *MD* curve represents the marginal damage that is averted by additional pollution reduction. This measures the social marginal benefit of pollution reduction. Marginal damage is drawn flat at \$100 for simplicity, but it could be downward sloping due to diminishing returns. The private marginal benefit of pollution reduction is zero, so it is represented by the horizontal axis; there is no gain to the plant's private interests from reducing dumping.

The *PMC* curve represents the plant's private marginal cost of reducing pollution. The *PMC* curve slopes upward because of diminishing marginal productivity of this input. The first units of pollution are cheap to reduce: just tighten a few screws or put a cheap filter on the sludge pipe. Additional units of reduction become more expensive until it is incredibly expensive to have a completely pollution-free production process. Because there are no externalities from the production of pollution reduction (the externalities come from the end product, reduced pollution, as reflected in the *SMB* curve, not from the process involved in actually reducing the pollution), the *PMC* is also the *SMC* of pollution reduction.

The free market outcome in any market would be zero pollution reduction. Because the cost of pollution is not borne by the plant, it has no incentive to reduce pollution. The plant will choose zero reduction and a full amount of pollution  $P_{full}$  (point *A*, at which the *PMC* of zero equals the *PMB* of zero).

What is the optimal level of pollution reduction? The optimum is always found at the point at which social marginal benefits and costs are equal, here point *B*. The optimal quantity of pollution reduction is  $R^*$ : at that quantity, the marginal benefits of reduction (the damage done by pollution) and the marginal costs of reduction are equal. Note that setting the optimal amount of pollution reduction is the same as setting the optimal amount of pollution. If the free market outcome is pollution reduction of zero and pollution of  $P_{full}$ , then the optimum is pollution reduction of  $R^*$  and pollution of  $P^*$ .

## Price Regulation (Taxes) Versus Quantity Regulation in This Model

Now, contrast the operation of taxation and regulation in this framework. The optimal tax, as before, is equal to the marginal damage done by pollution, \$100. In this situation, the government would set a tax of \$100 on each unit of pollution. Consider the plant's decision under this tax. For each unit of pollution the plant makes, it pays a tax of \$100. If there is any pollution reduction that the plant can do that costs less than \$100, it will be cost-effective to make that reduction: the plant will pay some amount less than \$100 to get rid of the pollution, and avoid paying a tax of \$100. With this plan in place, plants will have an incentive to reduce pollution up to the point at which the cost of that reduction is equal to the tax of \$100. That is, plants will "walk up" their marginal cost curves, reducing pollution up to a reduction of  $R^*$  at point *B*. Beyond that point, the cost of reducing pollution exceeds the \$100 that they pay in tax, so they will just choose to pay taxes on any additional units of pollution rather

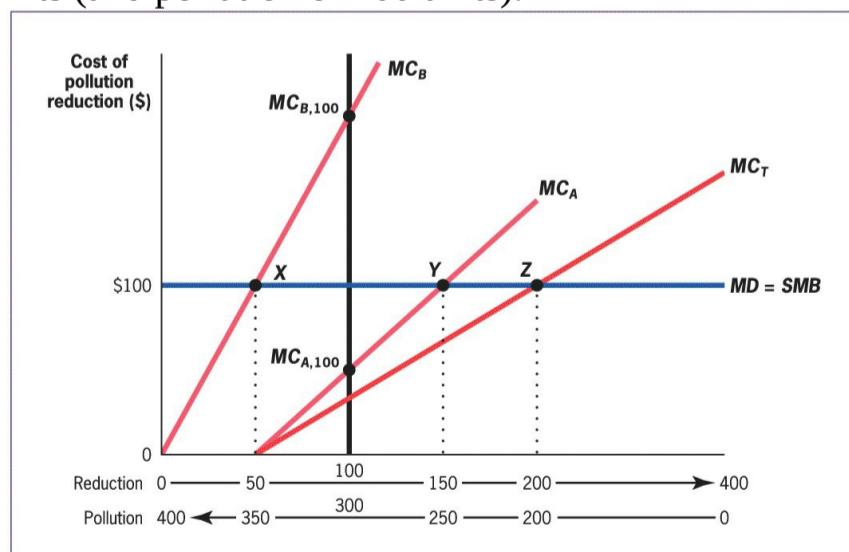
than to reduce pollution further. Thus, a Pigouvian (corrective) tax equal to \$100 achieves the socially optimal level of pollution reduction, just as in the earlier analysis.

Regulation is even more straightforward to analyze in this framework. The government simply mandates that the plant reduce pollution by an amount  $R^*$ , to get to the optimal pollution level  $P^*$ . Regulation seems more difficult than taxation because, in this case, the government needs to know not only  $MD$  but also the shape of the  $MC$  curve. This difficulty is, however, just a feature of our assumption of constant  $MD$ ; for the more general case of a falling  $MD$ , the government needs to know the shapes of both  $MC$  and  $MD$  curves in order to set either the optimal tax or the optimal regulation.

## Multiple Plants with Different Reduction Costs

Now, let's add two wrinkles to the basic model. First, suppose that there are now two steel plants doing the dumping, with each plant dumping 200 units of sludge into the river each day. The marginal damage done by each unit of sludge is \$100, as before. Second, suppose that technology is now available to reduce the sludge associated with production, but this technology has different costs at the two different plants. For Plant A, reducing sludge is cheaper at any level of reduction because it has a newer production process. For Plant B, reducing sludge is much more expensive for any level of reduction.<sup>23</sup>

[Figure 5-9](#) summarizes the market for pollution reduction in this case. In this figure, there are separate marginal cost curves for Plant A ( $MC_A$ ) and for Plant B ( $MC_B$ ). At every level of reduction, the marginal cost to Plant A is lower than the marginal cost to Plant B because Plant A has a newer and more efficient production process available. The total marginal cost of reduction in the market, the horizontal sum of these two curves, is  $MC_T$ : for any total reduction in pollution, this curve indicates the cost of that reduction if it is distributed most efficiently across the two plants and is, therefore, the social marginal cost of reduction. For example, the total marginal cost of a reduction of 50 units is \$0 because Plant A can reduce 50 units for free; so the efficient combination is to have Plant A do all the reducing. The socially efficient level of pollution reduction (and of pollution) is the intersection of this  $MC_T$  curve with the marginal damage curve,  $MD$ , at point Z, indicating a reduction of 200 units (and pollution of 200 units).



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FIGURE 5-9

Pollution Reduction with Multiple Firms • Plant A has a lower marginal cost of pollution reduction at each level of reduction than does Plant B. The optimal level of reduction for the market is the point at which the sum of marginal costs equals marginal damage (at point Z, with a reduction of 200 units). An equal reduction of 100 units for each plant is inefficient because the marginal cost to Plant B ( $M_{CB}$ ) is so much higher than the marginal cost to Plant A ( $M_{CA}$ ). The optimal division of this reduction is where each plant's marginal cost is equal to the social marginal benefit (which is equal to marginal damage). This occurs when Plant A reduces by 150 units and Plant B reduces by 50 units, at a marginal cost to each of \$100.

## Policy Option 1: Quantity Regulation

Let's now examine the government's policy options within the context of this example. The first option is regulation: the government can demand a total reduction of 200 units of sludge from the market. The question then becomes: How does the government decide how much reduction to demand from each plant? The typical regulatory solution to this problem in the past was to ask the plants to split the burden: each plant reduces pollution by 100 units to get to the desired total reduction of 200 units.

This is not an efficient solution, however, because it ignores the fact that the plants have different marginal costs of pollution reduction. At an equal level of pollution reduction (and pollution), each unit of reduction costs less for Plant A ( $M_{CA}$ ) than for Plant B ( $M_{CB}$ ). If, instead, we got more reduction from Plant A than from Plant B, we could lower the total social costs of pollution reduction by taking advantage of reduction at the low-cost option (Plant A). So society as a whole is worse off if Plant A and Plant B have to make equal reductions than if they share the reduction burden more efficiently.

This point is illustrated in [Figure 5-9](#). The efficient solution is one where, for each plant, the marginal cost of reducing pollution is set equal to the social marginal benefit of that reduction—that is, where each plant's marginal cost curve intersects with the marginal benefit curve. This occurs at a reduction of 50 units for Plant B (point X), and 150 units for Plant A (point Y). Thus, mandating a reduction of 100 units from each plant is inefficient; the total costs of achieving a reduction of 200 units will be lower if Plant A reduces by a larger amount.

## Policy Option 2: Price Regulation Through a Corrective Tax

The second approach is to use a Pigouvian corrective tax, set equal to the marginal damage, so each plant would face a tax of \$100 on each unit of sludge dumped. Faced with this tax, what will each plant do? For Plant A, any unit of sludge reduction up to 150 units costs less than \$100, so Plant A will reduce its pollution by 150 units. For Plant B, any unit of sludge reduction up to 50 units costs less than \$100, so it will reduce pollution by 50 units. Note that these are exactly the efficient levels of reduction! Just as in our earlier analysis, Pigouvian taxes cause efficient production by raising the cost of the input by the size of its external damage, thereby raising private marginal costs to social marginal costs. Taxes are preferred to quantity regulation, with an equal distribution of reductions across the plants, because taxes give the plants more flexibility in choosing their optimal amount of reduction, allowing them to choose the efficient level.

## Policy Option 3: Quantity Regulation with Tradable Permits

Does this mean that taxes *always* dominate quantity regulation with multiple plants? Not necessarily. If the government had mandated the appropriate reduction from each plant (150 units from A and 50 units from B), then quantity regulation would have achieved the same outcome as the tax. Such a solution would, however, require much more information. Instead of just knowing the marginal damage and the total marginal cost, the government would also have to know the marginal cost curves of each individual plant. Such detailed information

would be hard to obtain.

Quantity regulation can be rescued, however, by adding a key flexibility: issue permits that allow a certain amount of pollution and let the plants trade. Suppose the government announces the following system: It will issue 200 permits that entitle the bearer to produce one unit of pollution. It will initially provide 100 permits to each plant. Thus, in the absence of trading, each plant would be allowed to produce only 100 units of sludge, which would in turn require each plant to reduce its pollution by half (the inefficient solution previously described).

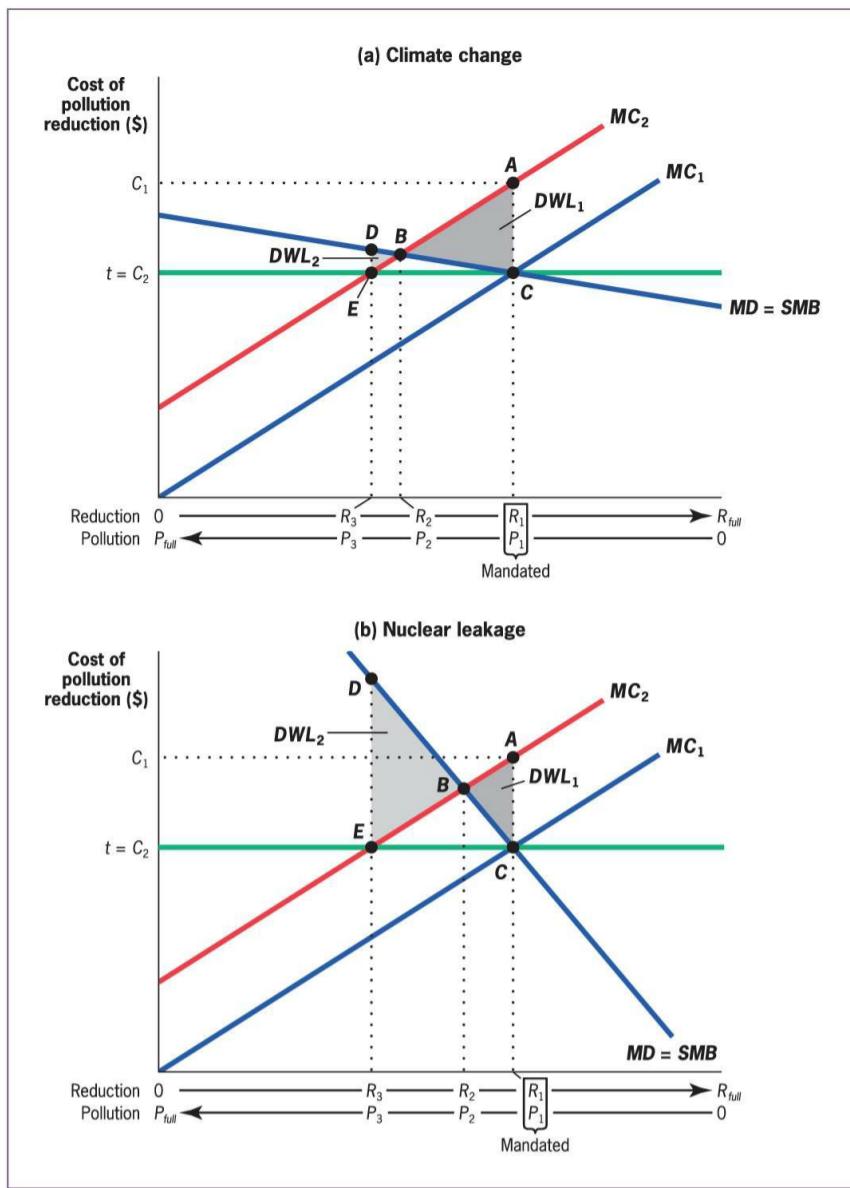
If the government allows the plants to trade these permits to each other, however, Plant B would have an interest in buying permits from Plant A. For Plant B, reducing sludge by 100 units costs  $MC_{B100}$ , a marginal cost much greater than Plant A's marginal cost of reducing pollution by 100 units, which is  $MC_{A100}$ . Thus, Plants A and B can be made better off if Plant B buys a permit from Plant A for some amount between  $MC_{A100}$  and  $MC_{B100}$ , so that Plant B would pollute 101 units (reducing only 99 units) and Plant A would pollute 99 units (reducing 101 units). This transaction is beneficial for Plant B because as long as the cost of a permit is below  $MC_{B100}$ , Plant B pays less than the amount that it would cost Plant B to reduce the pollution on its own. The trade is beneficial for Plant A as long as it receives for a permit at least  $MC_{A100}$  because it can reduce the sludge for a cost of only  $MC_{A100}$  and make money on the difference.

By the same logic, a trade would be beneficial for a second permit, so that Plant B could reduce sludge by only 98 and Plant A would reduce by 102. In fact, any trade will be beneficial until Plant B is reducing by 50 units and Plant A is reducing by 150 units. At that point, the marginal costs of reduction across the two producers are equal (to \$100), so that there are no more gains from trading permits.

What is going on here? We have simply returned to the intuition of the Coasian solution: we have internalized the externality by providing property rights to pollution. So, like Pigouvian taxes, trading allows the market to incorporate differences in the cost of pollution reduction across firms. In [Chapter 6](#), we discuss a successful application of trading to the problem of environmental externalities.

## Uncertainty About Costs of Reduction

Differences in reduction costs across firms are not the only reason that taxes or regulation might be preferred. Another reason is that the costs or benefits of regulation could be uncertain. Consider two extreme examples of externalities: climate change and nuclear leakage. [Figure 5-10](#) extends the pollution reduction framework from [Figure 5-8](#) to the situation in which the marginal damage (which is equal to the marginal social benefit of pollution reduction) is now no longer constant, but falling. That is, the benefit of the first unit of pollution reduction is quite high, but once the production process is relatively pollution-free, additional reductions are less important (i.e., there are diminishing marginal returns to reduction).



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■ FIGURE 5-10

Market for Pollution Reduction with Uncertain Costs • In the case of climate change [panel (a)], the marginal damage is fairly constant over large ranges of emissions (and thus emission reductions). If costs are uncertain, then taxation at level  $t = C_2$  leads to a much lower deadweight loss (DBE) than does regulation of  $R_1$  (ABC). In the case of nuclear leakage [panel (b)], the marginal damage is very steep. If costs are uncertain, then taxation leads to a much larger deadweight loss (DBE) than does regulation (ABC).

Panel (a) of [Figure 5-10](#) considers the case of climate change. In this case, the exact amount of pollution reduction is not so critical for the environment. Because what determines the extent of climate change is the total accumulated stock of carbon dioxide in the air, which accumulates over many years from sources all over the world, even fairly large shifts in carbon dioxide pollution in one country today will have little impact on climate change. In that case, we say that the social marginal benefit curve (which is equal to the marginal damage from climate change) is very flat: that is, there is little benefit to society from modest additional reductions in carbon dioxide emissions.

Panel (b) of [Figure 5-10](#) considers the case of radiation leakage from a nuclear power plant. In this case, a very small difference in the amount of nuclear leakage can make a huge difference in terms of lives saved. Indeed, it is possible that the marginal damage curve (which is once again equal to the marginal social benefit of pollution reduction) for nuclear leakage is almost vertical, with each reduction in leakage being very important in terms of saving lives. Thus, the social marginal benefit curve in this case is very steep.

Now, in both cases, imagine that we don't know the true costs of pollution reduction on the part of firms or individuals. The government's best guess is that the true marginal cost of pollution reduction is represented by curve  $MC_1$  in both panels. There is a chance, however, that the marginal cost of pollution reduction could be much higher, as represented by the curve  $MC_2$ . This uncertainty could arise because the government has an imperfect understanding of the costs of pollution reduction to the firm, or it could arise because both the government and the firms are uncertain about the ultimate costs of pollution reduction.

## Implications for Effect of Price and Quantity Interventions

This uncertainty over costs has important implications for the type of intervention that reduces pollution most efficiently in each of these cases. Consider regulation first. Suppose that the government mandates a reduction,  $R_1$ , which is the optimum if costs turn out to be given by  $MC_1$ : this is where social marginal benefits equal social marginal costs of reduction if marginal cost equals  $MC_1$ . Now, suppose that the marginal costs actually turn out to be  $MC_2$ , so that the optimal reduction should instead be  $R_2$ , where  $SMB = MC_2$ . That is, regulation is mandating a reduction in pollution that is too large, with the marginal benefits of the reduction being below the marginal costs. What are the efficiency implications of this mistake?

In the case of climate change [panel (a)], these efficiency costs are quite high. With a mandated reduction of  $R_1$ , firms will face a cost of reduction of  $C_1$ , the cost of reducing by amount  $R_1$  if marginal costs are described by  $MC_2$ . The social marginal benefit of reduction of  $R_1$  is equal to  $C_2$ , the point where  $R_1$  intersects the  $SMB$  curve. Because the cost to firms ( $C_1$ ) is so much higher than the benefit of reduction ( $C_2$ ), there is a large deadweight loss ( $DWL_1$ ) of area  $ABC$  (the triangle that incorporates all units where cost of reduction exceeds benefits of reduction).

In the case of nuclear leakage [panel (b)], the costs of regulation are very low. Once again, with a mandated reduction of  $R_1$ , firms will face a cost of reduction of  $C_1$ , the cost of reducing by amount  $R_1$  if marginal costs are described by  $MC_2$ . The social marginal benefit of reduction at  $R_1$  is once again equal to  $C_2$ . In this case, however, the associated deadweight loss triangle  $ABC$  ( $DWL_1$ ) is much smaller than in panel (a), so the inefficiency from regulation is much lower.

Now, contrast the use of corrective taxation in these two markets. Suppose that the government levies a tax designed to achieve the optimal level of reduction if marginal costs are described in both cases by  $MC_1$ , which is  $R_1$ . As discussed earlier, the way to do this is to choose a tax level,  $t$ , such that the firm chooses a reduction of  $R_1$ . In both panels, the tax level that will cause firms to choose reduction  $R_1$  is a tax equal to  $C_2$ , where  $MC_1$  intersects  $MD$ . A tax of this amount would cause firms to do exactly  $R_1$  worth of reduction, if marginal costs are truly determined by  $MC_1$ .

If the true marginal cost ends up being  $MC_2$ , however, the tax causes firms to choose a

reduction of  $R_3$ , where their true marginal cost is equal to the tax (where  $t = MC_2$  at point  $E$ ), so that there is too little reduction. In the case of climate change in panel (a), the deadweight loss ( $DWL_2$ ) from reducing by  $R_3$  instead of  $R_2$  is only the small area  $DBE$ , representing the units where social marginal benefits exceed social marginal costs. In the case of nuclear leakage in panel (b), however, the deadweight loss ( $DWL_2$ ) from reducing by  $R_3$  instead of  $R_2$  is a much larger area,  $DBE$ , once again representing the units where social marginal benefits exceed social marginal costs.

## Implications for Instrument Choice

The central intuition here is that *the instrument choice depends on whether the government wants to get the amount of pollution reduction right or whether it wants to minimize costs*. Quantity regulation ensures there is as much reduction as desired, regardless of the cost. So, if it is critical to get the amount exactly right, quantity regulation is the best way to go. This is why the efficiency cost of quantity regulation under uncertainty is so much lower with the nuclear leakage case in panel (b). In this case, it is critical to get the reduction close to optimal; if we end up costing firms extra money in the process, so be it. For climate change, getting the reduction exactly right isn't very important; thus, it is inefficient in this case to mandate a very costly option for firms.

Price regulation through taxes, on the other hand, ensures that the cost of reductions never exceeds the level of the tax but leaves the amount of reduction uncertain. That is, firms will never reduce pollution beyond the point at which reductions cost more than the tax they must pay (the point at which the tax intersects their true marginal cost curve,  $MC_2$ ). If marginal costs turn out to be higher than anticipated, then firms will just do less pollution reduction. This is why the deadweight loss of price regulation in the case of climate change is so small in panel (a): the more efficient outcome is to get the exact reduction wrong but protect firms against very high costs of reduction. This is clearly not true in panel (b): for nuclear leakage, it is most important to get the quantity close to right (almost) regardless of the cost to firms.

In summary, quantity regulations ensure environmental protection, but at a variable cost to firms, while price regulations ensure the cost to the firms, but at a variable level of environmental protection. So, if the value of getting the environmental protection close to right is high, then quantity regulations will be preferred; but if getting the protection close to right is not so important, then price regulations are a preferred option.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Externalities are the classic answer to the “when” question of public finance we studied in [Chapter 1](#): when one party’s actions affect another party, and the first party doesn’t fully compensate (or get compensated by) the other for this effect, then the market has failed and government intervention is potentially justified. In some cases, the market is likely to find a Coasian solution, whereby negotiations between the affected parties lead to the “internalization” of the externality. For many cases, however, only government intervention can solve the market failure.

This point naturally leads to the “how” question of public finance. There are two classes of tools in the government’s arsenal for dealing with externalities: price-based measures (taxes and subsidies) and quantity-based measures (regulation). Which of these methods will lead to the most efficient regulatory outcome depends on factors such as the heterogeneity of the firms being regulated, the flexibility embedded in quantity regulation, and the uncertainty over the costs of externality reduction. In the next chapter, we take these somewhat abstract principles and apply them to some of the most important externalities facing the United States (and the world) today.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Externalities arise whenever the actions of one party make another party worse or better off, yet the first party neither bears the costs nor receives the benefits of doing so.
- Negative externalities cause overproduction of the good in a competitive market, while positive externalities cause underproduction of the good in a competitive market, in both cases leading to a deadweight loss.
- Private markets may be able to “internalize” the problems of externalities through negotiation, but this Coasian process faces many barriers that make it an unlikely solution to global externalities, such as most environmental externalities.
- The government can use either price (tax or subsidy) or quantity (regulation) approaches to addressing externalities.
- When firms have different marginal costs of pollution reduction, price mechanisms are a more efficient means of accomplishing environmental goals, unless quantity regulation is accompanied by the ability to meet regulatory targets by trading pollution permits across polluters.
- If there is uncertainty about the marginal costs of pollution reduction, then the relative merits of price and quantity regulations will depend on the steepness of the marginal benefit curve. Quantity regulation gets the amount of pollution reduction right, regardless of cost, and so is more appropriate when marginal benefits are steep; price regulation through taxation gets the costs of pollution reduction right, regardless of quantity, so it is more appropriate when marginal benefits are flat.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. In 2012, the state of California implemented a system of quantity regulation of greenhouse gases, which included tradable permits. This “cap-and-trade” program for greenhouse gas emissions distributes a fixed amount of greenhouse gas “allowances” to large emitters of greenhouse gases, such as electric power stations and large industrial plants. Plants may then purchase additional greenhouse gas emission allowances at auction, or, alternatively, may purchase unused allowances from another polluter. Theory predicts that this trading system will lead to a socially efficient allocation of pollution. Describe how such an outcome would occur.
2. Can an activity generate both positive and negative externalities at the same time? Explain your answer.
3. In the midwestern United States, where winds tend to blow from west to east, states tend to approve new polluting industries more easily near their eastern borders than in other parts of the state. Why do you think this is true?
4. The rise of apps such as Uber and Lyft has generated considerable debate among policy makers and politicians in major urban areas over whether these services are net harmful or beneficial. The debate has centered, in part, on the positive and negative externalities generated by these ride-sharing services. Discuss one negative and one positive externality generated by these services.
5. Can government assignment and enforcement of property rights internalize an externality? Will this approach work as well as, better than, or worse than direct government intervention? Explain your answers and describe one of the difficulties associated with this solution.
6. In close congressional votes, many members of Congress choose to remain “undecided” until the last moment. Why might they do this? What lesson does this example teach about a potential shortcoming of the Coasian solution to the externality problem?
7. Suppose that a firm’s marginal production costs are given by  $MC = 10 + 30Q$ . The firm’s production process generates a toxic waste, which imposes an increasingly large cost on the residents of the town where it operates: the marginal external cost associated with the  $Q$ th unit of production is given by  $6Q$ . What is the marginal private cost associated with the 10th unit produced? What is the total marginal cost to society associated with producing the 10th unit (the marginal social cost of the 10th unit)?
8. In two-car automobile accidents, passengers in the larger vehicle are significantly more likely to survive than are passengers in the smaller vehicle. In fact, death probabilities are decreasing in the size of the vehicle you are driving, and death probabilities are increasing in the size of the vehicle you collide with. Some politicians and lobbyists have argued that this provides a rationale for encouraging the sale of larger vehicles and discouraging legislation that would induce automobile manufacturers to make smaller cars. Critically examine this argument using the concept of externalities.
9. Why do governments sometimes impose quantity regulations that limit the level of negative-externality-inducing consumption? Why do governments sometimes impose price regulations by taxing this consumption?
10. Answer the following two questions for each of the following examples: (i) smoking by individuals; (ii) toxic waste production by firms; (iii) research and development by a high-tech firm; and (iv) individual vaccination against communicable illness.
  1. Is there an externality? If so, describe it, including references to whether it is positive or negative and whether it is a consumption or production externality.
  2. If there is an externality, does it seem likely that private markets will arise that allow this externality to be internalized? Why or why not?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. Warrenia has two regions. In Oliviland, the marginal benefit associated with pollution cleanup is  $MB = 300 - 10Q$ , while in Linneland, the marginal benefit associated with pollution cleanup is  $MB = 200 - 4Q$ . Suppose that the marginal cost of cleanup is constant at \$120 per unit. What is the optimal level of pollution cleanup in each of the two regions?
12. The private marginal benefit associated with a product's consumption is  $PMB = 350 - 4Q$  and the private marginal cost associated with its production is  $PMC = 6Q$ . Furthermore, the marginal external damage associated with this good's production is  $MD = 4Q$ . To correct the externality, the government decides to impose a tax of  $T$  per unit sold. What tax  $T$  should it set to achieve the social optimum?
13. Suppose that demand for a product is  $Q = 1,200 - 4P$  and supply is  $Q = -240 + 2P$ . Furthermore, suppose that the marginal external damage of this product is \$12 per unit. How many more units of this product will the free market produce than is socially optimal? Calculate the deadweight loss associated with the externality.
14. The marginal damage averted from pollution cleanup is  $MD = 200 - 5Q$ . The marginal cost associated with pollution cleanup is  $MC = 25 + 2Q$ .
1. What is the optimal level of pollution reduction?
  2. Show that this level of pollution reduction could be accomplished through taxation. What tax per unit would generate the optimal amount of pollution reduction?
15. Two firms are ordered by the federal government to reduce their pollution levels. Firm A's marginal costs associated with pollution reduction is  $MC = 150 + 3Q$ . Firm B's marginal costs associated with pollution reduction is  $MC = 10 + 9Q$ . The marginal benefit of pollution reduction is  $MB = 250 - 4Q$ .
1. What is the socially optimal level of each firm's pollution reduction?
  2. Compare the social efficiency of three possible outcomes: (i) require all firms to reduce pollution by the same amount; (ii) charge a common tax per unit of pollution; or (iii) require all firms to reduce pollution by the same amount, but allow pollution permits to be bought and sold.
16. One hundred commuters need to use a strip of highway to get to work. They all drive alone and prefer to drive in big cars—it gives them more prestige and makes them feel safer. Bigger cars cost more per mile to operate, however, since their gas mileage is lower. Worse yet, bigger cars cause greater permanent damage to roads.

The weight of the car is  $w$ . Suppose that the benefits from driving are  $12w$ , while the costs are  $3 \times w^2$ . The damage to roads is  $2 \times w^3$ . Assume that individuals have utility functions of the form  $U = x$ , where  $x$  are the net benefits from driving a car of a given size.

1. What car weight will be chosen by drivers?
  2. What is the optimal car weight? If this differs from (a), why does it?
  3. Can you design a toll system that causes drivers to choose the optimal car weight? If so, then how would such a system work (e.g., how might the toll depend on the car)?
17. Firms A and B each produce 80 units of pollution. The federal government wants to reduce pollution levels. The marginal costs associated with pollution reduction are  $MC_A = 50 + 3Q_A$  for firm A and  $MC_B = 20 + 6Q_B$  for firm B, where  $Q_A$  and  $Q_B$  are the quantities of pollution reduced by

each firm. Society's marginal benefit from pollution reduction is given by  $MB = 620 - 3Q_T$ , where  $Q_T$  is the total reduction in pollution.

1. What is the socially optimal level of each firm's pollution reduction?
2. How much total pollution is there in the social optimum?
3. Explain why it is inefficient to give each firm an *equal* number of pollution permits (if they are not allowed to trade them).
4. Explain how the social optimum can be achieved if firms are given equal numbers of pollution permits but *are* allowed to trade them.
5. Can the social optimum be achieved using a tax on pollution?

18. Suppose that the (external) damage done by pollution is known to be  $MD = 300 + 5Q$ , and the (private) cost and benefit are given by  $MC = 100 + 2Q$  and  $MB = D_0 - 2Q$ , where  $D_0$  is not precisely known.

1. If  $D_0 = 1,000$ , what would be the optimal quantity? What tax would be necessary in order for that to be the equilibrium quantity?
2. Suppose that, based on the result from part (a), a cap-and-trade system is imposed to allow the optimal quantity of pollution to be produced. If  $D_0 = 900$ , what would be the deadweight loss associated with having the wrong quantity?
3. Suppose that, based on the result from part (a), a tax is imposed to allow the optimal quantity of pollution to be produced. If  $D_0 = 900$ , what would be the deadweight loss associated with having the wrong tax level?
4. If  $D_0$  is not exactly known, which is likely to give better results, a cap-and-trade system or a tax? What would be the answer to this question if the marginal damage were  $300 + 3Q$  instead of  $300 + 5Q$ ?

# CHAPTER 6 Externalities in Action: Environmental and Health Externalities



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [6.1 The Role of Economics in Environmental Regulation: The Case of Particulates](#)
- [6.2 Climate Change](#)
- [6.3 The Economics of Smoking](#)
- [6.4 The Economics of Other Addictive Behaviors](#)
- [6.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How has public policy toward particulates affected the environment and the economy?
- How can the world come together to combat climate change?
- What are the appropriate government responses to health externalities such as smoking, drinking, and obesity?

As discussed in the introduction to [Chapter 5](#), the major environmental threat facing the world over the coming century is the warming of our atmosphere and resulting changes in our climate known as climate change. Responding to this threat, in 2009, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ruled that it had the power to regulate the major cause of climate change, carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>).<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 2014, the Obama administration announced the Clean Power Plan (CPP), stipulating that the United States would cut annual carbon dioxide emissions from existing power plants by 17% by 2020 and 30% by 2030. The rule provided for a number of options (called “building blocks”) to cut carbon emissions and proposed specific emissions rate targets for each state by estimating the extent to which a state can utilize each block. The blocks include improving the efficiency of fossil fuel plants, utilizing more low-CO<sub>2</sub>-emitting power sources, expanding the use of renewable energy sources (wind, solar) to generate power, and using electricity more efficiently. Different states had dramatically different targets, reflecting each state’s unique mix of energy-generation resources, energy technology, costs, and emissions reduction potential with regard to each of the blocks. The state of Washington, for example, had to cut carbon emissions by 72% by 2030, which the EPA deemed reasonable because the state’s enormous Centralia coal plant is slated to shut down in the 2020s. By contrast, Indiana was only be required to cut carbon emissions by 20% because it lacks easy access to natural gas.<sup>2</sup>

This rule was praised by environmental groups. Daniel J. Fiorino, who directs the Center for Environmental Policy at American University, said that the approach is a “really nice example of smarter regulation” because it gives the states great leeway in choosing how to meet the federal standard. Similarly, Andrew Steer of the World Resources Institute claimed that the Clean Power Plan is a “momentous development” that “raises the bar for controlling carbon emissions in the United States.”<sup>3</sup> The EPA estimates that the rule will cut traditional air pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and soot by 25% by 2030, yielding a positive externality of between \$55 and \$93 billion per year until 2030, far outweighing the expected costs of between \$7 and \$9 billion per year for implementing the plan.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, opponents of the rule argued that Obama’s proposed emissions cuts are simply not feasible given current technology. House Speaker John Boehner went on record, claiming, “The president’s plan is nuts, there’s no really succinct way to describe it.” He argued that Obama’s efforts to address climate change will “ship jobs overseas” and condemn Americans to “higher bills and lower incomes.”<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a report outlining that the Clean Power Plan would cost businesses more than \$50 billion a year.

Due to pushback in the courts, the Clean Power Plan did not take effect under the Obama administration. When President Trump took office, he took policy in a very different

direction. The Trump White House and EPA began dismantling the wide array of climate reforms instituted under President Obama, including the CPP. Standards for emissions from new power plants, and startup and shutdown practices of existing plants were loosened. Limits for release of coal ash waste into the air and toxic byproduct into U.S. waterways are also under review.<sup>6</sup> And emissions standards that would have required new cars and light trucks to get an average of 50 miles to the gallon by 2025 are being reversed, although 13 states, led by California, are suing for the right to keep the strict regulations in place in their states.<sup>7</sup>

The EPA is also fighting hard to fully repeal the Clean Power Plan, though it must overcome a fair number of legal hurdles to do so. In particular, it is tumultuous to repeal the CPP without a replacement because the law states that the EPA is required to regulate CO<sub>2</sub> emissions so as to minimize the harm to humans.<sup>8</sup>

The Trump administration has reconciled this contradiction between the requirement that the EPA regulate CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and Trump administration policy goals by recalculating the findings of Obama-era experts whose job it was to quantify the harm that released carbon actually causes. In 2009, those experts concluded that the cost of every ton of CO<sub>2</sub> released was approximately \$47 dollars, a calculation that became known as the social cost of carbon. The EPA's revised 2017 estimate is that each ton of CO<sub>2</sub> released costs between \$1 and \$6. The reduction can be explained, in part, because the new calculation increases the discount rate and only considers domestic benefits of cutting carbon emissions, while Obama's calculations included global benefits. This reduction in the social cost of carbon set a precedent for the repeal of other Obama era regulations. It also gives the Trump administration footing to fight implementation of the CPP.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter, we apply the theoretical tools of [Chapter 5](#) to real-world policy issues such as the regulation of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. We begin by focusing on a different but historically important source of negative environmental externalities—particulate emissions.

The U.S. experience with particulate regulation highlights the enormous value of a tool introduced in the previous chapter: emissions trading. Allowing trade within the particulate regulatory scheme lowered the costs of these regulations by 50% or more. This lesson has proved influential in the debate over climate change. In this chapter, we discuss the initial efforts to address climate change and the important role that trading can play in future regulatory interventions.

We then turn to another major potential source of externalities: health externalities, especially those caused by cigarette smoking. Health behaviors provide an excellent forum for assessing when actions cause externalities on others (and when they do not), as well as for raising the question of whether actions of an individual that harm only that individual should be regulated by the government.

## 6.1 The Role of Economics in Environmental Regulation: The Case of Particulates

Here is a miniature but important chemistry lesson: power plants that burn coal and natural gas create energy by breaking bonds between carbon atoms. Breaking these bonds releases energy, which the plants then capture. The issue is that in the process of breaking carbon bonds, other chemical reactions take place. These reactions release harmful particulates and chemicals into the air. Burning coal releases mercury, a heavy metal toxic to humans; SO<sub>2</sub> (sulfur dioxide) and NO<sub>x</sub> (nitrogen oxide), which combine with hydrogen in the atmosphere to create “acid rain”; and particulate matter (soot), which is associated with everything from low visibility to heart attacks. The majority of these particulate pollutants come from coal-fired power plants, most of which are heavily concentrated in the Ohio River Valley.<sup>10</sup>

Particulates have a large number of negative impacts on the environment, ranging from raising the acidity of our water, to corroding metals and paint, to reduced visibility.<sup>11</sup> But the most significant impacts are on human health. Emissions from fine particulates can be inhaled deep into people’s lungs, triggering lung, blood vessel, and heart inflammation. Fine particulates can also penetrate indoors. Many scientific studies have identified a relationship between elevated levels of fine particulates and increased illness and premature death from heart and lung disorders such as asthma and bronchitis. Other health effects from exposure include difficulty breathing, coughing, lung damage, aggravated asthma, bronchitis, irregular heartbeat, heart attacks (nonfatal), and cancers.<sup>12</sup> In fact, airborne particulates often contain complex organic materials, including benzene, polychlorinated biphenyls, and polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), many of which are known and suspected carcinogens.<sup>13</sup> Some individuals are particularly at risk, especially those with existing heart and lung diseases, children, and the elderly.

Particulates are a classic negative production externality. As a by-product of their production, power plants in the Midwest damage the quality of life along the East Coast of the United States. Private-sector (Coasian) solutions are unavailable because of the problems noted in [Chapter 5](#), such as negotiation difficulties with hundreds of polluters and millions of affected individuals. Thus, government intervention is required to address this externality. In fact, the government has intervened to reduce particulates for more than 30 years. The story of this intervention and the effects it has had on the environment, on health, and on the economy provides an excellent example of the possibilities and limitations of government policy toward the environment.

### History of Particulate Regulation

Regulation of the emissions that contain damaging particulates began with the [1970 Clean Air Act \(CAA\)](#), which set maximum standards for atmospheric concentrations of various substances, including SO<sub>2</sub>. The act set New Source Performance Standards (NSPS) for any new coal-fired power plant, forcing any new plant to reduce emissions in one of two ways: either by switching to coal with a lower sulfur content or by installing scrubbers, which are devices that remove a large portion of pollutants from the plant’s exhaust fumes. In terms of the theory of government policy discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the government chose a regulatory (quantity) approach over a tax (price) approach for dealing with this environmental problem.

#### 1970 Clean Air Act (CAA)

Landmark federal legislation that first regulated damaging emissions by setting maximum standards for atmospheric concentrations of various substances, including SO<sub>2</sub>.

Total emissions of SO<sub>2</sub> declined by the early 1980s, but some new concerns arose that motivated additional attention to the emissions issue. Most importantly, the vast majority of emissions came from older plants that were not subject to the NSPS. By mandating NSPS only for new plants, the 1970 act gave utilities great incentive to run older, dirtier plants for longer than policy makers had predicted (i.e., longer than the plants' natural "lifetimes"). Moreover, an additional requirement put in place in 1977 that all new plants have scrubbers increased the expense of building new plants and thus further encouraged the upkeep of older plants. These problems are excellent examples of the hazards of partial policy reform. By mandating regulations only for new plants, the government opened a major loophole in the law that encouraged firms to extend the use of outdated, more highly polluting older plants, thus undercutting the effectiveness of the law.

## The 1990 Amendments and Emissions Trading

In 1990, a series of amendments to the CAA were passed, most notably a regulation that mandated a reduction of more than 50% in the level of SO<sub>2</sub> emissions nationwide and included all plants, even older ones. A key feature of the amendment was that it established an **SO<sub>2</sub>** allowance system that granted plants permits to emit SO<sub>2</sub> in limited quantities, based on their historical fuel utilization.<sup>14</sup> Plants were allowed to buy, sell, and save (for future years) these allowances. Plants that found it very costly to reduce emissions could try to purchase allowances from other plants that could more easily reduce emissions below their allowance level. The allowance market was supposed to increase the cost-effectiveness of the plan by encouraging utilities to exploit the differences in the cost of reducing emissions (something discussed theoretically in [Chapter 5](#)). Older plants, for which reductions were most expensive, could buy allowances from newer plants, for which reductions were cheaper. Heeding the advice of economists on the benefits of trading, the market for permits involved very few restrictions: trading could occur anywhere within the nation, no review or approval of trades was required, anyone (plants, brokerage firms, and so on) could trade, and the frequency and mechanism of trading were unlimited.

### SO<sub>2</sub> allowance system

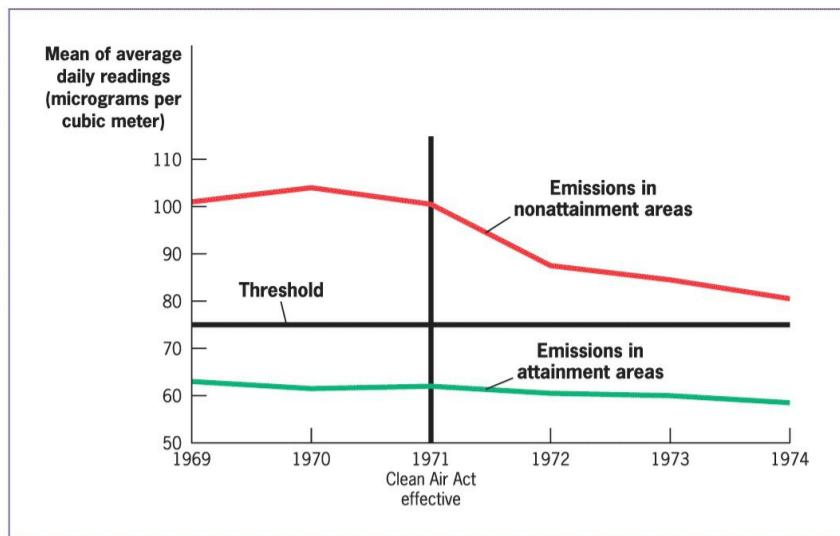
The feature of the 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act that granted plants permits to emit SO<sub>2</sub> in limited quantities and allowed them to trade those permits.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Estimating the Adverse Health Effects of Particulates*

The estimates of the health costs of particulates come from a large empirical literature on pollution and health outcomes. The typical approach taken in this literature is to relate adult mortality in a geographical area to the level of particulates in the air in that area. The results from this type of analysis are suspect, however, due to the key empirical problem highlighted in [Chapter 3](#): the areas with more particulates may differ from areas with fewer particulates in many other ways, not just in the amount of particulates in the air. Imagine, for example, that researchers compared two areas, one with old plants that emit a lot of particulates and one with newer plants that are much cleaner. If the researchers found higher mortality in the areas with the older dirty plants, they might attribute this to the effects of particulates on human health. Suppose, however, that older plants are also less safe places to work than newer plants. In this case, the higher mortality in areas with older plants might be due to workplace accidents, not pollution. It is difficult to observe valid treatment and control groups in a situation like this; you can't just compare dirty areas to cleaner ones because so many other things could differ between them, imparting bias to the estimates.

[Chay and Greenstone \(2003a\)](#) addressed this problem using the regulatory changes induced by the Clean Air Act. This act applied differentially to different counties in the United States, based on whether they were above or below a mandated "attainment" of clean air levels. Counties with emissions above a mandated threshold (nonattainment counties) were subject to state regulation, while those with similar emissions, but that fell just below that threshold, were not. In the nonattainment counties, this regulation led to a very large reduction in emissions measured as total suspended particulates (TSPs), as shown in [Figure 6-1](#). This figure shows TSPs over time for counties above and below the mandated threshold. For areas with TSPs below the mandated threshold, there was only a slight reduction in TSPs over time, from just above 60 to just below 60 micrograms per cubic meter. For areas above the mandated threshold (those areas subject to this regulation), there was a very large reduction in emissions after the legislation became effective in 1971, from greater than 100 to 80 micrograms per cubic meter.



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■ FIGURE 6-1

Trends in Emissions in Counties That Were and Were Not Subject to the CAA • In the set of counties that had low levels of TSPs before the CAA (attainment areas), there was little change in emissions over this time period. In the set of higher-emitting counties that were subject to the restrictions of the regulations (nonattainment areas), TSPs fell dramatically after 1971.

Data from: [Chay and Greenstone \(2003a\)](#), Figure 2a.

Applying a term we learned in [Chapter 3](#), we have an excellent quasi-experiment here. The treatment group is those areas that were in nonattainment, for which TSPs fell dramatically. The control group is those areas that were in attainment, for which there was little change in TSPs. These groups were similar beforehand and should be subject to similar changes over time other than the regulatory intervention. Thus, the only change in nonattainment areas relative to attainment areas is the intervention itself, so that any effect on health represents a causal impact of regulation. Chay and Greenstone made this comparison by examining a clear indicator of bad health, the infant mortality rate (the share of newborns who die before their first birthday). Infants can develop severe and potentially fatal respiratory problems from particulates in the air.

Chay and Greenstone's findings are striking: infant mortality declined substantially in areas with regulation-induced reductions in emissions, relative to areas in which emissions were not mandated to fall. They found that each 10% decline in particulates led to a 5% decline in the infant mortality rate. This estimate implies that 1,300 fewer infants died in 1972 as a result of the Clean Air Act, confirming in a much more convincing manner the high health costs of emissions and the benefits of regulation.

Since this study, a sizeable literature has used innovative new empirical methods to estimate the impact of particulates on health. Some studies look at short-term variation in pollution. For example, [Deryugina et al. \(2016\)](#) noted that changes in wind direction can significantly increase particulate concentrations in some areas, without changing anything else that would impact mortality, allowing them to obtain unbiased estimates of the effect of particulates by comparing the same areas when the wind was blowing in different directions. They found that such particulate increases raised mortality among the elderly.<sup>20</sup>

Other studies look at longer-term evidence. For example, [Barreca et al. \(2017\)](#) examined individuals living nearer or farther from coal-power whose emissions were regulated by the government. They found that those living closer to the plants saw a large and growing reduction in mortality after emissions regulations were introduced, relative to those farther away who were not impacted by regulation.

This amendment drew strong opposition from two different sources. On the one hand, the sizeable SO<sub>2</sub> restrictions were criticized on economic grounds by the utilities and coal miners, particularly those in eastern states whose coal supplies were high in sulfur content. An industry study in 1989 predicted the cost of fully implementing an acid rain program at \$4.1 billion to \$7.4 billion annually, with a loss of up to 4 million jobs.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the allowance and trading system were strongly criticized by environmentalists. Former Minnesota senator Eugene McCarthy likened the allowance system to the indulgences that church members could buy in the Middle Ages, which forgave them their sins for a price, calling this a "pollution absolution." McCarthy and other environmentalists opposed these amendments on the grounds that they were creating a "market for vice and virtue."<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the costs of these regulations have been much lower than predicted due to the

benefits of permit trading. Daniel Ellerman, an expert on acid rain regulations, estimated that the trading program lowered costs by more than half over the 1995–2007 period, from \$35 billion to \$15 billion.<sup>17</sup> A wider range of studies finds that the trading program has lowered estimated costs between 33 and 67%.<sup>18</sup>

The CAA amendments have shown that trading has worked, as economists suggested it would, to greatly improve the efficiency of regulation. Based on this success, trading regimes have gained in popularity in the environmental community in the United States and to a lesser extent around the world.

Environmentalists have realized that more efficient regulation is in their interest as well because it reduces the economic opposition to increased government regulation. According to [Ellerman and colleagues \(2000\)](#), p. 4), “Most observers quickly judged the program to be a great success. . . . In less than a decade, emissions trading has gone from being a pariah among policy makers to being a star—everybody’s favorite way to deal with pollution problems.”<sup>19</sup>

## Has the CAA Been a Success?

Economists are best at laying out the costs and benefits of alternative interventions and leaving it to others to decide if those interventions can be called successful or not. Clearly, the CAA, particularly after the 1990 amendments, has a lot to recommend it. However, it is much harder to determine whether the net economic costs from this program are smaller than its benefits. The set of regulations imposed by this program were clearly costly: [Greenstone \(2002\)](#) estimated that in its first 15 years, the CAA cost almost 600,000 jobs and \$75 billion in output in pollution-intensive industries. At the same time, these regulations were clearly beneficial in terms of lowering the costs of particulate emissions, particularly in terms of health improvements. And these health improvements may have long-term benefits: [Isen et al. \(2017\)](#) found that those who were protected from air pollution by the 1970 CAA had much higher earnings later in life, amounting to \$4,300 more in lifetime earnings for the 1.5 million individuals born into newly protected counties each year.

The trick is to put all of these observations together into a definite conclusion. (We discuss how economists approach this problem in [Chapter 8](#).) In one attempt to reach such a conclusion, [Burtraw et al. \(1997\)](#) estimated that the health benefits alone from reducing emissions exceeded by seven times the cost of reduction once this lower-cost trading regime was in place.

## 6.2 Climate Change

The environmental externality that could potentially cause the most harm to humans is climate change. The Earth is heated by solar radiation that passes through our atmosphere and warms the Earth's surface. The Earth radiates some of the heat back into space, but a large portion is trapped by certain gases in the Earth's atmosphere, such as CO<sub>2</sub> and methane, which reflect the heat back toward the Earth again. This phenomenon is called the **greenhouse effect** because a greenhouse works by letting in sunlight and trapping the heat produced from that light. The greenhouse effect is essential to life: without it, the Earth would be about 60 degrees cooler, and life as we know it would end.<sup>21</sup>

### greenhouse effect

The process by which gases in the Earth's atmosphere reflect heat from the sun back to the Earth.

The problem is that human activity has been increasing the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases, and thus the magnitude of the greenhouse effect has risen. Since the Industrial Revolution (which took place in Europe and the United States from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries), for example, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere has increased by about a third, to 800 billion metric tons of carbon—its highest level in 400,000 years (amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> are measured by what the carbon alone would weigh if in solid form, sort of like a chunk of coal). Most of this CO<sub>2</sub> has come from the use of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas. By our use of fossil fuels, humans have contributed to the warming of the Earth's atmosphere as reflected in the increase of surface temperatures by more than 1 degree Fahrenheit since 1951, the most rapid increase in at least 1,000 years (see [Figure 5-1, p. 120](#)). Global snow cover has declined by 10% since the 1960s, and global sea levels have risen by one-third to two-thirds of a foot over the last century. 2016 was the hottest year on record globally, and nine of the top ten years have occurred since 2005.<sup>22</sup>

More worrisome are projections for the next century. The average surface temperature of the Earth is likely to increase by 0.5 to 8.4 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the twenty-first century, relative to 2005, with a best estimate of at least 2.7 degrees. The average rate of warming over each inhabited continent is very likely to be at least twice as great as that experienced during the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> A temperature rise of 6 degrees would lower global GDP in 2100 by more than 10%, with India, Africa, and western Europe seeing reductions of more than 15%.<sup>24</sup>

Temperature rise will also have dramatic implications for biodiversity: a temperature rise of 3% is projected to lead to the extinction of up to 30% of all the world's species.<sup>25</sup> Four out of five of the last mass extinctions happened when the amount of carbon dissolved in the ocean passed a “threshold of catastrophe”; we are set to reach that threshold around 2100, though species are already going extinct at a rate comparable to previous mass extinctions.<sup>26</sup>

When carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) dissolves in the ocean, it combines with water (H<sub>2</sub>O), to create carbonic acid (H<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>). In the last 200 years, the ocean has become 30% more acidic. This is incredibly dangerous to ocean life. The water literally dissolves animals' shells, putting the entire food chain at risk. Pteropods, pea-sized shelled animals, form much of the base of the food chain, and their shells are already dissolving in the Southern Ocean.<sup>27</sup>

And climate change is projected to increase the severity of extreme weather conditions dramatically: as surface temperatures have increased by 1% since the 1970s, there has been a 75% increase in category 4 or 5 hurricanes. Increase in rainfall during wet seasons leads to

significant plant and foliage growth. Coupled with especially warm dry seasons, the number and severity of wildfires have increased, making 2017 the most expensive firefighting year in history. The federal government spent \$2.39 billion combating fires in 2017. Between 2016 and 2017, federal disaster relief aid requests increased by 1,000%.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most vivid short-run illustration of the damages of climate change was the destruction of the Ward Hunt ice shelf. This ice shelf was 80 feet thick and three times the size of Boston, making it the largest ice shelf in the Arctic, but in the summer of 2003, it split into two large pieces and many small islands, an event labeled “unprecedented” by scientists. Unprecedented, but perhaps not surprising: temperatures have been rising by 1 degree Fahrenheit per decade in the Arctic, and the thickness of this ice shelf had decreased by half since 1980.<sup>29</sup>

On July 12, 2017, one of the largest icebergs on record broke off of the Larsen C ice shelf in Antarctica. This chunk of ice covered more than 2,000 square miles and weighed about 1 trillion tons.<sup>30</sup> Over the past 25 years, Antarctica has lost 2.71 trillion tons of ice.<sup>31</sup> Recent studies have found that the eventual collapse of the West Antarctica Ice Sheet appears likely, leading to another 4 feet of sea level rise over the next several centuries, on top of the existing projected sea level rises.<sup>32</sup>

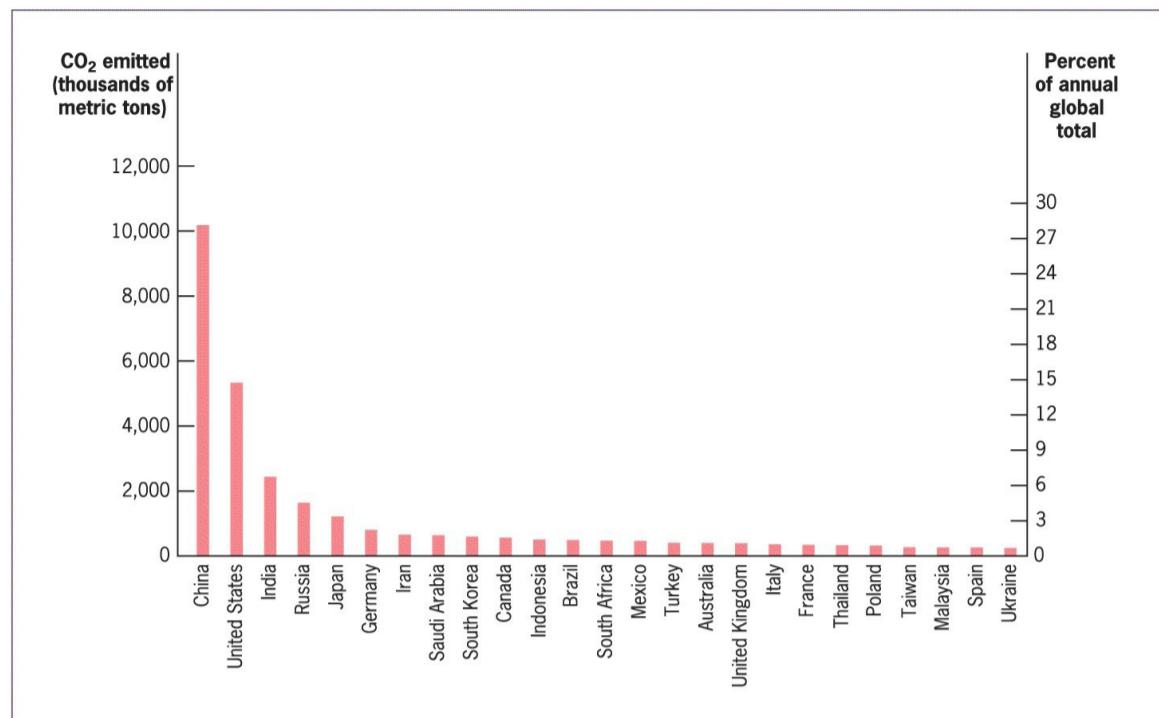


*“Gentlemen, it’s time we gave some serious thought  
to the effects of global warming.”*

Mick Stevens/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

[Figure 6-2](#) shows how much CO<sub>2</sub> the most polluting nations emit annually by burning fossil fuels, the main source of greenhouse gas emissions. (In the United States in 2016, for example, fossil fuels accounted for about 78% of all the energy used.)<sup>33</sup> China and the United States are by far the largest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub>, together accounting for more than two-fifths of the world’s total. But the high share of emissions for developing countries such as China or India is a relatively recent phenomenon: if we add up such emissions over the course of the

twentieth century, we find that although developed nations have only 20% of the world's population, they are responsible for 60% of the total greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels.<sup>34</sup>



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### FIGURE 6-2

Top 25 Fossil Fuel CO<sub>2</sub> Emitters in 2016 • The United States and China together accounted for more than 40% of the world's total CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2016.

Data from: [U.S. Energy Information Administration \(2018\)](#).

Despite this unequal role in producing emissions, climate change is truly a global problem. Carbon emissions have the same effect on the global environment whether they come from Boston or Bangkok. Moreover, it is the stock of CO<sub>2</sub> in the air, not the level of yearly emissions, that causes warming. Climate change, therefore, is not a problem that can be solved immediately by cutting back on carbon use. Even if all nations ended their use of all fossil fuels today, it would take centuries to undo the damage done by the industrialization of the developed world.



### APPLICATION

#### The Montreal Protocol

An excellent example of international cooperation is the Montreal Protocol of 1987, which banned the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). CFCs were a popular chemical used in many facets of everyday life, including refrigerators, air conditioners, and spray cans. Their popularity partly derived from their very long life, but this longevity also led to a major environmental problem: CFCs were drifting into our stratosphere, and in the process of decaying were breaking down the ozone layer, which protects the Earth from harmful UV-B radiation from the sun. As with climate change, this was a potentially enormous long-run problem: projections showed that, by 2050, ozone depletion would have reached 50 to 70% in the Northern Hemisphere, resulting in 19 million more cases of nonmelanoma skin cancer, 1.5 million cases of melanoma cancer, and 130 million more cases of eye cataracts.<sup>35</sup>

Unlike climate change, the CFC problem was showing itself immediately and urgently: by the 1980s, a hole measuring 25 million square kilometers had opened in the ozone layer over Antarctica. This hole spurred the international community to action, and in September 1987, the Montreal Protocol was adopted, aiming for a complete phaseout of specified chemicals (mostly CFCs and halons) according to specified schedules. This agreement was ratified by 184 countries, and worldwide consumption of CFCs dropped from 1.1 million tons in 1986 to 64,112 tons in 2004.<sup>36</sup> The result is that, after reaching its peak size in 2000 of 30 million square kilometers, the hole in the ozone layer has declined by 9%. It currently is about the same size as it was when it was first discovered, but will continue to recover and return to normal around 2070.<sup>37</sup>

One unintended consequence of banning chlorofluorocarbons is that the world found a substitute in hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs). HFCs are surprisingly large contributors to the greenhouse effect. Recognizing this, 197 countries met in Kigali, Rwanda, in 2016 to update the Montreal Protocol. Deliberations were difficult. Developing countries worried that using more expensive alternatives to HFCs would make air conditioners unaffordable for millions. Facing a projected explosion in HFC use, countries eventually agreed to an amendment to the Montreal Protocol. Wealthy countries will cap their HFC use by 2019, developing countries such as China and Brazil will have until 2024 to curb their use, and the poorest countries will have until 2028, and foreign monetary assistance. Cutting these pollutants is projected to curb global temperature rise by 0.4 to 0.8 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>38</sup>

These positive examples of international coordination to curb CFCs and HFCs are very exciting. But these are cases with consequences that are immediate and observable, and with required behavioral changes that are modest. The problem with the climate change case is that the changes are more subtle and the behaviors that we would have to curb are much more central to daily life (e.g. driving and heating). This makes international coordination of this type much more challenging. ■

## The Kyoto Treaty

International conferences to address the problem of climate change began in 1988. The first peak of activity was a 1997 meeting in Kyoto, Japan, which was attended by more than 170 nations. At that meeting, after intense negotiation, the 38 industrialized nations agreed to begin to combat climate change by reducing their emissions of greenhouse gases to 5% below 1990 levels by the year 2010.<sup>39</sup>

These goals were written into a treaty that was ratified by 37 of the 38 signatory countries and went into effect in early 2005. Notably absent from the ratification list is the United States, which was not interested in committing to this level of emissions reduction. Given the growth in the U.S. economy since the Kyoto treaty was signed, a reduction to 7% below 1990 levels would have meant reducing 2010 emissions by 16%.<sup>40</sup> [Nordhaus and Boyer \(2000, Table 8.6\)](#) estimated that achieving the Kyoto targets would imply a present discounted value cost to the United States of more than \$1 trillion. These authors estimated that the United States would bear a much higher share of the total world cost of meeting the Kyoto targets than the share that it contributes to annual greenhouse gas emissions. This is because U.S. emissions were forecast to grow so rapidly and would be very costly to reduce due to continued reliance on coal-fired power plants (as opposed to natural gas or nuclear-powered plants more frequently used in other nations, at the time, such as Japan, which produced much lower levels of greenhouse gases).

# Can Trading Make Environmental Agreements More Cost-Effective?

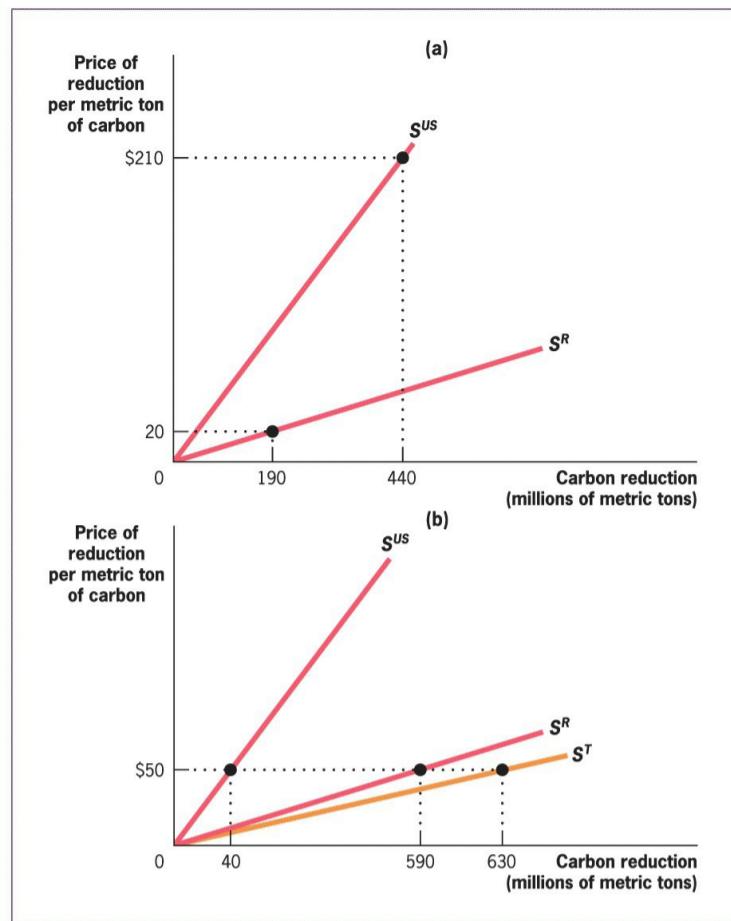
Given the enormous cost estimates just presented, the reluctance of the United States to ratify Kyoto is understandable. But these estimates ignored a key feature negotiated into the Kyoto treaty, largely at the behest of the United States: **international emissions trading**. Under the Kyoto treaty, the industrialized signatories are allowed to trade emissions rights among themselves, as long as the total emissions goals are met. That is, if the United States wanted to reduce its emissions to only 1990 levels, rather than to 7% below 1990 levels, it could have done so by buying emissions permits from another nation and using them to cover the reduction shortfall.

## international emissions trading

Under the Kyoto treaty, the industrialized signatories are allowed to trade emissions rights among themselves, as long as the total emissions goals are met.

This is an important aspect of the treaty because there are tremendous differences across developed nations in the costs of meeting these goals, for two reasons. First, there are large differences in the rate of growth since 1990: the lack of economic (and thus emissions) growth in the 1990s in Russia, for example, implies that it will not be very costly for Russia to return to 1990 emissions levels. Second, growth has been more “environmentally conscious” in some nations than in others, so economic growth has not been as much accompanied by emissions growth in nations such as Japan that use more gas- and nuclear-powered production. Thus, much as with our two-firm example in [Chapter 5](#), the total costs of emissions reductions can be reduced if we allow countries with low costs of reduction, such as Russia, to trade with countries with high costs of reduction, such as the United States. By some estimates, such trading could have lowered the global costs of reaching the Kyoto targets by 75%.<sup>41</sup>

This point is illustrated in [Figure 6-3](#). This figure shows the market for carbon reduction, with millions of metric tons of carbon reduction on the x axis. There is a fixed target of carbon reduction in the Kyoto treaty for the United States at 7% below 1990 levels, a reduction of 440 million metric tons. The total worldwide mandated reduction under Kyoto was 630 million metric tons, so that the rest of the world would have had to achieve a net reduction of 190 million metric tons.



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■ FIGURE 6-3

**The Benefits of Trading** • The supply curve of reductions for the United States ( $S^{US}$ ) is much steeper than that for the rest of the world ( $S^R$ ). If the United States has to do all of its reductions by itself (panel a), it costs \$210 per ton of reduction. In that case, the United States reduces by 440 million metric tons (mmt) and the rest of the world reduces by 190 mmt. If the United States and other nations can trade (panel b), then the relevant supply curve is  $S^T$ . In that case, the price per ton falls to \$50, with the rest of the world reducing by 590 mmt and the United States reducing by only 40 mmt.

With no trading, shown in panel (a), nations would have to meet this target from their own supply of reduction opportunities. The reduction opportunities in the United States are represented by the supply curve  $S^{US}$ . This curve slopes upward because initial reduction opportunities are low cost: for example, plants that are close to energy-efficient can be fitted with relatively cheap changes to become energy-efficient. Costs rise as reduction increases, however: additional reductions may require replacing energy-inefficient but perfectly functional plants with newer ones at great cost.

In this no-trading world, the marginal cost of achieving the Kyoto target of a reduction of 440 million metric tons (as measured by the  $S^{US}$  curve) is \$210 per metric ton of carbon. For ease, we combine the rest of the world into one group with reduction opportunities represented by  $S^R$  in panel (a) of Figure 6-3. The  $S^R$  curve lies far below  $S^{US}$ , indicating that these nations have much lower marginal cost reduction opportunities. For those nations to reduce by 190 million metric tons would cost them only \$20 per metric ton of carbon.

Now suppose that the United States can buy permits from Russia and other nations. In panel (b) of Figure 6-3, we can measure the aggregate supply curve to the world market by horizontally summing the two supply curves  $S^R$  and  $S^{US}$  to obtain the aggregate supply curve  $S^T$ . The cost of the worldwide required level of reduction of 630 million metric tons is \$50 per ton, given this supply curve. This means that, with international trading, any reductions that cost more than \$50 per ton can be offset by purchasing permits instead. At that price, the United States would choose to reduce its own emissions by 40 million metric tons (because

any additional reduction costs more than the \$50 price per permit) and buy the remaining 400 from other nations. Other nations would reduce their emissions by 590 million metric tons, the 190 million required plus the 400 million sold to the United States. The total cost of meeting the Kyoto target worldwide would now have fallen substantially: instead of most of the reduction being done at high cost in the United States, it would now be done at low cost elsewhere.

That is, by distributing the reduction from the high-cost United States to the low-cost other nations, we have significantly lowered the price of reductions worldwide. Note that, even though the marginal cost of reduction in other nations has risen, this is because they have moved up their supply curve: these other nations are happy to supply that higher level of reduction at \$50 per metric ton (they are deriving substantial producer surplus from that transaction because most of their reduction costs much less than \$50 per ton). The importance that U.S. environmental negotiators placed on negotiating this trading regime shows the extent to which environmentalists in the United States internalized the lessons from the Acid Rain Program about the benefits of allowing flexibility in meeting environmental targets.<sup>42</sup>

## Participation of Developing Countries

The trading story does not end with the developed nations of the world, however: by the year 2030, developing nations will produce more than half of the world's emissions, with China and India leading the way.<sup>43</sup> As a result, an agreement that does not ultimately include developing nations is doomed to failure as a mechanism for addressing climate change.

Moreover, including developing nations in such a plan adds flexibility and lowers the costs of meeting emission reduction targets. The cost of reducing emissions in developing countries is much lower than in the developed world. This is because it is much cheaper to use fuel efficiently as you develop an industrial base than it is to "retrofit" an existing industrial base to use fuel efficiently. By some estimates, if we had an international trading system that included developing nations, the cost to the developed world of complying with the Kyoto treaty would fall by another factor of four.<sup>44</sup> That is, with both international trading and developing country participation, the costs of meeting the Kyoto targets would be only one-sixteenth of their costs without these "flexibilities."

The developing nations wanted no part of this argument at Kyoto, however. They pointed out, rightly, that the problem facing the world resulted from environmentally insensitive growth on the part of developed nations. Why, they asked, should they be forced to be environmentally conscious and clean up the mess that the United States and other developed nations left behind? This conflict must be resolved for an effective solution to this global problem. Ultimately, obtaining the participation of developing nations will likely involve some significant international transfers of resources from the developed to the developing world as compensation.



### APPLICATION

## Congress Takes on Climate Change and Fails

In 2009, government initiatives to reduce climate change became a "hot" issue again, thanks to the election of a new Democratic president and to Democratic majorities in the House and Senate. In the House, Democrats Henry Waxman and Edward Markey cosponsored the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES), the most far-reaching effort to date to

regulate carbon emissions.

A central feature of the proposal was to allow emissions permits to be traded, a process built on the lessons drawn from basic economics and on the success of trading under the CAA and its amendments. Under ACES, there would be lower limits on the amount of emissions allowed, and firms could comply with the tighter targets in a number of ways:

- They could reduce their emissions.
- They could continue emitting pollutants up to the amount of their purchased emissions permits.
- They could purchase pollution credits to offset their emissions. Such credits would be given to other entities that are not subject to the caps but that take actions to reduce climate change. For example, farmers who plant trees that sequester carbon from the air could receive credits for doing so, and they could sell these credits to a power plant, which could then use the credits to offset their emissions.

The [Congressional Budget Office \(CBO; 2009\)](#) estimated that emissions permits would cost \$28 per ton of emissions by 2020. In that year, roughly 80% of the permits would be given away to existing carbon-emitting firms, and 20% would be sold to polluters to raise government revenue. Over time, the share that is sold would rise, reaching 70% by 2035.

ACES immediately drew criticism from several sources. First up were those who criticized the bill for raising the cost of energy production because emitting firms would either need to buy permits, buy credits, or undertake other expensive actions to reduce their emissions. As one critic wrote, “[T]here’s no getting around it—higher energy costs will inevitably lead to higher consumer prices and fewer jobs.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the CBO estimated that the firms that must acquire permits would pass on the costs of doing so to their customers in the form of higher energy prices, with a gross cost to the economy of \$110 billion in 2020, or almost \$900 per household. To counter this objection, the CBO pointed out that these valuable permits would be initially allocated to emitting firms, and that any money that the firms would receive if they sold their permits could offset their need to raise prices. The CBO estimated that the value of these permits would be \$85 billion in 2020, so the net cost in 2020 would be only \$25 billion (\$110 billion – \$85 billion), or \$175 per household.<sup>46</sup>

Remember, however, that all such analysis is only a projection, and, as discussed in [Chapter 5](#), because the costs of emissions reduction are uncertain, the cost to society of a fixed emissions target could be much higher. The legislation recognized this issue and took several actions to address it, including allowing firms to “bank” any excess emissions permits they had purchased or been issued, allowing firms to meet their targets over a two-year period so they would not have to undertake radical reductions in one given period, and setting up a “strategic reserve” of extra allowances that would be provided to the market if the cost of allowances rose to more than 160% of their projected price.

The second source of criticism of ACES came from those who felt that the full value of the allowances should be rebated to consumers, not simply given back to the polluting industries. ACES attempts to address this concern by specifying that polluting utility companies should pass the value of the allocated permits back to consumers. This solution has two problems, however. First, there is no guarantee that the utilities will do so; they may instead use the money raised from the sale of these valuable permits to raise their profitability and thus the

return to their investors. Second, if the permit values are passed back to consumers of energy, then ACES may undo the very goal of the legislation, which is to raise the price of energy so that consumers use less of it!

It is for these reasons that economists strongly support not only having tradeable permits, but also determining the initial allocation of permits through auction. That is, instead of directly giving the permits to various polluting firms, the government would hold an auction in which polluting firms would bid against each other for the permits that allow them to emit a specified amount of pollution. By charging polluters for their permits rather than giving them away, the government would simultaneously raise money and raise the prices of energy consumption (which would address the negative externality of climate change directly). But such an approach is less popular with politicians because they would then face opposition from polluting industries (which would have to pay for their permits) and from energy consumers (who would see higher energy prices). Whether the revenue raised from such an auction could be used to offset these criticisms is unclear. In the case of ACES, politicians apparently felt that the only way to pass the legislation was to give the pollution permits to the polluters rather than raise revenues by selling them.

The final concern came from others who felt that the legislation didn't go far enough to address climate change. But President Obama was confident that the bill would allow the United States to turn the corner toward more efficient energy use, saying, "This legislation will finally make clean energy . . . profitable energy."<sup>47</sup>

The debate over this legislation on the floor of the House of Representatives was contentious. The bill's opponents continued to portray the bill as a massive tax on U.S. energy consumption; Pennsylvania Republican Joe Pitts said, "No matter how you doctor it or tailor it, it is a tax."<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, on June 26, 2009, the bill passed by a narrow margin of seven votes. But, there was not enough support in the Senate to bring the bill to a vote, partly due to the political problems of raising energy costs during a recession, and the bill failed. There has been continued reluctance in recent years to attempt such a broad legislative approach to climate change. ■

## The Paris Agreement and the Future

The most significant recent step toward incorporating developing countries into a worldwide plan to reduce emissions was the Paris Agreement of 2015. On December 12, 2015, 195 countries agreed to the Paris Agreement.<sup>49</sup> In doing so, these countries committed to strengthening "the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels" according to UN Climate Change. Ahead of its signing, 186 countries submitted plans for how they would limit their own emissions by 2025 or 2030. Under the agreement, countries must submit new, more aggressive plans for curbing their climate impact in 2020. Starting in 2023, a global progress evaluation will occur every five years so that the global community can assess each country's success at holding up their commitment.<sup>50</sup>

The United States pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26 to 28% below 2005 levels, and to make a best effort of cutting emissions by 28%.<sup>51</sup> This commitment was reflected in the Obama administration's Climate Action Plan, which includes the CPP discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Goals outlined in the Paris Agreement were jeopardized in 2017, however, when President Trump announced his intention to remove the United States from the agreement.

In contrast, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, China, made ambitious commitments in Paris. In order to fulfill them, China is set to launch what will be the largest emissions trading scheme in the world. In its first phase, this plan will encompass 1,400 companies and 3 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually.<sup>52</sup> The scheme will set maximum allowable emissions for companies, and then those companies will be able to buy and sell emissions credits below that cap. Over time, the maximum limit will decline, and the program will expand to include all of China's high-emitting industries.

In addition to this trading scheme for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, China launched a campaign to curb pollution in 2014. Four years later, cities have 32% less particulate matter in the air. China has imposed stricter rules and spent more money than most countries can fathom—the city of Beijing set aside \$125 billion when the government mandated that they cut pollution by 25%.<sup>53</sup> The money appears to have worked: in the winter of 2017, the evidence was everywhere. The sky was blue, instead of grey with smog. Greenpeace estimated that there were 116,000 fewer premature deaths across China in 2017 than in 2016.<sup>54</sup>

An important question for future debates about climate change is whether the international community should continue with quantity-based policy or move toward a price-based policy that would include internationally coordinated taxes on carbon usage, as advocated, for example, by [Nordhaus \(2006\)](#). The uncertainty model presented in [Chapter 5](#) clearly suggests that taxation would dominate regulation (even with trading) in this context. This is because the benefits of emissions reduction are related to the existing stock of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere so that the marginal benefits of any given emissions reduction are constant: given the enormous boulder that must be moved to stop climate change, each additional person pushing on the boulder has a fairly constant effect. But the marginal costs of emissions reduction are both uncertain and not constant across nations; for some countries, reduction is low cost, while for others, it is expensive. As we learned in [Chapter 5](#), in such a situation (i.e., one with uncertain and varying marginal costs, with flat marginal benefits), taxation dominates regulation because regulation can lead to excessive deadweight loss when emissions reduction gets very expensive.<sup>55</sup> Price and quantity approaches could even be combined in the future by pairing the quantity goals with a “safety valve” rule that allows countries to reduce their required emission reductions if the cost gets too high so that there is a price ceiling on quantity restrictions.

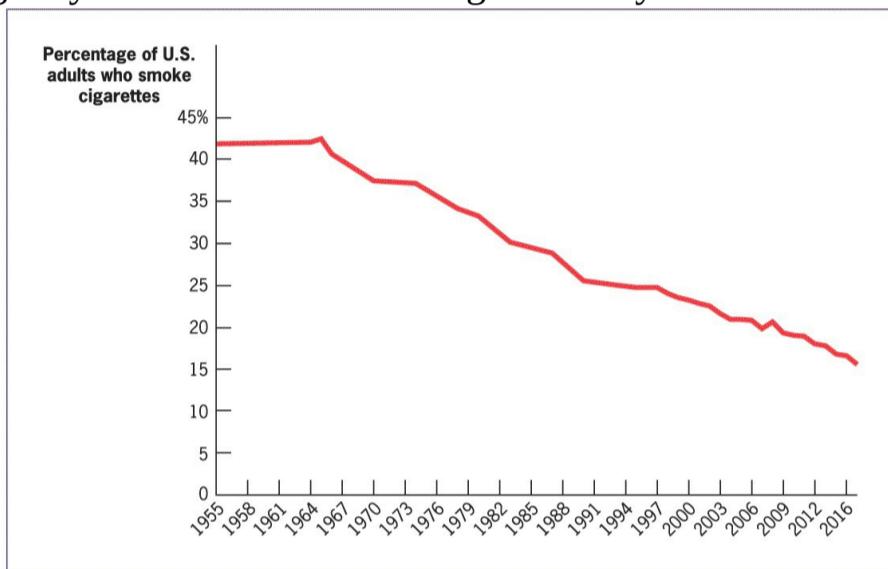
Of course, this discussion focuses on just two types of approaches to addressing climate change. There are a variety of other policy tools as well, ranging from changing how we eat (because methane from cows is a major source of greenhouse gases) to developing new “clean” technologies that can produce goods and services with a lower rate of emissions of gases. Indeed, the Global Calculator project sponsored jointly by the British and U.S. governments, as well as others, allows the user to assess the impact of alternative policy interventions on global temperature patterns.<sup>56</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that the use of these alternatives will ultimately be driven by government price and quantity policies. For example, one recent study found that use of clean technologies in automobiles is highly responsive to the cost of higher carbon taxes.<sup>57</sup>

## 6.3 The Economics of Smoking

All externalities are not large-scale environmental problems. Some of the most important externalities are local and individualized. Many of these arise in the arena of personal health, and one of the most interesting is smoking.

Cigarette smoking is the single greatest self-imposed health hazard in the United States today. The percentage of Americans who smoke has declined substantially over the past few decades, as shown in [Figure 6-4](#), yet almost 16% of Americans still smoke. This is despite the fact that smoking causes more than 480,000 deaths each year, more than HIV, illegal drug use, alcohol use, motor vehicle injuries, and firearm-related incidents combined. More than ten times as many U.S. citizens have died prematurely from cigarette smoking than have died in all the wars fought by the United States during its history.<sup>58</sup>



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■ FIGURE 6-4

Annual Percentage of U.S. Adults Who Smoke Cigarettes, 1955–2016 • Before the U.S. Surgeon General's report on the harmful effects of smoking came out in 1964, the rate of smoking in the United States was fairly flat. After, the rate fell steadily.

Data from: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2015a, 2016\)](#).

Worldwide, the problem is even worse. Of the more than 1 billion smokers alive today, up to half will die of smoking-related disease. By 2030, 8 million persons will die annually from smoking-related disease. At that point, smoking will be the leading cause of overall death (not just preventable death) throughout the world.<sup>59</sup>

Are these dire facts a cause for regulating smoking? Not in the view of traditional microeconomics. In the standard utility maximization model, any damage that individuals do to themselves from dangerous activities such as smoking results from a rational choice of trading off benefits against potential costs. The health hazards of smoking are now well known. The fact that smokers smoke given these risks, economists say, reveals their preference for the current pleasure of smoking over the distant costs of a shorter life.

Doesn't this argument ignore the fact that smoking is highly addictive? After all, leading experts on addiction rate nicotine as more addictive than either caffeine or marijuana and, in some cases, comparable to cocaine: among users of cocaine, about half say that the urge to smoke is as strong as the urge to use cocaine. Doesn't this mean that the damage that individuals do to themselves is a call to government action?

Once again, the answer from traditional economics is no. As postulated in a highly influential article by [Becker and Murphy \(1988\)](#), “rational addicts” understand that each cigarette they smoke today increases their addiction, leading them to smoke more tomorrow. As a result, when they buy a pack of cigarettes, they consider not only the cost of that pack but also the cost of all additional future packs that will now be purchased because their addiction has deepened. Moreover, the smoker understands that lighting up doesn’t just reduce health through the current cigarette, but through all the future cigarettes that will be consumed as a result of that addiction. If the smoker consumes the cigarette anyway, then this is a rational choice that does not call for government intervention.

## The Externalities of Smoking

The key public finance implication of the traditional economics approach is that the appropriate role for government is solely a function of the externalities that smokers impose on others. Like all other consumption decisions, smoking is governed by rational choice. That smokers impose enormous costs on themselves is irrelevant to public finance; only the costs smokers impose on others call for government action. Measuring the externalities from smoking is complicated, however, as we discuss next (and summarize in [Table 6-1](#)).

**TABLE 6-1 The Effects of Smoking: Externalities or Not?**

Effect	Not an externality if . . .	An externality if . . .
Increased health care costs	Insurance companies actuarially raise premiums for smokers.	Many individuals are insured by entities that spread the health costs of smokers among all of the insured; also, the health costs of the uninsured are passed on to others.
Less-productive workers	Employers adjust individuals’ wages according to productivity.	Employers do not adjust wages according to individual productivity, so that they must lower wages for all workers to offset productivity loss.
Increased number of fires	Smokers set fire only to their own property, requiring no help from the fire department, and insurance companies adjust premiums according to smoking status.	The fires damage nonsmokers’ property, raise the cost of the local fire department, or raise fire insurance premiums for all.
Earlier deaths	Smokers do not pay Social Security taxes or would not incur medical costs later in life.	Nonsmokers save money because smokers die too early to collect full Social Security benefits and because their deaths reduce the high health costs near the end of life (a positive externality).
Secondhand smoke effects	The effects are minimal or smokers account for their families’ utility when deciding to smoke.	The effects are serious and smokers do not account for their families’ utility when deciding to smoke.

Cigarette smoking has a number of physical and financial effects, but in many cases, they may not be externalities. The first column of this table lists examples of the effects of smoking. The second column discusses the situations under which these are not externalities, and the third column discusses the situations under which they are externalities.

### Increased Health Costs from Smoking

By one estimate, smoking-related disease increases U.S. medical care costs by \$176 billion, about 8.7% of the total cost of health care in the United States ([Xu et al., 2015](#)). This enormous number alone does not, however, justify government intervention. Suppose that all individuals in society had health insurance that they purchased on their own and that the price of that health insurance was set by insurance companies as a function of smoking status. Insurance companies would compute the extra amount they expect to spend on the medical care of smokers and charge smokers a higher premium to compensate the insurance company for those extra costs. Such increases in insurance prices to compensate for expected expense differences are called [actuarial adjustments](#). Actuarial adjustments internalize the medical cost externality from smoking. In this simplified model, there are no health externalities because smokers pay for the high medical costs associated with smoking through actuarial

adjustments: society (in this case, the insurance companies) is fully compensated for the extra costs due to smoking through these higher premiums.

#### actuarial adjustments

Changes to insurance premiums that insurance companies make in order to compensate for expected expense differences.

The external effects of increased health costs due to smoking arise because the real world deviates from this simplified example in three ways. First, insurance is not always actuarially adjusted for smoking behavior. At MIT, the price that I pay for my group insurance is independent of my smoking behavior. If I smoke, and if I have high medical costs, then the insurance company will have to raise the premiums that it charges to everyone at MIT by a small amount to compensate for this loss. In this case, I have exerted a negative externality on my coworkers, which I do not internalize because I do not fully pay the higher premiums associated with my smoking. This externality is falling over time, however, as companies are more frequently charging an insurance surcharge to their employees who smoke;<sup>60</sup> in addition, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) allows insurance rates to vary across individuals only by age and by smoking status (but not other health measures).



Quick Hint Externalities can be financial as well as physical. My smoking creates an externality because the social marginal benefit of my consumption of cigarettes is below my private marginal benefit by the extra amount that my coworkers have to pay for insurance.

Second, individuals who receive their insurance from the government do not pay higher premiums if they smoke. In this case, the negative externality occurs because the medical costs incurred by smokers are borne by all citizens through higher taxation. Finally, some individuals are uninsured and will not pay the cost of their medical care. Medical providers will typically make up these costs by increasing the amount they charge to other medical payers, exerting a negative financial externality on those payers.

## Workplace Productivity

There are many reasons smokers may be less productive in the workplace: they may require more sick leave or more frequent breaks (for smoking) when at work. One study found that smokers impose \$600 to \$1,100 per year in productivity and absenteeism costs on businesses, and another found that smokers miss 50% more workdays each year due to illness than do nonsmokers.<sup>61</sup> Is this a negative externality to the firm? Once again, the answer is a qualified maybe. In this case, it depends on whether these workers' wages adjust to compensate for their lower expected productivity. That is, actuarial adjustments aren't necessarily found only in insurance markets; they may exist in labor markets as well. If wages fail to compensate the firm for a smoker's lower productivity, then the firm can internalize the productivity externalities associated with smoking. If not, these externalities will not be internalized.

## Fires

Smokers are much more likely to start fires than nonsmokers, mostly due to falling asleep with burning cigarettes. In 2011, for example, fires started by smokers caused 540 deaths and \$621 million in property damage in the United States, and [Markowitz \(2010\)](#) reported that cigarettes caused 3 to 4% of all residential fires in the United States.<sup>62</sup> Does this death and destruction represent an externality? If a smoker lived by himself on a mountain and burned down his house, killing himself, but with no damage to any other person, flora, or fauna, then there is no externality. But, in reality, externalities from such fires abound. There is the cost of the fire department that combats the fire, the damage that the fire may do to the property of others, and the increased fire insurance premiums that everyone must pay unless there is

appropriate actuarial adjustment in the fire insurance market for smoking.

## The “Death Benefit”

An interesting twist on the measurement of smoking externalities is presented by the positive externalities for the taxpayer by the early deaths of smokers. Consider, for example, the Social Security program, which collects payroll tax payments from workers until they retire and then pays benefits from that date until an individual dies. Smokers typically die around retirement age so that they do not collect the retirement benefits to which their tax payments entitled them. In this situation, smokers are exerting a positive financial externality on nonsmokers: smokers pay taxes to finance the retirement benefits but do not live long enough to collect their benefits, leaving the government more money to pay benefits for nonsmokers. Thus, through the existence of the Social Security program, smokers benefit nonsmokers by dying earlier.

Moreover, the fact that smokers die earlier also offsets many of the medical cost effects of smoking. If smokers die at 65, then they won’t impose large nursing home and other medical costs at very advanced ages. These avoided medical costs offset much of the additional medical costs from treatment for cancers and heart disease at younger ages.

## Externality Estimates

The effects of these four components, along with some other minor negative externalities, make the estimate of the external costs of smoking roughly \$0.54 per pack in 2018 dollars.<sup>63</sup> This figure is sensitive to many factors, most importantly how one takes into account that the costs are often in the distant future while the benefits of smoking are current. Nevertheless, by most estimates, the external cost of smoking is well below the average federal plus state cigarette tax in the United States, which is more than \$1 per pack. Of course, these estimates leave out another externality that is potentially important but very difficult to quantify:

### secondhand smoke

**secondhand smoke**

Tobacco smoke inhaled by individuals in the vicinity of smokers.

## What About Secondhand Smoke?

The damage done to nonsmokers by breathing in secondhand cigarette smoke is a classic externality because individuals do not hold property rights to the air. Without clearly defined property rights, complete Coasian solutions to this problem are not available. Yet the costs of secondhand smoke are not easily added to the list of external costs we have noted for two reasons. First, there is considerable medical uncertainty about the damage done by secondhand smoke. As a result, estimates of the externalities from secondhand smoke vary from \$0.01 to \$1.28 per pack!<sup>64</sup>

Second, most of the damage from secondhand smoke is delivered to the spouses and children of smokers. And this damage can be significant: a recent study found that when cigarette taxes increase, reducing parental smoking, child sick days, doctor visits, and other medical care use falls as well.<sup>65</sup> If a smoking mother includes the utility of her family members in her utility function (maximizing family rather than just individual utility), she will take into account the damage she does to her husband and children by smoking. In this case, in making her choice to smoke, the smoker has decided that the benefits to her from smoking exceed the health costs both to herself and to her family members. When the externality is internalized in this way, the cost to other family members from being made ill must be offset by the large benefit the mother receives from smoking, or else she wouldn’t smoke. But, if the smoking mother fails to account fully for the costs to her family members (fails to maximize family utility), then some of the damage that she does to others will not be

internalized and should be counted in the externality calculation. Existing evidence suggests that family utility maximization is, in fact, incomplete, so these secondhand smoke costs are, to some extent, externalities.<sup>66</sup>

## Should We Care Only About Externalities, or Do “Internalities” Matter Also?

The traditional economics approach suggests that the only motivation for government intervention in the smoking decision is the externalities that smokers impose on others because any damage that smokers do to themselves has been accounted for in the smoking decision. But this model ignores some key features of the smoking decision that suggest that there may be other rationales for government intervention.

Two such features are particularly important: the decision by youths to smoke and the inability of adults to quit. After reviewing these features, we turn to how they challenge the traditional view of cigarette taxes based solely on externalities by suggesting that self-inflicted smoking damage matters for government policy as well.

### Youth Smoking

Of all adults who smoke, more than 75% begin smoking before their 19th birthday, but economics does not yet have a satisfactory model of the behavior of teenagers (as a matter of fact, neither do parents!).<sup>67</sup> The traditional model of smoking presumes that the decision to initiate this addictive behavior is made with a fully rational trade-off in mind between current benefits and future costs. If teens who begin to smoke do not correctly and rationally evaluate this trade-off, then government policy makers might care about the effect of the smoking decision on smokers themselves.

Indeed, there is some evidence that this monumental decision may not be made in the forward-looking fashion required by rational addiction models. A survey asked high school seniors who smoked a pack a day or more whether they would be smoking in five years and then followed up with the seniors five years later. Among those who had said they would be smoking in five years, the smoking rate was 72%—but among those who said they would *not* be smoking in five years, the smoking rate was 74%! This result suggests that teens who smoke may not account for the long-run implications of addiction.

### Adults Are Unable to Quit Smoking Even If They Have a Desire to Do So

Another key fact about smoking is that many adults who smoke would like to quit but are unable to do so. Consider the following facts:

- Eight in ten smokers in the United States express a desire to quit the habit, but many fewer than that actually do quit.
- According to one study, more than 80% of smokers try to quit in a typical year, and the average smoker tries to quit every eight and a half months.
- 54% of serious quit attempts fail within one week.

These facts are worrisome because they hint that smokers may face a **self-control problem**, an inability to carry out optimal strategies for consumption. Economic theory assumes that individuals can not only optimize their utility function but that they can then carry out those optimal plans. There is much evidence from psychology, however, that

contradicts this assumption: individuals are often unable to carry out long-term plans that involve self-control when there are short-term costs to doing so. An excellent example of this is smoking, where there is a short-term cost of quitting (in terms of physical discomfort and perhaps mental distress) but a long-term health benefit. Other examples include retirement savings (short-term cost in terms of forgone consumption today, but long-term benefits in terms of a higher standard of living in retirement) or whether to diet and/or exercise (short-term costs in terms of less food or more work today, but long-term benefits in terms of a longer life). In many arenas, individuals appear unable to control their short-term desires for their own longer-term well-being.

#### self-control problem

An inability to carry out optimal strategies for consumption.

There are two types of evidence for the existence of self-control problems. The first is from laboratory experiments in psychology. In laboratory settings, individuals consistently reveal that they are willing to be patient in the future but are impatient today, the defining characteristics of self-control problems. A person with self-control problems has the right long-run intentions (she rationally optimizes her utility function given her budget constraint), but she just can't carry them out. For example, in one experiment, most people preferred a check for \$100 that they could cash today over a check for \$200 that they could cash two years from now. Yet the same people prefer a \$200 check eight years from now to a \$100 check six years from now, even though this is the same choice—it's just six years in the future.<sup>68</sup> This is consistent with self-control problems: individuals are willing to be patient in the future, but not today when faced with the same choice.

The second type of evidence for self-control problems is the demand for **commitment devices**. If individuals have self-control problems and are aware of those problems, they will demand some type of device that helps them fight these problems. And the search for such commitment devices is the hallmark of most recommended strategies for quitting smoking: people regularly set up systems to refrain from smoking by betting with others, telling others about the decision, and otherwise making it embarrassing to smoke. These practices help individuals combat their self-control problems by raising the short-run costs of smoking to offset the short-run benefits of smoking. The use of self-control devices is widespread in other arenas as well: individuals set up Christmas club accounts at their banks to make sure they have enough money to buy Christmas presents, and they buy memberships at gyms to commit to working out when it would generally be cheaper to just pay each time they go.<sup>69</sup>

#### commitment devices

Devices that help individuals who are aware of their self-control problems fight their bad tendencies.

## Implications for Government Policy

Both irrationalities among youth smokers and self-control problems among older smokers seem to be sensible features of any model of the smoking decision: we all know (or were) irrational youths, and we all know (or are) individuals with problems of self-control. Yet these sensible psychological additions to the standard economic model have dramatic implications for government policy because, in either case, it is not just the external damage from smoking that matters for government intervention, but also some of the damage that smokers do to themselves. If smokers make mistakes when they are young, or would like to quit but cannot, the damage from smoking is a **negative internality**, which refers to the damage done to oneself through adverse behavior that is not fully accounted for in decision making. This internality justifies government regulation of smoking in the same way that externalities do in the traditional model. The government is once again addressing a failure; in this case, it is not an externality on others, but rather a cost imposed on one's long-run

health by one's short-run impatience or teen irrationality. If the government can make individuals better off in the long run by addressing short-run failings, then it can increase efficiency as if it were correcting a market failure.

#### **negative internality**

The damage done to oneself through adverse behavior that is not fully accounted for in decision making.

The stakes here are high. While the damage that smokers do to others is, on net, small, the damage that smokers do to themselves is extensive. Consider just one aspect of that damage: shortened lives. The average smoker is estimated to live about six fewer years than nonsmokers. A year of life is typically valued by economists at about \$200,000 (using methods discussed in detail in [Chapter 8](#)). At this estimate, the value of life lost from smoking is about \$35 per pack! This is an enormous figure, on the order of 75 times larger than the typical estimate of the external damage done by smoking.

The government has several policy tools at its disposal for addressing internalities. One tool is information. Much of the decline in smoking over the past 30 years has been traced to the release of information about the dangerous health implications of smoking. Information about long-run health effects will not, however, effectively combat problems of self-control or teen irrationality.<sup>[70](#)</sup>

The government can also solve the inability of the private market to provide sufficient commitment. Private commitment mechanisms are not fully successful for smokers, as highlighted by the facts on self-control earlier. More generally, private commitment mechanisms don't show promise in getting individuals to invest in preventive care.<sup>[71](#)</sup> But an excellent commitment device is available to the government: taxation, which raises the price of cigarettes to smokers. A large body of evidence shows that smokers are fairly sensitive to the price of cigarettes, with smoking falling by about 5% for each 10% rise in prices (and by even more among especially price-sensitive youth smokers). By raising taxes, the government can force smokers to face higher costs that lower their smoking, providing the desired self-control.<sup>[72](#)</sup> [Gruber and Koszegi \(2004\)](#) calculated that, for the type of self-control problems documented in laboratory experiments, the optimal tax would be on the order of \$5 to \$10 per pack, above and beyond any taxes imposed to combat externalities. This is a high level that is well above taxation rates today.

The notion that government policy should be determined not just by externalities, but by internalities as well, is a major departure from traditional microeconomic policy analysis. As such, much more research is needed to decide how large internalities really are. Nevertheless, the enormous health costs of smoking (\$35 per pack) suggest that even if such internalities are small, they might justify large government interventions.

## 6.4 The Economics of Other Addictive Behaviors

While cigarette smoking is a particularly interesting application, it is by no means the only health behavior in which externalities (or internalities) potentially cause market failure. We briefly consider three others.

### Drinking

Alcohol consumption presents an interesting alternative example to cigarette smoking because the externalities associated with alcohol consumption are much larger than those associated with smoking. This is mostly because the major externality associated with alcohol consumption is damage due to drunk driving. Every day, almost 30 people in the United States die in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. This amounts to one death every 48 minutes. In 2016, 10,497 people were killed in alcohol-impaired driving crashes, accounting for nearly one-third (28%) of all traffic-related deaths in the United States.<sup>73</sup> Overall, the estimated social costs of excessive drinking are about \$250 billion per year, or about \$2,000 per U.S. household.<sup>74</sup> Even though the drunk driver may lose her license and see her insurance premiums rise, she is unlikely to bear the full costs to society of her action. An estimate for the externalities due to drinking are \$2.05 per drink,<sup>75</sup> which is much higher than current alcohol taxes that amount to an average of \$0.21 per ounce of ethanol, and depends on the type of drink (taxes per ounce of ethanol vary across beer, wine, and other alcoholic drinks).<sup>76</sup>

These figures do not include another potentially important externality from drinking: the increased tendency toward violence and crime. A total of 55% of violent crimes and two thirds of victims attacked by a significant other report that the perpetrator had been drinking before committing the crime.<sup>77</sup> A series of articles by Sara Markowitz and colleagues document strong effects of anti-alcohol policies (such as higher taxes on alcohol) in lowering violence, crime, risky sexual behavior, and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>78</sup> A study in India found that alcohol prohibition was associated with large reductions in violence against women.<sup>79</sup> And after implementation of the 24/7 Sobriety Program in South Dakota, which sentences drunk driving offenders to mandatory abstinence with constant monitoring, there was a sizable reduction in DUI arrests, domestic violence, and deaths.<sup>80</sup> Once again, if this violent behavior only involves family members, it may or may not be an externality; when it involves others, such as through criminal acts, the behavior is clearly an externality.

The internalities due to drinking may be much smaller than those due to smoking, however. Drinking in small quantities, while it may impair one's driving, may actually be good for long-run health. And it is only a small share of drinkers who damage their health or otherwise harm themselves by drinking. Thus, the major rationale for government regulation of drinking is the standard one, from externalities. That said, drinking does have least some internalities through reduced health; one recent study in Russia showed a powerful effect of alcohol liberalization in raising death rates, and of higher alcohol taxes in lowering mortality.<sup>81</sup>

The appropriate role for government in regulating drinking is difficult because the externalities due to drinking arise from the share of drinking that results in drunk driving and violence, which is relatively small. In theory, the optimal policy would target drunk driving and violence with steeper fines and penalties. But it is impossible to realistically raise the cost of drunk driving or violence enough to account for the externalities of that activity. At the other extreme, raising taxes on all alcohol consumption is a very blunt instrument that will lower drinking too much among those who aren't going to drive drunk or commit violent acts

and not enough among those who are at risk for driving drunk or alcohol-related violence. Nevertheless, given the enormous damage done by drinking, higher alcohol taxes would raise social welfare overall, relative to a system that leaves taxes at a level so far below the externalities of drinking.<sup>82</sup> A better source of targeting may be raising the age at which youths can access alcohol, as discussed in the Empirical Evidence box.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *The Effect of Legal Drinking at Age 21*

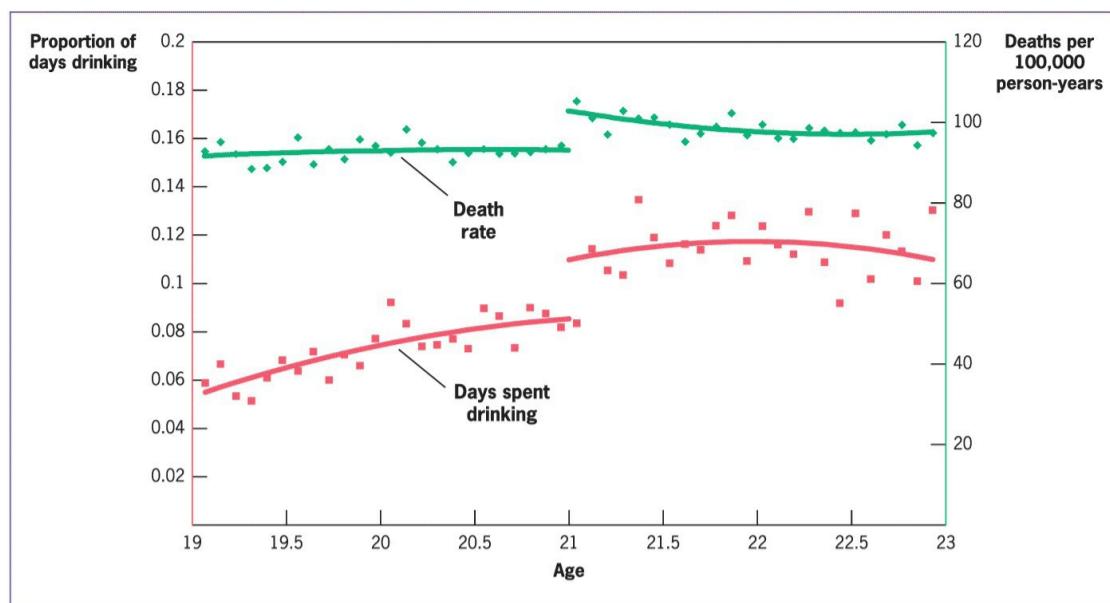
In the United States today, the legal drinking age is 21, but in many states, it was lowered to 18, 19, or 20 during the early 1970s, before being normalized back to age 21 in the late 1980s. One concern with a lower drinking age is that youths are particularly susceptible to the internalities and externalities of drinking, particularly with respect to drunk driving. At the same time, others argue that a drinking age of 21 doesn't stop youth drinking and may even make it worse. Vice-chancellor and president of University of the South, John McCardell, said in a *New York Times* op-ed, "those against whom the law is directed routinely evade it, and often with life-threatening results." McCardell says the law has created a dangerous culture of irresponsible and reckless behavior and unsupervised binge and extreme drinking.<sup>83</sup> So does the drinking age matter? Addressing this question by simply comparing drinking rates above and below age 21 would not be convincing because those over age 21 may have different tastes for drinking than those below age 21. Suppose, for example, that the taste for alcohol rises with age. Then we might find that drinking rises after age 21 but that this increase has nothing to do with legality. If noncomparability due to differing tastes for drinking by age is the source of the difference, rather than the difference in legal status, then our estimates of the effect of the drinking age on drinking would be biased. Research, however, has suggested two interesting empirical strategies for addressing this noncomparability issue.

The first is to use the fact that states changed their drinking ages at different times in the 1980s as they moved from lower drinking ages toward a nationally uniform standard of age 21. This provides an excellent quasi-experiment, in which the treatment group is states that raised their drinking ages and the control group is states that didn't. If the drinking age matters for drinking, then drinking should have fallen among those people between the old drinking age and age 21 when the law changed, relative to states where the law did not change.

A number of studies have assessed this quasi-experiment and have found that raising the drinking age not only deterred youth drinking, but also had other important effects. [Carpenter and Dobkin \(2011\)](#) summarized the evidence and reported that a lower drinking age led to 6 to 17% more drinking among 18- to 20-year-olds. [Cook and Moore \(2001\)](#) found that a lower drinking age led not only to more drinking among youths, but also that as those youths aged, they drank more. That is, those who started earlier were more likely to drink later in life. [Carpenter and Dobkin \(2011\)](#) found that lower drinking ages were associated with a 17% increase in the rate of motor vehicle deaths for 18- to 20-year-olds. And [Fertig and Watson \(2009\)](#) found that lower drinking ages led to worse outcomes for births to teen mothers, including low birth weight and premature births.<sup>84</sup>

The second empirical strategy is to contrast outcomes in recent data right around the 21st birthday. While those who are over 21 may be different in general than those under age 21, those who are observed in the few days before their 21st birthday should be very similar to those in the few days after their 21st birthday—except for the fact that the latter group can drink legally. By comparing the outcomes among those comparable groups just before and after their 21st birthday, researchers can derive a causal estimate of the impact of legal drinking on outcomes through what is called a regression discontinuity approach.

This approach is illustrated in [Figure 6-5](#), from [Carpenter and Dobkin \(2009\)](#). The x axis of this figure shows age in monthly intervals. The bottom line (in red) graphs the proportion of days on which individuals had a drink (and the quantities are denoted on the left-hand vertical axis). The points in the figure are the actual monthly averages by month of age. The solid line is a regression line of the type discussed in [Chapter 3](#), but where the regression line is estimated separately for ages up to 21 and ages over 21. What is clear from this diagram is that there is a discontinuous shift at age 21—a clear jump in the proportion of days drinking at the 21st birthday. Regression analysis that uses the actual birthday, rather than just month of birth, shows that those individuals just over age 21 spend about 30% more days drinking than those just below age 21.<sup>85</sup> This sizeable discontinuity suggests that there is an effect of legalization at age 21.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 6-5

Changes in Drinking and Mortality Around Age 21 • There is a strong “regression discontinuity” around age 21 for both the proportion of days spent drinking and the death rate.

Data from: [Carpenter and Dobkin \(2009\)](#).

The top line (in green) repeats this exercise for a different outcome: death rates (the quantities denoted on the right-hand vertical axis). Once again, there was a striking jump in death rates at age 21, with death rates just after the 21st birthday being 9% higher than just before. That is, the higher numbers of people drinking just after becoming legal was associated with higher rates of mortality. The authors also show that these mortality effects derived largely from higher alcohol-related driving deaths.

Other studies confirm the importance of age 21 for the damage done by drinking. [Carrell et al. \(2011\)](#) found that academic performance suffered upon reaching the drinking age. [Yoruk \(2015\)](#) found that young adults worked less when drinking became legal. And [Hansen and Waddell \(2016\)](#) found that crime increased right at age 21, with increases due to assaults lacking in premeditation and alcohol-related nuisance crimes. It is clear from these empirical analyses that lowering the drinking age in the United States does matter and has serious adverse effects on those aged 18 to 20.<sup>83</sup>

## Illicit Drugs

Another addictive behavior that raises government concern is the use of illicit drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, and heroin. In the United States, as in most countries, the government regulates these activities by prohibiting illicit drug consumption, subject to criminal penalty. This is a particularly interesting case because most of the externalities associated with illicit drugs arise because of their illegality. Indeed, legal consumption of some illicit drugs is likely to have much lower externalities than consumption of alcohol. Thus, the rational addiction model would suggest that there is no more call for regulating illicit drug use than for regulating smoking. As the famous economist [Milton Friedman wrote in 1972](#), in advocating the legalization of drugs, “The harm to us from the addiction of others arises almost wholly from the fact that drugs are illegal. A recent committee of the American Bar Association estimated that addicts commit one-third to one-half of all street crime in the U.S. Legalize drugs, and street crime would drop dramatically.”<sup>84</sup> And a group of 22 medical experts convened by Johns Hopkins University in 2016 called for the decriminalization of all nonviolent drug use and possession, instead moving gradually toward regulated drug

markets.<sup>85</sup>

This type of argument has been influential in the recent wave of marijuana legalization in the United States. Marijuana has been legalized for medical purposes in 30 states and the District of Columbia. Full legalization for recreational use is in place in nine of those states (Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, Nevada, and California) and the District of Columbia, beginning with Colorado in 2014.<sup>86</sup> Colorado sold roughly \$600 million worth of marijuana during the first 11 months of the program, a small fraction of the \$1.5 billion the marijuana industry generated in 2017.<sup>87</sup> Since the law passed, there has been a 41% decrease in drug arrests. At the same time, past studies of states with medical marijuana laws have found significant rises in the likelihood of initiating use of marijuana by teens and a rise in the odds of frequent smoking by adults.<sup>88</sup>

Yet, despite the move to legalize marijuana, broader drug legalization remains a radical idea in most nations, including the United States. Thus, policy makers clearly don't believe that the rational addiction model applies equally to illicit drugs and other potentially addictive activities, such as drinking and smoking. For illicit drugs, but not for smoking and drinking, the government appears to have concluded that individuals are not making the right long-term decisions for themselves—otherwise, it is difficult to rationalize the public policies pursued in most industrialized nations.<sup>89</sup>



## APPLICATION

### Public Policy Toward Obesity

A potential health externality that has recently attracted significant attention in the United States and elsewhere is obesity. *Obesity* is defined as having a body mass index (BMI) well above the norm for one's age. The BMI measures the ratio of height to weight. There has been an enormous rise in obesity in the United States: the share of the adult population classified as obese has risen from 12% in 1960 to 39.5% in 2016.<sup>93</sup> While the United States is gaining weight at a more rapid rate than other developed countries, the general rise in obesity is a global phenomenon; the World Health Organization (WHO) reports that about 650 million adults worldwide are obese, or more than one of every ten adults on the planet.<sup>94</sup>

Why is obesity on the rise? Studies have shown that the blame lies with increased caloric intake and reduced physical activity. Caloric intake is rising naturally as incomes rise, and there has been a shift over time from healthy foods (which tend to be preparation-intensive) to unhealthy ones (which are readily available and easier to prepare). The ready availability may especially contribute to obesity when individuals suffer from self-control problems that leave them susceptible to easy, low-cost avenues for weight gain. A number of studies show that individuals will eat more, for example, if more is placed in front of them, or if the plate is larger so that it appears that there is less food; as [Downs et al. \(2009\)](#) argue, many individuals are irrationally sensitive to external cues (how full their plate is) relative to their internal cues (how full they are), which should matter most. Another study by [Read and van Leeuwen \(1998\)](#) found that individuals were willing to commit to eating healthier in the future, but when faced with immediate choices, they chose less healthy options. In addition, just as caloric intake is rising, physical activity is falling. Industrialized societies have moved from a situation in which individuals were paid to exercise (through jobs that require physical labor and activity) to one in which individuals must pay to exercise (because jobs are sedentary and

exercise must come at the cost of forgone leisure time and often at the cost of paid gym memberships).

Public policy makers should care about this rise in obesity because it has both enormous externalities and internalities. Indeed, the fastest growing public health problem in the United States today is diabetes, a disease whereby the body is unable to regulate its glucose (sugar) intake. Diabetes is a progressive and often fatal disease with no known cure. It can attack every organ in the body, resulting in higher risk of heart failure, stroke, and poor circulation, which can lead to amputation. In 2012, 29 million Americans, or 9.4% of the U.S. population, had diabetes, and 25.8% of the adult population was prediabetic.<sup>95</sup> The number one factor driving the rise in diabetes is the rise in obesity and inactive lifestyles.

When all the negative health effects associated with obesity are taken into account, the most recent estimates suggest that obesity-related illness may cost the United States \$342 billion per year in medical costs.<sup>96</sup> Within 50 years, obesity will likely shorten the average life span by at least two to five years, a higher impact than that of cancer or heart disease.<sup>97</sup> Thus, under either traditional models or models that take into account self-control problems, there may be a large role for the government in addressing this problem.

Understanding why obesity is rising and the harm it is causing is easy, however, compared to deriving proper policy responses to the problem. There have been a number of different approaches to using public policy tools to reduce obesity, but none has proven highly successful to date.

The first is to change the nature of food supply by making healthier foods more readily available, particularly in low-income “food deserts” where options for healthy eating had previously been limited. But such efforts have so far failed to change eating behavior. The city of Philadelphia, for example, invested millions in new grocery stores to provide healthier options for lower-income areas of the city. Yet a recent study found that the availability of such stores did nothing to change eating habits among residents, while other research has shown that while nutritional food is less available in low income neighborhoods, this only explains a small fraction of the reason nutrition is worse in disadvantaged communities.<sup>98</sup>

Another approach is to tax or even ban unhealthy foods. Addressing obesity through taxing food, however, is much more difficult than addressing smoking because while every cigarette is bad for you, clearly some food consumption is good for you! So a simple tax on calories could do more harm than good by deterring low-income families from getting enough nutrition. More generally, there is a very complicated relationship between different types of food consumption and health; for example, as [Rosin \(1998\)](#) wrote, “Measuring fat content is not always practical. Hamburger meat has a certain percentage of fat, but most of it would melt away during grilling. And what about sugary no-fat snacks such as soda and candy?” Another complication with taxing food inputs is illustrated by the case of Denmark, which imposed a tax on saturated fat content in foods in 2011; this tax was repealed one year later when it led to a huge increase in Danes shopping in other nations for fatty foods.<sup>99</sup>

A particularly popular target for policies in this area has been sugary drinks. Studies show that consumption of sugary beverages has nearly tripled from 1980–2000, and by 1998, Americans were consuming more than a gallon of soft drinks a week. In 2016, consumption dropped to 411 cans a year, or about 0.75 gallon a week.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, this figure is still huge. Recently, Berkeley, California, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, passed sugar taxes. Studies on the short-term impact of these taxes have found significant changes in beverage

consumption. Two months after the tax was enacted in Philly, residents reported being 40% less likely to consume soda every day, 64% less likely to have energy drinks daily, and 58% more likely to drink bottled water every day. In Berkeley, a year after the tax took hold, there was a 10% decrease in sugary drink sales, and a 16% increase in water sales. New York City proposed an alternative strategy in 2011, seeking federal permission to ban the use of publicly provided food subsidies for the purchase of sugary soda, but the request was denied. New York City also proposed a ban on the sale of large sugared soft drinks, but the request was rejected by the state's highest court.

Other nations are aggressively taxing sugar. Mexico passed a tax for bottlers of 1 peso per liter of sugared beverage (roughly a 10% price increase for a 16 ounce Coke) in 2013, and soda consumption was down 12% a year later.<sup>101</sup> Britain designed their 2018 sugar tax differently: they created a two-tiered system, with sodas with sugar content between 12 and 19 grams per 12 ounce can taxed at a lower rate than sodas with more than 19 grams (6 cents per serving versus 8 cents). Even before the tax took effect, beverage companies announced plans to decrease added sugar content of their drinks, and restaurants took drinks with high sugar content off self-serve soda fountains, to avoid higher taxes. There is no data yet about the effects of Britain's tax.<sup>102</sup>

Some communities have turned to an outright ban on unhealthy food stuffs, such as artificial trans-fats, which are found in baked goods such as pastries, cookies, and many other desserts, and in fried foods such as French fries and chicken nuggets. Citing the fact that trans-fats are "chemically modified food ingredients that raise levels of a particularly unhealthy form of cholesterol and have been squarely linked to heart disease," the New York City Board of Health voted in December 2006 to adopt the first significant municipal ban on the use of trans-fats.<sup>103</sup> Denmark limited the use of industrially produced trans-fats as far back as 2003, and trans-fats have been virtually purged from the Danish people's diets.<sup>104</sup> In the United States, a ban on partially hydrogenated oils (PHOs) came into effect in 2018. PHOs are the largest source of trans-fats in most people's diets, but trans-fats can also be found in some meats and elsewhere.<sup>105</sup>

Major targets of policies to date have been schools and childhood obesity. There has been ready access to junk food in schools in the United States, perhaps driven by financial need because schools profit from selling these foods. One study found that a 10 percentage point increase in probability of accessibility to junk food led to a 1 percentage point increase in the average student's BMI; this study estimated that access to unhealthy school food options had accounted for one-fifth of the increase in average BMI among adolescents between 1990 and 2000 ([Anderson and Butcher, 2005](#)). Policies to remedy this trend include restricting the sale of junk food in schools and reforming school meal plans to focus on more healthy food options. To increase physical activity, some policies require more rigorous school physical education programs. Some researchers are even experimenting with paying schoolchildren to eat healthier, and finding large effects; one study found that small (25 cent) incentives could double the share of children eating fruits or vegetables, and that this effect largely persisted even after the incentive payment ended.<sup>106</sup>

The major focus of policies to address obesity has been through improved information and targeting of the substances most closely linked to obesity. For example, in July 2008, New York City enforced a law requiring all chain restaurants (those with 15 or more establishments) to display calories on their menus or face a fine ranging from \$200 to \$2,000 ([Sorrel, 2009](#)). A study of the early implementation of this regulation found that it led to a

small but statistically significant decrease in the calories per food transaction, but a follow-up study suggests that the effects faded away over time as individuals learned to ignore the labels.<sup>107</sup> The Affordable Care Act mandated calorie labeling at all chain restaurants, vending machines, and food retail establishments with more than 20 locations; this policy was only put into force in 2018, so it is too early to assess its effects.

A more successful approach may be to engage consumers directly in self-control strategies. Studies have found that when consumers are directly offered the opportunity to downsize their starchy side portions at a Chinese restaurant, a sizeable fraction chose to do so and did not offset this with more calories consumed elsewhere in the meal; when a children's menu at a chain restaurant was changed to be more healthy, there was a resulting increase in healthy orders; and labeling receipts with personalized, lower-calorie ordering suggestions (e.g., substituting ham for sausage or frozen yogurt for ice cream) led to a modestly sized switch to the suggested alternative in future visits to the restaurant.<sup>108</sup>

In a more aggressive approach, some states and nations have moved directly to penalize individuals for being obese. In 2011, then-Governor of Arizona Jan Brewer proposed an annual \$50 Medicaid charge on patients who were obese, to be levied only if the identified patients failed to improve their health.<sup>109</sup> In 2008, Japan's Ministry of Health passed mandates requiring local governments and employers to add a "waist measurement test" to mandatory annual checkups for adults. Those who fail the test with waistlines exceeding preset limits must take corrective measures, while local governments and companies whose populations do not meet specified guidelines face financial penalties.<sup>110</sup> Some states and employers are using rewards to address obesity, for example, by providing financial incentives to employees to enroll in wellness programs that will help them manage their weight. However, a recent study of employees who participated in yearlong health promotion programs that offered financial rewards for weight loss showed a steady, but not significant, loss in weight ([Cawley and Price, 2011](#)). ■

## Summary

Regulating other health behaviors raises many issues similar to those we raised for smoking. For drinking and obesity, however, existing taxes are already so far below the level of negative externalities that assessing the role of self-control problems and internalities is not critical: virtually any economic model would imply that if these externality calculations are correct, taxes should be higher. Yet there are challenges in raising taxes in both cases, ranging from the fact that a moderate amount of consumption may actually be good for people to the fact that it is difficult to design taxes that properly target the externality.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the externality theory developed in [Chapter 5](#) has many interesting and relevant applications. Public finance provides tools to help us think through the regulation of regional externalities such as particulates, global externalities such as climate change, and even the “internalities” of smoking. Careful analysis of public policy options requires distinguishing truly external costs from costs that are absorbed through the market mechanism; understanding the benefits and costs of alternative regulatory mechanisms to address externalities; and considering whether externalities only, or externalities *and* internalities, should count in regulatory decisions.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Particulates are a clear negative externality exerted primarily by power plants on wildlife, trees, structures, and (through associated particulate emissions) human health.
- The original CAA significantly (but inefficiently) reduced the amount of particulates in the air (and thus reduced acid rain). Regulation became much more efficient with the trading regime imposed by the 1990 amendments to the act.
- Climate change is a difficult problem because the effects are truly global and very long lasting.
- The Kyoto treaty would be a costly (for the United States) first step in addressing climate change, but trading and developing country participation could lower costs significantly.
- The net external costs of smoking are fairly low, suggesting a limited government role under the traditional model. Alternative models where consumers have self-control problems suggest that the government role may be larger.
- Other activities such as alcohol consumption and obesity have much larger externalities, but it is difficult to design regulatory mechanisms to target the exact source of the externality (drunk driving and fat consumption, respectively).

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. There is concern that California's cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gases, implemented in 2012, has led to "hot spots" of pollution—localized areas with very high concentrations of hazardous pollutants such as air toxics and particulate matter. A recent study by [Cushing et al. \(2018\)](#) showed that socioeconomically disadvantaged communities have been disproportionately exposed to these air pollutants under California's cap-and-trade program. This has happened despite the fact that overall greenhouse gas emissions and exposure to pollutants in the state have been reduced significantly under the program. How might a cap-and-trade system lead to such "hot spots"? Are these "hot spots" necessarily a bad thing from an overall social welfare perspective? Explain.
2. Consider the environmental damage that results from the emissions of coal-fired power plants. These plants produce pollutants such as sulfur dioxide ( $\text{SO}_2$ ) and nitrogen oxide ( $\text{NO}_x$ ), which combine with hydrogen to make acid rain. They release mercury into the environment and emit other particulate matter such as soot, as well. Which of these externalities are highly localized, and which are borne by society at large? Explain.
3. Comment on the free rider problem in the context of global climate agreements. How does recent historical experience with the Kyoto Treaty and the Paris Agreement relate to this problem?
4.  Think about the concerns about the original 1970 CAA described in the text. To what degree did the 1990 amendments to the act address these concerns? Explain your answer.
5. Some observers argue that since  $\text{CO}_2$  and temperature levels have been much higher in Earth's history than they are today, the current concerns about the human contribution to climate change are overblown. How would you empirically test this argument?
6. Every year the federal government conducts the Monitoring the Future survey to study trends in teenage substance use. The survey covers smoking, drinking, and use of other drugs. Navigate to <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/monitoring-future-survey-high-school-youth-trends>. Or you can search the National Institute on Drug Abuse website for the most current year's DrugFacts summary report on the Monitoring the Future survey.
  - Answer the following questions using the most current year's Monitoring the Future survey.
    1. What substances have teenagers used the most and the least in the past year?
    2. Over the past five years, what substances are teenagers using more frequently? What substances are they using less often?
    3. What is the single most significant change in teenage substance abuse over the past five years? What two additional conclusions about increases and decreases in use can you draw from the data?
7. As of 2017, the majority of states have enacted smoking bans in public places such as workplaces, restaurants, and bars. What is the economic rationale behind these bans in public places? Would a similar rationale exist for banning smoking in private settings such as cars, apartment buildings, and private homes?
8. In Problem 7, we considered the externalities of secondhand smoke in public places. Concerns about these externalities motivated policy makers in most U.S. states to enact smoking bans in bars and restaurants, despite concerns that the bans would have a negative economic impact on the restaurant and bar industry. Whether those negative economic effects have occurred has been the subject of debate. Several economic studies have shown that these laws have had a null or positive economic effect. [Shafer \(2017\)](#) posits that these laws might create differential economic effects for different kinds of establishments. His study tests the hypothesis that the null or positive average effect of these laws might mask the fact that some establishments are harmed economically.
  - Discuss the behavior of smokers and nonsmokers when moving from a smoking permissive regime to a smoking ban. What would need to be true for a ban to have a net positive economic impact? A net negative economic impact? Explain how Shafer's hypothesis might be true.
9. How can smoking exert a *positive* externality on others?
10. Some policy experts from states with the highest adult obesity rates have argued that since obesity causes so many serious health problems, fatty foods should be regulated. Do you agree with them?

The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11.  Why does [Chay and Greenstone's \(2003b\)](#) approach to measuring the effects of acid rain reduce the identification problems associated with more “traditional” approaches?
12.  Imagine that in your first job out of college you have been hired as a legislative aide to a congresswoman who is crafting a new antipollution law, intended to be her signature legislative accomplishment. She tasks you with doing historical research on the Clean Air Act of 1970 in order to gain historical perspective on key past legislative efforts. You find that some writers of the period made the interesting argument that the CAA might actually make the air dirtier, since it only covers new plants.
  1. What did these writers mean when they made this argument?
  2. Other writers support the act, and are unconcerned that this effect would materialize in practice. How would you construct an empirical test to distinguish between these hypotheses?
13. Caffeine is a highly addictive drug found in coffee, tea, and some sodas. Unlike cigarettes, however, there have been very few calls to tax it, regulate its consumption, or limit its use in public places. Why the difference? Can you think of any economic arguments for regulating (or taxing) its use?
14. When Wisconsin had lower drinking ages than its neighboring states, it experienced higher levels of alcohol-related crashes in its border counties than in other counties in its interior. What does this finding imply for the spillover effects of the policies of one state (or country) on other jurisdictions?
15. In [Becker and Murphy's \(1988\)](#) “rational addiction” model, smokers are perfectly aware of the potential for smoking to cause addiction, and they take this into account when deciding whether or not to smoke. Consider the emergence of e-cigarettes, a new technology that makes quitting smoking much easier and less costly. If Becker and Murphy’s model is correct, what effect would you expect the invention of e-cigarettes to have on tobacco cigarette smoking rates? How would your answer be different for younger and older cohorts?

# CHAPTER 7 Public Goods



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [7.1 Optimal Provision of Public Goods](#)
- [7.2 Private Provision of Public Goods](#)
- [7.3 Public Provision of Public Goods](#)
- [7.4 Conclusion](#)
- [APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 7](#)
  - [The Mathematics of Public Goods Provision](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do we determine the optimal level of public goods?
- When is the private sector likely to provide the optimal level of public goods?
- What are the major issues in public provision of public goods?

In the Republic of Lebanon, if you bought a home with a beach view, you may now have a house that instead has the view—and the smell—of garbage. Lebanon has never had a national, comprehensive waste management system. As the country urbanizes and people move to cities, waste production has increased, creating a crisis. In 2015, Lebanon's trash garnered international attention when one of the country's largest landfills closed, causing trash to pile up in the streets of Beirut, Lebanon's capital and largest city. The trash inspired widespread protest. Eventually, the government got the trash out of Beirut, largely through the creation of temporary dumps.

On average there is one dump per 6.5 miles<sup>1</sup> in Lebanon. Many of these dumps are improperly run and pose serious health threats to people and the surrounding environment. Seaside landfills let waste runoff into the ocean. Coastal resort towns, especially around Beirut, have seen their economies collapse as tourism declines due to the mountains of refuse on the beaches and in the water. Additionally, many dumps solve space constraints by openly burning waste, which is linked to asthma, obstructive pulmonary disease, and respiratory irritation. "It's like there's fog across the whole town," said a resident living near a burning site, "We are coughing all the time, unable to breathe, sometimes we wake up and see ash in our spit."<sup>2</sup>

Given these enormous problems, why don't the residents of Beirut simply hire a private trash collection system to come collect their trash and haul it away? In this way, the free market might solve the problem. The trouble is that private trash collection, financed by a voluntary fee paid by neighborhood residents, faces the classic *free rider problem* introduced in [Chapter 5](#): any resident could continue to throw their trash into the streets or onto dumps, and then refuse to pay her share of the trash collection fee, with the hope that her neighbors would pick up the costs for her. If her neighbors cover the cost of collection, this free rider gets all the benefits of trash collection but pays none of the costs. Yet, if some in the neighborhood free ride, others will feel exploited by paying to have their nonpaying neighbors' trash picked up; these residents might decide not to pay either. Eventually, the number of free riders might grow large enough that the town would not be able to raise sufficient funds to finance the trash collection from a private company.

The problems faced by Lebanon illustrate the difficulties of effectively addressing the free rider problem through a private mechanism. Goods that suffer from this free rider problem are known in economics as *public goods*, and they are the focus of this chapter. We begin by defining *public goods* and determining the optimal level of their provision. We then turn to the first question of public finance and ask if the government should be involved in the provision of public goods. We show that the private sector is, in fact, likely to underprovide public goods due to the free rider problem. Sometimes, however, private actors successfully provide public goods, so we discuss the factors that make private provision successful.

We then discuss the public provision of public goods. In principle, the government can

simply compute the optimal amount of a public good to provide and then provide that level. In practice, however, the government faces several difficulties in providing the optimal level of public goods. First, when private parties are already providing the public good, government provision may simply *crowd out* this private provision so that the total amount of the public good provided does not rise. Second, the optimal mix of public and private provision of the public good can be difficult to determine. Third, measuring the actual costs and benefits of public goods (which is required for determining optimal public goods provision) is difficult. Finally, determining the public's true preferences for public goods, and aggregating those preferences into an overall decision on whether to pursue public goods projects, raises a variety of challenges.

This chapter begins our section on public goods provision. [Chapters 8 and 9](#) provide details on the problems of measuring the costs and benefits of public projects (*cost-benefit analysis*), and on the difficulties of effectively translating voters' preferences for public projects into public policy (*political economy*). [Chapter 10](#) discusses the local provision of public goods and raises the important question of whether competition across localities can solve the public goods provision problems raised in [Chapters 7–9](#). Finally, [Chapter 11](#) focuses on one of the most important public goods provided in the United States: education.

## 7.1 Optimal Provision of Public Goods

Goods that are **pure public goods** are characterized by two traits. First, they are **non-rival in consumption**; that is, my consuming or making use of the good does not in any way affect your opportunity to consume the good. Second, they are **non-excludable**; even if you want to deny someone else the opportunity to consume or access the public good, there is no way you can do so. These are fairly strong conditions, and very few goods meet these conditions in practice. Most of the goods we think of as public goods are really **impure public goods**, which satisfy these two conditions to some extent but not fully.

### **pure public goods**

Goods that are perfectly non-rival in consumption and are non-excludable.

### **non-rival in consumption**

One individual's consumption of a good does not affect another's opportunity to consume the good.

### **non-excludable**

Individuals cannot deny each other the opportunity to consume a good.

### **impure public goods**

Goods that satisfy the two public good conditions (non-rival in consumption and non-excludable) to some extent, but not fully.

**Table 7-1** shows possible combinations of public good characteristics. Goods that are both excludable and rival are pure private goods. Private goods such as ice cream are completely rival (once you eat an ice cream cone, I cannot consume that ice cream cone at all), and they are completely excludable (you can simply refuse to sell me an ice cream cone).

TABLE 7-1 Defining Pure and Impure Public Goods

		Is the Good Rival in Consumption?	
		(Yes)	(No)
Is the Good Excludable?	(Yes)	Private good (ice cream)	Impure public good (TV streaming)
	(No)	Impure public good (crowded city sidewalk)	Pure public good (national defense)

Whether a good is private or public depends on whether it is rival and excludable. Pure private goods such as ice cream are both rival and excludable. Pure public goods such as national defense are neither rival nor excludable. Goods that are rival but not excludable, and vice versa, are impure public goods.

There are two types of impure public goods. Some goods are *excludable, but not rival*. The best example here is TV streaming services: the use of these services by others in no way diminishes your enjoyment of TV programs and movies, so consumption is non-rival. It is, however, possible to exclude you from consuming streamed programs: the streaming service can simply refuse to allow you access. Other goods, such as walking on a crowded city sidewalk, are *rival but not excludable*. When you walk on a crowded city sidewalk, you reduce the enjoyment of that walking experience for other pedestrians, who must now fight against even more foot traffic. Yet it would be very difficult for any city to exclude individuals from using the sidewalk! These types of goods are often known as “common goods,” referring to public lands or “commons” on which local residents would feed their livestock.

Pure public goods are rare because there are few goods that are both not excludable and not rival. A classic example of a pure public good is national defense. National defense is not rival because if someone builds a house next to yours, that action in no way diminishes your national defense protection. National defense is not excludable because once an area is protected by national defense, everyone in the area is protected: there is no way the government can effectively deny you protection because your house is in a neighborhood with many other houses. Other classic examples of pure public goods include lighthouses and

fireworks displays.

It is helpful to think about a public good as one with a large positive externality. If you set off fireworks high into the sky, it benefits many more people beyond yourself because many people will be able to see the display. You are not compensated for other people's enjoyment, however—you can't exclude others from seeing the fireworks, so you can't charge them for their enjoyment. It is also helpful to recognize that public goods often have high fixed costs and large economies of scale. It doesn't make sense for one house to have its own defense system since the fixed costs of setting up that system are so large relative to the budget of any one house.

## Optimal Provision of Private Goods

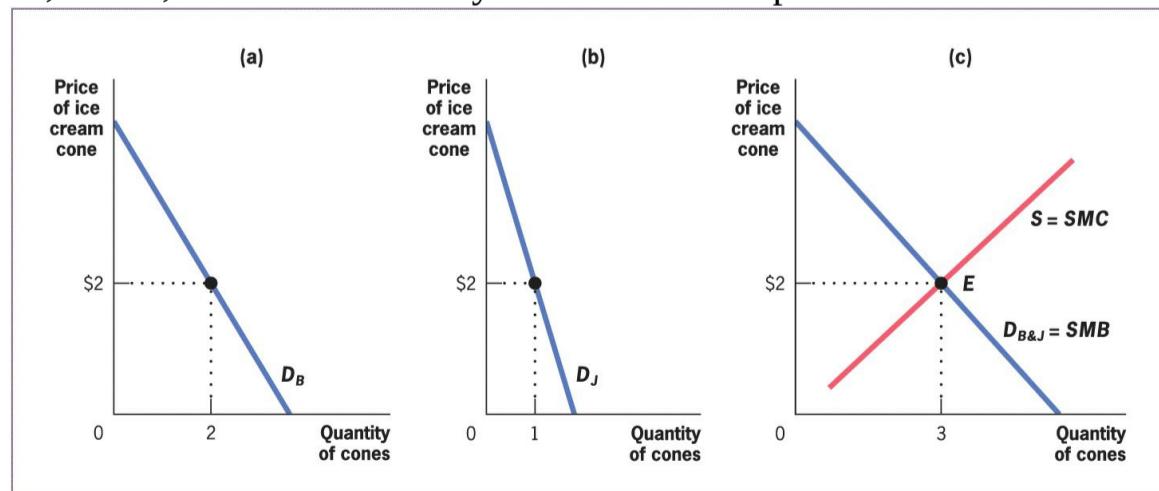
Before we model how to determine the optimal quantity of public goods to provide, let's review the conditions for optimal provision of private goods. Imagine that there are two individuals, Ben and Jerry, who are deciding between consuming cookies and ice cream, two pure private goods. For simplicity, suppose that the price of cookies is \$1.

► Quick Hint A convenient modeling tool in economics is the **numeraire good**, a good for which the price is set at \$1. This tool is convenient because all choice models are technically written about the choice between goods, not the choice of a particular good. As a result, what matters for modeling the demand for any good (such as ice cream) is its price relative to other goods (such as cookies), not the absolute level of its price. By setting the price of cookies to \$1, we make the analysis easier by making the absolute and relative price of ice cream equal.

### numeraire good

A good for which the price is set at \$1 to model choice between goods, which depends on relative, not absolute, prices.

[Figure 7-1](#) shows the analysis of the market for ice cream cones. Panels (a) and (b) show Ben's and Jerry's individual demand curves for ice cream cones, that is, the number of ice cream cones that each man would demand at each price. Panel (c) shows the market demand curve, the horizontal sum of the two individual demands: for every price of ice cream cones, we compute Ben's demand and Jerry's demand and then add them to produce a total market demand. At \$2, Ben would like two ice cream cones, and Jerry would like one, for a total market demand of three cones. As we learned in [Chapter 5](#), the demand curve in the final panel of [Figure 7-1](#) also represents the *social marginal benefit (SMB)* of ice cream consumption, that is, the value to society from the consumption of that cone.



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■ FIGURE 7-1

**Horizontal Summation in Private Goods Markets** • In private goods markets, we horizontally sum the demands of Ben and Jerry to get market demand for ice cream cones. If Ben demands two ice cream cones at \$2 and Jerry demands one ice cream cone at \$2, then, at a market price of \$2, the quantity demanded in the market is three ice cream cones.

The market supply curve for ice cream represents the marginal cost of producing ice cream cones for a firm. As discussed in [Chapter 5](#), in a market with no failures, this curve also represents the *social marginal cost (SMC)* of ice cream production, the cost to society from the production of that cone. In a private market, then, equilibrium occurs where  **$SMB = SMC$** , the point at which supply and demand intersect. In [Figure 7-1](#), equilibrium is at point *E*: at a price of \$2, the market demands three ice cream cones, which are supplied by the firm.

A key feature of the private market equilibrium is that *consumers demand different quantities of the good at the same market price*. Ben and Jerry have different tastes for ice cream, relative to cookies. The market respects those different tastes by adding up the demands and meeting them with an aggregate supply. In this way, Ben and Jerry can consume according to their tastes. Because Ben likes ice cream more than Jerry, he gets two of the three cones that are produced.

It is also useful to represent this equilibrium outcome mathematically. Recall from [Chapter 2](#) that an individual's optimal choice is found at the tangency between the indifference curve and the budget constraint. This is the point at which the *marginal rate of substitution* between ice cream cones and cookies (the rate at which consumers are willing to trade ice cream cones for cookies) equals the *ratio of the prices* of ice cream cones and cookies. That is, Ben and Jerry each consume ice cream cones and cookies until their relative marginal utilities from the consumption of these products equal the relative prices of the goods. The *optimality* condition for the consumption of private goods is written as:

(1)

$$MU_{ic}^B / MU_c^B = MRS_{ic,c}^B = MRS_{ic,c}^J = P_{ic} / P_c$$

where *MU* is marginal utility, *MRS* is the marginal rate of substitution, the superscripts denote Ben (*B*) or Jerry (*J*), and the subscripts denote ice cream cones (*ic*) or cookies (*c*). Given that the price of cookies is \$1, and the price of an ice cream cone is \$2, then the price ratio is 2. This means that in equilibrium, each individual must be indifferent between trading two cookies to get one ice cream cone. Ben, who likes ice cream more, is willing to make this trade when he is having two ice cream cones. But Jerry, who likes ice cream less, is only willing to trade two cookies for one ice cream cone at his first cone; after this, he isn't willing to give away two more cookies to get one more ice cream cone.

On the supply side, ice cream cones are produced until the marginal cost of doing so is equal to the marginal benefit of doing so, which, in this competitive market, is equal to the price. Thus, equilibrium on the supply side requires:

(2)

$$MC_{ic} = P_{ic}$$

Recall that we have set  **$P_c = \$1$** . Thus, we have from equation (1) that  **$MRS = P_{ic}$** , and we have from equation (2) that  **$MC = P_{ic}$** . In equilibrium,

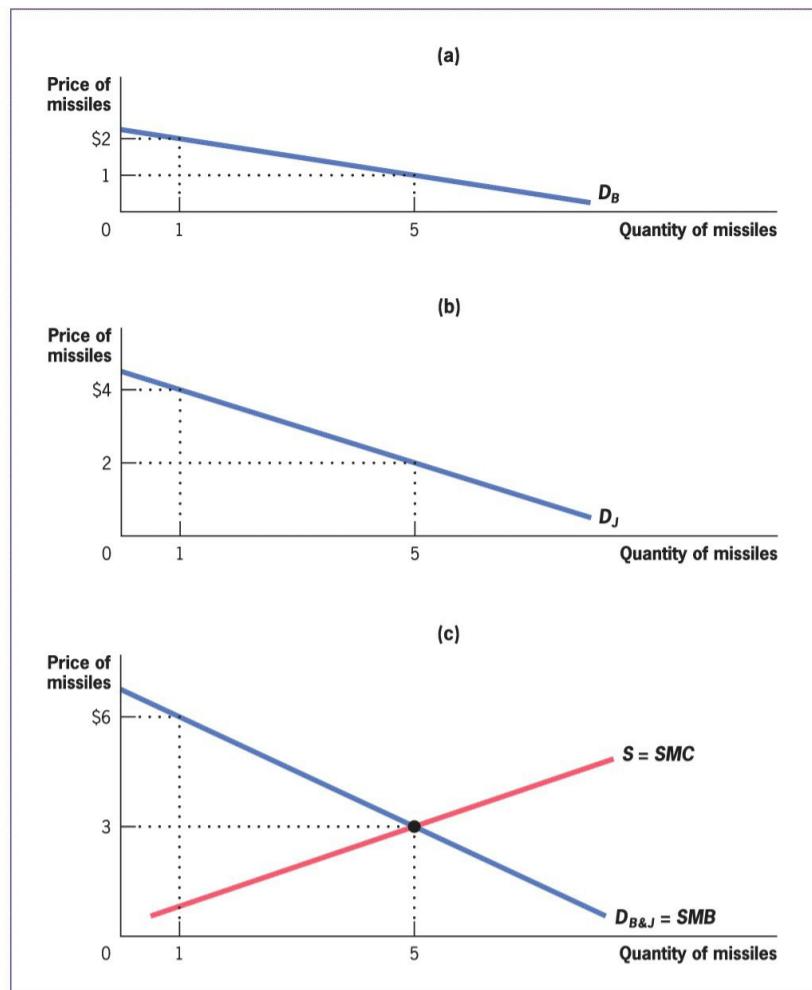
therefore,  $MRS = MC$ .

The private market equilibrium is also the social-efficiency-maximizing choice (the point that maximizes social surplus). This is because when there are no market failures, the  $MRS$  for any quantity of ice cream cones equals the  $SMB$  of that quantity; the marginal value to society is equal to the marginal value to any individual in the perfectly competitive market. Similarly, when there are no market failures, the  $MC$  for any quantity of ice cream cones equals the  $SMC$  of that quantity; the marginal cost to society is equal to the marginal cost to producers in a perfectly competitive market. Thus, at the private market equilibrium,  $SMB = SMC$ , which is the condition for efficiency we derived in [Chapter 5](#) for efficiency maximization. The efficiency-maximizing point is the one where the marginal value of consuming the next unit to any consumer equals the marginal cost of producing that additional unit.

## Optimal Provision of Public Goods

Now, imagine that Ben and Jerry are choosing not between ice cream cones and cookies but between missiles (a public good) and cookies. Once again, the price of cookies is set equal to \$1. A difference between missiles and ice cream cones is that individuals cannot tailor their own specific consumption of missiles. Because missiles are a public good, whatever amount is provided must be consumed equally by all.

This characteristic of the market for public goods turns the private market analysis on its head, as shown in [Figure 7-2](#). Each person is now forced to choose a common quantity of the public good. Because Ben and Jerry have different tastes for missiles and cookies, they will be willing to pay different prices for this common quantity. Ben has a very flat demand for missiles; he is willing to pay only \$2 for the first missile and \$1 for the fifth missile [panel (a)]. Jerry has a steeper demand, and is willing to pay \$4 for the first missile and \$2 for the fifth missile [panel (b)].



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**FIGURE 7-2**

Vertical Summation in Public Goods Markets • For public goods, we vertically sum the demands of Ben and Jerry to get the social value of the public good. If Ben is willing to pay \$1 for the fifth missile and Jerry is willing to pay \$2 for the fifth missile, then society values that fifth missile at \$3. Given the private supply curve for missiles, the optimal number of missiles to produce is five, where social marginal benefit (\$3) equals social marginal cost (\$3).

Whatever number of missiles is chosen applies to Ben and Jerry equally because missiles are a public good. To arrive at the market demand for missiles, we do not sum horizontally, as with private goods (where we sum the individual quantities demanded at the given market price). Instead, we sum *vertically* by adding the prices that each individual is willing to pay for the fixed market quantity. Ben and Jerry are together willing to pay \$6 for the first missile, but their willingness to pay declines as the number of missiles increases, so they are only willing to pay \$3 for the fifth missile. This vertically summed demand curve is shown in panel (c) of [Figure 7-2](#).

Panel (c) also shows a supply curve for missiles, which equals their marginal cost of production. The socially optimal level of production is the intersection of this supply with the vertically summed demand. That is, given that any missiles that are provided protect both Ben and Jerry, the producer should consider the *sum* of their valuations (their willingness to pay) in making its production decision. The resulting socially optimal level of production is five missiles.

Once again, a mathematical exposition helps clarify the mechanism underlying this result. The marginal missile is worth  $MRS_{m,c}^B$  to Ben and  $MRS_{m,c}^J$  to Jerry, so its total value to society is  $MRS_{m,c}^B + MRS_{m,c}^J$ . The social marginal benefit (*SMB*) of the next missile is the sum of Ben and Jerry's marginal rates of substitution, which represent their

valuation of that missile. The social marginal cost (*SMC*) is the same as earlier: the marginal cost of producing a missile. Thus, the social-efficiency-maximizing condition for the public good is:

(3)

$$MRS_{m,c}^B + MRS_{m,c}^J = MC$$

Social efficiency is maximized when the marginal cost is set equal to the *sum of the MRSs* rather than being set equal to *each individual's MRS*. For private goods, it is optimal for firms to produce until the marginal cost equals the benefit to the marginal consumer, which is the private competitive market outcome. For public goods, however, it is socially optimal for firms to produce until the marginal cost equals the benefit to *all* consumers combined because the private good is rival; once it is consumed by any one consumer, it is gone. The public good is non-rival; because it can be consumed jointly by all consumers, society would like the producer to take into account the sum of all consumers' preferences.

## 7.2 Private Provision of Public Goods

We have now developed the conditions for the optimal provision of public goods: public goods should be produced until the marginal cost for producers equals the sum of the marginal rates of substitution for all consumers. With this finding in mind, the first question to ask (as always) is the following: Does the private sector get it right? If the private sector provides the optimal quantity of goods at the market price, then there is no market failure, and there is no potential role for the government in terms of improving efficiency.

### Private-Sector Underprovision

In general, the private sector in fact *underprovides public goods* because of the **free rider problem** discussed in [Chapter 5](#): because your enjoyment of public goods is not solely dependent on your contribution to them, you will contribute less to their provision than is socially optimal. It's due to this problem that we end up with too much uncollected trash in places like Lebanon.

**free rider problem**

When an investment has a personal cost but a common benefit, individuals will underinvest.

Let's consider this problem in the context of an example. Suppose that Ben and Jerry live by themselves far away from others. It is July Fourth, and they want to have a celebration. For this celebration, they care about only two consumption goods: ice cream cones and fireworks. The price of each of these goods is \$1, so for every firework they buy, they forgo a serving of ice cream. Ice cream is a private good here, but fireworks are a pure public good. Fireworks are non-rival because both Ben and Jerry can enjoy them without impinging on the other's enjoyment, and fireworks are non-excludable because they explode high in the sky for both Ben and Jerry to see. Neither Ben nor Jerry cares about who sends up a firework, as long as it's up in the sky for them to see. Both Ben and Jerry benefit equally from a firework sent up by either of them; what matters to them is the *total amount of fireworks*. To further simplify the example, suppose that Ben and Jerry have identical preferences over different combinations of fireworks and ice cream.

If left to their own devices, Ben and Jerry will choose to consume combinations of fireworks and ice cream cones identified by the points at which their indifference curves are tangent to their budget constraints. The slope of the budget constraints is 1 because fireworks and ice cream cones are each \$1 per unit. The slope of the indifference curves is the *MRS*, or the ratio of marginal utilities. So both Ben and Jerry will set their marginal utility as  $\mathbf{MU}_F / \mathbf{MU}_{ic} = 1$ , or  $\mathbf{MU}_{ic} = \mathbf{MU}_F$ . This equivalence will determine the quantities of fireworks and ice cream cones consumed.

The optimality condition for public goods is that the marginal cost of the good should be set equal to the *sum* of marginal rates of substitution. Optimal consumption of fireworks would therefore occur at the point at which  $\mathbf{MU}_F^B / \mathbf{MU}_{ic}^B + \mathbf{MU}_F^J / \mathbf{MU}_{ic}^J = 1$ . Because Ben and Jerry's preferences are identical, this is equivalent to saying that  $2 \times (\mathbf{MU}_F / \mathbf{MU}_{ic}) = 1$ , or  $\mathbf{MU}_F = 1/2 \times \mathbf{MU}_{ic}$ .

Recall that marginal utilities diminish with increasing consumption of a good. In a private-market equilibrium, fireworks are consumed until their marginal utility equals the marginal utility of ice cream (because the prices of both goods are \$1). But the optimality calculation

shows that fireworks should be consumed until their marginal utility is *half* the marginal utility of ice cream; that is, more fireworks are consumed in the optimal public goods outcome than in the private outcome.

This result is exactly what we would expect from the free rider problem. Ben and Jerry each have to forgo a serving of ice cream to provide a firework, but both Ben and Jerry benefit from each firework that is provided. There is a clear and strong positive externality here: Ben’s or Jerry’s provision of the firework greatly benefits the other person. As we saw with positive externalities earlier, this situation leads naturally to underproduction. Thus, the free rider problem leads to a potential role for government intervention. (The appendix to this chapter works out a formal mathematical example of the free rider problem, illustrating how the private market underprovides the public good.)



## APPLICATION

### The Free Rider Problem in Practice<sup>3</sup>

The free rider problem is one of the most powerful concepts in all of economics, and it applies to everything from your everyday interactions to global politics. Some everyday examples, and interesting solutions, include the following:

- The state of Victoria in Australia faced an important free rider problem in the provision of fire services. Until 2013, fire services were financed by a tax on home fire insurance policies. This meant that when individuals did not insure their homes against fire, they still got the services of the fire department, and it was paid for by those who did insure their homes. This raised the price of insurance and, in turn, led more and more individuals to drop insurance and rely on the payments of neighbors to support fire services. Recognizing this problem, in 2013 Victoria moved to financing its fire services through property taxes to ensure that everyone contributed to the services that they might need to use.
- Museums and other public art institutions that do not charge for admission face a significant free rider problem. Since 1970, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York city has had a “recommended” donation instead of an admissions fee. For years, the Met tried to solve its free rider problem by putting “recommended” in much smaller letters than the rest of the sign, but after a lawsuit in 2013 they had to change the sign to make it clear that the donation was recommended and not required.<sup>4</sup> When they did, the share of visitors paying the full \$25 charge fell from more than half to only 17%. To address this free rider problem, the Met has decided to start charging admission to out of town visitors.<sup>5</sup>
- More than 500 million unique visitors consult Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, each month. The site’s content is exclusively written by volunteer contributors; less than 0.5% of readers contribute regularly.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, at the end of Wikipedia’s 2017 fund-raising campaign, only about 1.5% of readers donated to the non-profit.<sup>7</sup> That leaves more than 490 million readers who free ride on both the editors’ efforts and the donors’ money. However, Wikipedia was created to make knowledge available to all and, as such, has not made any attempt to reduce free riding. ■

# Can Private Providers Overcome the Free Rider Problem?

The free rider problem does not lead to a complete absence of private provision of public goods. Many of us grew up in towns where there were privately financed fireworks displays, parks, and even garbage collection. Indeed, one of the most famous counterarguments to the necessity of public provision of private goods was made for the case of lighthouses. Lighthouses seem to fit the definition of a pure public good: one ship's use of the light does not affect another's, and ships cannot be excluded from seeing the light when they are at sea. Indeed, for many generations, economists pointed to lighthouses as a classic example of a public good that would be underprovided by the private sector. John Stuart Mill was the first to argue that government should build lighthouses because "it is impossible that the ships at sea which are benefited by a lighthouse should be made to pay a toll on the occasion of its use." The great economist Paul Samuelson, in his classic text *Economics*, agreed that lighthouse building was "government activity justifiable because of external effects."<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, in a famous 1974 article, Ronald Coase (of Coase's theorem) conducted historical research showing that British lighthouses had been successfully provided by private interests long before the government ever took over the task. Private individuals, sensing a profitable opportunity, obtained permission from the government to build lighthouses and then levy tolls at the ports where the ships anchored. These individuals would determine how many lighthouses the ship had passed on its route and then charge them accordingly. Thus, lighthouses were successfully provided by the private market until 1842, by which point the British government had purchased all private lighthouses to publicly provide this particular good.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it appears that the private sector can, in some cases, combat the free rider problem to provide public goods. The following policy application shows another example of privately financing public goods through such user fees—and the problems that such an approach can face.



## APPLICATION

### Business Improvement Districts

The quality of city streets is another example of a public good. Residents all want clean, safe spaces in which to walk, but it is infeasible to charge pedestrians a fee for using the streets. For this reason, cities use tax revenues to publicly provide police departments for safety, sanitation departments for cleanliness, and public works departments to decorate the public spaces.

Unfortunately, public provision of these services does not always work effectively. Take, for example, New York City's Times Square, an area of midtown Manhattan that, by 1980, was infested with muggers, pickpockets, heroin dealers, prostitutes, and stores selling pornography and various kinds of weapons. The city government spent ten years attempting to clean up Times Square but eventually gave up on the area once described as "dirty, dangerous, decrepit and increasingly derelict."<sup>10</sup>

Then, in 1992, a group of local businessmen decided to start a Business Improvement

District (BID), a legal entity that privately provides local security and sanitation services and funds these services with fees charged to local businesses. In theory, BIDs should fail because of the free rider problem: each business will simply hope that other area businesses will pay for the services from which they all will benefit. The New York law, however, is structured so that if the BID organizers can get more than 60% of the local business community to agree to join, then the BID can levy fees on all local businesses. In the Times Square case, 84% of local businesses agreed to pay fees to fund the BID's services.

The Times Square Alliance has been a resounding success. Now with a budget greater than \$14 million, the BID has 120 employees, half of whom do sanitation duties such as sweeping, emptying trash cans, and removing graffiti, while the other half work as unarmed "public safety officers" in conjunction with the police. Crime has dropped significantly, the area is cleaner and more attractive, and, as a result of these improvements, business and tourism are once again booming. As the head of the BID describes it, "What BIDs are able to do is to devote an intense effort to a small place that the city itself could never afford. It's a way of localizing much of the functions of government and concentrating your community effort." The BID's power to levy fees on local businesses allows seemingly public goods (safety and cleanliness) to be provided through private channels. [Brooks \(2008\)](#) and [Cook and MacDonald \(2011\)](#) provide in-depth analyses of the Los Angeles BID, which shows that it provided crime reductions much more efficiently than did the private sector.

Whether a BID works well depends strongly on the form of the law allowing BIDs to form in the first place. In Massachusetts, for example, BID laws allow local businesses to opt out of paying the required fees within 30 days of approval of the BID by the local government. The opt-out approach discourages businesses from pursuing plans for BIDs because of a fear that, after all the groundwork for the plans has been laid, businesses will withdraw from the program at the last minute rather than pay their fee for BID costs. As a result of the provision, only 9 BIDs have successfully formed in Massachusetts; the rest of the nation has more than 1,000 scattered throughout the states.<sup>11</sup> ■

## When Is Private Provision Likely to Overcome the Free Rider Problem?

While the free rider problem clearly exists, there are also examples in which the private market is able to overcome this problem to some extent. Under what circumstances are private-market forces likely to solve the free rider problem, and under what circumstances are they not? In this section, we review three factors that are likely to determine the success of private provision: differences among individuals in their demand for the public good, altruism among potential donors to the public good, and utility from one's own contribution to the public good.

### Some Individuals Care More Than Others

Private provision is particularly likely to surmount the free rider problem when individuals are not identical and when some individuals have an especially high demand for the public good. For example, let's assume that Ben has more income than Jerry, but total income between the two is the same as the previous example, so that the social optimum for fireworks is the same as when their incomes are equal. As we show mathematically in the appendix, in this case, Ben would provide more fireworks than Jerry: if the income differential is large enough, the total number of privately provided fireworks rises toward the socially optimal number of fireworks. We obtain a similar outcome if Ben and Jerry have the same income, but Ben gets more enjoyment from fireworks; even though they are a public

good, Ben will still provide more of them.

The key intuition here is that the decision about how many fireworks to provide for any individual is a function of the enjoyment that the individual gets from total fireworks, that is, the net of their cost. If a person gets a lot of enjoyment or has a lot of money to finance the fireworks, he will choose to purchase more fireworks, even though he is sharing the benefits with others: as enjoyment net of costs gets very large for any one individual, the provision of the public good starts to approximate private good provision.

Consider, for example, a driveway that is shared by a mansion and a run-down shack. In principle, there is a free rider problem in plowing the driveway when the costs of plowing are borne by one party, but both residences benefit from a clean driveway. Despite this, the mansion owner may nevertheless plow the driveway, allowing the owner of the shack to free ride because the mansion owner has more money and perhaps cares more about having a clear driveway.

Higher incomes or stronger tastes for the public goods can mitigate the free rider problem to some extent, but they are not likely to solve the problem. Even when one individual provides all of a public good, the individual still does not take into account the benefit to other individuals, and so the public good is usually still underproduced. Thus, while the owner of the mansion may end up plowing the driveway, he may not bother to plow as close to the shack as the shack's owner would like.

## Altruism

Another reason that private agents may provide more of a public good than our model would predict is that the model assumes purely selfish utility-maximizing agents. In fact, there is much evidence that individuals are **altruistic**—that is, they care about the outcomes of others as well as themselves. If individuals are altruistic, they may be willing to contribute to a public good even if the free rider problem suggests they should not. In terms of our model, this would be equivalent to Ben caring not only about the costs of fireworks to himself, but the cost to Jerry as well, so that he is willing to contribute more to lower Jerry's burden.

altruistic

When individuals value the benefits and costs to others in making their consumption choices.

Evidence for altruism comes from *laboratory experiments* of the kind that are typically employed in other fields, such as psychology, but that are gaining popularity as a means of resolving difficult economic issues. The typical public goods experiment proceeds as follows: five college undergraduates are placed in a room to play ten rounds of a simple game. In each round, the students are given \$1, and they have the option of keeping that \$1 or placing it in a “public” fund. After all students decide whether to contribute, the amount in the public fund is then doubled (by the economist running the experiment) and divided up evenly among all five students, *regardless of whether or not they contributed*. Thus, if all choose to contribute \$1 to the fund, they each receive \$2 in return. If only 4 contribute to the fund, each of the contributors receives \$1.60 ( $4 \times \$2/5$  students), while the noncontributor retains her full \$1 and gets the \$1.60 from the public fund, for a total of \$2.60. Relative to full participation, the contributors lose money, and the noncontributor makes money. Thus, there is a very clear incentive to free ride off the contributions of others so that economists predict theoretically that no one should ever contribute to the public fund. If we start from a point of no contributors, any particular individual loses money by voluntarily becoming a contributor, so no one should do so.

The experimental evidence shows an outcome that is very different from that predicted by

economic theory. As reviewed in [Ledyard \(1995\)](#), nearly every such public goods experiment results in 30 to 70% of the participants contributing to the public fund. Interestingly, in experiments with multiple rounds, such as the one just described, contributions tend to decline as the rounds progress but rarely, if ever, reach zero. Thus, altruism appears to trump the purely selfish prediction that underlies the theory of the free rider problem.

Laboratory experiments, however, suffer from some limitations as a source of information about real-world behavior. Individuals may behave differently in a laboratory setting, where the stakes are often small, than they do in actual markets, where the stakes can be higher. Moreover, most of the experimental evidence used in economics comes from laboratory work with college undergraduates, which may not be representative of the general population.

Nevertheless, some real-world evidence is also consistent with altruism in private support of public goods. For example, [Brunner \(1998\)](#) noted that the traditional theory of public goods suggests that as the numbers of users of a good increases, the tendency for individuals to contribute to the financing of that good should decrease as they feel that their contribution has less and less of an impact (with only one user, there is no free rider possibility, but as the number of users grows, each individual's contribution benefits that person less and less and others more and more). Brunner, therefore, studied public radio stations across the country, examining listeners' contributions in relation to the total size of a given station's audience. Surprisingly, Brunner found that the number of listeners contributing decreases only modestly as the number of listeners increases and that, among contributors, the amount of the contribution is unchanged. This seems to suggest that there is a subset of public goods contributors who get utility simply out of giving what they feel is their appropriate share.

What determines altruism? This is a very difficult question and has given rise to an entire field of study of [social capital](#), the value of altruistic and communal behavior in society. A central finding of this field is that individuals are likely to be more altruistic when they are more "trusting" of others. For example, [Anderson et al. \(2003\)](#) ran a typical public goods experiment of the type described and paired the results across individuals with both attitudinal measures of trust (do you agree with statements like "most people can be trusted"? ) and behavioral measures of trust (do you loan money to friends and strangers? have you ever been a crime victim? do you purposefully leave your doors unlocked? and so on). They found that most of the attitudinal and behavioral measures of trust were positively correlated with high contributions to the public good.

[social capital](#)

The value of altruistic and communal behavior in society.

## Warm Glow

A final reason that private individuals might provide more of the public good than suggested by our model is that individuals might care about their own contributions per se.

Under the [warm glow model](#), individuals care about both the total amount of the public good *and* their particular contributions. Perhaps they get a plaque with their name on it from making contributions, or maybe their contributions are known publicly so that their friends praise them for their generosity, or maybe they get a psychological benefit that is directly related to how much they give. If individuals get utility from their particular contributions for any reason, the public good becomes like a private good, and individuals will contribute more than predicted by our original model (in which they care only about the total public good quantity). Warm glow does not fully solve the underprovision problem, however, because individuals still do not account for the positive benefits to others of their public goods provision.

**warm glow model**

A model of the public goods provision in which individuals care about both the total amount of the public good and their particular contributions as well.

## 7.3 Public Provision of Public Goods

The discussion in [Section 7.2](#) highlights that the private sector will generally underprovide public goods so that government can potentially improve efficiency by intervening. In principle, the government could solve the optimal public goods provision problem previously presented and intervene to achieve that outcome.

In practice, however, governments face some significant issues when they attempt to solve the free rider problem in the provision of public goods. In this section, we discuss four of those issues: private responses to public provision, or “crowd-out”; the question of reliance on public versus private actors to resolve the free rider problem; the difficulty of measuring the costs and benefits of public goods; and the difficulty of determining the public’s preferences for public goods.

### Private Responses to Public Provision: The Problem of Crowd-Out

In some instances, public goods will not be provided at all by those in the private sector unless the government tells them they must provide the good. In other cases, as we noted, the private sector is already providing the public good to some extent before the government intervenes, and this private provision will react to government intervention. In particular, public provision will to some extent **crowd out** private provision: as the government provides more of the public good, the private sector will provide less. This decrease in private provision will offset the net gain in public provision from government intervention.

#### **crowd-out**

As the government provides more of a public good, the private sector will provide less.

The extent of such crowd-out depends on the preferences of the private individuals providing the public good. Let’s continue to explore the fireworks example and make three assumptions:

1. Ben and Jerry care only about the total amount of fireworks provided; there is no warm glow from giving.
2. The government provision of fireworks will be financed by charging Ben and Jerry equal amounts.
3. The government provides fewer fireworks than Ben and Jerry were providing beforehand.

In this case, as we show mathematically in the appendix, *each dollar of public provision will crowd out private provision one for one*. That is, the government’s intervention will have no *net effect* on the quantity of fireworks provided.

This outcome illustrates the fundamental *robustness of economic equilibria*: if a person starts from her individual optimum, and the market environment changes, and if the person can undo this change to get back to that optimum, she will do so. The private equilibrium is the preferred outcome for Ben and Jerry. If they can undo any government intervention to get back to that preferred outcome, they will do so; what was optimal before the government intervention remains optimal after government intervention given our three earlier assumptions.

For example, suppose that in the pre-government optimum, Ben and Jerry were each providing 10 fireworks, at a cost of \$10 for each person. The total private provision is,

therefore, 20 fireworks, but let's say the social optimum is 30 fireworks. To reach the social optimum, the government decides to take \$5 each from Ben and from Jerry and use the \$10 raised to buy 10 more fireworks.

Ben and Jerry each have \$5 less, and they observe the government providing 10 fireworks. They simply cut their spending on fireworks by \$5 each so that they spend the same (\$5 on fireworks, \$5 to the government) and see the same total fireworks (20). So they are exactly where they originally wanted to be, and the government intervention has done nothing. This is a case of full crowd-out.

Crowd-out is a classic example of the unintended consequences of government action that we first discussed in [Chapter 1](#). The government intended to do the right thing by increasing fireworks to the social optimum. But, in fact, it ended up having no effect because its actions were totally offset by changes in individual actions.

Full crowd-out is rare. Partial crowd-out is much more common and can occur in two different cases: when noncontributors to the public good are taxed to finance provision of the good and when individuals derive utility from their own contribution as well as from the total amount of public good.

## Contributors Versus Noncontributors

Suppose that some people contribute more for public goods than others—either because they are richer or because they have a stronger preference for the public good. In the extreme case, suppose that Ben contributes \$20 to buy 20 fireworks, and Jerry contributes nothing, because Ben likes fireworks more than Jerry or because he is richer than Jerry. This is still below the social optimum of 30 fireworks, however.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Measuring Crowd-Out*

A large number of studies consider how private spending on public goods responds to public spending on the same public goods. A classic example is [Kingma's \(1989\)](#) study of public radio. Public radio is supported partly by contributions from its listeners and partly by government contributions. Kingma collected data on how much governments contribute to public radio stations in different cities around the country. He then gathered data on how much individuals contribute to their public radio stations in those same cities. He found that for every \$1 increase in government funding, private contributions fell by 13.5¢, for only a very partial crowd-out. Other studies in this vein typically also find that crowd-out is fairly small.<sup>12</sup>

This is an interesting finding, but it potentially suffers from the bias problems discussed in [Chapter 3](#): there may be reasons why areas with different government contributions to public radio might also have different tastes for private giving. For example, suppose that governments are more able to support public radio in high-income areas than in low-income areas (because the government raises more tax revenues in the high-income areas) and that individuals contribute more to charitable causes (like public radio) in high-income areas than in low-income areas. Then high-income and low-income areas are not good treatment and control groups to use for measuring the effect of government spending on individual giving. Such comparisons will be biased by the fact that high-income areas would have given more even in the absence of government intervention. In principle, regression analysis using controls for income can correct this bias, but in practice, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#), controls are typically unable to fully correct this type of problem.

Recent studies have used clever quasi-experimental methods to try to surmount these empirical problems. One example is [Hungerman's \(2005\)](#) study of the response of Presbyterian Church spending on charitable activities to changes in federal transfer programs. As discussed at length in [Chapter 17](#), in 1996, the federal government introduced a major welfare reform that made a number of fundamental changes in cash welfare programs, one of which sharply restricted the eligibility of noncitizens for welfare programs. Hungerman compared the change in spending on charitable activities by churches in areas with a large number of immigrants (which saw the largest reduction in government transfer spending) to the change in spending by churches in areas with smaller numbers of immigrants (which saw smaller reductions). He found that after the reforms had been enacted, churches in the high-immigrant areas increased their charitable spending much more than the churches in the low-immigrant areas had. This finding is consistent with crowd-out: government transfers were reducing private church charity so that, when government transfers to immigrants declined, charity rose in those areas where immigrants were most likely to reside. The estimated crowd-out of charitable spending is relatively modest, however; such spending falls only by about 20¢ for each dollar in increased transfer spending. [Hungerman and Gruber \(2007\)](#) used a similar approach to show that church charitable spending fell in response to New Deal spending during the Great Depression; they found even more modest crowd-out with charitable spending falling by only 5¢ for each dollar in increased transfer

spending. [Payne \(1998\)](#) found that spending by a broad cross-section of non-profit organizations falls by about 50¢ for each dollar of government spending.

The other type of evidence that has been used in this area comes from laboratory experiments. The classic study using this approach is [Andreoni \(1993\)](#). He set up an experiment in which individuals contributed to a public good in a laboratory setting by contributing tokens they were given to a common fund. He set up the payoffs for this experiment so that each player, if acting as a free rider, should choose to contribute 3 tokens to maximize the player's likely return. This predicted contribution (3 tokens) was close to the level actually chosen by each participant (2.78 tokens).<sup>13</sup>

Andreoni then made the following change to the laboratory game: using the same payment schedule, he instituted a 2-token tax on every player. This tax was then contributed to the public good. This change mirrors the full earlier crowd-out example, so without warm glow effects, players should have reduced their contributions by 2 tokens to 0.78 token to offset the government contribution plan. In fact, however, each player cut his or her contributions by only 1.43 tokens so that contributions fell only to 1.35 tokens. That is, crowd-out was less than full; each token of government contribution crowded out only 0.715 token of private contributions.

This crowd-out estimate is much higher than that obtained from empirical studies, which ranges from a lower bound of 5¢ to an upper bound of 50¢ for each dollar of government spending. At the same time, as already noted, laboratory experiments have their limitations as a source of economic evidence. Thus, the true extent of crowd-out remains an important question.

Now, suppose that the government charges Ben and Jerry each \$5 for firework contributions and then provides 10 fireworks in an attempt to bring the number of fireworks to the socially optimal level of 30. Jerry now spends \$5 more on fireworks as he was providing nothing before. Ben, on the other hand, will not reduce his firework consumption by the full \$10 (to offset government provision). Ben has effectively been made better off: there are 10 more fireworks that only cost him \$5 in government-mandated contributions, rather than the \$10 he would have spent if he had bought those 10 fireworks. This increase in Ben's effective wealth (the value of fireworks plus the value of other goods he can purchase) has a positive income effect on Ben's purchase of fireworks, so government intervention will not fully crowd out his spending. The total number of fireworks will rise above 20. By forcing Jerry to become a contributor, the government has increased total public goods provision.

## Warm Glow

Alternatively, there may not be full crowd-out if you care about your own contributions per se, as in the warm glow model. If you get utility from your particular contributions for any reason, then an increase in government contributions will not fully crowd out your giving. For example, consider the extreme case where *all* you care about is how much you give, and you don't care about gifts from others. If the government increases contributions from others, these contributions have no offsetting effects on your giving because your giving is, from your perspective, a private good. In this extreme case, there may be *no* crowd-out of your contributions by government intervention. As long as there is some warm glow from your own contributions, then crowd-out will be less than one for one because part of your contribution is a private good.

## Evidence on Crowd-Out

How important is the crowd-out problem in reality? Unfortunately, the existing evidence on crowd-out is quite mixed. On the one hand, studies assessing how individual contributions respond to government spending suggest a very small crowd-out. As the Empirical Evidence box indicates, however, these studies suffer from many of the bias problems discussed in [Chapter 3](#). On the other hand, evidence from laboratory experiments suggest that crowd-out is large but less than full. Thus, while there is no evidence for full crowd-out, there is also no consensus on the size of this important individual response to government intervention.

# The Right Mix of Public and Private

Even after establishing that the government should intervene, there remains the second question of public finance: How should the government intervene? In particular, while the private sector underprovides public goods on its own, private-sector actors may still play a useful role in achieving the optimal level of public goods provision. An important issue to be resolved is, therefore, the right mix of public and private actors in providing public goods.

There are a variety of options here, as highlighted in [Chapter 1](#). At one extreme is provision entirely by the public sector, with management, workers, and financing all coming from the government. At the other extreme is subsidized or mandated private provision, with the government providing incentives for or mandating private actors to provide the optimal level of the public good. In between are various degrees of [\*\*contracting out\*\*](#), an approach through which the government retains responsibility for providing the good or service but hires private-sector firms to actually provide the good or service. Governments can harness the forces of competition in this context through *competitive bidding*, asking a number of private firms to submit bids for the right to perform the service or provide the good. In principle, the government then grants the right to provide the good or service to the private entity that can provide the good most efficiently. Indeed, the application begins with an example that illustrates the success of competitive bidding for providing health insurance in Massachusetts.

## **contracting out**

An approach through which the government retains responsibility for providing a good or service but hires private-sector firms to actually provide the good or service.

In practice, however, there are two problems with contracting out. First, the private sector's incentives may not align with public goals, leading to lower public costs but worse outcomes along other dimensions that policy makers may care about. Second, bidding in contracting out is often far from competitive. In many situations, government bureaucrats may exploit their power and award contracts not to the most efficient, lowest-cost bidder but to the one that assists them in maximizing their own power or, in the case of kickbacks and bribes, even their personal wealth. The application shows examples of both of these types of problems. Thus, whether contracting out is the best approach to providing a public good depends critically on the nature of the contract and the interests of both the contractor and the government.



## APPLICATION

### The Good and Bad Sides of Contracting Out

As highlighted in the text, contracting out public goods to private companies may or may not work to deliver public goods efficiently. In this application, we begin with a recent successful example of contracting out, followed by some more problematic cases.

The success story comes from contracting out to provide health insurance to low-income enrollees under the Massachusetts health care reform of 2006 (discussed in detail in [Chapter 16](#)). One central aspect of that reform was the establishment of a new program, Commonwealth Care, which delivered very low-cost health insurance to the poorest residents of Massachusetts. Rather than provide that health insurance through publicly paid providers, however, the state contracted with five different private “managed care organizations” (MCOs) to provide all of the poorest residents’ medical needs for one fixed charge per month. Individuals could choose any of the five MCOs, and the government would pay most of the

bill. Because the state was paying the premium for most participants in the MCOs, the MCOs had no market incentive to offer low rates to enrollees. To keep its expenditures down, therefore, the state had to figure out how to give the MCOs some incentive to offer their plans at low, competitive prices.

To mitigate this problem, the state used an innovative bidding mechanism. The state would “auto-assign” new enrollees to the MCO that provided the lowest cost bid to the state. These new enrollees were often the healthiest patients and were, therefore, the most profitable to the MCOs (because the MCO would receive the premium payment from the state but wouldn’t have to pay out very much in medical costs). The desire to be the MCO to which the new, healthy enrollees were assigned led MCOs to bid competitively so that they could attract these low-cost patients. As a result of this aggressive bidding, costs in the Commonwealth Care Program rose by only 3.7% from 2007 through 2013; over roughly this same period, premiums for employer-sponsored insurance in Massachusetts rose by 30%. Even though premiums grew slowly, consumers were very satisfied with their plans; survey data indicate that 85% of Commonwealth Care consumers reported themselves to be very or extremely satisfied with their plans.<sup>14</sup>

Less successful examples of contracting out come in the arena of public safety. For example, [Hart et al. \(1997\)](#) compared private to public prisons. They found that private prisons are roughly 10% cheaper per prisoner but that those savings are achieved by paying lower wages to prison guards. The low pay led to staffing with lower-quality guards, which in turn resulted in higher instances of violence (and, in one case, a major riot). Thus, lowered costs were achieved at the expense of quality. A recent federal report confirmed that private for-profit prisons are more dangerous than public prisons, and the Department of Justice has announced that the federal government will stop relying on private prisons to house inmates.<sup>15</sup>

Another related example is New Jersey’s experience with halfway houses for newly released prison inmates. Halfway houses, or residential reentry centers (RRCs), offer assistance to newly released inmates to ease the transition back into society. The RRCs provide important services such as job search, drug abuse treatment, and medical and mental health care. They are also typically less expensive than prisons and so can be a more cost-effective means of handling prisoners transitioning out of the system.

New Jersey has a total of 3,500 beds in the halfway house system. It costs New Jersey \$125 to \$150 per day for an inmate to be in prison, compared to \$65 to \$75 per day for an inmate to be in a halfway house. This has led to an increased use of halfway houses as an alternative to jailing prisoners.

One major halfway house, Delaney Hall, started out as a place to house those convicted for minor crimes and those who had been sentenced to less than one year in jail. But those convicted of more serious crimes were soon placed in Delaney Hall, including 25 residents with weapons and violent crime charges. After a resident was killed for \$3 at Delaney Hall, the trial revealed that this halfway house was run by gangs and, because of the lower level of security, had created a situation in which inmates were not safe.

The conditions in the halfway houses themselves are also a cause for concern. There are reports of high levels of drug use, cases of violence and sexual assault, and reports of the inability of counselors to control dangerous situations. For example, a study conducted by the State Commission of Investigation in 2009 found that facilities with the biggest gang

problems were not prisons, but halfway houses. In the same year, Mercer County of New Jersey conducted a surprise drug test at Bo Robinson Halfway House; out of 75 inmates, 73% tested positive for drugs. A counselor even mentioned that some inmates wanted to go back to prison because they didn't feel safe at the Robinson House. These types of problems are not restricted to the United States; similar controversies have arisen in the United Kingdom around shocking negligence of private companies in maintaining homes for the elderly and disabled.<sup>16</sup>

Contracting out is much more likely to deliver efficiency gains if potential contractors compete to deliver cost savings or quality gains to the government. In practice, however, such competitive bidding can be the exception rather the rule. For example, since 2005, the Pentagon has awarded directly (i.e., without competitive bidding) more than \$50 million of military contracts to a Tucson-based company called Applied Energetics. The Pentagon wanted solutions to combat against improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and Applied Energetics promised a futuristic "lightning weapon" to detonate these roadside bombs. Even after failed tests, the company continued to receive federal funds. Meanwhile, competing companies such as Xtreme Alternative Defense Systems had created their own anti-IED technologies, with better results.

Despite its successes, Xtreme Alternative Defense Systems has only received \$1.5 million of federal funds, a mere 3% of the amount Applied Energetics had been paid. In August 2011, the Marine Corps had to cancel a \$3 million contract with Applied Energetics because the "lightning weapon" did not meet the Corps' needs.<sup>17</sup>

In another example, Wackenhut Corporation has been the primary security contractor at weapons plants across the United States since the early 2000s. In January 2004, the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Energy revealed that in running drills to test security at weapons plants, Wackenhut attackers had told Wackenhut defenders which buildings and targets were to be attacked, in addition to whether any diversionary tactic would be used. Consequently, the defense teams were found to have performed remarkably well in these drills, but, as the inspector general reported, the results were "tainted and unreliable." Nonetheless, in August 2004, the Nuclear Energy Institute announced that it would be hiring Wackenhut—which, at the time, was already responsible for security at more than half of the country's civilian reactors—to train and manage "adversary teams" to attack these reactors in drills. Representative Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts protested that allowing Wackenhut to test security at plants at which it was the security contractor was akin to allowing athletes to conduct their own drug tests.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these failings, the use of noncompetitive bidding by the U.S. military is actually growing. Publicly available federal data show the dollar amount of "noncompeted" contracts has nearly tripled since 2001, from roughly \$50 billion in 2001 to more than \$140 billion in 2010. Over the past ten years, the Pentagon has "competed" only about 60% of its total contract dollars.<sup>19</sup>

# Measuring the Costs and Benefits of Public Goods

In the previous theoretical analysis, we assumed that the government could measure both the benefits and costs of providing public goods. In practice, this is quite difficult. Consider the example of improving a highway to reduce traffic slowdowns and improve safety. There is a clear free rider problem in relying on the private sector for this improvement. The benefits of highway improvement are fairly small for any one driver, although they may be quite large for the total set of drivers using the highway. Thus, no one driver will invest the necessary resources to improve the highway.

Should the government undertake these highway improvements? That depends on whether the costs of doing so exceed the sum of the benefits to all drivers who use the highway, but measuring these costs and benefits can be complicated. Consider the costs of the labor needed to repair the highway. The budgetary cost of this labor is the wage payments made by the government for this labor, but the economic costs can be different. What if, without this highway project, half of the workers on the project would be unemployed? How can the government take into account that it is not only paying wages, but also providing a new job opportunity for these workers?

Even more difficult problems face the government as it tries to assess the benefits of the project. What is the value of the time saved for commuters due to reduced traffic jams? And what is the value to society of the reduced number of deaths if the highway is improved?

These difficult questions are addressed by the field of *cost-benefit analysis*, which provides a framework for measuring the costs and benefits of public projects. [Chapter 8](#) provides a detailed discussion of cost-benefit analysis, within the context of this highway example.

# How Can We Measure Preferences for Public Goods?

In our discussion of optimal public goods provision, the government knows each individual's preferences over private and public goods. The government can, therefore, compute for each individual that person's marginal valuation of public goods (her marginal rate of substitution of the public for the private good), sum these valuations across all individuals, and set this equal to the marginal cost of the public good (relative to the marginal cost of the private good).

In practice, of course, there are at least three problems facing a government trying to turn individual preferences into a decision about public goods provision. The first is *preference revelation*: individuals may not be willing to tell the government their true valuation, for example, because the government might charge them more for the good if they say that they value it highly. The second is *preference knowledge*: even if individuals are willing to be honest about their valuation of a public good, they may not know what their valuation is because they have little experience pricing public goods such as highways or national defense. The third is *preference aggregation*: How can the government effectively put together the preferences of millions of citizens to decide on the value of a public project?

These difficult problems are addressed by the field of *political economy*, the study of how governments go about making public policy decisions such as the appropriate level of public goods. In [Chapter 9](#), we discuss the various approaches used by governments to address these problems and the implications each approach has for the ability of government to effectively intervene in problems such as the free rider problem.

## 7.4 Conclusion

A major function of governments at all levels is the provision of public goods. The potential gains from such government intervention are apparent from free rider problems, such as the lack of proper waste and garbage disposal in Lebanon. In some cases, the private sector can provide public goods, but, in general, it will not achieve the optimal level of provision.

When there are problems with private market provision of public goods, government intervention can potentially increase efficiency. Whether that potential will be achieved is a function of both the ability of the government to appropriately measure the costs and benefits of public projects and the ability of the government to carry out the socially efficient decision. In the next two chapters, we investigate those two concerns in detail.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Pure public goods are goods that are non-rival (your consuming or making use of the good does not in any way affect someone else's opportunity to consume the good) and non-excludable (even if you want to deny someone else the opportunity to consume or access the public good, there is no way you can do so).
- For pure public goods, the optimal level of provision is the point at which the sum of marginal benefits across all recipients equals the marginal cost.
- The private market is unlikely to provide the optimal level of public goods due to the free rider problem.
- In some cases, the private market can overcome the free rider problem, at least partially. A solution closer to the socially optimal one is more likely if there are individuals with high incomes or high demand for the public good, individuals who are altruistic, or individuals who derive a “warm glow” from their contributions.
- Public provision of public goods can lead to crowding out of private provision.
- Contracting out can be an effective means of integrating the private sector into public provision, but it has limitations as well.
- Additional problems with optimal public goods provision include determining the costs and benefits of public projects and effectively reflecting the public’s demand for public goods.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. We add the demands of *private* goods horizontally but add the demands of *public* goods vertically when determining the associated marginal benefit to society. Why do we do this, and why are the procedures different for public and private goods?
2. The citizens of Balaland used to pave 120 miles of roadways per year. After the government of Balaland began paving 100 miles of roadways per year itself, the citizens cut back their paving to 30 miles per year, for a total number of roadway miles paved per year of 130 miles. What might be happening here?
3. Ryan's demand for hamburgers (a private good) is  $Q = 21 - 6P$  and Madison's demand is  $Q = 6 - 3P$ .
  1. Write down an equation for the social marginal benefit of hamburger consumption.
  2. Now suppose that hamburgers are a *public* good. Write down an equation for the social marginal benefit of hamburger consumption.
4. Your neighbors pay annual dues to a neighborhood association. This association refunds neighborhood dues to selected home owners who do a particularly nice job of beautifying their yards.
  1. Why might the neighborhood association provide this refund?
  2. At the most recent neighborhood association meeting, home owners voted to end this practice because they felt that it was unfair that some people would not have to pay their share of the costs of maintaining the neighborhood. What is likely to happen to the overall level of neighborhood beautification? Explain.
5. Zorroland has a large number of people who are alike in every way. Boppoland has the same number of people as Zorroland, with the same average income as Zorroland, but the distribution of incomes is wider. Why might Boppoland have a higher level of public good provision than Zorroland?
6. Think about the rival and excludable properties of public goods. To what degree is *radio broadcasting* a public good? To what degree is a *highway* a public good?
7. Think of an example of a free rider problem in your hometown. How can your local government overcome this problem?
8. To determine the right amount of a certain public good to provide, the government of Wakanda decides to survey its residents about how much they value the good. It will then finance the public good provision by taxes on residents. Describe a tax system that would lead residents to underreport their valuations. Describe an alternative system that could lead residents to overreport their valuations.
9.  Why is it difficult to empirically determine the degree to which government spending crowds out private provision of public goods?
10. Why can the public good provision problem be thought of as an externality problem?

The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. Suppose that you have a friend who works in fundraising at the public radio station in your town. One day she tells you excitedly that the station has just been selected to receive a large grant from the federal government. The marketing department at the station plans to feature details about the grant in an upcoming promotional email, hoping that the news will drive a wave of new donations.
1. Using the theoretical tools of this chapter, discuss what would have to be true for your friend's idea for a promotional email featuring the new grant to be effective in increasing donations.
  2. As a budding experimental economist you are interested in the questions about crowd-out that emerged when speaking with your friend about marketing for the local public radio station. You suggest to your friend that this is a perfect opportunity to study crowd-out empirically. You suggest that the station run a small experiment, randomizing the recipients of the email into two groups—one group receiving an email promoting the new federal grant, and the other receiving an email highlighting the great work the station has done recently, but omitting mention of the grant. How would this improve on [Kingma's 1989](#) study of public radio? What might be the pitfalls of such an approach?
12. Suppose 20 people each have the demand  $Q = 20 - P$  for streetlights, and 5 people have the demand  $Q = 18 - 2P$  for streetlights. The cost of building each streetlight is \$10. If it is impossible to purchase a fractional number of streetlights, how many streetlights are socially optimal?
13. Amy, Brooke, and Chelsea live in Minneapolis. Amy's demand for bike paths, a public good, is given by  $Q = 24 - 4P$ . Brooke's demand is  $Q = 14 - P$ , and Chelsea's is  $Q = 5 - P/3$ . The marginal cost of building a bike path is  $MC = 18$ . The town government decides to use the following procedure for deciding how many paths to build. It asks each resident how many paths she wants, and it builds the largest number asked for by any resident. To pay for these paths, it then taxes Amy, Beth, and Cathy the prices  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  per path, respectively, where  $a + b + c = MC$ . (The residents know these tax rates before stating how many paths they want.)
1. If the taxes are set so that each resident shares the cost evenly ( $a = b = c$ ), how many paths will get built?
  2. Show that the government can achieve the social optimum by setting the correct tax prices  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$ . What prices should it set?
14. The town of Springfield has two residents: Homer and Bart. The town currently funds its fire department solely from the individual contributions of these residents. Each of the two residents has a utility function over private goods ( $X$ ) and total firefighters ( $M$ ), of the form  $U = 6 \times \log(X) + 2 \times \log(M)$ . The total provision of firefighters hired,  $M$ , is the sum of the number hired by each of the two persons:  $M = M_H + M_B$ . Homer and Bart each have an income of \$100, and the price of both the private good and a firefighter is \$1. Thus, they are each limited to providing between 0 and 100 firefighters.
1. How many firefighters are hired if the government does not intervene? How many are paid for by Homer? By Bart?
  2. What is the socially optimal number of firefighters? If your answer differs from (a), why?
15. The town of Musicville has two residents: Bach and Mozart. The town currently funds its free outdoor concert series solely from the individual contributions of these residents. Each of the two residents has a utility function over private goods ( $X$ ) and total concerts ( $C$ ), of the form  $U = 3 \times \log(X) + 2 \times \log(C)$ . The total number of concerts given,  $C$ , is the sum of the number paid for by each of the two persons:  $C = C_B + C_M$ . Bach and Mozart both have income of 60, and the price of both the private good and a concert is 1. Thus, they are limited to providing between 0 and 60 concerts each.
1. How many concerts are given if the government does not intervene?
  2. Suppose that the government is not happy with the private equilibrium and decides to provide 8 concerts in

addition to what Bach and Mozart may choose to provide on their own. It taxes Bach and Mozart equally to pay for the new concerts. What is the new total number of concerts? How does your answer compare to (a)? Have we achieved the social optimum? Why or why not?

3. Suppose that instead an anonymous benefactor pays for 8 concerts. What is the new total number of concerts? Is this the same level of provision as in (b)? Why or why not?
16. Consider an economy with three types of individuals, differing only with respect to their preferences for monuments. Individuals of the first type get a fixed benefit of 250 from the mere existence of monuments, whatever their number. Individuals of the second type get benefits according to:

$$B_{\text{II}} = 30M - 2M^2 \text{ for } M < 2, \text{ but}$$

$$B_{\text{II}} = 200 + 30M - 2M^2$$

for  $M \geq 2$ . Individuals of the third type get benefits of

$$B_{\text{III}} = 150 + 90M - 4M^2$$

where  $M$  denotes the number of monuments in the city. Assume that there are 50 people of each type. Monuments cost \$3,000 each to build. How many monuments should be built?

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 7 The Mathematics of Public Goods Provision



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In this appendix, we present the mathematics behind the analysis of the private provision of public goods and discuss how government intervention affects that provision. This analysis uses the tools of *game theory*, a method used by economists to solve problems in which multiple parties interact to make a decision.

## Setup of the Example

Imagine that Ben and Jerry live by themselves far away from others. They choose between consuming a private good,  $X$ , with a price of  $\$1 (P_x = 1)$ , and a public good, fireworks, with a price of  $\$1 (P_F = 1)$ . They each have an income of \$100. Because fireworks are a public good, the total amount provided is the sum of the amount provided by each individual:  $F = F_B + F_J$ . Each individual ( $i$ ) has a utility function of the form:

$$U = 2 \times \log(X_i) + \log(F_B + F_J)$$

which he or she maximizes subject to the budget constraint:

$$X_i + F_i = 100$$

## Private Provision Only

Initially, Ben and Jerry provide the public good on their own, with no government intervention. A question for modeling private provision is how Ben and Jerry will behave, given that each knows the other will also provide fireworks. Game theory models designed to answer questions such as these typically assume *Nash bargaining*: each actor solves for his optimal strategy given the other actor's behavior, and an equilibrium exists if there is a set of mutually compatible optimal strategies. The *Nash equilibrium* is the point at which each actor is pursuing his optimal strategy, given the other actor's behavior.

Combining the equations for the utility function and the budget constraint, Ben solves a problem of the form:

$$\text{Max } U = 2 \times \log(100 - F_B) + \log(F_B + F_J)$$

Differentiating this expression with respect to  $F_B$ , we obtain:

$$-2/(100 - F_B) + 1/(F_B + F_J) = 0$$

which we can solve to generate:

$$(100 - F_B) / (2 \times (F_B + F_J)) = 1$$

and therefore:

$$F_B = (100 - 2F_J) / 3$$

Note the free rider problem implied by this equation: Ben's contribution goes down as Jerry's contribution goes up.

We can solve a similar problem for Jerry:

$$F_J = (100 - 2F_B) / 3$$

This yields two equations in two unknowns, which we can substitute one into the other to solve for  $F_B$  and  $F_J$ . Doing so, we find that  $F_B = F_J = 20$ , so the total supply of fireworks is 40.

## Socially Optimal Level

How does this compare to the socially optimal level of provision? The social optimum is the quantity at which the sum of the individuals' marginal rates of substitution equals the ratio of prices (which is 1 in this example). Each individual's *MRS* is the ratio of his marginal utility of fireworks to his marginal utility of private goods, which we obtain by differentiating the previous utility function with respect to fireworks and then again with respect to private goods. So the optimal amount of fireworks is determined by:

$$(100 - F_B) / [2 \times (F_B + F_J)] + (100 - F_J) / [2 \times (F_B + F_J)] = 1$$

Using the fact that total fireworks  $F = F_B + F_J$ , we can rewrite this equation as:

$$(200 - F) / 2F = 1$$

Solving this, we obtain  $F = 66.6$ . This quantity is much higher than the total provision by the private market, 40, due to the free rider problem. The public good is underprovided by the private market.

## Different Types of Individuals

Suppose now that Ben has an income of \$125, while Jerry has an income of only \$75. In that case, Ben maximizes:

$$U = 2 \times \log(125 - F_B) + \log(F_B + F_J)$$

So Ben's demand for fireworks is:

$$F_B = (125 - 2F_J) / 3$$

Jerry, in this case, maximizes his utility:

$$U = 2 \times \log(75 - F_J) + \log(F_B + F_J)$$

So Jerry's demand for fireworks is:

$$F_J = (75 - 2F_B) / 3$$

Solving these two equations, we find that  $F_B = 45$  and  $F_J = -5$ . Because individuals can't provide negative fireworks, this means that Jerry provides no fireworks, and the total supply is 45. This quantity is higher than the private quantity supplied when Ben and Jerry have equal incomes. Thus, having one actor with a higher income leads the outcome to be closer to the social optimum.

## Full Crowd-Out

Suppose that the government recognizes that the private sector underprovides fireworks by a total of 26.6 in the original example. It therefore attempts to solve this problem by mandating that Ben and Jerry each contribute \$13.30 toward more fireworks. Will this solve the underprovision problem?

In fact, it will not; such a mandate will simply crowd out existing contributions. Under the mandate, both Ben and Jerry now maximize their utility, which has the form:

$$\text{Max } U = 2 \times \log(X_i) + \log(F_B + F_J + 26.6)$$

Each maximizes that utility function subject to the budget constraint:

$$X_i + F_i = 100 - 13.3$$

Solving this problem as above, we find that the optimal level of fireworks provision for both Ben and Jerry falls to 6.7 each, so that total provision (public of 26.6 plus private of 13.4) remains at 40. By reducing their provision to 6.7, Ben and Jerry can return to the private solution that they find to be optimal, which is total spending of \$20 each, and a total of 40 fireworks. As discussed in the chapter, however, full crowd-out is only one of a range of possible outcomes when government provides a good that is also provided by the private sector.

# CHAPTER 8 Cost-Benefit Analysis



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [8.1 Measuring the Costs of Public Projects](#)
- [8.2 Measuring the Benefits of Public Projects](#)
- [8.3 Putting It All Together](#)
- [8.4 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do we appropriately measure the costs and benefits of public projects?
- What are the best methods for dealing with difficult-to-measure costs and benefits, such as the value of time and of human life?
- How do we compare costs and benefits to evaluate the optimality of public projects?

California's transportation system is under a lot of stress. As a result of the rapid growth in the state's population, travel on the state's highway system is increasing five times faster than its capacity. This problem will only worsen in the future: the state's population is expected to increase by about 20 million persons over the next 30 to 40 years. To address this developing crisis, the state is going to build the first high-speed rail (HSR) system in the United States. It will cover the 800 miles from Sacramento to San Diego, will have the ability to reach speeds of over 200 miles per hour (thus cutting travel time from 8 1/2 hours to about 4 hours), and was projected to cost \$68 billion. In 2008, California residents voted to pay for the HSR through a combination of state bonds, revenue from the state's sale of carbon dioxide permits, federal contributions, and private investment.<sup>1</sup>

California voters might never have approved the HSR project without the information from a study commissioned by the state that assessed the costs and benefits of such a project for the state.<sup>2</sup> The analysts first computed the project's expenditures, which consisted of capital costs (such as design, management, and land acquisition), operation costs (such as labor costs and electrical power costs), and maintenance costs (maintenance of tracks and signals). The analysts also addressed the nonmonetary costs of the project, such as air pollution and noise pollution (which, in turn, took into account the loss of sleep and the lower productivity that results from increased noise levels). The analysts concluded that all these costs would be more than offset by the project's benefits.

Benefits from the project came in many forms. The analysts estimated that by the year 2040, the HSR would have 34 million riders, thus saving almost 150 million hours annually through reduced time spent sitting in traffic and through increased reliability of travel relative to airline travel. Productivity would also increase because people on the train would likely work, which they could not do if they were driving a car. The report also predicted that the HSR would save almost 250 million gallons of automotive fuel and 35 million gallons of airline fuel per year. And, with fewer people on the road, the number of auto accidents would fall, so people would not suffer the lost wages and high medical expenses associated with auto accidents. The HSR would also reduce overall pollution, which would improve health (resulting in more medical expense savings), and lessen the social costs imposed by global warming.

Ultimately, the analysts concluded that the value of the train's benefits were about \$252 billion, while its costs were \$119 billion, so that the project delivers net benefits of about \$133 billion. This large net benefit may help explain the broad support for the HSR project among California voters, despite the long-run increase in state tax revenues that will be required to pay off the bonds that finance the project. Recent cost overruns may challenge that support, although the rise in projected costs to \$77 billion still leaves the project with very positive net benefits.<sup>3</sup>

The discussion in [Chapter 7](#) relied on the theoretical concepts of the marginal social benefit and the cost of public goods. For a government making decisions about how much of a public good to provide, however, these theoretical concepts must be translated into hard numbers. To accomplish this translation, the government uses **cost-benefit analysis** to compare the costs and benefits of public goods projects to decide if they should be undertaken. In principle, cost-benefit analyses are accounting exercises, a way of adding up the benefits and costs of a project and then comparing them. In practice, however, cost-benefit analyses are rich economic exercises that bring to bear the microeconomic reasoning reviewed in [Chapter 2](#) and a host of interesting empirical evidence.

#### **cost-benefit analysis**

The comparison of costs and benefits of public goods projects to decide if they should be undertaken.

This richness is clearly illustrated by California's HSR train example. Carrying out the cost-benefit analysis in this case required answering hard questions, such as: How do we value the time savings to commuters? How do we value the costs of noise and reduced visibility due to pollution? How do we value the benefits of increased safety? And how do we deal with the fact that many of these costs and benefits accrue not today, but far into the future?

In this chapter, we discuss the important set of issues that must be addressed to carry out cost-benefit analysis. In doing so, we explore how policy makers use the tools of this field to apply the theory developed in [Chapter 7](#).

## 8.1 Measuring the Costs of Public Projects

In this section, we introduce the example that will guide us through our discussion of cost-benefit analysis and then turn to the difficulties associated with measuring the costs of public projects. Although the principles discussed here are general, the best way to understand cost-benefit analysis is through an example.

### The Example

Suppose that you are again working for your state government but that instead of working on health and human services issues, you are running the highway department. Your state turnpike is in poor shape, with large potholes and crumbling shoulders that slow down traffic and pose an accident risk. You have been charged by the governor with the task of considering whether the state should invest in repairing this road.<sup>4</sup>

As shown in [Table 8-1](#), making the improvements will require the following inputs:

- 1 million bags of asphalt
- 1 million hours of construction labor (500 workers for 2,000 hours each)
- \$10 million per year in the future for maintenance costs

TABLE 8-1 Cost-Benefit Analysis of Highway Construction Project

		Quantity	Price/Value	Total
Costs	Asphalt	1 million bags		
	Labor	1 million hours		
	Maintenance	\$10 million/year		
			First-year cost:	
			Total cost over time:	
Benefits	Driving time saved	500,000 hours/year		
	Lives saved	5 lives/year		
			First-year benefit:	
			Total benefit over time:	
			Benefit over time minus cost over time:	

The renovation of the turnpike in your state has three costs: asphalt, labor, and future maintenance. There are two associated benefits: reduced travel time and reduced fatalities. The goal of cost-benefit analysis is to quantify these costs and benefits.

There are two main benefits to these road improvements:

- Driving time for producers (trucks) and consumers will be reduced by 500,000 hours per year

- The road will be safer, resulting in 5 fewer fatalities per year

## Measuring Current Costs

The first goal of the cost-benefit analysis is to measure the cost of this public good. It seems an easy task: add up what the government pays for all the inputs just listed to obtain the cost. This method represents the **cash-flow accounting** approach to costs that is used by accountants. This does not, however, correspond to the theoretical concept of social marginal cost that we used in [Chapter 7](#) to determine the optimal level of public goods. The social marginal cost of any resource (e.g., the asphalt, labor, and future maintenance costs) is its **opportunity cost**: the value of that input in its next best use. Thus, the cost to society of employing any input is determined not by its cash costs, but by the next best use to which society could put that input. Consider first the asphalt. The next best use for a bag of asphalt, besides using it on this project, is to sell the bag to someone else. The value of this alternative use is the market price of the bag, so in this case, the opportunity cost is the input's price. This is the first lesson about opportunity costs: if a good is sold in a perfectly competitive market, then the opportunity cost is equal to the price. If the price of a bag of asphalt is \$100, the asphalt costs for the project will be \$100 million; if in a competitive equilibrium, price equals marginal social cost.

### **cash-flow accounting**

An accounting method that calculates costs solely by adding up what the government pays for inputs to a project and calculates benefits solely by adding up income or government revenues generated by the project.

### **opportunity cost**

The social marginal cost of any resource is the value of that resource in its next best use.

If the labor market is perfectly competitive, then the same argument applies to the labor costs of the project. In this case, the value of an hour of labor used on this project is the market wage—that is, what that labor is worth in its next best alternative use. If the market wage for construction workers is \$10 per hour, then the opportunity cost of the labor for the project is \$10 million.

## Imperfect Markets

Suppose, however, that construction jobs pay much more than the next best job. For example, perhaps state law mandates a minimum wage of \$20 per hour for construction workers, while the market wage is \$10 per hour for all other workers.<sup>5</sup>

Because the construction wage is higher than other wages, there will be some workers who would happily work in construction but cannot find jobs, so they must instead work for \$10 per hour elsewhere.

In that case, the opportunity cost for a new project such as this one is the next best alternative for the workers who join the project, which is the \$10 they could have earned elsewhere. Therefore, the opportunity cost for the 1 million hours of labor is \$10 million.

How can this be, when the government actually spends \$20 million to hire these workers? The cash cost to the government for labor consists of two components: the opportunity cost of the resource (labor) plus the transfer of **rents**, which are payments to the resource deliverer (the worker) beyond those required to obtain the resource. The opportunity cost of one hour of labor is only \$10 per hour because that is what workers could earn elsewhere. Thus, by paying them \$20 per hour, we are transferring an extra \$10 per hour to them. This is not a cost to society; it is simply a transfer from one party (the government) to another (construction workers). So, of the \$20 million paid by the government, \$10 million is a transfer of rents from government to workers and is not counted as a true economic cost of

the project (despite being a cash accounting cost). *Economic costs are only those costs associated with diverting the resource from its next best use*, which, for these new construction workers, was working in another job at \$10 per hour. Any other costs are transfers.

#### rents

Payments to resource deliverers that exceed those necessary to employ the resource.

Similarly, suppose that the asphalt was sold to the government not by a perfectly competitive firm, but by a monopoly, which charges a price that is above its marginal cost. In this case, the resource cost of the asphalt is the marginal cost of producing it—the cost of the asphalt in terms of what else could have been done with these resources. The difference between the price paid for the bag of asphalt and the marginal cost of its production is simply a transfer of rents from the government to the monopoly asphalt maker.

## Measuring Future Costs

The final cost is maintenance, which involves both materials and labor. The analysis for those materials and labor is the same as we have pursued thus far. But there is a new wrinkle as well because we need to combine a future stream of costs (maintenance) with the one-time costs associated with construction. To do this, we compare the **present discounted value (PDV)** of these costs, as reviewed in [Chapter 4](#). A dollar tomorrow is worth less than a dollar today because I could put the dollar in a bank today, earn interest, and have more money tomorrow. So a dollar today is worth  $(1 + r)$  times as much as a dollar tomorrow, where  $r$  is the interest rate that I could earn in the bank. As a result, future maintenance costs must be discounted to compare them to today's construction costs.

#### present discounted value (PDV)

A dollar next year is worth  $1 + r$  times less than a dollar now because the dollar could earn  $r\%$  interest if invested.

While applying present discounted value involves simple algebra, there are some important economic issues involved in choosing the right **social discount rate** to use for these calculations (the “ $r$ ” in the expression for *PDV* on [page 103 of Chapter 4](#)). If a private firm were making an investment decision, the proper discount rate should represent the opportunity cost of what else the firm could accomplish with those same funds. If there is an existing investment that yields 10% per year with certainty, and the firm pays a tax rate of 50%, then this investment would net the firm a return of 5% per year. The opportunity cost of spending money on any new project, then, is the 5% net return that the firm could earn on the existing investment. Thus, 5% is the rate that should be used to discount the payments associated with any new project.

#### social discount rate

The appropriate value of  $r$  to use in computing *PDV* for social investments.

The government should also base its discount rate on the private-sector opportunity cost. The next best use for any money by the government is its use in the hands of the private sector. Thus, if a private firm could earn a 10% return on its money, then the government counts that full 10% as its opportunity cost. Unlike the private actor, the government does not count solely the after-tax portion of the investment return as its opportunity cost because the government is the party collecting the taxes. Thus, the social cost of removing the money from the private sector is 10%: the 5% after-tax return to the firm and the 5% in tax revenues to the government. This is the opportunity cost of devoting the funds to the government's project, so 10% should be used as a discount rate.<sup>6</sup>

In practice, the U.S. government uses a variety of discount rates.<sup>7</sup> The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recommended in 1992 that the government use a discount rate of 7%, the historical pre-tax rate of return on private investments, for all public

investments. Using a discount rate of 7%, and recalling the rule from [Chapter 4](#) that the *PDV* of a long-term stream of payment is just the payment amount over the interest rate, the \$10 million future stream of maintenance costs has a present discounted value of \$143 million ( **$\$10 \text{ million}/0.07 = \$143 \text{ million}$** ). Thus, the total costs of the project in today's dollars are \$100 million for asphalt, \$10 million for labor, and \$143 million for maintenance, for a total of \$253 million. This set of costs is shown in [Table 8-2](#).

TABLE 8-2 Cost-Benefit Analysis of Highway Construction Project

		Quantity	Price/Value	Total
Costs	Asphalt	1 million bags	\$100/bag	\$100 million
	Labor	1 million hours	\$10/hour	\$10 million
	Maintenance	\$10 million/year	7% discount rate	\$143 million
			First-year cost:	\$110 million
			Total cost over time:	\$253 million
Benefits	Driving time saved	500,000 hours/year		
	Lives saved	5 lives/year		
			First-year benefit:	
			Total benefit over time:	
			Benefit over time minus cost over time:	

The cost of the asphalt for this project is dictated by the market price for asphalt, \$100 per bag. The cost of labor depends not on the wage, but on the full opportunity cost of the labor, which incorporates the current unemployment of any workers who will be used on the project. The cost of future maintenance is the present discounted value of these projected expenditures.

## 8.2 Measuring the Benefits of Public Projects

Measuring the benefits associated with this project is more difficult than measuring the costs because it is more difficult to use market values to place a value on the benefits.

### Valuing Driving Time Saved

The first benefit associated with this project is that both producers and consumers will save travel time. For producers, we can value the time savings in a straightforward manner. The benefits to producers arise from a reduction in the cost of supplying goods because it takes less time to transport them. The decreased costs lead to an increase in supply (a rightward shift in the supply curve), which raises the total size of social surplus. This increase in social surplus is the benefit to society from the lower cost of producing goods.

It is much trickier to measure the benefits of time saved for consumers: How do we value the benefits of being able to get from point to point more quickly? What we need is some measure of society's valuation of individuals' *time*: What is it worth to me to have to spend fewer minutes in the car? Economists have several approaches to answering this question. None are fully satisfactory, but by putting them together, we can draw some general conclusions about the value of time.

#### Using Market-Based Measures to Value Time: Wages

Suppose that we can show that the time individuals save by driving faster is spent at work. Suppose, moreover, that there is a perfectly competitive labor market that allows individuals to earn their hourly wage for each additional hour spent at work. Under these assumptions, we would use drivers' wages to value their time savings. Opportunity cost is the value of the next best alternative use, and the next best alternative use in this example is being at work. The value of time at work in a perfectly competitive labor market is the wage rate that could be earned during that hour. The average wage rate for workers in the United States was \$26.94 per hour in 2018.<sup>8</sup>

What if the time savings is spent partly at work and partly in leisure? Once again, if we are in a perfectly competitive labor market in which individuals can freely choose how many hours they want to work, then the wage is the right measure *even if the time is spent on leisure*. This is because, in a competitive model, individuals set the value of their next hour of leisure time equal to their wage. If the marginal utility of leisure time were above the wage, individuals would work less and take more leisure (driving down the marginal utility of leisure by consuming more leisure). If the marginal utility of leisure time were below the wage, individuals would work more and take less leisure (driving up the marginal utility of leisure by consuming less leisure). Thus, in a perfectly competitive labor market with freely adjusting hours, the value of time is always the wage, even if the time is spent on leisure activities.

As you might expect, this theoretical proposition runs into some problems in practice:

- Individuals can't freely trade off leisure and hours of work; jobs may come with hour restrictions. Suppose that I'd like to work more than 40 hours per week at my current wage, but my employer will not let me because that would involve paying me a higher overtime wage. In this case, my value of leisure could be below my wage, but I can't drive them to equality by working longer hours. So the wage *overstates* the value to me of saving time.

- There may be nonmonetary aspects of the job. For example, in the summertime, my office at work is air conditioned, while my home is not. This means that I value time at work at more than the wage; I also value the fact that it is more comfortable. Thus, my total compensation at work is higher than my wage. The value of leisure is set equal to total compensation from work, not just the wage, so the wage *understates* the value to me of saving time.

These problems limit the value of the wage as a value of time, leading economists to consider a variety of other approaches to time valuation.

## Using Survey-Based Measures to Value Time: Contingent Valuation

Before you took any economics, if I had asked you to figure out the value of time to someone, how would you have proposed doing it? Most likely, you would have simply asked individuals what time is worth to them! That is, you could ask, “How much would you pay to save five minutes on your drive?” This approach is labeled by economists as **contingent valuation**, that is, asking individuals to value an option they are not now choosing, do not have the opportunity to choose, or is not yet available to them.

**contingent valuation**

Asking individuals to value an option that they are not now choosing, that they do not have the opportunity to choose, or that is not yet available to them.

The advantage of contingent valuation is that, in some circumstances, it is the only feasible method for valuing a public good. Consider the difficulty of valuing efforts to save a rare species of owl. There is no obvious market price that you can use to value that species. But you can survey individuals and ask what it is worth to them to save the species. These preferences can then be aggregated (added up) to form a value of efforts to save the species.

The problems with contingent valuation, however, are daunting, as reviewed in the following Application.



### APPLICATION

## The Problems of Contingent Valuation

While contingent valuation seems the most straightforward means of valuing benefits such as time savings, critics contend that the results of contingent valuation studies prove their uselessness. Two of the leading critics of contingent valuation are economists Peter Diamond and Jerry Hausman, who point out that varying the structure of contingent valuation surveys can lead to widely varying responses.<sup>9</sup> Examples of this problem include the following:

- *Isolation of issues matters.* When asked only one question on how much they'd be willing to pay to improve visibility at the Grand Canyon, respondents gave answers five times higher than when that question was placed third in a list with other questions.
- *Order of issues matters.* When asked how much they'd pay to save seals and whales (in that order), respondents said that seals were worth \$142 and whales \$195. When the order was reversed, whales (first) were now worth \$172 and seals only \$85.
- *The “embedding effect” matters.* Asked to value preservation from logging of one, two, and three wilderness areas, respondents gave roughly the same values for all three

scenarios, suggesting that the value reported was not for the task specified, but for the general value of preserving wilderness. Similarly, respondents placed roughly equal value on saving 2,000, 20,000, and 200,000 birds. ■

## Using Revealed Preference to Value Time

The natural way for noneconomists to value time is to ask individuals what their time is worth, but this approach runs into the previously noted problems. The natural way for economists to value time is instead to use **revealed preference**: let the actions of individuals reveal their valuation. The mantra of economics is: people may lie, but their actions, which result from utility maximization, don't!

**revealed preference**

Letting the actions of individuals reveal their valuation.

Suppose we compare two identical houses, one of which is five minutes closer to the central city where most commuters work. If individuals are willing to pay more for the closer home, this implies that they value the time savings. We can therefore use the difference in sales prices between the two homes to assign a value to saving five minutes of commuting. This comparison provides a market-based valuation of their time that truthfully reveals the preferences of individuals.

While appealing in theory, this approach also runs into problems in practice. This example works if the two homes are identical. But what if the house that is closer to the city is also nicer? Then we would find that it sells for a lot more, and we would incorrectly assume that this implies that individuals value their time very highly. The problem is that the price of any good values the entire set of attributes of that good, but for revealed preference analysis, we are concerned with only one particular attribute (in this case, distance to the city). Because other attributes of the good differ, it is difficult to use revealed preference to distill the value of a particular attribute of the good, such as location.

The ideal way to value time would be a controlled experiment, where we varied just the attribute of the good that we are trying to value: in this example, we could take the same house and move it five minutes closer to the city. This is clearly not possible in many cases. As reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box, however, a clever attempt to resolve this problem suggests that the value of an hour of time is remarkably consistent with the estimate from market-based measures.

## Valuing Saved Lives

Returning to our highway example, the other major benefit of improving the turnpike is that repairing the road will improve safety and save lives. Valuing human lives is the single most difficult issue in cost-benefit analysis. Many would say that human life is priceless, that we should pay any amount of money to save a life. By this argument, valuing life is a reprehensible activity; there is no way to put a value on such a precious commodity.

This argument does not recognize that there are many possible uses for the limited government budget, each of which could save some lives. By stating that life should not be valued, we leave ourselves helpless when facing choices of different programs, each of which could save lives. By this logic, we would have to finance *any* government program that could save lives, at the expense of, say, education or housing expenditures. Alternatively, we could claim that virtually any government expenditure has some odds of saving a life; by improving education, for example, we may reduce crime, which will save victims' lives. To escape the impotence that would be imposed by the "life is priceless" argument, one needs to be able to

place some value on a human life.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### Valuing Time Savings

The fundamental problem facing the revealed preference approach in practice is the type of bias that we discussed in [Chapter 3](#). When doing revealed preference analysis, the treatment is a good with a certain attribute (such as being only ten minutes from the city), while the control is another good without that attribute (such as being ten minutes farther from the city). The problem is that the treatments and controls may differ in ways that lead to bias. Suppose that homes built closer to the city are smaller, or that they have smaller yards. This would lead their value to be lower, so that when one compared the prices of houses farther away and closer to the city, one might not find the expected decline in prices for farther-away homes. In the Boston metropolitan area, for example, the town of Everett is, on average, only 4 miles from downtown Boston, while the suburban town of Lexington is 11 miles away. Yet the average home price in Everett is \$353,000, while the average home price in Lexington is about 2.2 times higher at \$778,000.<sup>10</sup> This is because the houses in Lexington are typically much larger and have nicer attributes than those in Everett.

Many of these attributes are observable, such as the square footage of the house or the number of bathrooms. In such cases, we can try to control for these other attribute differences using cross-sectional regression analysis with control variables. Indeed, in this context there is a name for such a strategy: *hedonic market analysis*. Hedonic market analysis proceeds by running a regression of house values on each of the bundle of attributes of housing: distance to town center, number of bedrooms, number of bathrooms, square footage, and so on. The notion is that if we control in a regression context for all of the attributes other than distance, we will essentially be comparing identical houses in different locations.

As we highlighted in [Chapter 3](#), however, this is not likely to be a fully satisfactory approach. There are many differences between houses that are hard to observe, such as the perceived quality of the neighborhood or the care taken by the previous owner. If these things are correlated with distance to the town center, it will mean that the treatment group (close houses) and the control group (more distant houses) are not identical products, so our (biased) estimates do not give a true valuation of time differences.

In order to provide a more convincing estimate of the value of time savings, a quasi-experimental approach can be used. An example of such a study was done by [Deacon and Sonstelie \(1985\)](#). During the oil crisis of the 1970s, the government imposed price ceilings on the large gasoline companies, setting a maximum price that those companies could charge per gallon of gas. These low prices (relative to the true market price) led consumers to wait in long lines to get gas. These price ceilings did not apply to smaller, independently owned stations, so lines were shorter there. As a result, the amount of time that individuals were willing to wait at the stations owned by large gas companies (the treatment group) relative to independent stations (the control group) can be compared to the amount of money saved by going to the treatment stations instead of the control stations to form a value of time.

The authors compared Chevron stations in California, which were mandated to lower their prices by \$0.51 per gallon (in 2017 dollars) below the price being charged by the control group of independent stations. Lines formed at Chevron stations for cheaper gas, forcing customers to wait an average of 14.6 minutes more at Chevron than at competing stations. The mean purchase was 10.5 gallons, suggesting roughly that people were saving \$21.50 (in 2017 dollars) per hour they waited. That is, individuals revealed themselves to be willing to wait an hour for \$21.50—very close to the average hourly wage in the United States.<sup>11</sup>



## APPLICATION

### Valuing Life<sup>12</sup>

A problem in valuing life in public policy debates is that “real lives” often count more than “statistical lives.” When individuals are faced with the prospect of saving a particular individual’s life, they have a much higher willingness to pay than when faced with expenditures that are likely to save a higher number of lives. Indeed, social experiments reveal that as the number of victims in a tragedy increases, willingness to pay decreases. There is even a drop off in willingness to pay to help when the number of victims in a situation increases from one to two!<sup>13</sup> The sticky ethical problem of valuing life arises in many instances in public policy, as shown by these examples.

1. In 1993, consumer groups demanded that General Motors recall about 5 million pickup trucks that it had manufactured between 1973 and 1987. The gas tanks on these trucks

were mounted on the outside of the vehicle. These groups claimed that the trucks' side-mounted gas tanks made the trucks more likely to explode on impact, causing 150 deaths over the period that the truck was manufactured. This recall would cost \$1 billion and would, according to government calculations, save at most 32 more lives (because the trucks were slowly falling out of use). Using these estimates, the cost per life saved by the recall would have been  **$\$1 \text{ billion}/32 = \$31.25 \text{ million}$** .

GM didn't want to spend this much money and instead managed to reach a settlement with the government, agreeing to provide \$50 million to support education programs about seat belts and drunk driving, to undertake research into burn and trauma treatment, and to buy 200,000 child safety seats for low-income families. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader called the settlement "the most unprecedented buyout of law enforcement officials by a culpable corporation in regulatory history." But was it? The government estimated that the child safety seats alone would save 50 lives. If this were the only benefit (and it wasn't), the cost per life saved would be  **$\$50 \text{ million}/50 = \$1 \text{ million}$** , much less than the \$31.25 million per life saved that the recall would have cost. In other words, this alternative to the recall was saving more lives at a much lower cost. By this measure, the settlement was much better than the recall alternative, but it was only possible because the government was willing to set a value on human life.

2. In October 1999, a commuter train crash at London's Paddington Station killed 31 people and prompted calls by an outraged public for more investment in rail safety measures. The public's anger was in part focused on the fact that British Rail, once a public entity, had recently been *privatized* (sold to a private-sector entity, a policy we discuss more in [Chapter 9](#)), so people assumed that the profit-seeking companies in charge of the system had skimped on safety measures to improve their profits. Emotions ran high at the time of the crash, and one government official promised that everything possible would be done to protect rail passengers, saying, "A billion is not a lot of money when safety is at stake."

The government responded by requiring the rail companies to install the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS), which, for \$700 million (in U.S. dollars), would be able to quickly stop any train traveling under 75 mph if a dangerous situation were detected. But then a government investigation into rail safety recommended installing even more advanced technology, the European Train Control System (ETCS), which could stop trains traveling at any speed. Installing the ETCS would cost between \$3 billion and \$9 billion, save anywhere from one to three lives per year, and would last anywhere from 30 to 50 years. At best (\$3 billion to save three lives per year for 50 years), this would mean spending \$20 million per life saved; at worst (\$9 billion to save one life per year for 30 years), it would mean \$300 million per life saved.

As critics noted the immensely high cost of the ETCS, government officials began to back down from promises to spend whatever it took to ensure rail safety. Furthermore, as opponents of the proposed safety measures noted, many more Britons are killed on roads than on rails, so that implementing the government's safety standards on Britain's roadways would save more lives, and at a cost of only \$2 million per life saved. As a result, the government did not commit itself to installing the more expensive rail safety system. ■

## Using Wages to Value a Life

As with valuing time, the market-based approach to valuing lives is to use wages: life's value is the present discounted value of the lifetime stream of earnings. While this seems like a logical approach, it faces a number of problems. One major problem is that using wages to value life doesn't value any time that isn't spent working. In a competitive markets model, we would want to add up not only the wages that are earned at work, but also the leisure time that is valued at that market wage. [Keeler \(2001\)](#) calculated that a worker under 50 will spend 10 to 20% of her future hours working, so that, assuming she values leisure time at her wage rate, the value of her life is about 5 to 10 times her future lifetime earnings. Using data on employment, wages, and mortality rates, Keeler calculated that the average 20-year-old female will have future earnings of \$642,000 (net present value in 2015 dollars) but will value her life at \$4.066 million (in 2015 dollars). Men have slightly higher values because of higher earnings, while older people have lower values because they have fewer hours of life remaining.

This approach also faces the same problem as using wages to value time, which is that the market wage may not accurately reflect the value of leisure time. Moreover, life may mean more than just wages earned or corresponding leisure. For example, an individual may internalize the enjoyment derived by others from her being alive.

## Contingent Valuation

The second approach to valuing a life uses contingent valuation. One way to do this is to ask individuals what their lives are worth. This is obviously a difficult question to answer. Thus, a more common approach is to ask about the valuation of things that change the probability of dying. For example, one such survey asked participants how much more they would pay for a ticket on an airline with one fatal crash out of 500,000 flights, compared to the same ticket on an airline with two fatal crashes out of 500,000 flights. Another question asked how much less they would be willing to pay for a house in an area with environmental pollution that would reduce their life span by one year, compared to a house in an unpolluted area.

The problems of contingent valuation just raised will clearly haunt this analysis as well, however. Perhaps for this reason, contingent valuation studies have provided a very wide range of results for life values, ranging from \$1.0 million to \$28.8 million per life saved.<sup>[14](#)</sup>

## Revealed Preference

As with valuing time savings, the method preferred by economists for valuing life is to use revealed preferences. For example, we can value life by estimating how much individuals are willing to pay for something that reduces their odds of dying. Suppose that a passenger air bag could be added to a new car for \$350, and there is a 1 in 10,000 chance that it would save the life of the car passenger. This implies that the value of lives to individuals who buy airbags is at least \$3.5 million.

Alternatively, we can value life by estimating how much individuals must be paid to take risky jobs that raise their chance of dying. Suppose that we compare two jobs, one of which has a 1% higher risk of death each year (e.g., a coal miner versus a cashier in a retail store). Suppose further that the riskier job pays \$30,000 more each year. This \$30,000 is called a [compensating differential](#). In this example, individuals must be compensated by \$30,000 to take this 1% increased risk of dying, so that their lives are valued at \$3 million (\$30,000/0.01).

### compensating differentials

Additional (or reduced) wage payments to workers to compensate them for the negative (or positive) amenities of a job, such as increased risk of mortality (or a nicer office).

There is a large literature in economics that uses these types of revealed preference approaches to valuing lives. The consensus from this revealed preference approach, as summarized by the renowned expert in the field, Kip Viscusi of Harvard University, is that the value of life is roughly \$9.6 million.<sup>15</sup>

This approach, however, also has its drawbacks. First of all, it makes very strong information assumptions. In doing this type of revealed preference approach, we assume that the coal miner knows that he has a 1% higher chance of dying each year than the cashier. This type of information is often not readily available. The implied value of life from compensating differentials depends on individuals' perceptions of the risk, not the actual statistical risk, and these perceptions are often unknown to the researcher trying to estimate the value of life. Second, the literature on psychology suggests that, even armed with this information, individuals are not well prepared to evaluate these trade-offs. For example, a large experimental literature shows that individuals typically overstate very small risks (such as the odds of dying in a plane crash) and understate larger risks (such as the odds of dying on a dangerous job).<sup>16</sup>

The third problem with revealed preference studies was highlighted in the discussion about housing and time savings: the need to control for other associated attributes of products or jobs. For example, suppose that a coal miner faces a 1% higher chance of dying each year than does a cashier and also faces a 5% higher chance of being seriously injured. Then the \$30,000 compensating differential incorporates both of these effects and cannot simply be used to infer the value of life. Moreover, because of the nature of the work, coal mining is considered a much less pleasant job compared to other types of work. Compensating differentials reflect both job risks and job "amenities" that determine the overall attractiveness of the job. The negative amenities of coal mining, along with other health risks, provide reasons why the compensating differential for that job overstates the value of life (because it incorporates the compensating differential for work injury and bad work conditions).

Fourth, there is the central problem of *differences in the value of life*. There is presumably not one common value of life in society but rather a distribution across individuals of different tastes. The revealed preference approach provides an estimate of the value of life for the set of individuals who are willing to take a riskier job or buy a safer product. This may not, however, provide a representative answer for the population as a whole.

For example, suppose that there are 10,000 people in society, 1,000 of whom don't much care about on-the-job risk (risk neutral) and 9,000 of whom are very worried about on-the-job risk (risk averse). Suppose that there are two types of jobs in society, a risky job with a 1% chance of dying each year and a non-risky job with no chance of dying. The risk-neutral workers require only \$1,000 more each year to work in the risky job, while the other workers require \$100,000.

If there are 1,000 risky jobs in this society, who will take them, and how much more will they pay than the non-risky jobs? If the firms that offer those risky jobs pay only \$1,000 in compensating differential, the jobs will be filled by the 1,000 risk-neutral workers; the risk-averse workers would not take the job at that small compensating differential. Firms would like to pay the smallest possible compensating differential, so they will pay the \$1,000 to get the 1,000 risk-neutral workers.

As a result, there will be a \$1,000 compensating differential in equilibrium, implying a

value of life of \$100,000 ( $\$1,000/0.01$ ). Such a difference doesn't mean that life is worth only \$100,000 for the average person in society, however; it is the value only for the risk-neutral individuals who take these jobs. This estimate would provide a very misleading answer for the overall social value of life. The importance of this distribution is highlighted by the study of [Rohlf et al. \(2015\)](#), who looked at the willingness to pay for air bags in the 1990s and early 2000s. They found that the willingness to pay implies a value of life of roughly \$10 million for the typical individual but that the valuation ranges from negative values up to \$19 million.<sup>17</sup>

More generally, because risk-neutral individuals are always the first to take risky jobs, revealed preference pricing of risk will generally underestimate the value of life for the average person. This is because it is not an average person you are observing, but a person who (by definition) is more risk loving than average.

## Government-Revealed Preference

Another approach to valuing lives is not to rely on how individuals value their lives but to focus, instead, on existing government programs and what they spend to save lives. One study reviewed 76 government regulatory programs that are designed to protect public safety and computed both the associated improvements in mortality and costs of the regulation to society (e.g., through higher costs to producers if imposing regulatory standards). The key conclusions from this study are summarized in [Table 8-3](#), with costs updated to 2015 dollars. The costs varied from \$134,000 per life saved for safety interventions, such as childproof cigarette lighters, to \$224.1 million per life saved from regulations for cattle feed. Of the 76 regulations, 45 had a cost per life saved below the \$9.6 million figure that comes from studies of compensating differentials, but 31 of the regulations had a cost above that level.

**TABLE 8-3 Cost per Life Saved of Various Regulations**

Regulation Concerning . . .	Year	Agency	Cost per Life Saved (millions, in 2018 dollars)
Childproof lighters	1993	CPSC	\$0.13
Food labeling	1993	FDA	0.52
Reflective devices for heavy trucks	1999	NHTSA	1.24
Children's sleepwear flammability	1973	CPSC	3.0
Rear/up/shoulder seatbelts in cars	1989	NHTSA	6.1
Asbestos	1972	OSHA	7.65
VALUE OF STATISTICAL LIFE			9.93
Benzene	1987	OSHA	30.0
Asbestos ban	1989	EPA	106.32
Solid waste disposal facilities	1991	EPA	136.41
Cattle feed	1979	FDA	231.76

Data from: [Morrall \(2003\)](#), Table 2, updated to 2018 dollars.<sup>18</sup>

Government safety regulations increase costs and save lives, and these costs and benefits can be compared to compute an implicit cost per life saved. These values range from a low of \$130,000 (\$0.13 million) per life saved for childproof lighters to a high of more than \$231.1 million per life saved for solid waste disposal facility regulations.

The U.S. government does have an official value of life threshold that it uses in evaluating policies that save (or cost) lives. Strikingly, however, the values used are different in different agencies! In 2016, values used ranged from \$9.6 million, used by the U.S. Transportation Department to value auto safety, to \$9.5 million, used by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to value cigarette warning labels, to \$10 million, used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to value pollution reductions.<sup>19</sup> It is unclear why

lives saved in different ways by government policy should be worth such different amounts!

The fact that the government is willing to spend so much to save lives in many public policy interventions suggests that the public sector values lives quite highly. Another interpretation, however, is that the government is simply inconsistent and does not apply the same standards in some arenas as it does in others.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

##### *How Much Does It Cost to Avoid a Traffic Fatality?*

One of the most important sources of mortality risk worldwide is traffic accidents; estimates suggest that each year nearly 1.3 million lives are lost worldwide due to motor vehicle accidents. Damages from accidents have been placed at \$413.8 billion per year in the United States alone.<sup>20</sup> One of the most important policies to reduce traffic accidents is increased police enforcement of speed limits and other traffic laws. One study by [DeAngelo and Hansen \(2014\)](#) assessed what happened to traffic fatalities when the state of Oregon saw a large reduction in its police force. In particular, they asked what impact reduced policing had on driving safety and what it implied about the cost per life saved of additional policy enforcement.

In February 2003, there was a mass layoff of the Oregon State Police due to budgetary problems in the state. Thirty-five percent of state troopers were laid off, dramatically reducing the ability of the state police to enforce driving safety. Because they were less afraid of being caught, drivers drove more dangerously—average speeds rose by more than 0.5 mile per hour after the law changed. This may not seem like much, but that average included many safety-conscious drivers who would not speed excessively regardless of police presence. Thus, this increase in driving speed may reflect a small minority of drivers who drove much faster, and therefore more dangerously, because they were less likely to be caught.

To study the impact of this reduction in policing, DeAngelo and Hansen compared traffic injury and fatality numbers in Oregon to those in nearby Washington and Idaho, where there were no dramatic reductions in policing. The Oregon layoff set up a quasi-experiment on policing's effect on driving safety. The treatment group is drivers in Oregon who faced a lower risk of getting caught driving over the speed limit because there were fewer police to catch them; the control group is drivers in Washington and Idaho where nothing changed.

[DeAngelo and Hansen \(2014\)](#) found that not only did the reduction in police enforcement lead to faster driving, it also led to more traffic fatalities. Over the period 1979–2005, they estimated that had the state police workforce stayed at its original 1979 level, there would have been 2,167 fewer highway fatalities. The cost of maintaining troopers at their 1979 numbers would have meant paying for 5,445 more trooper-years of service at an annual wage of \$123,000, for a total cost of \$670 million. This finding implies that Oregon could have saved lives at a cost of \$309,000 each, which is well below most estimates of both the value of a life and the cost to the government of saving lives in other ways. And this is not the only savings Oregon would have reaped: because of increased enforcement, and associated safer driving, nonfatal injuries would have fallen as well.

## Discounting Future Benefits

A particularly thorny issue for cost-benefit analysis is that many projects have costs that are mostly immediate and benefits that are mostly long term. An excellent example of this would be efforts to combat climate change through reducing the use of carbon-intensive products (e.g., via a tax on the carbon content of goods). The costs of such efforts would be felt in the near term as consumers have to pay more for goods (such as gasoline) whose consumption worsens climate change. The benefits of such efforts would be felt in the very distant future, however, as the global temperature in 100 years would be lower with such government intervention than it would be without any such intervention.

These types of examples are problematic for two reasons. First, the choice of discount rate will matter enormously for benefits that are far in the future. For example, a dollar benefit in

$$\left[ \frac{1}{(1.02)^{100}} = 0.138 \right],$$

100 years is worth 13.8¢ if the discount rate is 2%, 5.2¢ if the discount rate is 3%, and 2¢ if the discount rate is 4%. This sensitivity of benefit calculations to small changes in the discount rate places enormous importance on getting the discount rate exactly right.

Second, long-lived projects provide benefits not only to the generation that pays the costs but to future generations as well. Should we treat benefits to future generations differently

than benefits to current generations? Some would argue that we should just weight the benefits to the current generation, who are paying the costs. But what if the current generation cares about its children? In that case, the argument could be made to incorporate the children as well.

## Cost-Effectiveness Analysis

Despite the list of clever approaches to valuing the benefits of public projects, in some cases society may be unable (or unwilling) to do so. This does not imply that the techniques of cost-benefit analysis are useless. Rather it implies that, instead of comparing costs to benefits, we need to contrast alternative means of providing the public good and choose the approach that provides that good most efficiently. This comparison is called **cost-effectiveness analysis**, the search for the most cost-effective approach to providing a desired public good. For example, society may decide to combat climate change even if it is impossible to put an estimate on the benefits of doing so (or if the benefit is hugely uncertain because it is so far in the future). Even so, as discussed in [Chapter 6](#), there are many ways of combating climate change, and cost-effectiveness must be considered in choosing the best approach.

### cost-effectiveness analysis

For projects that have unmeasurable benefits, or are viewed as desirable regardless of the level of benefits, we can compute only their costs and choose the most cost-effective project.

## 8.3 Putting It All Together

[Table 8-4](#) shows the comparison of the costs and benefits of the turnpike renovation project. The present value of the costs of this project is \$253 million. The benefits are 500,000 reduced hours of driving time and five reduced fatalities per year. Let's assume that we can value both the increased time to producers and consumers at the same value, \$22.70 per hour (which comes from the revealed preference study cited earlier). That would produce time savings benefits of \$11.4 million per year. Let's also assume that we can value each of the 5 lives saved at the revealed preference average of \$9.6 million per life. That would produce a value of life savings of \$48 million per year. The total benefits would therefore be \$59.4 million per year.

TABLE 8-4 Cost-Benefit Analysis of Highway Construction Project

		Quantity	Price/Value	Total
Costs	Asphalt	1 million bags	\$100/bag	\$100 million
	Labor	1 million hours	\$10/hour	\$10 million
	Maintenance	\$10 million/year	7% discount rate	\$143 million
		First-year cost:		\$110 million
		Total cost over time (7% discount rate):		\$253 million
Benefits	Driving time saved	500,000 hours/year	\$22.70/hour	\$11.4 million
	Lives saved	5 lives/year	\$9.6 million/life	\$48 million
			First-year benefit:	\$59.4 million
		Total benefit over time (7% discount rate):		\$848.6 million
		Benefit over time minus cost over time:		\$595.6 million

The time savings from this project is most appropriately valued by the revealed preference valuation of time, which is \$22.70/hour. The life savings is most appropriately valued by the revealed preference value of life, which averages \$9.6 million. The present discounted value of costs for this renovation project is \$253 million, while the *PDV* of benefits for this project is \$848.6 million. Because benefits exceed costs by \$595.6 million, the project should clearly be undertaken.

Applying the same 7% discount rate to benefits, these benefits have a present discounted value of \$848.6 million, more than three times the cost of this project. Even if the value of both time and lives is half as large as those assumed here, the benefits would still significantly exceed the costs of this project. Thus, society benefits from these road improvements, and the government should provide them.

## Other Issues in Cost-Benefit Analysis

While the previous discussion is complicated enough, there are three other major issues that make cost-benefit analysis difficult: common counting mistakes such as double-counting benefits, concerns over the distributional effects of public projects, and uncertainty over costs and benefits.

### Common Counting Mistakes

When analyzing costs and benefits, a number of common mistakes arise, such as:

- *Counting secondary benefits*: If the government improves a highway, there may be an increase in commercial activity along the highway. One might be tempted to count this as a benefit of the project, but this new road may be taking away from commercial activity elsewhere. What matters in determining the benefits is only the total rise in social surplus from the new activity (the *net* increase in surplus-increasing trades that results from the improved highway).
- *Counting labor as a benefit*: In arguing for projects such as this highway improvement, politicians often talk about the jobs created by the project as a benefit. But wages are part of a project's costs, not its benefits. If the project lowers unemployment, this lowers the opportunity cost of the workers, but it does not convert these costs to benefits.
- *Double-counting benefits*: Public projects often lead to asset-value increases. For example, the fact that consumers save time driving to work when the highway is improved could lead to higher values for houses farther away from the city. When considering the value of this highway improvement, some may count both the reduction in travel times *and* the increase in the value of houses as a benefit. Because the rise in house values results from the reduction in travel time, however, both should not be counted as benefits.

Sometimes, these types of mistakes are made because of hasty or uninformed analysis. Other times, however, they are made on purpose by one side or another of a heated cost-benefit debate. The growing role of cost-benefit analysis in public policy making has raised the stakes for avoiding this type of manipulation of what should be an objective exercise.

## Distributional Concerns

The costs and benefits of a public project do not necessarily accrue to the same individuals; for example, when we expand a highway, commuters benefit, but those living next to the road lose from more traffic and noise. In theory, if the benefits of this project exceed its costs, it is possible to collect money from those who benefit and redistribute it to those who lose, and make everyone better off. In practice, however, such redistribution rarely happens, partly due to economic problems (such as the informational requirements of carrying out such redistribution) and partly due to political problems of the type discussed in the next chapter.

In the absence of such redistribution, we may care specifically about the parties gaining and losing from a public project. For example, if a project benefits only the rich and hurts only the poor, we may want to discount benefits and raise costs to account for this. The problem, of course, is: How do we pick the weights? This will depend on the type of social welfare function we use, as discussed in [Chapter 2](#).

## Uncertainty

As should be clear from the previous discussion, the costs and benefits of public projects are often highly uncertain. The extent of such uncertainty, however, can vary from project to project and should be accounted for when comparing projects. For reasons that we discuss in great detail in [Chapter 12](#), for any predicted outcome, individuals prefer that outcome be more rather than less certain. As a result, for any gap between costs and benefits, governments should prefer projects that have a more certain, rather than a less certain, estimate of the gap. Much as governments might prefer projects that have their greatest benefits for the poor, they also might prefer projects that deliver their benefits with more certainty.

## 8.4 Conclusion

Government analysts at all levels face a major challenge in attempting to turn the abstract notions of social costs and benefits into practical implications for public project choice. What at first seems to be a simple accounting exercise becomes complicated when resources cannot be valued in competitive markets. One complication arises when markets are not in competitive equilibrium, so that the opportunity costs of resources must be computed. Another complication arises when benefits are not readily priced by the market, and approaches such as contingent valuation or revealed preference must be employed. Nevertheless, economists have developed a set of tools that can take analysts a long way toward a complete accounting of the costs and benefits of public projects.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Providing optimal levels of public goods requires evaluating the costs and benefits of public projects.
- The costs of inputs to public projects are appropriately measured by their opportunity cost, or their value in the next best alternative use.
- If markets are in competitive equilibrium, the opportunity cost of an input is its market price; if markets are not in competitive equilibrium, however, the opportunity cost will differ from the market price, and some of the government spending may simply be transfers of rents.
- If costs are in the future, we must use a social discount rate to value those costs in present dollars.
- Measuring the benefits of public projects is difficult, and approaches range from using market values (such as wages to value time), to asking individuals about their valuation (contingent valuation), to using real-world behavior to reveal valuations (such as the compensating differentials for risky jobs to value life).
- Benefits are often in the future as well, which makes valuation very sensitive to the social discount rate chosen.
- Public project analysis requires considering the distributional implications of the project, the level of uncertainty over costs and benefits, and the budgetary cost of financing the project.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. A new public works project requires 300,000 hours of labor to complete.
  1. Suppose that the labor market is perfectly competitive and the market wage is \$20. What is the opportunity cost of the labor employed for the project?
  2. Suppose that there is currently unemployment among workers and that there are some workers who would willingly work for \$12 per hour. What is the opportunity cost of the labor employed? Does this vary depending on the fraction of would-be unemployed workers hired for the project?
  3. If your answers to (a) and (b) differ, explain why.
2. How does the opportunity cost of a government purchase vary depending on whether the market for the purchased good is perfectly competitive or monopolistic?
3. Two city councilors are debating whether to pursue a new project. Councilor Miles says it is only “worth it” to society if suppliers lower their costs to the city for the inputs to the project. Councilor Squeaky disagrees, and says it doesn’t matter—society is no better off with these cost concessions than it would be without the concessions. Where do you stand? Explain.
4. For your senior thesis, you polled your classmates, asking them, “How much would you be willing to pay to double the amount of parking on campus?” Based on their responses, you estimated that your fellow students were collectively willing to pay \$12 million to double the amount of on-campus parking. What are some problems with this type of analysis?
5. Consider the [Deacon and Sonstelie \(1985\)](#) approach to valuing time described in the text on [p. 224](#). Imagine that two cars are equivalent to one another in every way (such as gas mileage) except for gas tank size, and car A’s tank has twice the gas capacity of car B’s tank. Which driver is more likely to patronize a Chevron station mandated to lower prices below those of independent stations? Explain your answer.
6. A city government is considering building a new system of lighted bike paths. A councilor supporting their construction lists the following as potential benefits of the paths: (1) more enjoyable bike rides for current and future bikers, (2) reduced rush-hour automobile traffic due to increases in bike commuting, and (3) the creation of 15 construction-related jobs. Can all of these be considered benefits? Explain.
7. Suppose that, at your current hourly wage, you prefer working 40 hours per week to 20 hours, and would prefer working 32 hours per week to either 20 or 40 hours. However, you are forced to work either 20 hours or 40 hours per week. Is your hourly wage rate an accurate reflection of the value of your time? Explain.
8.  The city of Metropolita added a new subway station in a neighborhood between two existing stations. After the station was built, the average house price increased by \$10,000 and the average commute time fell by 15 minutes per day. Suppose that there is one commuter per household, that the average commuter works 5 days a week, 50 weeks a year, and that the benefits of reduced commuting time apply to current and future residents forever. Assume an interest rate of 5%. Produce an estimate of the average value of time for commuters based on this information.
9. One approach to calculating the value of life involves the use of compensating differential studies. What informational problems make these studies difficult to carry out?



The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

10. 

The city of Smallville is considering whether to build a new public swimming pool. This pool would have a capacity of 800 swimmers per day, and the proposed admission fee is \$6 per swimmer per day. The estimated cost of the swimming pool, averaged over the life of the pool, is \$4 per swimmer per day. Smallville has hired you to assess this project. Fortunately, the neighboring identical town of Springfield already has a pool, and the town has randomly varied the price of that pool to find how price affects usage. The results from their study follow:

Swimming Pool Price per Day	Number of Swimmers per Day
\$8	500
\$10	200
\$4	1,100
\$6	800
\$2	1,400

1. If the swimming pool is built as planned, what would be the net benefit per day from the swimming pool? What is the consumer surplus for swimmers?
  2. Given this information, is an 800-swimmer pool the optimally sized pool for Smallville to build? Explain.
11. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recommends that the government use different discount rates for public investments than for the sale of government assets. For public investments, the OMB suggests a discount rate that reflects the historical pre-tax rate of return on private investments, while for the sale of government assets, the OMB recommends using the cost of government borrowing as a discount rate. Why might the OMB make this distinction?
12. The city of Animaltown has built a new bridge across the river separating the two halves of the city for use by its residents. It is trying to decide whether to impose a toll and, if so, how much to charge; it would need to collect \$28,000 per hour to finance the bridge, but if it collects less than that, it will finance the remainder of the expense from general tax revenues. City planners estimate a local demand curve for hourly use of the bridge to be  $Q = 2,800 - 100P$ . The bridge will be able to accommodate 2,000 cars per hour without congestion. If the cost of collecting a toll is negligible, is it more efficient to collect a toll or not? If so, how much should Animaltown charge for crossing the bridge?
13. You are trying to decide where to go on vacation. In country A, your risk of death is 1 in 20,000, and you'd pay \$5,000 to go on that vacation. In country B, your risk of death is 1 in 30,000, and you'd pay \$5,600 to go on that vacation. Supposing that you're indifferent between these two destinations, save for the differential risk of death, what does your willingness to pay for these vacations tell you about how much you value your life?
14. Jellystone National Park is located 10 minutes away from city A and 20 minutes away from city B. Cities A and B have 200,000 inhabitants each, and residents in both cities have the same income and preferences for national parks. Assume that the cost for an individual to go to a national park is represented by the cost of the time it takes her to get into the park. Also assume that the cost of time for individuals in cities A and B is \$.50 per minute.

You observe that each inhabitant of city A goes to Jellystone ten times a year, while each inhabitant of city B goes only five times a year. Assume the following: the only people who go to the park are the residents of cities A and B; the cost of running Jellystone is \$1.5 million a year; and the social discount rate is 10%. Also assume that the park lasts forever.

1. Compute the cost per visit to Jellystone for an inhabitant of each city.
2. Assuming that those two observations (cost per visit and number of visits per inhabitant of city A, and cost per visit and number of visits per inhabitant of city B) correspond to two points on the same linear individual demand curve for visits to Jellystone, derive that demand curve. What is the consumer surplus for inhabitants of each city? What is the total consumer surplus?
3. There is a timber developer who wants to buy Jellystone to run his business. He is offering \$100 million for the

park. Should the park be sold?

15. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is considering funding a grant for a promising research project that aims to cure a rare disease. The time frame of the research is five years. The grant would fund the hiring of 20 scientists making \$150,000 per year for five years, a one-time investment in new lab equipment of \$3 million during the first year, and \$1 million per year for five years in lab supplies and materials. If successful, the cure would be available upon completion of the project, starting in Year 6.

As the scientist reviewing the proposal for the NIH, you estimate that the probability of success for this project is only 2%. However, if it were successful, it would immediately cure all patients with the disease, which is fatal within one year of diagnosis, and kills approximately 15 people annually.

To answer the following questions, assume the NIH uses a 7% discount rate, and is risk neutral.

1. Conduct a formal cost-benefit analysis for this project, weighing the costs of funding the proposal and the benefits of a possible cure for the disease. Use the figure of \$9.6 million for the value of a life. Do the costs outweigh the benefits? Do you recommend funding the grant? (Note: use a spreadsheet to conduct the cost-benefit analysis. Assume you are conducting these calculations in Year 0, and that funding and project costs would begin in Year 1.)
  2. One of your colleagues argues that a 2% chance of success is possibly an overestimate—the chance of the research being a success may more realistically be around 1%. If your colleague is right, how does this change the calculations you arrived at in part (a)?
16. The NIH receives many grant applications from scientists studying a wide array of diseases. Consider the grant decision presented in Problem 15(a), which led to funding approval for research into a rare disease. Suppose the situation changes and the grant application in that case is now no longer being considered in isolation. Instead, it is one of 30 applications, only 10 of which can be approved based on the current NIH budget. As the scientist reviewing these applications, how would these new details impact your decision? What are the key considerations that will affect your decision to fund the project?

# CHAPTER 9 Political Economy



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [9.1 Unanimous Consent on Public Goods Levels](#)
- [9.2 Mechanisms for Aggregating Individual Preferences](#)
- [9.3 Representative Democracy](#)
- [9.4 Public Choice Theory: The Foundations of Government Failure](#)
- [9.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do different methods of aggregating preferences affect public good choice?
- To what extent does a representative democracy deliver the outcomes desired by the typical voter?
- What are the problems that can arise when a government isn't solely interested in maximizing the well-being of voters?

In 2004, President Bush threatened to use his first veto to kill a highway spending bill written by a Congress controlled by his own party. The reason? The bill contained so many projects of dubious value that he could not justify increasing the deficit further. (The bill would cost \$275 billion over the next six years.) Perhaps the most egregious offenders were two bridges slated for construction in Alaska.<sup>1</sup>

One bridge would cost \$200 million to build and would be among the tallest in America, nearly the height of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Unlike the Golden Gate, however, it would not serve millions of travelers a year. Instead, it would connect the town of Ketchikan (population 7,845 at the time) to an island with 50 residents and the area's airport (offering six flights a day). The crossing from Ketchikan to the island is made by a ferry that takes five minutes and that one resident calls "pretty darn reliable." The other bridge, which would cost taxpayers up to \$2 billion, would be two miles long, connecting Anchorage to a port with one resident and almost no homes or businesses. The enactment of this plan would result in federal spending on transportation of \$1,151 per Alaska resident, compared to a U.S. average of \$44 per resident.<sup>2</sup>

Such economically useless endeavors are clear examples of politicians deriving power by bringing funds, and thus jobs, to their home districts. One resident of Ketchikan observed, "Everyone knows it's just a boondoggle that we're getting because we have a powerful congressman." That congressman is Alaska's lone representative, Republican Don Young (also called "Mr. Concrete"; he was sworn in on January 3, 2017, for his 23rd term). As chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee when the 2004 highway bill was written, Congressman Young declared, "This is the time to take advantage of the position I'm in. . . . If I had not done fairly well for our state, I'd be ashamed of myself." In defending the provision of such political "pork" (federal spending for local projects that serve mostly to transfer federal dollars to a politician's constituents), Missouri senator Kit Bond once said, "Pork is a mighty fine diet for Missouri, low in fat and high in jobs."<sup>3</sup>

In July 2005, the House and Senate approved the transportation bill, which was signed by President Bush in August. Ultimately, \$286.4 billion was allocated. Over \$24 billion of the total amount was set aside for spending on 6,373 pet projects.<sup>4</sup> In the final bill, \$1 billion was earmarked for more than 100 pork projects in Alaska, including the Ketchikan and Anchorage bridges.<sup>5</sup> Although Alaska ranks 47th in the nation in terms of population, it received more pork than all but three other states. As Young said of the bill, "I stuffed it like a turkey."<sup>6</sup> Despite the promise of federal funding, however, the Ketchikan "Bridge to Nowhere" was never undertaken and became a symbol of excessive pork in the 2008 presidential election. The Anchorage bridge project, however, remains in place, with completion expected in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

In [Chapter 7](#), we learned how to determine the optimal level of public goods by setting

marginal social costs and benefits equal; in [Chapter 8](#), we learned how to use cost-benefit analysis to quantify the costs and benefits of public projects. In the real world, however, economists do not get to decide whether public policies are undertaken or not. Instead, such decisions are made in the context of a complex political system. In some countries, these decisions may be made by a single ruler or group of rulers. In others, the decisions are made by elected officials or by the direct votes of citizens. Do any or all of these mechanisms deliver the optimal interventions suggested by the theoretical analyses of this book? In some cases, they will, but in other cases, they will not.

This chapter discusses how government actually operates when it makes decisions about the economy, such as the provision of public goods. This chapter is the only place in the book that focuses specifically on the fourth question of public finance: *Why* do governments do what they do? We begin by discussing the best-case scenario in which a government appropriately measures and aggregates the preferences of its citizens in deciding which public projects to undertake. We then discuss the problems with this idealized scenario and turn to more realistic cases.

One more realistic case is that of *direct democracy*, whereby voters directly cast ballots in favor of or in opposition to particular public projects. We discuss how voting works to turn the interests of a broad spectrum of voters into a public goods decision. The second case is that of *representative democracy*, whereby voters elect representatives, who in turn make decisions on public projects. We discuss when it is likely or not likely that representative democracy yields the same outcomes as direct democracy.

In the final section of the chapter, we move beyond models of voting behavior to talk in broader terms about the prospects for *government failure*, the inability or unwillingness of governments to appropriately address market failures. We discuss some of the implications of government failure and discuss evidence about its importance to economic well-being.

## 9.1 Unanimous Consent on Public Goods Levels

Our discussion of political economy starts with the example of a government that is able to optimally determine the level of public goods to provide through the unanimous consent of its citizens. It does so through **Lindahl pricing**, a system by which individuals report their willingness to pay for the next unit of a public good, and the government aggregates those willingnesses to form an overall measure of the social benefit from that next unit of public good. This marginal social benefit can then be compared to the marginal social cost of that next unit of public good to determine the optimal amount of the public good, and the good can be financed by charging individuals what they were willing to pay. We then discuss the problems that governments face in implementing this solution in practice, to set the stage for discussing the more realistic mechanisms that governments use to determine the level of public goods.

### Lindahl pricing

An approach to financing public goods in which individuals honestly reveal their willingness to pay, and the government charges them that amount to finance the public good.

## Lindahl Pricing

This approach, as introduced by the Swedish economist Erik Lindahl in 1919, relies on using individuals' **marginal willingness to pay**, the amount that individuals report themselves willing to pay for an incremental unit of a public good. Recall from [Chapters 2 and 5](#) that the demand curve for any private good measures the marginal willingness to pay for that private good. Lindahl suggested that we could similarly construct a demand curve for public goods by asking individuals about their willingness to pay for different levels of public goods.

### marginal willingness to pay

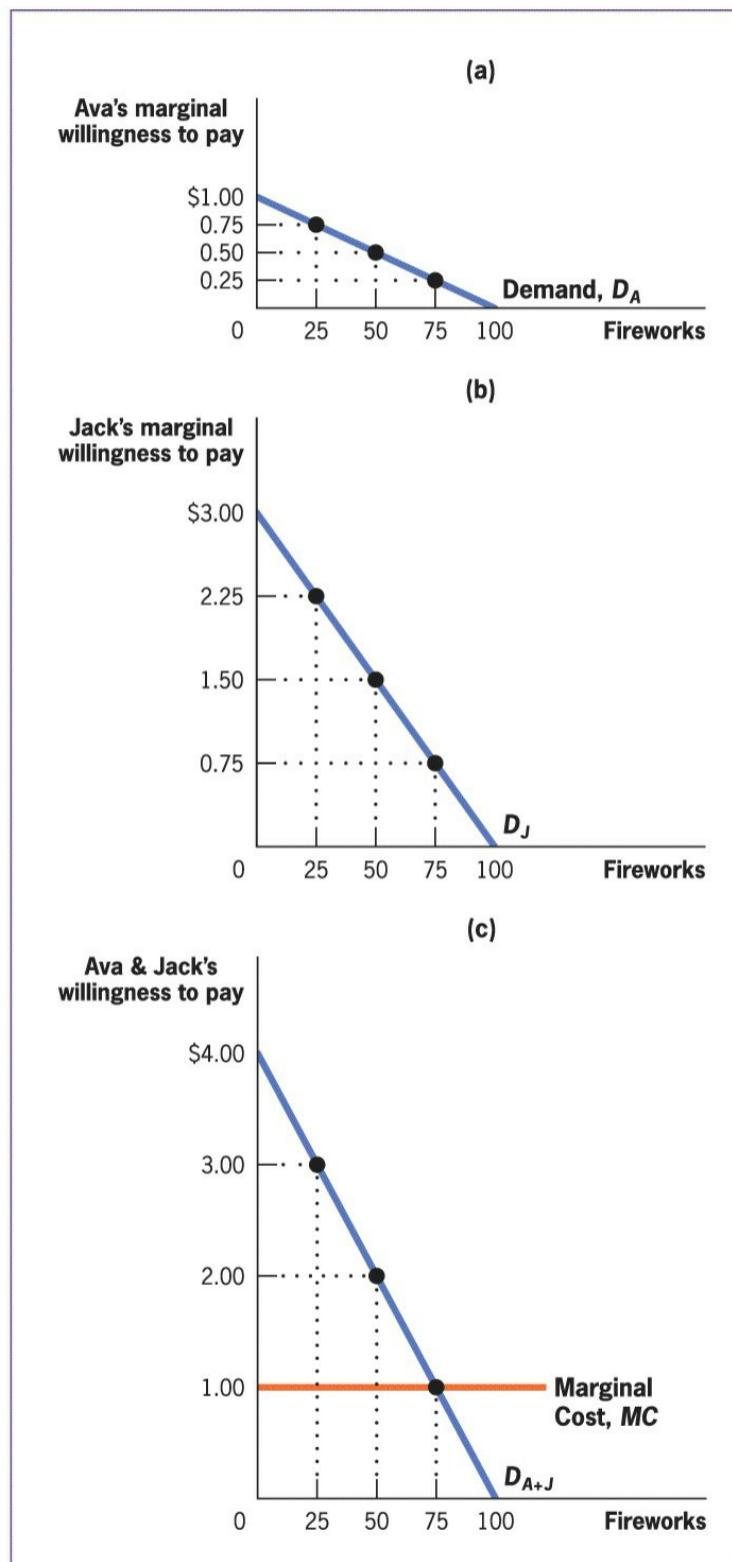
The amount that individuals are willing to pay for the next unit of a good.

To illustrate Lindahl's procedure, suppose that we have a public good, fireworks, with a constant marginal cost of \$1. This public good will be provided to two people, Ava and Jack. Remember the key feature of public goods from [Chapter 7](#): the fireworks must be provided in equal quantities to both Ava and Jack. Lindahl's procedure operates as follows:

1. The government announces a set of *tax prices* for the public good, the share of the cost that each individual must bear. For example, the government could announce that Ava and Jack are each paying 50¢ of the cost of a firework or that Ava pays 90¢ and Jack pays 10¢.
2. Each individual announces how much of the public good he wants at those tax prices.
3. The government repeats these steps to construct a *marginal willingness to pay schedule* for each individual that shows the relationship between willingness to pay and quantity of public goods desired.
4. The government adds up individual willingnesses to pay at each quantity of public good provided to get an overall demand curve for public goods ( $D_{A+J}$ ).
5. The government relates this overall demand curve to the marginal cost curve for the public good to solve for the optimal public good quantity.
6. The government then finances this public good by charging individuals their willingnesses to pay for that quantity of public good.

This point is illustrated graphically in [Figure 9-1](#). Panel (a) shows Ava's marginal

willingness to pay for fireworks. For the first firework, Ava has a marginal willingness to pay of \$1. For the 50th firework, she has a marginal willingness to pay of 50¢. For the 75th firework, she has a marginal willingness to pay of 25¢, and by the 100th firework, her marginal willingness to pay is zero. Panel (b) shows Jack's marginal willingness to pay for fireworks. For the first firework, Jack has a marginal willingness to pay of \$3. For the 50th firework, he has a marginal willingness to pay of \$1.50. For the 75th firework, he has a marginal willingness to pay of 75¢, and by the 100th firework, his marginal willingness to pay is also zero.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

### FIGURE 9-1

**Lindahl Pricing** • Panel (a) shows Ava's marginal willingness to pay for fireworks, and panel (b) shows Jack's marginal willingness to pay for fireworks. These marginal willingnesses to pay are summed in panel (c). The marginal cost of a firework is \$1, so the optimal level of firework provision is 75 fireworks, the point at which marginal cost equals the sum of willingness to pay.

Panel (c) shows the aggregate marginal willingness to pay for fireworks. Ava and Jack are together willing to pay \$4 for the first firework; because this is well above the marginal cost of a firework (\$1), the first firework should clearly be produced. Ava and Jack are willing to pay \$2 for the 50th firework, which is once again well above the marginal cost of a firework. The marginal cost curve intersects their aggregate willingness to pay curve at the 75th firework, when they are together willing to pay the \$1 marginal cost of the firework. Thus, the Lindahl equilibrium involves charging Ava 25¢ and Jack 75¢ for each of 75 fireworks.

This is an equilibrium for two reasons. First, both Ava and Jack are happy: they are both happy to pay those tax prices to get 75 fireworks. Second, the government has covered the marginal cost of producing the fireworks by charging each individual his or her marginal willingness to pay. Lindahl pricing corresponds to the concept of **benefit taxation**, in which individuals are taxed for a public good according to their valuation of the benefit they receive from that good.

#### benefit taxation

Taxation in which individuals are taxed for a public good according to their valuation of the benefit they receive from that good.

Importantly, this equilibrium is also *the efficient level of public goods provision*, the point at which the sum of the social marginal benefits of the public good is set equal to social marginal cost. Notice the parallel between [Figure 9-1](#) and [Figure 7-2 \(p. 192\)](#) from [Chapter 7](#). In both cases, we vertically sum the individual demand curves to get a social demand curve for public goods and then set social demand equal to the social marginal cost of the public good to determine the optimal level of public goods provision. In [Chapter 7](#), this was accomplished by maximizing utility functions to obtain each individual's demand for public goods and then adding them to get a total social demand. With Lindahl pricing, the government does not need to know the utility functions of individual voters; it gets the voters to reveal their preferences by stating their willingness to pay for different levels of the public good. Yet the outcome is the same: the sum of social marginal benefits (computed by the government in [Chapter 7](#), or revealed by each voter in the Lindahl equilibrium) is set equal to social marginal cost.

## Problems with Lindahl Pricing

Although Lindahl pricing leads to efficient public goods provision in theory, it is unlikely to work in practice. In particular, there are three problems that get in the way of implementing the Lindahl solution.

### Preference Revelation Problem

The first problem is that individuals have an incentive to lie about their willingness to pay because the amount of money they pay to finance the public good is tied to their stated willingness to pay. Individuals may behave strategically and pretend that their willingness to pay is low so that others will bear a larger share of the cost of the public good. The incentive to lie with Lindahl pricing arises because of the free rider problem; that is, if an individual reports a lower valuation of the public good, he pays a lower amount of tax but he doesn't get much less of the public good. Suppose, for example, that Jack lied and said that his preferences were identical to Ava's. Following the procedure we used earlier, we find that at the Lindahl equilibrium, Jack and Ava will each pay 50¢, and 50 fireworks will be produced. Jack now pays \$25 for the 50 fireworks, whereas in the previous example he paid 75¢ for each of 75 fireworks, for a total of \$56.25. Thus, Jack pays less than half the total he paid before but receives two-thirds as many fireworks; he is now free riding on Ava. Ava used to pay 25¢ for each of 75 fireworks, or \$18.75. Now, she pays more (\$25) to get fewer fireworks

(50 instead of 75)! Especially in large groups, individuals have a strong incentive to underreport their valuation of the public good and thus shift more of the costs to others.

## Preference Knowledge Problem

Even if individuals are willing to be honest about their valuation of a public good, they may have no idea of what that valuation actually is. How would you answer the question of how much you value fireworks or national defense? It is very hard for individuals to properly value goods they don't shop for on a regular basis.

## Preference Aggregation Problem

Even if individuals are willing to be honest and even if they know their valuation of the public good, there is a final problem: How can the government aggregate individual values into a social value? In our example, it was straightforward to keep asking Jack and Ava their willingness to pay to trace out their willingness to pay curves and find the correct level of public goods provision. Clearly, this will be considerably more difficult in reality. In the case of national defense in the United States, it is simply impossible to canvass each of 319 million U.S. citizens and ask them the value they place on the missiles, tanks, and soldiers that protect them.

Thus, the Lindahl pricing solution, while attractive in theory, is unlikely to work in practice. In the next two sections, we discuss more practical solutions to determining the optimal level of public goods. In particular, we focus on two questions. First, how can societies use voting mechanisms to effectively aggregate individual preferences? Second, how well do elected representatives carry out the preferences of individual voters?

## 9.2 Mechanisms for Aggregating Individual Preferences

In this section, we discuss how voting can serve to aggregate individual preferences into a social decision. We do not yet discuss the fact that voters elect representatives, who then make policy decisions. For now, we are considering only direct voting on policies, as discussed in the following application.



### APPLICATION

#### Direct Democracy in the United States<sup>8</sup>

On February 11, 1657, the residents of the town of Huntington, New York, held a meeting and voted to hire Jonas Houldsworth as the first schoolmaster of their town. Almost 350 years later, a similar meeting held in the town of Stoneham, Massachusetts, rejected a \$6 million plan to convert the local arena into a major sports complex. Through three and a half centuries, the tradition of *direct democracy*, whereby individuals vote directly on the policies that affect their lives, remains strong in America—and, indeed, has grown throughout the twentieth century.

At the local level, the town meeting remains an important venue for decision making in many New England communities. [Bryan \(2003\)](#) undertook a comprehensive study of meetings in 210 Vermont towns over the 1970–1998 period, encompassing 1,435 meetings attended by 63,140 citizens. On average, more than one-fifth of all Vermont residents participated in a town meeting. Other towns do not have a town meeting but have direct local voting on town budgets and other matters. For example, in 2015, almost 12,000 voters in Delaware’s Red Clay School District turned out to vote on a proposal to increase property taxes in the area; the measure passed with 6,395 votes. In 2018, the neighborhood of Koreatown in Los Angeles held a vote on whether to split into Koreatown and Bangladesh Town. The voting was supposed to end at 8 p.m. but went well past 11 p.m. as both sides made their case; ultimately, voters kept the status quo.<sup>9</sup>

Direct democracy plays an important role at the state level as well. A state [referendum](#) allows citizens to vote on state laws or constitutional amendments that have already been passed by the state legislature. All states allow *legislative referenda*, whereby state legislatures or other officials place such measures on the ballot for citizens to accept or reject. Twenty-four states allow *popular referenda*, whereby citizens, if they collect enough petition signatures, can place on the ballot a question of whether to accept or reject a given piece of state legislation. The important feature of a referendum is that it is designed to elicit reactions to legislation that politicians have already approved.

#### referendum

A measure placed on the ballot by the government allowing citizens to vote on state laws or constitutional amendments that have already been passed by the state legislature.

Much more frequent than referenda are [voter initiatives](#), which allow citizens, if they can collect enough petition signatures, to place their own legislation on the ballot for voters to accept or reject. Twenty-four states allow such initiatives, the first two of which (concerning election reforms and alcohol regulation) made it to Oregon’s ballot in 1904. Since that time, more than 8,000 initiatives have been filed by concerned citizens. More than 2,500 of them

have made it to state ballots, and 39% of these have passed. Interestingly, 60% of all initiative activity occurs in six states: Arizona, California, Colorado, North Dakota, Oregon, and Washington.<sup>10</sup>

#### voter initiative

The placement of legislation on the ballot by citizens.

Initiatives were very popular early in the twentieth century with the rise of the Progressive political movement, and from 1911 to 1920, nearly 300 initiatives appeared on various state ballots. That activity had tapered off dramatically by the 1960s, when fewer than 100 initiatives made it to state ballots. In 1978, California voters passed Proposition 13, an initiative that amended the state constitution to severely limit property tax rates that local governments could impose (discussed in more depth in [Chapter 10](#)). The measure sparked a wider “tax revolt” throughout other states, and the initiative once again became a frequently used political tool. The 1990s saw nearly 400 initiatives on state ballots (a record high of 48% were approved); in 1996 alone, almost 100 initiatives were voted on. Since 1996, however, the rate of initiatives has tapered off, with only 31 on the ballots in the 2018 elections.<sup>11</sup>

Referenda and initiatives can be sparked by all kinds of issues. Early in the twentieth century, voters changed election rules, alcohol regulation, labor laws, and the administration of government. By the 1970s, voters were interested in tax reform, environmental issues, and nuclear developments. In recent years, public attention has shifted to the minimum wage, legalization of marijuana, gun regulation, reproductive rights, and campaign finance reform.



## Majority Voting: When It Works

The Lindahl pricing scheme had a very high standard for setting the level of public goods—only when all citizens were *unanimously* in agreement did the government achieve the Lindahl equilibrium. In practice, the government typically does not hold itself to such a high standard. A common mechanism used to aggregate individual votes into a social decision is **majority voting**, in which individual policy options are put to a vote, and the option that receives the *majority* of votes is chosen. Yet even this lower standard can cause difficult problems for governments trying to set the optimal level of public goods.

#### majority voting

The typical mechanism used to aggregate individual votes into a social decision, whereby individual policy options are put to a vote, and the option that receives the majority of votes is chosen.

In this section, we discuss the conditions under which majority voting does and does not provide a successful means of aggregating the preferences of individual voters. In this context, success means being able to *consistently* aggregate individual preferences into a social decision. To be consistent, the aggregation mechanism must satisfy three goals:

- *Dominance*: If one choice is preferred by all voters, the aggregation mechanism must be such that this choice is made by society; that is, if every individual prefers building a statue to building a park, the aggregation mechanism must yield a decision to build a statue.
- *Transitivity*: Choices must satisfy the mathematical property of transitivity; that is, if a large statue is preferred to a medium-size statue, and a medium-size statue is preferred to a small statue, then a large statue must be preferred to a small statue.
- *Independence of irrelevant alternatives*: Choices must satisfy the condition that if one choice is preferred to another, then the introduction of a third independent choice will

not change that ranking. For example, if building a statue is preferred to building a park, then the introduction of an option to build a new police station will not suddenly cause building a park to be preferred to building a statue.

These three conditions are generally viewed as necessary for an aggregation mechanism to provide a successful translation of individual preferences to aggregate decisions. In fact, however, majority voting can *produce a consistent aggregation of individual preferences only if preferences are restricted to take a certain form*.

To illustrate this point, consider the example of a town that is deciding between alternatives for school funding. Schools, an impure public good (as discussed in [Chapter 11](#)), are financed by property taxes, so a higher level of funding also means higher taxes for the town's property owners. The town is choosing between three possible levels of funding:  $H$  is the highest level of funding (and thus the highest property taxes);  $M$  is a medium level of funding and property taxes; and  $L$  is a low level of funding and property taxes. There are three types of voters in this town, with equal numbers in each group:

- *Parents*, whose main concern is having a high-quality education for their children. This group's first choice is  $H$ , their second choice  $M$ , and their third (least-preferred) choice is  $L$ .
- *Elders*, who don't have children and therefore don't care about the quality of local schools, so their main priority is low property taxes. This group's first choice is  $L$ , their second choice is  $M$ , and their third choice is  $H$ .
- *Young couples without children*, who do not want to pay the high property taxes necessary to fund high-quality schools right now but who want the schools to be good enough for their future children to attend. This group's first choice is  $M$ , their second choice is  $L$ , and their third choice is  $H$ .

The preferences of these three groups are represented in [Table 9-1](#).

Suppose the town uses majority voting to choose a level of funding for local schools and that to reach a decision, the town compares one alternative with another through a series of pairwise votes until there is a clear winner. At each vote, individuals will vote for whichever of the presented options they prefer. Because there are three options, this will require a series of pairwise votes. For example, the town could proceed as follows:

- First, vote on funding level  $H$  versus funding level  $L$ : The parents will vote for funding level  $H$  because they prefer it to funding level  $L$ . The elders and the young couples will both vote for funding level  $L$ , however, because they prefer it to the higher funding level  $H$ . Thus,  $L$  gets two votes, and  $H$  gets one, so  $L$  wins the first pairwise vote.
- Then, vote on funding level  $H$  versus funding level  $M$ :  $M$  gets two votes (elders and young couples prefer  $M$  to  $H$ ), and  $H$  gets one (parents), so  $M$  wins the second pairwise vote.
- Then, vote on funding level  $L$  versus funding level  $M$ :  $M$  gets two votes (parents and young couples prefer  $M$  to  $L$ ), and  $L$  gets one (elders), so  $M$  wins the third pairwise vote.

Because  $M$  has beaten both  $H$  and  $L$ ,  $M$  is the overall winner. Indeed, no matter what

ordering is used for these pairwise votes,  $M$  will be preferred to the other options. Majority voting has aggregated individual preferences to produce a preferred social outcome: medium school spending and taxes.

TABLE 9-1 Majority Voting Delivers a Consistent Outcome

		Types of Voter		
		Parents (33.3%)	Elders (33.3%)	Young Couples (33.3%)
Preference Ratings	First	H	L	M
	Second	M	M	L
	Third	L	H	H

In this example, the option chosen by majority voting will be the medium level of funding, the choice of the median voter (the young couples).

## Majority Voting: When It Doesn't Work

Suppose now that the town is the same except that the elderly are replaced by individuals who have children but are contemplating choosing private school over the local public schools to make sure that their children get the best education possible. This group's first choice is low public school spending and low property taxes. If property taxes are low, they can afford to send their children to private school. If they can't get low school spending, their second choice is *high* school spending and high property taxes. Without the low taxes, they will not be able to afford to send their children to private schools; they will therefore choose public schools, in which case, they want the highest quality public schools and are willing to pay the taxes to support them. From these new families' perspective, the worst outcome would be medium spending. They would face somewhat high property taxes, but because the schools wouldn't be top quality, they would send their children to private school anyway.

The set of preferences with this new group included is shown in [Table 9-2](#). If the town uses the same pairwise majority voting approach to assess the spending level with these new preferences, the outcome would be the following:

- First, vote on funding level  $H$  versus funding level  $L$ :  $L$  gets two votes ( $L$  is preferred to  $H$  for the private school group and the young couples), and  $H$  gets one ( $H$  is preferred to  $L$  for the parents), so  $L$  wins.
- Then, vote on funding level  $H$  versus funding level  $M$ :  $H$  gets two votes (public and private school parents prefer  $H$  to  $M$  ), and  $M$  gets one (young couples prefer  $M$  to  $H$  ), so  $H$  wins.
- Then, vote on funding level  $L$  versus funding level  $M$ :  $M$  gets two votes (public school parents and young couples prefer  $M$  to  $L$ ), and  $L$  gets one (private school parents prefer  $L$  to  $M$  ).

to  $M$ ), so  $M$  wins.

This set of outcomes is problematic because there is no clear winner:  $L$  is preferred to  $H$ , and  $H$  is preferred to  $M$ , but  $M$  is preferred to  $L$ ! Indeed, no matter what order the pairwise votes occur, there is never a clear winner. These results violate the principle of transitivity, resulting in *cycling*; that is, when we aggregate the preferences of the individuals in this town, we do not get a consistently preferred outcome. So majority voting has failed to consistently aggregate the preferences of the town's voters.

TABLE 9-2 Majority Voting Doesn't Deliver a Consistent Outcome

		Types of Voter		
		Public School Parents (33.3%)	Private School Parents (33.3%)	Young Couples (33.3%)
Preference Ratings	First	$H$	$L$	$M$
	Second	$M$	$H$	$L$
	Third	$L$	$M$	$H$

In this example, there is no consistent outcome from majority voting.

Note that the failure to get a consistent winner from majority voting does not reflect any failure of the individuals in the town; as described, each individual has a sensible set of preferences across the spending levels. The problem is in aggregation. We are unable to use voting to aggregate these individual preferences into a consistent social outcome. This creates the problem that the agenda setter, the person who decides how voting is to be done (which mechanism and in which order), can significantly influence the outcome. For example, an agenda setter who wanted low spending could first set up a vote of  $M$  versus  $H$ , which  $H$  would win, and then of  $H$  versus  $L$ , which  $L$  would win, and declare that  $L$  was the winner. Or an agenda setter who wanted high spending could first set up a vote of  $M$  versus  $L$ , which  $M$  would win, and then of  $M$  versus  $H$ , which  $H$  would win, and declare that  $H$  was the winner. The inability to get a consistent winner from majority voting can, ultimately, give dictatorial power to the agenda setter.

## Arrow's Impossibility Theorem

The failure to consistently aggregate individual preferences is not just a problem with majority voting. In the example with the private school parents, there is in fact *no voting system* that will produce a consistent outcome. Consider some alternative approaches:

- We could let everyone vote on their first choice, rather than pairwise voting, but this

would just produce a three-way tie in both examples because each group is the same size and has a different first choice.

- We could do weighted voting by assigning, for example, 3 points for one's first choice, 2 points for one's second choice, and 1 point for one's third choice, and then pick the outcome with the most points. In the first example,  $M$  would win with 7 points, while  $L$  would have 6, and  $H$  would have 5. In the second example, however, there would be a three-way tie, with each option having 6 points.

One of the most important insights of political economy theory was developed by Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow in 1951.<sup>12</sup> **Arrow's Theorem** states that there is no social decision (voting) rule that converts individual preferences into a consistent aggregate decision without either (1) restricting the type of preferences assumed for voters or (2) imposing a dictatorship. That is, no matter what the voting rule is, one can always find examples where it cannot be used to turn individual preferences into a clear, socially preferred outcome through majority voting unless one of two shortcuts is used. The first is to restrict voters' preferences by imposing some additional assumptions on the general structure of preferences. The second shortcut is to impose a dictatorship because dictators can always make a consistent social decision simply by imposing their preferences.

#### Arrow's Theorem

There is no social decision (voting) rule that converts individual preferences into a consistent aggregate decision without either (a) restricting preferences or (b) imposing a dictatorship.

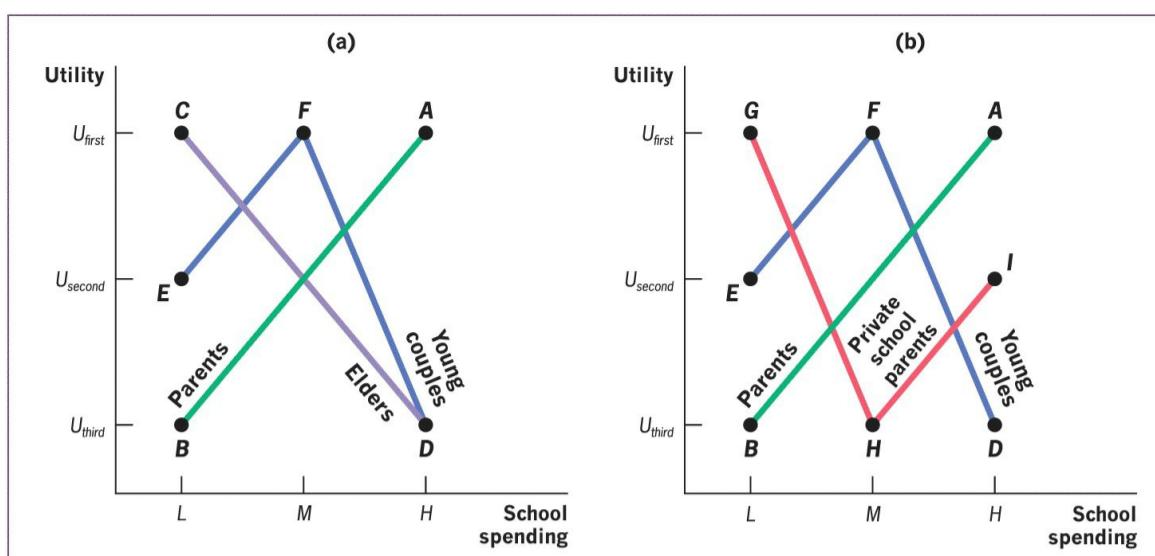
## Restricting Preferences to Solve the Impossibility Problem

The most common restriction of preferences that is used to solve the impossibility problem is to impose what are called **single-peaked preferences**. A “peak” in preferences (also called a *local maximum*) is a point that is preferred to all its immediate neighbors. *Single-peaked* preferences feature only one such point, so utility falls as choices move away in any direction from the peak choice. *Multi-peaked* preferences feature more than one such point, so that utility may first rise to a peak, then fall, and then rise again to another peak. The key advantage of single-peaked preferences for economic theory is that *any* peak can be assured of being the *only* peak. That is, if utility falls in both directions away from any point, we can be sure that a voter prefers this option most. With multi-peaked preferences, this is not necessarily the case; utility may fall away from a peak but then rise again to a new peak.

#### single-peaked preferences

Preferences with only a single local maximum, or peak, so that utility falls as choices move away in any direction from that peak.

If preferences are single-peaked, majority voting will yield consistent outcomes. We can understand this concept visually by graphing out our earlier examples. [Figure 9-2](#) graphs the utility from each choice (the vertical axis) against the level of spending represented by that choice (the horizontal axis). For example, in both panels of [Figure 9-2](#), parents' preferences are summarized by line  $AB$ : they get the largest utility value,  $U_{first}$ , at the highest level of spending. At the medium level of spending, they get a medium utility value,  $U_{second}$ . At the lowest level of spending, they get a low utility value,  $U_{third}$ .



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FIGURE 9-2

Single-Peaked Versus Non-Single-Peaked Preferences • Panel (a) graphs the preferences from [Table 9-1](#), which are all single-peaked; utility is always falling as each individual moves away from the preferred choice. Panel (b) graphs the preferences from [Table 9-2](#); now the parents considering private school don't have single-peaked preferences because utility first falls and then rises as spending levels increase.

In panel (a), which graphs the example shown in [Table 9-1](#), all preferences are single-peaked. The single peak of the parents is high spending: relative to the point with high spending (point A), utility is always falling (as spending declines). The single peak of the elders is low spending: relative to the point with low spending (point C), utility is always falling (as spending rises). The single peak of the young couples is medium spending: relative to the point with medium spending (point F), utility is always falling (as spending either rises or falls).

Panel (b) corresponds to the second example (summarized in [Table 9-2](#)), in which the elders are replaced with parents considering private school, a group that has *double-peaked* preferences. These families have a peak at low spending (point G), their first choice; then, as spending rises, their utility falls to point H (medium spending gives them the lowest utility). Unlike the other families, however, their utility then rises again as spending moves from medium to high spending, creating a second peak (point I). The failure of the single-peaked preferences assumption in this second case is what leads to the inability of majority voting to consistently aggregate preferences.

Fortunately, single-peakedness is generally a reasonable assumption to make about preferences. In most cases, when choosing among public goods such as national defense, individuals will have one preferred level, with utility falling as spending either rises or falls from that level. Single-peakedness is a potentially problematic assumption, however, when there is the possibility of a private substitute for a public good. The schools example is a good illustration of this point. If private substitutes are available, individuals could be worst off with the middle option, leading to double-peaked preferences. Another example might be voting about the quality of a local park. Individuals might want either a very nice local park or no local park (in which case, they'll just rely on their own backyards), but having a mediocre local park (paid for by local taxes) could be the worst option of all.

## Median Voter Theory

If the preferences of voters are single-peaked, majority voting will deliver a consistent aggregation of the preferences of the individual voters. Under this assumption of single-

peaked preferences, in fact, we can make an even stronger statement about the outcome of majority voting across public goods options. The **Median Voter Theorem** states that majority voting will yield the outcome preferred by the *median voter* if preferences are single-peaked. The **median voter** is the voter whose tastes are in the middle of the set of voters, so an equal number of other voters prefer more and prefer less of the public good.

#### Median Voter Theorem

Majority voting will yield the outcome preferred by the median voter if preferences are single-peaked.

#### median voter

The voter whose tastes are in the middle of the set of voters.

In both examples, the median voters are the young couples; their first preference is for the middle option, and in each case, there is one voter group that prefers low spending and another that prefers high spending. In the first case, where preferences are single-peaked, the outcome preferred by the median voter is the one chosen (medium spending). In the second case, where one voter group has double-peaked preferences, the outcome is not consistent.

## The Potential Inefficiency of the Median Voter Outcome

The median voter outcome from majority voting is very convenient. Taken literally, it implies that the government need find only the *one voter* whose preferences for the public good are right in the middle of the distribution of social preferences and implement the level of public goods preferred by that voter. The government need not know anything about the preferences of the many voters on either side of the median. All the government has to do is find the median voter and then implement that voter's preferences. This median voter outcome is certainly convenient; however, it might not be socially efficient. Social efficiency requires that the social marginal benefits of a public project equal its social marginal costs. This may not be true with median voter outcomes because such outcomes do not reflect *intensity of preferences*.

Recall that the social marginal benefits of a public good are the sum of the private marginal benefits that each individual derives from that good. If a small number of individuals derive enormous benefits from the public good, then they should be accounted for in computing total social marginal benefits. This will not necessarily be the case with the median voter, however, because the outcome is determined only by the *ranking* of voters and not by the intensity of their preferences.<sup>13</sup>

Imagine, for example, that your hometown is considering building a monument to you to recognize your wonderful successes in life. There are 1,001 voters in your town. The monument will cost \$40,040, which will be financed by a one-time \$40 tax on each voter. The town takes a vote on whether this monument should be built or not. Everyone in town has single-peaked preferences, so the median voter will determine the outcome.

Five hundred of the voters in your town recognize your enormous contributions to society and are willing to pay up to \$100 each to support a monument; 501 of the voters are unaware of your contributions and are not willing to pay anything to support the monument. The social marginal benefit is therefore  $500 \times 100 + 501 \times 0 = \$50,000$ . The social marginal cost is \$40,040. So the socially efficient outcome is for this monument to be built. Yet a proposal to build the monument, financed by a tax of \$40 on each citizen, would lose by a vote of 501–500. Because the median voter doesn't want the monument at that price, it does not get built.

This socially inefficient outcome arises because the median voter outcome does not reflect

intensity of preferences. The fact that many voters were willing to pay much more than \$40 to support the monument is irrelevant. All that matters is that the pivotal median voter was not willing to pay \$40. Whether this inefficiency is likely depends on whether there are particularly intense preferences on one side or another of a vote on a given issue.

## Summary

Many decisions in direct democracies are made by majority voting. In this section, we have discussed the situations under which majority voting may or may not serve to consistently aggregate the preferences of individual voters. If preferences are single-peaked, majority voting will consistently aggregate preferences, and the outcome chosen will be the one preferred by the median voter. This outcome, while convenient, may not be efficient.

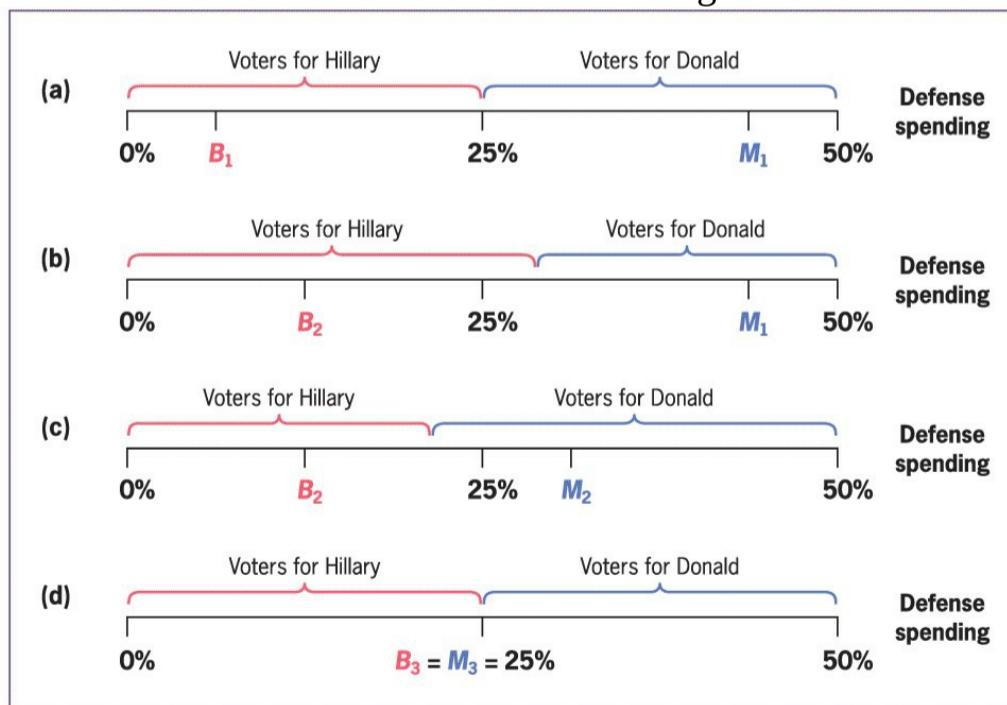
## 9.3 Representative Democracy

In reality, people in most developed nations don't vote directly on public goods. Rather, they elect representatives who are supposed to aggregate the public's preferences and take them into account when voting on the appropriate level of spending on public goods. To understand outcomes in a representative democracy such as the United States, we therefore need a theory that explains how politicians behave. The most common theory that has been used in public finance is a version of the *median voter theory* just discussed for direct democracy: politicians will choose the outcome that is preferred by the median voter. In this section, we review the median voter theory for representative democracies, discussing the assumptions underlying it and presenting the empirical evidence for and against it.

### Vote-Maximizing Politicians Represent the Median Voter

The median voter theory in the context of a representative democracy rests on a central assumption that all politicians care about is maximizing the number of votes they get. If this is true, then elected politicians will choose the outcome preferred by the median voter (as long as preferences are single-peaked). That is, with vote-maximizing politicians, the theory we used to explain direct democracy can be applied to representative democracy as well.

This point was illustrated by [Downs \(1957\)](#). With single-peaked preferences, we can model voters as being distributed along a line as in [Figure 9-3](#). This line shows desired levels of defense spending as a percentage of the government budget, ranging from 0% on the left to 50% on the right. Suppose that voters are spaced evenly throughout this line so that the median voter would like the government to spend 25% of its budget on defense. Finally, suppose that voters vote for the candidate who most closely represents their views on this issue, that is, the candidate who is closest to the voter along this line.



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■ FIGURE 9-3

**Vote Maximization Leads to the Median Voter Outcome** • In panel (a), Hillary favors small defense and Donald favors large defense, and they get an equal number of votes. In panel (b), Hillary increases the level of defense spending she will support, and by doing so, she obtains more than half the votes. In panel (c), Donald then reduces the level of defense spending he will support, and by doing so, he obtains more than half the votes. This continues until, in panel (d), both politicians support the outcome preferred by the median voter and get the same number of votes.

Suppose now that two politicians, Hillary and Donald, are running for office and vying to maximize their votes. Hillary wants to appeal to those who don't want to spend much on defense, so she places herself initially at point  $H_1$ ; Donald wants to appeal to those who want to spend a lot on defense, so he places himself initially at point  $D_1$ . In this case, the candidates will split the vote because they have equal shares of voters near them on the line, as shown in panel (a) of [Figure 9-3](#).

What if Hillary shifts her position to  $H_2$ , where she advocates for a somewhat larger defense? In that case, Hillary would get more votes, as shown in panel (b) of [Figure 9-3](#). She would continue to capture all those who want a small defense and would capture some of those who want a larger defense because she is closer to their preferences than is Donald.

What should Donald do in response to Hillary's change in position? He should shift his position to  $D_2$ , as shown in panel (c), where he now favors a smaller defense than he did previously. After this move, Donald would get the majority of votes, leaving Hillary stuck with the now minority that favors a small defense. If these politicians are purely vote-maximizing, this jockeying back and forth will continue until both candidates support the position held by the median voter, which is 25% of budget on defense, as shown in panel (d). If either candidate advocates more or less spending on defense than the median amount, she or he will reduce the number of votes received, so there is no incentive for a candidate ever to deviate from the median.

In this context, as with direct democracy, the median voter model is a powerful tool. Politicians and political analysts need not know the entire distribution of preferences to predict vote outcomes in this model. All they need to understand is the preferences of the median voter.

## Assumptions of the Median Voter Model

Although the median voter model is a convenient way to describe the role of representative democracy, it does so by making a number of assumptions. In this section, we review several of these assumptions and discuss why they may be violated, leading politicians to move away from the position of the median voter.

### Single-Dimensional Voting

First, the median voter model assumes that voters are basing their votes on a single issue. In reality, representatives are elected not based on a single issue, but on a bundle of issues. Individuals may be located at different points of the voting spectrum on different issues, so appealing to one end of the spectrum or another on some issues may be vote-maximizing. For example, if the median voter on most issues happens to advocate a lot of spending on defense, then politicians may position themselves toward high spending on defense to attract that median voter on all the other issues.

At the same time, if voter preferences on different issues are highly correlated, voting may end up close to single-dimensional. That is, if all voters who want small defense spending also want more spending on education, more spending on health care, and greater benefits for the unemployed, and all voters who want large defense spending also want less spending on education, less spending on health care, and fewer benefits for the unemployed, then voting may in effect be single-dimensional even with multiple issues.

### Only Two Candidates

Second, the median voter model assumes that there are only two candidates for office. If there are more than two candidates, the simple predictions of the median voter model break down. If all three candidates are at the median, then moving slightly to the left or right will increase the votes of any one candidate (because that candidate will get all of one end of the spectrum), while the other two candidates split the other end. Indeed, there is no stable equilibrium in the model with three or more candidates because there is always an incentive to move in response to your opponents' positions. There is never a set of positions along the line where one of the politicians can't increase his or her votes by moving.

In many nations, the possibility of three or more valid candidates for office is a real one. In the United States, there are typically only two candidates, Republican and Democrat.

## No Ideology or Influence

Third, the median voter theory assumes that politicians care only about maximizing votes. In practice, politicians may actually care about their positions and not simply try to maximize their votes. Moreover, in practice, politicians with ideological convictions may be able to shift the views of voters toward their preferred position. Ideological convictions could lead politicians to position themselves away from the center of the spectrum and the median voter.

## No Selective Voting

Fourth, the median voter theory assumes that all people who are affected by public goods vote, but in fact only a fraction of citizens vote in the United States. In presidential election years, only about half the citizens vote, and in nonpresidential elections, participation is even worse: only a little over one-third vote.<sup>14</sup> Even if the views of citizens on a particular topic are evenly distributed, it may be the most ideologically oriented citizens who do the voting. In that case, it could be optimal for a politician to appeal to likely voters by taking a position to the right or left of center, even if this position is not what is preferred by the majority of citizens (including both voters and nonvoters).

## No Money

Fifth, the median voter theory ignores the role of money as a tool of influence in elections. Votes are the outcome of a political process, but there are many inputs into that process. One key input is resources to finance reelection campaigns, advertisements, campaign trips, and other means of maximizing votes. Running for office in the United States has become increasingly expensive.<sup>15</sup> From 1990 to 2016, the cost of winning a seat in the House of Representatives more than doubled, from \$550,000 to \$1.52 million, while the cost of winning a seat in the Senate also more than doubled, rising from \$4.3 million to \$10.5 million.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, if taking an extreme position on a given topic maximizes fund-raising, even if it does not directly maximize votes on that topic, it may serve the long-run interests of overall vote maximization by allowing the candidate to advertise more.

## Full Information

Sixth and finally, the median voter model assumes perfect information along three dimensions: voter knowledge of the issues, politician knowledge of the issues, and politician knowledge of voter preferences. All three of these assumptions are unrealistic. Many of the issues on which our elected representatives must vote are highly complicated and not well understood by the majority of their constituents—and often not by the representatives themselves.<sup>17</sup> Democratic senator Robert Byrd was once asked if he knew what was in a 4,000-page \$520 billion omnibus spending bill passed by the House of Representatives. “Do I know what’s in this bill?” he replied. “Are you kidding? Only God knows what’s in this conference report!”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even when voters understand an issue, it is difficult for

politicians to gain a complete understanding of the distribution of voter preferences on the issue.

## Lobbying

These problems of information and the advantages of money make it likely that elected representatives will be *lobbied* by highly interested and informed subgroups of the population. **Lobbying** is the expending of resources by certain individuals or groups in an attempt to influence a politician.<sup>19</sup> Politicians find it in their interest to listen to lobbies for two reasons. First, these groups can provide relevant information about an issue to an uninformed politician. When particular groups or subgroups have a strong interest in a complicated issue, they also typically have a thorough and deep understanding of it. Second, these groups will reward politicians who support their views by contributing to the politicians' campaigns and getting group members to vote for the politicians, which can help with overall vote maximization.

### lobbying

The expending of resources by certain individuals or groups in an attempt to influence a politician.

In principle, lobbying can serve two useful roles: providing information and representing intensity of preferences. Given the potential inefficiency of the median voter outcome, some amount of lobbying is probably optimal. The problem that arises with lobbying is that when there is an issue that particularly benefits a small group and imposes only small costs on a larger (perhaps even majority) group, lobbying can lead politicians to support socially inefficient positions. Suppose, for example, there is a project that will benefit 100 U.S. citizens by \$1 million each, but cost the remaining 259,999 million citizens \$100 each. Clearly, this project has negative overall social benefits (because  $100 \times \$1,000,000 < \$100 \times 259,999,900$ ). If the interested group lobbies politicians, however, promising votes and campaign contributions, and if the remainder of the citizenry is not informed about the issue and so will not vote on it, the project could be accepted by self-interested politicians.

Evidence for both views of lobbying is provided in [Bertrand et al. \(2014\)](#). They looked at the connection between lobbyists of a particular expertise and politicians who may benefit from that expertise. On the one hand, they found that lobbyists "follow" politicians to whom they were initially connected by subject expertise even when the politician switches to another committee in a different subject area; this suggests that lobbyists are trading on connections, not expertise. On the other hand, they found that there are particular experts in complicated policy areas that politicians will listen to regardless of policy affiliation. Using data on lobbyist compensation, the authors argue that the former type of lobbyist role is more highly compensated, so that while expertise is valuable, connections are even more valuable.

The key point to recognize here is that large groups with a small individual interest on an issue suffer from a free rider problem in trying to organize politically; it is in no individual's interest to take the time to lobby policy makers over the lost \$100. Small groups with large individual interest, however, may be able to overcome this problem, leading to a socially inefficient outcome. An excellent example of this result is farm subsidies, as discussed in the following application.



### APPLICATION

#### Farm Policy in the United States

In 1900, 35% of workers in the United States were employed on farms. By the year 2017, this share had fallen to 1.6%, due both to increased farm efficiency and to imports of agricultural products.<sup>20</sup> Yet this small sector receives \$16 billion in direct support from the federal government each year.<sup>21</sup> This support traditionally took two forms: *direct subsidy* payments to farmers of about \$6 billion per year, and *price supports*, guaranteed minimum prices for crops, which cost about \$5 billion per year.<sup>22</sup> These price supports raised the average price of food products for American consumers and cost \$14 billion a year in higher prices.<sup>23</sup> However, after the Farm Bill of 2014 passed, direct subsidies were cut and replaced with increased crop insurance programs, which protect farmers against loss of their crops due to natural disasters or declining prices and cost the United States an average of \$9 billion between 2012 and 2017.<sup>24</sup> Funding farms costs each American household about \$136 per year on average, and the average recipient of the federal assistance receives \$14,831 annually in commodity programs and crop insurance, which is larger than the amount paid to many individuals who receive payments from the social insurance programs we discuss in [Chapters 12–17](#).<sup>25</sup>

Why do American families pay such large costs to support the farm sector? The typical answer provided by public policy makers of all political leanings is that this financial support is necessary to preserve the American “family farm” from larger agriculture companies and foreign competitors. When President Bush signed into law a 2002 farm bill estimated to cost \$190 billion over the following decade, he declared that the bill “will promote farmer independence and preserve the farm way of life for generations.”<sup>26</sup> The problem with such justification is that it is completely at odds with the facts. Only 20 of the roughly 400 crops grown in the United States are eligible for subsidies, and the amount of subsidy increased with the amount of crop produced, so larger farms benefited more from the subsidies than did small farms. As a result, three quarters of all subsidies accrued to 10% of recipients, most of whom earned more than \$100,000 a year.<sup>27</sup> Between 1995 and 2016, the top 10% of farms received, on average, \$500,000 per year while the bottom 80% received \$7,498 per year.<sup>28</sup>

If farm subsidies are so expensive and their distribution is so at odds with their stated goals, how does this program survive? The answer is that the \$136 total cost per year to the typical American family of farm subsidies is dwarfed by the enormous gain of \$14,831 to the typical farm from insurance and commodity programs. These farms are able to effectively organize and lobby for the maintenance of the subsidy and price support programs, and the larger group of taxpayers hurt by these programs is not. Recognizing this imbalance, Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, the Agriculture Committee’s ranking Republican under President Bush, refused to attend Bush’s signing of the 2002 farm bill, calling it “a recipe for a great deal of hurt and sadness, and at the expense of a huge transfer payment from a majority of Americans to a very few.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, candidates in presidential primaries face their first trials in Iowa, the leading recipient of farm subsidies, so opposing farm subsidies can be perilous to a presidential candidate.

This example should not be taken to imply that large subsidies to farms are a uniquely American phenomena. The European Union spends about \$58 billion annually supporting its farmers.<sup>30</sup> The average European cow, for example, is supported by \$2.20 a day of government spending. Japan spends more than \$51 billion on its farmers, protecting them with measures such as rice tariffs of nearly 800%.<sup>31</sup> In total, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that the developed world spends \$258 billion annually directly supporting farmers.<sup>32</sup>

It might seem that the power of ordinary U.S. citizens is no match for the powerful agricultural lobby, but the case of New Zealand shows that reform of farm subsidies is not impossible—and may not even be ultimately harmful to the farm sector. As is the case with the United States and other developed nations, New Zealand had a sizeable patchwork of subsidy programs for farming until the mid-1980s. These programs ranged from price supports and low-interest loans to subsidies to purchase fertilizer. Some experts concluded that these subsidies led to the oversupply of agricultural products and falling commodity prices, as well as byzantine policy contradictions. For example, farmers were paid to install conservation measures such as hedgerows and wetlands after having been paid to rip them out a generation earlier; of course, other farmers who had maintained such landscape and wildlife features all along got nothing.

When New Zealand weaned its economy off these large agricultural subsidies beginning in the mid-1980s, there were initially some dislocations. About 1% of farms shut down, and sheep farmers (the most heavily subsidized group) saw particularly sizeable reductions in their incomes. But after a transition period that lasted roughly six years, land prices, commodity prices, and farm profitability stabilized. Today, New Zealand has about the same percentage of people employed in agriculture, and about the same number of people in New Zealand live in rural areas as lived there when farming was subsidized.<sup>33</sup>

The most recent ambitious reform of the U.S. farm subsidy program, the Agricultural Act of 2014, was presented as an effort to improve the efficiency of agricultural subsidies by replacing some direct payments to farmers with a subsidized crop insurance program. Indeed, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reported that this shift would save more than \$23 billion in costs. But critics of the law have highlighted that it did nothing to reduce the increasing concentration of government subsidies to the largest farms. As one critic said, “People say it’s helping family farms, but what it’s doing is propping up really large operations.”<sup>34</sup> ■

## Evidence on the Median Voter Model for Representative Democracy

As we’ve seen, while the median voter model is a potentially powerful tool of political economy, its premise rests on some strong assumptions that may not be valid in the real world. A large body of empirical work in political economy has tested the median voter model by assessing the role of voter preferences on legislative voting behavior relative to other factors such as party or personal ideology. Consider, for example, a Democratic politician who has personally liberal views but who represents a very conservative congressional district in the South. The Median Voter Theorem would predict that this politician would have a very conservative voting record to maximize votes in the district, but other factors such as party or individual ideology could lead to a more liberal voting record.

Studies of this nature have provided mixed conclusions. On the one hand, the preferences of the median voter clearly matter; for example, when district boundaries are redrawn so that the district includes more conservative voters, the representative of that district starts to vote more conservatively.<sup>35</sup>

A particularly interesting example of politicians responding to their voters arose in 2007. In an effort to fight the earmarks such as those discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the Democratic leaders of the House of Representatives added new rules to make earmarks more transparent and to clearly associate each earmark with its sponsor. The hope may have been

to shame representatives into lowering their demand for earmarks, but the effect was exactly the opposite. As the *New York Times* wrote, “Far from causing embarrassment, the new transparency has raised the value of earmarks as a measure of members’ clout. Indeed, lawmakers have often competed to have their names attached to individual earmarks and rushed to put out press releases claiming credit for the money they bring home.” Earmark growth continued, with proposed projects such as \$2.6 million for a new grape genetics research center at Cornell University, in New York State’s wine-producing Finger Lakes region. Defending her own earmark request for \$100,000 for a prison museum near Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Representative Nancy Boyda said, “Democracy is a contact sport, and I’m not going to be shy about asking for money for my community.”<sup>36</sup>

Congress went further and banned earmarks in 2011. But the ban didn’t actually end earmarks—it just made the process less direct and, some might say, sneakier. Instead of securing useless bridges, Congress routes money through other departments, giving extra planes made by companies in their district to the Air Force.<sup>37</sup> President Trump has called for an end to the earmark ban, arguing ending the ban will unlock the gridlock in Congress. Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle agree, and they point to earmarks as an important way they advocate for their districts.<sup>38</sup>

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Testing the Median Voter Model*

As noted, empirical evidence on the median voter model is mixed. Some studies find strong support for the model. For example, [Stratmann \(2000\)](#) studied the effects of redistricting on the voting patterns of affected legislators. Every ten years when census data become available, congressional districts are reshaped to reflect population movements over the past decade.

Routine redistricting can change the nature of a district’s median voter. Stratmann compared the preferences of the new, redistricted constituency with the old by comparing differences in the patterns of voting for presidents across redistricted districts. He asked: When districts became more conservative through redistricting (as measured by voting more often for the Republican presidential candidate in 1988 and 1992) but were represented by the same politician, did the politician start to vote more conservatively? The answer was yes, confirming that median voter preferences matter to legislators. Confirmatory evidence is provided in [Aidt and Shvets \(2012\)](#), who found that when legislators faced a term limit (and therefore didn’t have to care anymore about the median voter), they delivered less “pork” to their districts.

At the same time, there is also clear evidence that “core constituencies,” as opposed to just the median voter in a district, matter for legislator behavior. A particularly striking test is to compare two senators from the same state but from different political parties. Because the office of senator is statewide, both elected officials are appealing to the same set of voters. Thus, the median voter model would predict that they would take the same position on legislation. In fact, this is not at all true. As [Levitt \(1996\)](#) showed, when a state has one senator from each party, the senators vote very differently; in fact, they vote very similarly to senators from other states who are in their party. Similar evidence is provided by [Lee et al. \(2004\)](#) who focus on very narrowly elected members of the House of Representatives from both parties; such representatives should vote similarly, regardless of party, because they each come from a nearly equally divided electorate. In fact, they find that narrowly elected politicians vote in the same way as politicians who were elected with large majorities and who, therefore, should be responding more to one side or the other.

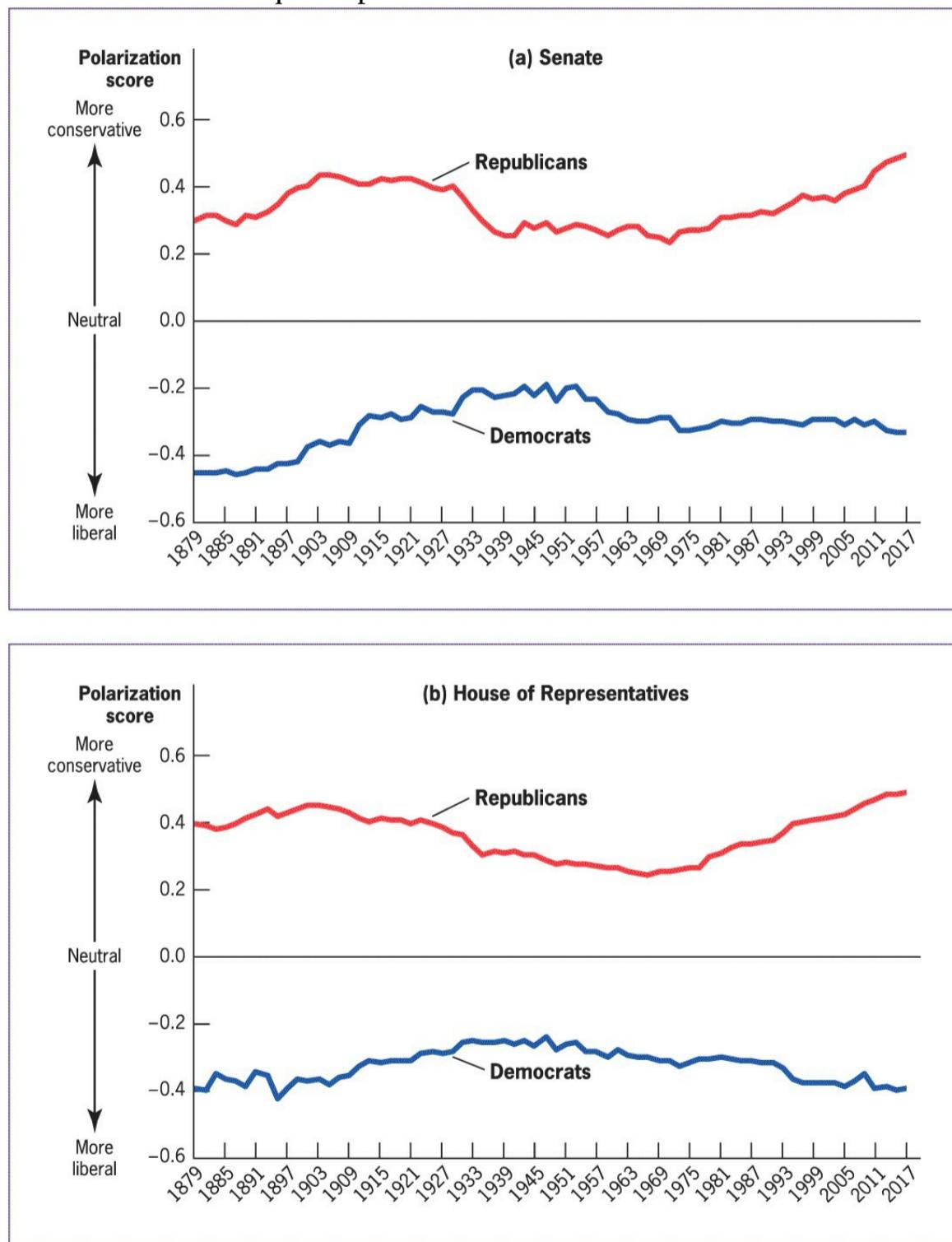
Direct evidence that ideology matters was also shown in a paper by [Washington \(2008\)](#). She compares legislators who have daughters to those with the same family size who have sons. Because a child’s gender is random, two legislators with families of the same size—one of which has more daughters than the other—should form natural treatments and controls for assessing whether individual ideological factors matter for legislator behavior (they should be otherwise the same except for the gender mix of their children). She finds that as a larger share of a legislator’s children are daughters, the legislator is more likely to vote in favor of women’s issues such as reproductive rights (such as by opposing laws that restrict teen access to abortion) or women’s safety (such as by supporting laws that increase the punishment for violence against women). Washington’s findings strongly support the notion that personal ideology matters: politicians are responding to their own experience, not just to the demands of the voters.

## Increasing Polarization in American Politics

A result of the failure of the median voter model to fully explain politician behavior may be the increased polarization of the U.S. electorate. [McCarthy et al. \(2006\)](#) have developed a measure of the ideology of politicians based on the votes that they cast and use this to

compute a historical measure of the degree of polarization between the parties in the United States.

[Figure 9-4](#) shows the results for the Senate and the House of Representatives, updated in 2018. The size of the gap between the two lines in each panel indicates the degree of polarity—the larger the gap, the greater the polarity. The U.S. political system was very polarized until the 1930s, but then went through a period of reduced polarization that lasted until the early 1950s. Polarization has grown rapidly in recent years, hitting historical highs in the House of Representatives. This trend is particularly strong in the Republican Party, whose polarization score in the House has almost quadrupled since the 1970s.<sup>39</sup>



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

#### FIGURE 9-4

Political Polarization in the House and Senate, 1879–2017 • Panel (a) shows the trend in party polarization in the Senate. The two parties were most ideologically similar between the 1930s and early 1950s, after which polarization increased in each direction, but particularly so for Republicans, whose score almost tripled since 1970. Panel (b) shows polarization trends in the House of Representatives. Democrats became notably more conservative in the first half of the twentieth century, and have slowly become more liberal in the second half of the twentieth century. Republicans had become gradually less

conservative between the 1900s and the 1970s, but 1977 saw the beginning of an exponential increase in polarity which has been ongoing in recent years. Polarity has reached an all-time high for both parties, and moderates are less common.

Data from: [Lewis \(2018\)](#).

What is causing this rise in polarization in American politics? There are a wide variety of possible explanations that can be roughly divided into four categories: voter polarization, media proliferation, the problem of gerrymandering, and other institutional changes. We'll now look at each.

## Voter Polarization

The first category is changes in the polarization of voters themselves, or as [Klein \(2017\)](#) puts it, an increased “tribalism” among members of the different political parties where party identification trumps other measures of identity. For example, 10% of Americans report that they are opposed to their child marrying someone of a different race. And 49% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats are opposed to their child marrying someone of a different party! These percentages have risen from only 5% of Republicans and 4% of Democrats in 1960.<sup>40</sup> A useful summary statistic on voter polarization comes from [Haidt and Abrams \(2015\)](#), who show that in 1972 there was only a fairly weak correlation between whether individuals identified themselves as liberal or conservative and the party they voted for. That correlation has grown dramatically since, so that liberal and conservative voting has become much more distinct.

## Media Proliferation

Voter polarization has been facilitated by the second explanation, a growing divergence in where voters of different parties get their information. For the first few decades after World War II, Americans got the same news from the same limited set of sources, the national news networks. Then, as [Haidt and Abrams \(2015\)](#) put it, “All that changed with the advent of cable television in the 1980s and the Internet in the 1990s. Now Americans can choose from hundreds of partisan news sources, many of which care more about arousing emotions than hewing to journalistic standards. This proliferation of sources interacts with the most notorious problem in human cognition: the confirmation bias. People rarely seek out evidence on both sides before making a decision on moral and political matters. Rather, they begin with their initial belief and then seek out evidence to confirm it.”

Going further, there is evidence that the partisan media environment isn’t just confirming voter beliefs, but shaping them, leading to what [Martin and Yorukoglu \(2017\)](#) describe as a “polarizing feedback loop: an ‘echo chamber’ where partisans can reinforce and strengthen their initial biases.” The usual poster child for such arguments is Fox News, which offers a generally conservative slant that has grown over time. [DellaVigna and Kaplan \(2007\)](#) found that in towns where Fox News entered the cable market, there was a significant shift toward Republican vote shares in subsequent elections. And [Martin and Yorukoglu \(2017\)](#) confirm this finding with a particularly clever methodology. They note that viewers are more likely to watch stations that are lower numbered in the channel system (due to “channel surfing” that starts at the bottom), so they use the essentially random placement of Fox News on the channel spectrum. They find that in locations where Fox News has a lower channel number, it is more likely to be watched, and the vote share is more Republican. In recent years, this “echo chamber” problem has been strengthened by an ongoing reliance on social media as a source of new information. In 2018, 68% of Americans reported getting at least some of their news from social media, and 85% get their news on a mobile device, which allows news providers to prioritize content and articles that readers are most likely to want to read—exacerbating the echo chamber.

## The Problem of Gerrymandering

The third explanation is any change in the political system that has emphasized polarization. The most prominent of these is the problem of *gerrymandering*. When you vote in a Senate race, you aren't just voting for the person who will create the best legislation. You are also voting for the politician who gets to draw the maps. In the United States, the party in power gets to define congressional districts. Ideally, politicians would adjust districts such that every American is represented. Unfortunately, redrawing maps often becomes an exercise for politicians in how to maximize their party's power. This process of manipulating maps so as to maintain or grow power is known as **[gerrymandering](#)**.<sup>41</sup>

**gerrymandering**

The process of manipulating maps, on the part of the political party in power, in an effort to maintain or grow their power.

A gerrymander-er has two tools in her belt: *cracking* and *packing*. Cracking divides the opposing party's constituents into multiple districts so that they lose by a very narrow margin. Packing combines the opposing party's constituents into a few districts so that they win by a large margin. Basically, a gerrymander-er's goal is to produce *wasted votes* for their opponent. A *wasted vote* is every vote for a candidate that loses, and each vote above 50%+1 for the winning candidate. One metric for measuring gerrymandering is the **[efficiency gap](#)**: Party A's wasted votes minus Party B's wasted votes, divided by all the votes cast in the election.

**efficiency gap**

A metric for measuring gerrymandering: Party A's wasted votes minus Party B's wasted votes, divided by all the votes cast in the election.

The efficiency gap was the subject of a 2017 Supreme Court case challenging the partisanship Wisconsin's congressional districts. The plaintiff, who accused Wisconsin of bias, brought witnesses to testify that the state's massive efficiency gap (around 12 percentage points) was not a matter of chance or political geography. Jowei Chen, a Michigan professor, used computer algorithms to illustrate this. He simulated different district maps for Wisconsin based on the nonpartisan criteria that is used to construct districts. His algorithm generated maps using the criteria. In aggregate, he created a random sample of 200 district options that satisfy the nonpartisan criteria. Using this sample, he was able to test how biased randomly generated districts were. Of the 200 computer-simulated maps, every single one had a smaller efficiency gap than the current map. In fact, the most biased maps were still more than 8 percentage points more equal than the existing map.<sup>42</sup> In 2018, the Supreme Court decided to give the plaintiffs more time to develop their case.<sup>43</sup>

Even without active gerrymandering, however, the nature of the process by which senators and the president are selected is likely to lead to more partisan division because of demographic shifts. While congressional representatives are proportional to a state's population, each state gets two senators, at a time when the American population is concentrated in a smaller number of states. Estimates suggest that by 2040, 30% of Americans who live in the 35 least populous states will choose 70 of our nation's 100 senators. These "overrepresented" states are typically more white, more male, and more rural.

The electoral college imposes a similar bias on our presidential elections because every state gets at least 3 of the 538 electoral votes—so small states are overrepresented compared to their populations. This means that a vote for president cast in Wyoming (population 574,000) counts nearly four times more in a presidential election as a vote cast by a Californian (California is our most populous state, population 39 million).<sup>44</sup>

## Other Institutional Changes

Laws that appear to be in place to maintain the integrity of our democracy are sometimes appropriated by the political parties and end up having the opposite effect. Voter regulation is one example that tends to be split down party lines. Republicans often champion increased restriction and regulation for voters to ensure that there is no voter fraud. But by requiring that voters prove ID, limiting early voting, or closing polls early, Republicans disproportionately limit access for low-income and minority Americans, demographics that tend to vote for Democrats. On the other side of the aisle, Democrats advocate for elections in off years, resisting efforts to streamline voting in local elections for boards of education, fire marshals, and other local positions. These off-year elections have very low voter turnout. But the voters that do show up tend to be very engaged, and lean more Democratic than the nation as a whole.<sup>45</sup>

Other institutional changes have played into growing polarization as well, as emphasized by [Haidt and Abrams \(2015\)](#). For example, the increasing role of money in the political process means that politicians take less time to form bipartisan political bonds and spend more time pleasing the (generally very partisan) donors who fund their party. Likewise, the increased nationalization of fundraising for local races, allows well-funded national groups with strongly held liberal or conservative views to target local politicians who do not hew to the party line. Changes in congressional rules have further increased polarization: for example, committee chairs in Congress used to be chosen by seniority, but are now assigned by party leadership, typically on the basis of party loyalty, making it less likely that members of Congress will deviate from the party line and partner with their colleagues on the other side of the aisle.

To conclude, this growing polarization has important implications for the design of our political institutions and the functioning of our democracy. One approach to address them would be to try to “de-partisanize” the election process. A notable study that considers this possibility is [Ash and MacLeod \(2016\)](#). They study the “quality” of judges who obtain their office through various electoral mechanisms, measuring quality by the extent to which judges’ opinions are cited by other judges in later cases (a sign of an important decision). They find that the lowest “quality” judges are those that are elected in a partisan process whereby judges run for office in affiliation with a political party. If, instead, the judges ran for election unaffiliated to a particular political party, higher-quality judges are chosen for office. And if judges are selected by nonpartisan technical merit commissions, they have the highest measured quality of all.

## 9.4 Public Choice Theory: The Foundations of Government Failure

The policy analysis in most of this book assumes a benign government intent on maximizing social welfare. Similarly, in this chapter, we have discussed the assumption that in both direct democracy and representative democracy, politicians typically strive to represent the will of the people. Starting in the 1950s, however, a school of thought known as [public choice theory](#) began to question this assumption. Begun by James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (the former of whom won the 1986 Nobel Prize), public choice theorists noted that governments often do not behave in an ideal manner so that the traditional assumption of a benevolent government maximizing social welfare may not be appropriate.<sup>46</sup> In this section, we review some of the important sources of [government failure](#), the inability or unwillingness of the government to act primarily in the interest of its citizens.

**public choice theory**

A school of thought emphasizing that the government may not act to maximize the well-being of its citizens.

**government failure**

The inability or unwillingness of the government to act primarily in the interest of its citizens.

### Size-Maximizing Bureaucracy

Some of the earliest critiques of idealist conceptions of government began with the idea that [bureaucracies](#), organizations of civil servants in charge of carrying out the services of government (such as the U.S. Department of Education or a town's Department of Public Works), might be more interested in their own preservation and growth than in carrying out their assigned missions efficiently. In 1971, William Niskanen developed the model of the *budget-maximizing bureaucrat*. In this model, the bureaucrat runs an agency that has a monopoly on the government provision of some good or service. For example, a town's Department of Public Works might be charged with collecting trash, maintaining the sewers, and so on. This bureaucracy is part of the larger town government, and the politicians running the larger government will decide on the bureaucrat's power and pay.

**bureaucracies**

Organizations of civil servants, such as the U.S. Department of Education or a town's Department of Public Works, that are in charge of carrying out the services of government.

Niskanen noted that while the private sector rewards its employees for efficient production, a bureaucrat's salary is typically unrelated to efficiency. In Niskanen's model, a bureaucrat's compensation (wages, benefits, status, quality of support staff, and so on) is based on the total measurable output of her bureaucracy. For example, the compensation of the director of the Department of Public Works rises as that department fixes more problems in the town. The goal of the bureaucrat is, therefore, to maximize the size of the agency she controls and thus maximize its budget, not to choose the level of service that maximizes efficiency. Even if the larger town government knows that the bureaucrat is pursuing a self-interested, inefficient goal, it is hard to enforce efficient production in the agency because the bureaucrat knows much more than the town government knows about the true cost of the service he is providing.<sup>47</sup>

### Leviathan Theory

Niskanen's theory assumes that individual bureaucrats try to maximize the size of their own agencies and that a larger government tries to rein them in. In contrast, [Brennan and Buchanan \(1980\)](#) see these two entities (bureaucrats and large government) as one monopolist (which they call "Leviathan") that simply tries to maximize the size of the public sector by taking advantage of the electorate's ignorance. Under this theory, voters cannot trust the

government to spend their tax dollars efficiently and must design ways to combat government greed.

This view of government can explain the many rules in place in the United States and elsewhere that explicitly tie the government's hands in terms of taxes and spending. In [Chapter 4](#), we discussed rules for limiting the size of the government budget. Likewise, a number of U.S. states have passed laws limiting the ability of local communities to raise property taxes (taxes imposed on the value of homes and businesses and the land they are built on). There is no reason to have these types of "roadblocks" if a benevolent government is maximizing social welfare, but with a Leviathan government, they may be a means of putting a brake on inefficient government growth.

Another way to combat the Leviathan tendencies of government is to ensure that politicians face electoral pressure to deliver public services efficiently, as suggested by a study by [Besley et al. \(2005\)](#). These authors studied the impact of the increased "political competition" in the southern United States during the twentieth century due to the enfranchisement of black people and other groups. They measured political competition as the extent to which voters choose a fairly balanced slate of candidates in local elections, as opposed to always voting for one party or another. They found that areas with more political competition had much faster economic growth (25% higher growth in the long run), partly because of lower taxes and higher quality jobs.

## Corruption

The theory of size-maximizing bureaucrats and Leviathan governments describes how governments will take action to maximize their size and power in carrying out their legitimate functions. Even more problematic is [corruption](#), the abuse of power by government officials seeking to maximize their own personal wealth or that of their associates. As the following policy application illustrates, corruption is an international phenomenon.

**corruption**

The abuse of power by government officials in order to maximize their own personal wealth or that of their associates.



### APPLICATION

#### Government Corruption

Corruption can take many forms, but the common theme is government officials using their power to enrich themselves or their associates. Following are several examples.

- In December 2003, former governor of Illinois George Ryan was indicted by a federal grand jury for selling state contracts to his friends in exchange for cash, gifts, loans, and trips for his family. The scandal unfolded after it came to light that truck drivers routinely bribed officials at the office of then-Secretary of State Ryan to obtain driver's licenses and that at least 20 people had died in accidents involving these drivers. An investigation resulted in 70 indictments with more than 60 convictions. Many of the convicted were close friends and allies of Ryan who had kicked some of the bribe money into his campaign funds.



*"But how do you know for sure you've got power unless you abuse it?"*

Image licensed from Cartoon Collections

In 2002, Ryan was replaced in office by Governor Rod Blagojevich, who campaigned for the office as a reformer who would clean up the corrupt state government. In fact, on December 9, 2008, Rod Blagojevich and his chief of staff were arrested on federal corruption charges for conspiring to sell Barack Obama's U.S. Senate seat (left vacant after Obama's election to the presidency) to the highest bidder.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Blagojevich threatened to withhold state assistance to the Tribune Company in its sale of the Chicago Cubs unless the newspaper fired members of its editorial board who were critical of him. Early in 2009, the Illinois senate voted unanimously to remove him from office and disqualify him from holding future public office in Illinois.<sup>49</sup> Two years later, Blagojevich was sentenced to 14 years in prison.<sup>50</sup>

- Former prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Rizak, was arrested in July, 2018, after a multiyear corruption scandal and accusations of his misappropriation of state funds. Since 2015, the U.S. Justice Department had been investigating \$4.5 billion stolen from a Malaysian government investment fund and laundered through U.S. corporations. More than \$1 billion of that was spent on U.S. goods, which the Justice Department hopes to reappropriate.<sup>51</sup> Those goods include a 22-carat pink diamond necklace that cost \$27.3 million, and 27 gold necklaces and bracelets that cost \$1.3 million, purchased by Rizak's wife. Meanwhile, his stepson's company produced the movie, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, allegedly funding it, in part, with money Rizak stole from the Malaysian government. His step son also gave extravagant gifts to Hollywood stars, including \$12 million in art to Leonardo DiCaprio.<sup>52</sup>

- Joseph Mobutu, however, may be the king of corruption. After taking over the Congo in 1965 (which he renamed “Zaire,” a name dropped after he was deposed in 1977), Mobutu treated the resource-rich country as his personal fiefdom. The World Bank estimates that between 1967 and 1997, income per capita in the Congo *fell* by two-thirds while it grew rapidly in the rest of the world. At the same time, Mobutu became one of the richest men in the world, with a fortune estimated by some at \$5 billion.<sup>53</sup>

Why does corruption exist? Some public choice theorists might agree with Lord Acton’s famous observation: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In this view, a government’s monopoly power over some spheres of its citizens’ lives is sufficient to explain corruption. Why shouldn’t clerks at your local Department of Motor Vehicles ask for \$10 to speed up your application for a driver’s license? Don’t they have complete power over who gets a license? Ultimately, of course, they are unlikely to ask for a bribe, in part because rampant corruption in the DMV might motivate voters to elect a politician who vows to clean up that particular department.

This view suggests that the only thing keeping corruption in check is *electoral accountability*, the ability of voters to throw out corrupt regimes. The notion that electoral accountability is a primary deterrent of corruption is supported by the evidence in [Persson and Tabellini \(2000\)](#), who measured the extent of government corruption using surveys of business leaders, the most direct victims of such corruption. They compared systems of government in which voters choose individual candidates, such as the United States, to systems with proportional voting where voters choose a party slate of candidates, such as the United Kingdom. They reasoned that in the latter type of system, individual politicians are less accountable to the electorate because the voter votes only for the party and not for the individual. Indeed, they found that corruption was much more prevalent in systems with proportional voting.

Other evidence that corruption is responsive to votes comes from [Ferraz and Finan \(2008\)](#), who studied the introduction of a random audit of use (and abuse) of federal funds by municipalities in Brazil. They found that mayors who were found to be corrupt were significantly less likely to be reelected. Likewise, [Campante and Do \(2014\)](#) found that states in which the capital city is more isolated from the majority of the populace (and therefore less subject to public oversight and interest) had a higher level of corruption.

Corruption also appears more rampant in political systems that feature more *red tape*, bureaucratic barriers that make it costly to do business in a country. [Djankov et al. \(2002\)](#) examined data from 85 countries regarding the procedures for starting a business. The procedures varied widely, taking as few as 2 days in Canada and Australia to as many as 152 days in Madagascar. The costs of these bureaucratic procedures ranged from less than 0.5% of per capita GDP in the United States to greater than 460% of per capita GDP in the Dominican Republic. This study found that countries requiring entrepreneurs to go through numerous bureaucratic procedures to start a business tended to have higher levels of corruption. ■

## The Implications of Government Failure

There is clear evidence that governments fail in some instances to benevolently serve the interests of their citizens. Do these failures have important implications? Or can citizens use policies such as property tax limitations to minimize the harm imposed by government structure? Some evidence suggests that government failures can have long-lasting negative

impacts on economic growth, as reviewed in the following Empirical Evidence box.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Government Failures and Economic Growth*

Several studies suggest that poor government structure can have long-lasting negative impacts on economic growth. One such study is [Mauro \(1995\)](#), which used data collected by a private firm whose agents in various countries rated the quality of government along various dimensions such as the amount of red tape involved in government procedures and the amount of corruption. Mauro found that nations with higher levels of corruption and red tape had slower growth rates and that these effects were large: if the most bureaucratically inefficient nation in his sample (Zaire) improved its efficiency to the level of the least inefficient nations (Switzerland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, or Singapore), his model predicts that Zaire's growth rate would be 4.9% per year higher!

The difficulty with studies such as Mauro's, however, is that the nations with high-quality governments (the treatment group) may differ from those with low-quality governments (the control group) for other reasons as well, biasing the estimates of the effect of government quality. Suppose, for example, that the efficiency of a bureaucracy rises as the wages of government workers rise. Then slow-growing low-income nations who cannot pay their government workers well will have poorly functioning governments. But, in this case, slow economic growth may cause government failure, not vice versa.

An attempt to surmount this problem using a historical perspective was taken by [Acemoglu et al. \(2001\)](#). They denoted two sets of nations that were quite similar when they were colonized by the same set of European powers and, therefore, could be considered comparable treatments and controls, but for which colonization took very different forms. The treatment nations in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa were governed from afar as their European colonizers focused solely on extracting from these countries as many natural resources (such as diamond, silver, and copper) as possible. The colonizers were not interested in setting up institutions in these nations to foster economic success (such as effective property rights or bureaucratic institutions). The control nations in North and South America, and Australia and New Zealand, were governed from within as the European colonizers moved to these nations in large numbers and set up institutions to foster economic success.

The reason for the lack of hands-on governing in the treatment nations was simple: the odds of colonists dying from infectious diseases such as malaria was much higher in these nations than in the control nations. In the nations of the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa, while native people were immune to local disease, settlers were not. So these nations were governed from afar with little long-term interest in settlement. In nations in North and South America, and in Australia and New Zealand, settlers were less likely to suffer from local infectious diseases, so they settled there in large numbers. In doing so, they set up institutions that would foster their success. The reason for this difference should not be otherwise associated with economic success because native people were immune to disease; these two sets of nations were comparable other than through the type of colonization.

Despite their precolonization similarity, these sets of nations have performed very differently in the postcolonial era. The treatment nations in the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa have grown much more slowly postcolonization than have the control nations in North and South America and Australia and New Zealand. These treatment nations appear to suffer from the long-run detrimental effects of inefficient government institutions. For example, the authors computed that if the quality of Nigeria's government institutions could be improved to the level of Chile's, Nigeria would see a sevenfold increase in per capita income.

[Acemoglu \(2003\)](#) made a similar "historical accident" argument with relation to North and South Korea, two halves of a region that had been a single region (Korea) under Japanese control until the end of World War II. There were no inherent differences between the northern and southern regions of Korea until World War II; they were culturally and economically very similar. After World War II, however, the Soviet Union occupied the northern half of Korea, which became a communist nation, and the United States occupied the southern half, which adopted a capitalist system. The results of this division of the nation into two different systems have been dramatic. [Maddison \(2001\)](#) showed that the two countries had similar income levels in 1950 of \$770 per capita, and North Korea was actually more heavily industrialized than the south. More than 60 years later, North Korea had per capita income of only \$1,800, compared to South Korea's \$35,400.<sup>54</sup>

The implications of political institutions for growth is not simply a historical issue. As discussed in [Acemoglu et al. \(2015\)](#), the Internet is one of the most important technologies available today. But a variety of countries, such as Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Uzbekistan, seriously curtail the use of the Internet or suppress online expression, in an effort to limit dissent and maintain political power. While this may be a successful short-run strategy for leaders in these nations, in the long run the limited availability of this key technology may lead to a lower growth rate for these nations.

## 9.5 Conclusion

In most of this book, and in most of public finance, the government is assumed to be a benign actor that serves only to implement the optimal policies to address externalities, to provide public goods and social insurance, and to develop equitable and efficient taxation. In reality, however, the government is a collection of individuals who have the difficult task of aggregating the preferences of a large set of citizens. Will governments operate to pursue policies in the ways suggested by the economic analyses presented in other chapters of this book?

The core model of representative democracy suggests that governments are likely to pursue the policies preferred by the median voter, which in most cases should fairly represent the demands of society on average. Yet, while that model has strong evidence to support it, there is offsetting evidence that politicians have other things on their minds. In particular, there are clear examples of government's failure to maximize the well-being of its citizens, with potentially disastrous implications for economic outcomes. The extent to which government serves or fails to serve the interests of its citizens is a crucial topic for future research in political economy.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- In theory, a government can efficiently finance public goods by simply asking individuals to pay their valuation of the good (Lindahl pricing).
- In practice, such a solution faces the problems of preference revelation (individuals not honestly reporting their preferences), preference knowledge (individuals not knowing their preferences), and preference aggregation (the government being unable to collect data on each individual's preferences).
- One way to aggregate preferences is through direct democracy, where votes are directly cast on particular issues. This voting mechanism will consistently aggregate preferences only if preferences are restricted to a particular form (single-peaked preferences).
- If preferences are single-peaked, the option chosen will be the one preferred by the median voter. This will not be the efficient outcome, however, if voters on one side or another of an issue have particularly intense preferences.
- Representative democracies will also support the policy preferred by the median voter if politicians are vote-maximizing and if other fairly restrictive assumptions hold. In practice, it appears that factors such as ideology, not just vote maximization, are important in determining legislator behavior.
- Public choice theory directly models the preferences of legislators and the government failures that can arise when legislators pursue their own interests rather than the common good. Government failures such as corruption can have serious negative ramifications for the economic well-being of societies.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. In a study about endangered species protection, Americans stated that they were willing to pay \$70 billion to protect all endangered species. They also stated that they were willing to pay \$15 billion to protect a single species. Which problem with Lindahl pricing does this demonstrate? Explain.
2. The preference revelation problem associated with Lindahl pricing becomes more severe as the number of people in society increases. Why do you think this is true?
3. [Matsusaka \(1995\)](#) showed that states that provide for voter initiatives tend to have smaller government growth than do states without such a provision. Why might this be so?
4. Major League Baseball uses what is known as a 5–3–1 system to vote for the league's most valuable player (MVP) in each league. Each voter gets to vote for three different players they consider worthy of the award. Their first-place candidate gets 5 points, their second-place candidate gets 3 points, and their third-place candidate gets 1 point. Points are then added up across all voters, and the player with the most total points wins the award. Suppose there are three voters—Neyer, Law, and Phillips—and five potential candidates for the award— Alex, David, Raffy, Manny, and Mario. The following table shows how each voter ranks the candidates. In addition, note that candidate Raffy is embroiled in a substance abuse scandal. A verdict on his guilt or innocence, will be made public one day before voting for MVP. A guilty verdict will nullify his votes.

Rank	Neyer	Law	Phillips
Best	David	David	Raffy
Second Best	Alex	Alex	Alex
Third Best	Raffy	Raffy	Manny
Fourth Best	Manny	Manny	Mario
Fifth Best	Mario	Mario	David

1. Who will win the MVP if Raffy is found innocent?
2. Who will win the MVP if Raffy is found guilty?
3. What problem with consistent aggregation does this MVP example illustrate?
5. Research shows that when congressional districts are redrawn to include more elderly people, members of Congress become more likely to take pro-elderly positions in congressional votes. Explain why the median voter model predicts this outcome.
6. [Stratmann \(1995\)](#) documented a condition of logrolling in Congress, in which members of Congress trade votes on one bill for votes on another. Is logrolling efficient, or does it entail costs that exceed its benefits? Explain.
7. A problem with the median voter outcome is that it does not take into account intensity of preferences. Suppose that the government decided to give every voter a fixed number of votes, which they may allocate freely across all questions on the ballot. Would this solve the problem? Why or why not?
8. When an energy company wants to raise the rate charged to their customers, it must first argue its case at a public hearing before a regulatory body. How does the free rider problem explain why energy companies are usually successful in getting permission to raise their rates?
9. Every year, the World Bank publishes the Worldwide Governance Indicators, a report that assesses and ranks the quality of governance in more than 200 countries. The indicators measure six key dimensions of governance quality: voice and accountability, political stability and lack of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Navigate to <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx> and download the full dataset in Excel or Stata to answer the following questions.
  1. Which governance indicators in the report are most closely related to economic health and future economic growth and why?
  2. For each of the indicators you identified in part (a), identify the three countries where the quality of governance

on these indicators has improved most significantly from 2000 to the present. Explain your answer.

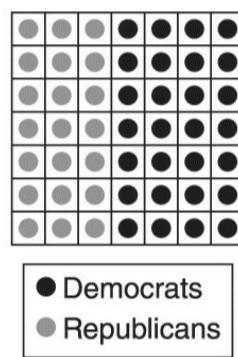
## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

10. After the 2016 election, economists [Hunt Alcott and Matt Gentzkow \(2017\)](#) experiment that attempted to gauge the impact of fake news stories on American voters. They asked voters about three kinds of highly partisan news stories they might have seen in various media (on TV, in print, on social media, etc.) before the election. The three types of news stories included: stories that were unambiguously true, stories that had been shared widely on social media but were unambiguously false, and a third category of “placebo” stories that were false and made up by the researchers for the purposes of the survey. Respondents were asked whether they had seen each news story during the election, and whether, given what they knew at the time, they had believed what they read.

Alcott and Gentzkow found about 25% of respondents recalled seeing true news stories, and about 19% believed them. By contrast, about 15% of respondents recalled seeing the false news stories that had been shared widely on social media, and 8% of them said they believed what they read. Interestingly, nearly the same percentage of respondents (14% and 8%) recalled seeing and believing the “placebo” stories that had been entirely fabricated by the researchers.

Consider this experiment in the context of the explanations for rising U.S. political polarization discussed in the chapter. What do the survey results indicate about these theories?

11. Consider the following “map” of a state with 49,000 residents, with the following geography: each square represents a precinct with 1,000 residents, and the color of the circle (gray or black) represents the partisan affiliation of the 1,000 residents, who predictably vote together as a uniform block in elections for the U.S. Congress (gray for Republicans, black for Democrats).



● Democrats  
● Republicans

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These 49,000 residents will be represented by 7 members in Congress. So the map must be divided into 7 districts comprised of 7 precincts, with 7,000 constituents in each district. The only rule for drawing the congressional map is that a precinct (square) must be connected horizontally or vertically (not diagonally) to at least one other precinct in the district.

1. Draw a map of 7 congressional districts that will produce a perfectly representative congressional delegation, in which the percentage of members of Congress who are Republicans and Democrats is equal to the percentage of constituents who belong to each of the two parties. Using the new map, determine how many Republicans and Democrats will go to the U.S. Congress after an election.
2. Suppose that Democrats win control of the state government through a series of unrelated local elections, giving them the opportunity to redraw the congressional map as they like. Suppose their only goal in redrawing the congressional map is to produce the most favorable map for their own party. Draw such a map and use it to determine how many Republicans and Democrats will go to the U.S. Congress. Explain whether the Democrats used the technique of “cracking” or “packing,” discussed in the chapter, to achieve their desired result.
3. Suppose that in the next series of local elections Republicans win control of the state government, and are now in control of drawing the congressional map. Like the Democrats, they are focused solely on producing the most favorable map for their party. Draw their map and use it to determine how many Republicans and Democrats will be in the congressional delegation. Explain whether the Republicans used the technique of

“cracking” or “packing” to achieve their goal.

12.

1. Using parts (a), (b), and (c) of Problem 11, calculate the “efficiency gap” of the three congressional elections depicted.
2. Comment on each of the three election results in Question 11 from the standpoint of fairness. Which election result is likely to be perceived as most fair and why? How does the “efficiency gap” metric calculated in part (a) relate to the perceived fairness of an election?
13. Alfie, Bill, and Coco each value police protection differently. Alfie’s demand for the public good is  $Q = 70 - 10P$ , Bill’s demand is  $Q = 70 - 5P$ , and Coco’s demand is  $Q = 44 - 4P$ . If the marginal cost of providing police protection is \$10.00, what is the socially optimal level of police provision? Under Lindahl pricing, what share of the tax burden would each of the three people pay?
14. Carrboro has three equal-sized groups of people: (1) Type A people consistently prefer more police protection to less; (2) Type B people prefer high levels of police protection to low levels, and they prefer low levels to medium levels; (3) Type C people most prefer medium levels to low levels, which they in turn prefer by a modest amount to high levels.
  1. Which types of people have single-peaked preferences? Which have multi-peaked preferences?
  2. Will majority voting generate consistent outcomes in this case? Why or why not?
15. Voters rarely get to choose the exact level of spending on a public good. Instead, they are provided with two options—a proposed spending level posed by the government and a default (or “reversion”) level that would be enacted if the proposal were rejected by voters. The Leviathan theory suggests that governments will intentionally select large proposed spending levels and default levels that are well below the desired level of spending. Why is this behavior consistent with a size-maximizing government?
16. Refer back to the discussion of [Chapter 4](#). There is an enormous intertemporal budget imbalance in the United States, with current generations spending well beyond their means and future generations bearing the ultimate costs. Why might the political system in the United States have led to this pattern of intergenerational transfers?
17. The House of Representatives is to consider two linked pieces of legislation, A and B. It is clear that the Senate will not pass Bill A or B either by itself, but it will pass them together. Two hundred representatives weakly support A and strongly oppose B. Two hundred representatives weakly support B and strongly oppose A. The remaining 35 representatives weakly support both bills. The Speaker of the House is deciding whether to combine Bills A and B (so that representatives can only vote for both A and B or against A and B) or submit them to the House as separate, not linked, bills.
  1. What outcome is expected if the bills are combined? If they are separated?
  2. Which result better accounts for preference intensity?

# CHAPTER 10 State and Local Government Expenditures



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [10.1 Fiscal Federalism in the United States and Abroad](#)
- [10.2 Optimal Fiscal Federalism](#)
- [10.3 Redistribution Across Communities](#)
- [10.4 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How does the provision of public goods at the local level affect their optimality?
- How should different types of spending be shared between different levels of government?
- What are the impacts of government grants designed to share spending across levels of government?

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law what would become one of his most significant contributions to domestic policy: the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. NCLB sought to address the problem of substandard educational opportunities for poor and minority children by requiring standardized testing starting in Grade 3 and continuing through high school. In addition, NCLB mandated that schools publish their scores categorized by race and ethnic group. Harsh penalties, including the possibility of the elimination of principals and teachers and the installation of new management, were to be imposed on schools that failed to show progress. NCLB represented the greatest expansion of federal power over schools in half a century.

The first years of NCLB were marked by intense controversy nationwide and a fierce battle between the states and the federal government. While some concerns arose due to technical shortcomings with the law and lower-than-expected federal funding, the central issue of contention was the intervention on the part of the federal government into public education, a domain that has historically been reserved for the local and state governments. On the one hand, supporters of the law applauded the federal government for intervening when it is clear that many states have either failed or not even tried to close the achievement gap between white and minority students. An April 2005 editorial in the *New York Times* supporting NCLB stated that, historically, “the federal government has looked the other way when the states have damaged the national interest by failing to educate large swaths of the population. That approach has left us with one of the weakest educational systems in the developed world . . . the Bush administration must stand firm against the districts that simply don’t want to make the effort.”<sup>1</sup>

On the other side, critics of NCLB countered that the federal government’s imposition of a standardized criterion across the nation interferes with ongoing local attempts to improve educational systems in a manner most suitable for each state. After a string of challenges to NCLB’s requirements, in 2011 the Obama administration announced that it would issue waivers to qualifying states. These waivers exempt states from the 100% proficiency standards in math and reading, provided that the states meet certain criteria for improvement and accountability and accept certain education reforms (such as the Common Core program discussed in [Chapter 11](#)). As of April 2015, a majority of states had these waivers.<sup>2</sup>

In December, 2015, Congress passed a rewrite of the NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The bill passed 85–12 in the Senate and 359–64 in the House. The bill eliminates the system that punishes states for not meeting sufficient standards, and largely gives states back the authority to test and to regulate how they are going to improve educational shortcomings. States will still be required to continue the federal testing schedule, as well as report achievement statistics, with breakdowns for minority and disability students. Additionally, there are still safeguards for the most underserved students. “Whereas No Child Left Behind prescribed a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to struggling schools, this law offers the flexibility to find the best local solutions—while also ensuring that students are

making progress,” said then education secretary Arne Duncan. The bipartisan bill garnered massive support from diverse organizations, including teachers unions, civil rights groups, and the National Governors Association, which had not endorse any legislation in almost 20 years. The bill took effect in the 2018–2019 school year.

At the heart of the debates over NCLB is the question of who should control educational policy.<sup>3</sup> This debate raises the important issue of **optimal fiscal federalism**, the question of which activities should take place at which level of government. Those who opposed NCLB were correct in asserting that local provision of government services allows communities to choose the package of services that best matches the tastes of their residents, potentially improving the efficiency of public goods delivery. The Bush administration was also correct in asserting that in some cases, programs that best serve local interests may not be in the national interest.

**optimal fiscal federalism**

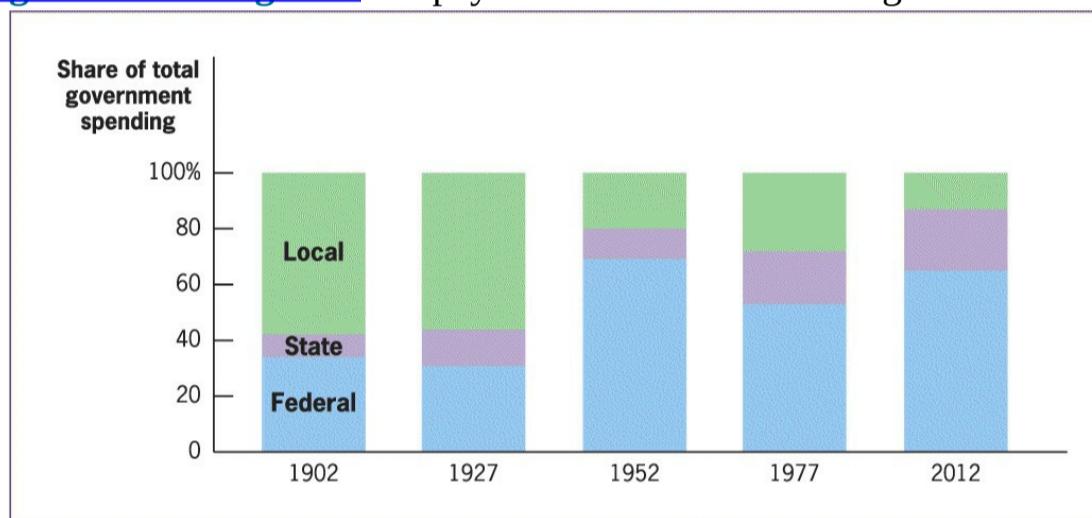
The question of which activities should take place at which level of government.

In this chapter, we discuss the set of issues surrounding state and local, or “subnational,” government spending, and the division of responsibilities across different levels of government. We begin with a discussion of the current division of responsibilities in the United States and other developed nations. We then turn to a discussion of whether local government provision of public goods solves the problems with government provision of public goods highlighted in the previous chapter. In particular, by allowing individuals to choose the jurisdiction that best matches their tastes, local government provision of public goods may allow local governments to provide the optimal amount of public goods, surmounting the problems of preference revelation and preference aggregation that hamper decisions about national public goods provision.

The remainder of the chapter asks whether and how the government should redistribute resources across communities. There are enormous differences across U.S. communities in the ability to finance local public goods, largely due to differences in the value of property on which local taxes are levied. Should the state and federal governments care about these differences? If so, what tools can these higher levels of government use to redistribute resources across communities?

# 10.1 Fiscal Federalism in the United States and Abroad

The last amendment (Amendment X) in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution states: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” Early in the history of the United States, therefore, the federal government played a relatively limited role in many aspects of the nation’s life, including the economy. As [Figure 10-1](#) shows, in 1902 the federal government accounted for only 34% of total government spending, with local governments accounting for 58% and state governments accounting for the remaining 8%. The federal government limited itself to spending on national defense, foreign relations, judicial functions, and the postal service. State and local governments were responsible for education, police, roads, sanitation, welfare, health, hospitals, and so on. The various levels of government operated in their own spheres, rarely overlapping or interfering with each other. Furthermore, the state and local governments funded their spending largely from their own sources. Less than 1% of state and local revenues at the time came from federal government grants. [Intergovernmental grants](#) are payments from one level of government to another.



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## FIGURE 10-1

**Changing Fiscal Federalism** • In the hundred and ten years from 1902 to 2012, the federal government has grown significantly relative to state and local governments.

Data from: 1902–1977 data from [Wallis and Oates \(1998\)](#), Table 5.1; [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2012\)](#).

### intergovernmental grants

Payments from one level of government to another.

Over the next 50 years, the situation changed dramatically. By 1952, the federal government accounted for 69% of total government spending, while local and state governments accounted for 20% and 11%, respectively. In addition, 10% of state and local revenue now came from federal grants. This change was largely due to three factors. The first was the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution (enacted in 1913), which allowed the federal government to levy income taxes on individual citizens (before this amendment, the Constitution had basically forbidden such taxation), thus providing a centralized source of revenue. The second factor in the growth of the federal government was the New Deal programs of the 1930s, which were the federal government’s response to the Great Depression. These programs initiated a number of federal government projects that fundamentally changed the relationship between the federal government and state and local governments. Federal grants to lower governments ballooned, and many of the new

programs, such as the Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) and highway programs, were funded by the federal government but administered locally. The third factor in the growth of federal government was the introduction of large social insurance and welfare programs by the federal government, most notably the Social Security old-age income support program and the system of matching grants to encourage states to provide assistance to the elderly, blind, and disabled.

The share of spending done at the local, state, and federal levels has remained fairly constant over the past 50 years. There has been a growth in the share of state financing coming from the federal government, largely due to the introduction in the 1960s of jointly federal- and state-financed welfare programs such as cash welfare and public Medicaid insurance for the poor. Federal grants accounted for 32% of state and local revenues in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

## Spending and Revenue of State and Local Governments

As noted in [Chapter 1](#), the sources of revenue and the types of spending done by state and local governments differ dramatically from those of the U.S. federal government. On the spending side, the largest element of state and local spending is education, followed by health care and transportation; the largest elements of federal spending are health care, Social Security, and national defense. The federal government plays a very small role in financing education. On the revenue side, states receive only 21.4% of their revenues from income taxes, while the federal government obtains nearly half its revenues from income taxation.

A major source of revenue raising at the local level is the [property tax](#), the tax on land and any buildings on it, such as commercial businesses or residential homes. Property taxes raised \$488 billion in revenue in 2016 and accounted for almost half of the (nongrant) revenues of local governments.<sup>5</sup> We discuss property taxation at length in [Chapter 23](#) as part of the broader discussion of wealth taxation.

### property tax

The tax on land and any buildings on it, such as commercial businesses or residential homes.

There is tremendous variety in spending and revenue-raising behavior across U.S. states. [Table 10-1](#) illustrates this variation by showing for a number of fiscal measures the state with the highest value, the median value, and the lowest value. For example, the state of Alaska has the highest education spending per capita in the nation, at \$3,508, while the median state, Virginia, spends \$1,930 per capita, and the lowest state, Arizona, spends \$1,156 per capita. Health care spending per capita in the District of Columbia, the highest state, is a little more than twice that in Utah, the lowest state. Income taxes per capita are highest in the state of New York, at \$2,699, and are zero in the seven states without an income tax, while sales taxes are highest in Washington, at \$1,904, and are zero in the four states and Washington, D.C., without a sales tax.

TABLE 10-1 Comparison of State Spending and Revenue Across the United States

		State	Dollars Per Capita
Spending	Education	Alaska	\$3,508 (high)
		Virginia	1,930 (median)
		Arizona	1,156 (low)
	Health Care	District of Columbia	11,944 (high)
		Missouri	8,107 (median)
		Utah	5,982 (low)
Taxes	Income Taxes	New York	2,431 (high)
		Utah	981 (median)
		AK/SD/FL/NV/WY/WA/TX	0 (low)
	Sales Taxes	Washington	1,749 (high)
		Nebraska	943 (median)
		DC/DE/OR/MT/NH	0 (low)

Data from: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2016\)](#); [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2014\)](#); and [Malm \(2015\)](#).

## Fiscal Federalism Abroad

Compared with most other developed nations, U.S. subnational (state and local) governments collect a much larger share of total (national plus subnational) government revenues and spend a somewhat larger share of total government spending. A recent survey of OECD nations, summarized in [Table 10-2](#), showed that the average nation's subnational governments collect only 19.2% of total government revenue, while in the United States subnational governments collect 42.4% of total revenue. The cross-national differences on the spending side are significant as well: the average OECD nation's subnational government accounts for 30.4% of spending, compared to 48.4% in the United States.

TABLE 10-2 Subnational Government Spending/Revenue as Share of Total Government Spending/Revenue in 2016

	Spending %	Revenue %
Greece	7.1	3.0
Portugal	12.4	10.3
France	19.4	16.0
Norway	33.0	16.7
United States	48.4	42.4
Denmark	63.5	27.8
OECD Average	30.4	19.2

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2016a\)](#), Table 5, Table 7.

Compared to the subnational governments of other nation state and local governments in the United States account for a relatively large portion of total government activity.

The higher level of centralization in other nations exists because, in many countries, such as Mexico, Austria, and Norway, subnational governments have almost no legal power to tax citizens: this power is reserved for the central government. Moreover, in most countries, central governments redistribute a larger share of their revenues to subnational governments. Many countries practice **fiscal equalization**, whereby the national government distributes grants to subnational governments in an effort to equalize differences in wealth. This can be accomplished by providing larger national grants on a per capita basis to poorer subnational areas. In Austria, for example, the federal government offsets more than half the difference across subnational areas in the revenues that they are able to raise through taxation. The federal government in the United States is notable because it does not use grants for equalization; the only such program, initiated by President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s, was eliminated by 1986.<sup>6</sup>

**fiscal equalization**

Policies by which the national government distributes grants to subnational governments in an effort to equalize differences in wealth.

Other nations also have a very different distribution of spending across national and subnational governments. In the United States, for instance, 30 to 40% of state and local spending is devoted to education, while the average in OECD nations is about 20%, highlighting the larger role that the central government plays in education in other countries.<sup>7</sup>

Recent years have seen a move toward fiscal decentralization around the globe. In the United States, there have been increased efforts to shift control and financing of public programs to the states for programs such as cash welfare. In countries as diverse as Hungary, Italy, South Korea, Mexico, and Spain, there have been efforts to shift responsibility for health care, education, and welfare from national to subnational governments. Thus, in most countries, spending by subnational governments has increased over the past couple of decades, often financed through grants from the national government. This increased funding and control has typically been accompanied by increasing imposition of national norms and quality standards on locally provided goods (such as increasingly rigid national curricula in education).

## 10.2 Optimal Fiscal Federalism

The different approaches to fiscal federalism seen in various nations raise a natural question: What is the optimal division of responsibilities across different levels of government? Why should anything be done by local governments? Alternatively, why is there any role for a central government? And which particular types of programs are most appropriately administered at which level of government? A theory of how the efficiency of public goods provision may differ at different levels of government will help answer these questions.

### The Tiebout Model

Two major problems with government provision of public goods, as discussed in the previous chapter, are the problems of *preference revelation* and *preference aggregation*: it is difficult to design democratic institutions that cause individuals to honestly reveal their preferences for public goods, and it is also difficult to aggregate individual preferences into a social decision. As a result, governments are often unable to deliver the optimal level of public goods in practice.

In 1956, economist Charles Tiebout (pronounced TEE-bow) asked: What is it about the private market that guarantees optimal provision of private goods that is missing in the case of public goods?<sup>8</sup> His insight was that the factors missing from the market for public goods were *shopping* and *competition*. Shopping is the fundamental force that induces efficiency in private goods markets. If a firm is selling an inferior good relative to its competitors, consumers will purchase from the competitors, not from the firm. This competition leads firms to produce efficiently in the perfectly competitive private goods market.

With many public goods, however, there is no shopping. Individuals don't debate whether to live in the United States or in Canada based on whether the marginal missile is produced by the federal government. Voters can shop across political parties based on their promises to provide public goods, but this is only one of a large number of factors that determine votes for federal office, and the process of changing federal decision making is slow. Because there is little real competition facing the federal government when it makes its decisions to provide public goods, the decisions can result in inefficient public goods provision (as we saw in [Chapter 9](#)).

Tiebout pointed out, however, that the situation is different when public goods are provided at the local level by cities and towns (and to a lesser extent, states). In this case, he argued, competition will naturally arise because individuals can *vote with their feet*: if they don't like the level of public goods provision in one town, they can move to the next town over, without nearly as much disruption to their lives as moving to another country.

Suppose, for example, that you read that the U.S. Department of Defense was spending \$110 on an electronic diode worth \$0.04, or \$435 on a single claw hammer, or \$437 on a tape measure (which happened in the United States in the 1980s).<sup>9</sup> What could you do about this? You are unlikely to move to another nation. You could vote out the party in power, but your vote for congressperson or president is based on a large number of factors, of which this is only one. So there is really little you can do to end such inefficiency.

Now suppose instead that you found out that your local public library was spending \$37,000 a year to supply the library's director with a sports car, as happened in New York City in 2014.<sup>10</sup> This waste clearly raises the property taxes that you pay to finance the town government. In this case, you have a realistic option: you can move to the town next door,

which may be similar along most dimensions but better in terms of fiscal discipline. With local public goods, we have a new *preference revelation device*: mobility.

Tiebout argued that this threat of exit can induce efficiency in local public goods production. Indeed, he went one step further and argued that under certain conditions, public goods provision will be *fully efficient* at the local level. By the same logic that the competitive equilibrium delivers the efficient level of private goods, competition across localities in public goods provision will deliver the efficient level of public goods. Towns that don't provide efficient levels of public goods will lose citizens to towns that do achieve efficiency—and will eventually go out of business.

## The Formal Model

In this section, we discuss the formal model that underlies Tiebout's intuition. This model makes a number of assumptions that are unrealistic, as we discuss in the next section. Yet the main message of the model, that competition across local jurisdictions places competitive pressures on the provision of local public goods, is an important one that is consistent with the evidence that we review later in this chapter.

The Tiebout model assumes that there are many people who divide themselves up across towns that provide different levels of public goods. Each town  $i$  has  $N_i$  residents and finances its public goods spending,  $G_i$ , with a uniform tax on all residents of  $G_i/N_i$ . Tiebout showed that in this model, individuals will divide themselves up so that each resident in any town has the same taste for public goods, and so demands the same level of public goods spending,  $G_i$ .

This model solves the problems of preference revelation and aggregation that cause difficulties with public provision of public goods. There is no problem of revelation because there is no incentive for people to lie with a uniform tax that finances the public goods. To illustrate this, let's return to the example of Jack and Ava from [Chapter 9 \(Figure 9.1\)](#), but now let's assume that fireworks cost 75¢ each. Suppose that Jack joins a town of 100 individuals identical to himself. Such a town would vote to have 75 fireworks, with each person paying 56¢ to finance the fireworks. Now suppose that once again Jack lies by saying that he has the same preferences as Ava. In Tiebout's model, to carry out that lie, he would have to actually move to a town of individuals like Ava (because those in his town want 75 fireworks, so that is the level provided). In Ava's town, they choose to only purchase 25 fireworks, with each individual paying 19¢ for each firework. By moving to Ava's town, Jack pays only one-third as much for fireworks—but he only gets one-third as many fireworks as a result. Jack has no incentive to lie because he must act on his lie by moving to a different town that matches his stated preferences. That is, Jack can't free ride when individuals in each town are identical and equally share the financing of the public good. The problem of preference aggregation is also solved because everyone in town wants the same level of public goods  $G_i$ , and the town government can simply divide that amount by the population to get the appropriate financing.

With the preference revelation and aggregation problems solved, Lindahl pricing works in the Tiebout model. Each individual reports her true valuation of the public good, the valuations are added, and then each individual is billed for the total cost of the public good divided by population size. This is an equilibrium because every person is happy to pay her share of the tax to get the public good, and the condition for optimal public goods provision is met because the level of public goods provided is determined by the sum of the individual benefits.

# Problems with the Tiebout Model

Although the Tiebout model is interesting, it is obviously extreme. A number of problems stand in the way of the prediction of the Tiebout model that local public goods provision will be efficient.

## Problems with Tiebout Competition

The Tiebout model requires a number of assumptions that may not hold in reality. The first assumption is perfect mobility: individuals must not only want to vote with their feet, they must be able to actually carry out that vote. This is difficult in practice. For example, I am quite settled in my home town in Massachusetts, with many friends and other comforts. It would take a lot more than inappropriate funding of a library director's sports car to get me to move now.

Perhaps even more implausible is the assumption that individuals have perfect information on the benefits that they receive from the town and the taxes that they pay. Even if the local public library were buying all its librarians sports cars, I would never find out unless it was somehow exposed by the local media (and I was paying attention).

Moreover, for the Tiebout model to hold, I must be able to choose freely among a range of towns that might match my taste for public goods. This range exists in the suburbs of Boston, where there are many towns that are fairly close to my job at MIT. But it might not be true in other areas, where towns are more spread out and voting with my feet would mean moving considerably farther from my job. Such restrictions on suitable substitutes for one's town could limit the usefulness of the Tiebout mechanism for smaller or declining metropolitan areas.

Finally, the provision of some public goods requires sufficient *scale* or size. It is not efficient to run a school with only a few students or to build a park that will be used by only a few residents because of the large fixed costs of constructing the school or the park. These fixed costs lead to *efficiencies of scale*, whereby the efficiency of a public good is much higher if it is used by many rather than few. A school that is used by 1,000 students can be financed by a much lower property tax per household than a school that is used by 10 students because the large fixed costs of schooling (e.g., the building, the principal) can be spread among the larger set of households.

At the same time, the Tiebout model requires that there be enough towns so that individuals can sort themselves into groups with similar preferences for public goods. This raises a clear tension: Can we divide the population into groups of people who all have similar preferences for public goods, yet also ensure that these groups are large enough to support the economies of scale required by public goods?

## Problems with Tiebout Financing

A second major problem with the operation of the Tiebout model is that it requires equal financing of public goods among all residents. This kind of financing is called a [lump-sum tax](#), a fixed sum that a person pays in taxation independent of that person's income, consumption of goods and services, or wealth. As we discuss in the tax chapters, this form of taxation is viewed as highly inequitable by the public because both rich and poor pay the same amount of tax (most forms of taxation place higher tax burdens on the rich than on the poor). As a result, lump-sum taxation is very rarely used to finance government expenditures. Indeed, the most high-profile attempt to impose lump-sum taxes, by the British government of Margaret Thatcher in 1990, resulted in major riots that led to the resignation of the once

incredibly popular prime minister.

**lump-sum tax**

A fixed taxation amount independent of a person's income, consumption of goods and services, or wealth.

Towns typically finance their public goods instead through a property tax that is levied in proportion to the value of homes. The problem that this property taxation causes is that the *poor chase the rich*. Richer people pay a larger share of the public goods bill than do poorer people, so people who value those goods would like to live in a community with people richer than they are. That way, the poorer people can benefit from the higher taxes paid by their richer neighbors. In other words, everyone wants to live in towns with people who are richer than they are so that they can free ride on their neighbors' higher tax payments.<sup>11</sup>

One way that towns have endeavored to solve this problem is through the use of **zoning**. Zoning regulations are restrictions that towns place on how real estate property can be used, ostensibly with the goal of preserving the character of the local community. For example, one common zoning regulation requires that houses be built a certain distance back from the street to preserve some yard space and thus the aesthetic character of the neighborhood. Other examples of zoning regulations include prohibitions against using one's home to run a business in a residential neighborhood, restrictions on the maximum number of occupants a lot or building may house, requirements for minimum lot sizes, constraints on the maximum size of buildings, and bans on multifamily housing.

**zoning**

Restrictions that towns place on the use of real estate.

Zoning regulations protect the tax base of wealthy towns by pricing lower-income people out of the housing market. For example, a town that prohibits multifamily dwellings (such as two-family houses and apartment buildings) lowers the available amount of housing and thus inflates the value of existing housing so that poor people can't afford to move in and free ride on the tax payments of higher-income neighbors. Indeed, [Glaeser and Gyourko \(2002\)](#) compared areas with different zoning laws and found that the prices of land in zoned areas are higher by a factor of ten than prices in unzoned markets.

## No Externalities/Spillovers

A third problem with the Tiebout model is that it assumes that public goods have effects only in a given town and that the effects do not spill over to neighboring towns. If such spillovers exist, there is a case for provision of public goods at a higher level of government, or grants that subsidize local purchases.

Imagine that my town is considering building a large new public park. This park will be enjoyed primarily by individuals in my town, but many people from neighboring towns will visit its beautiful grounds as well. Under the Tiebout mechanism, when my town decides whether to build the park, it will consider only the preferences of residents in my town, not the preferences of residents of other towns who might enjoy the park. Thus, we face the standard problem with public goods provision: because people in other towns are free riding on my town's park, my town will underprovide park services. If the social benefits (to my town and all surrounding towns) exceed the cost of building the park, it should be built, but if the private benefits to my town are smaller than the costs of building the park, then it will not be built, which is socially inefficient.

Many local public goods have similar externality or spillover features: police (if my town's police department is not large enough, criminal activity in my town might spill over to other towns); public works (if my town's streets are covered in potholes, the drivers from neighboring towns might suffer as they drive through my town); education (the entire nation

benefits from a more educated citizenry); and so on. Thus, there is a fundamental trade-off with the Tiebout approach. There are advantages to locally provided public goods for small towns of similar individuals, but it may be optimal to provide public goods that have external effects or spillovers to other towns at a higher level of government that can internalize the externalities.

## Evidence on the Tiebout Model

The Tiebout model clearly imposes a very restrictive set of assumptions if taken literally, yet the basic intuition that individuals vote with their feet is still a strong one. Indeed, two types of tests reveal that the provision of local public goods is generally consistent with the Tiebout description.

### Resident Similarity Across Areas

A clear prediction of the Tiebout model is that people living in a given local community (such as a town) should have similar preferences for local public goods. The more local communities there are from which to choose, by the logic of this model, the more residents can sort themselves into similar groupings. If a city has only one suburb within commuting distance, it will be hard for residents working in the city to vote with their feet if they don't like the level of public goods provision in that one suburb. Thus, a testable implication of the Tiebout model is that when people have more choice of local community, the tastes for public goods will be more similar among town residents than when people do not have many choices (and so can't sort themselves into like-minded Tiebout communities).

Supportive evidence on this point comes from [Gramlich and Rubinfeld \(1982\)](#), who surveyed Michigan households on their demand for public goods. They found that in larger metropolitan areas (i.e., in suburbs near cities), where people have greater choice of which community they can live in, preferences for public goods were more similar within towns than in smaller areas with fewer independent towns to choose from. Moreover, in urban/suburban areas, residents were much more satisfied with the level of public goods spending than in nonurban areas where there are fewer ways to vote with one's feet because there are fewer towns to move to. [Bergstrom et al. \(1986\)](#) used the data from Michigan suburbs to estimate individual demands for public goods and showed that the provision of local public goods appeared to satisfy the efficiency condition that the marginal cost equals the sum of marginal rates of substitution of residents.

### Capitalization of Fiscal Differences into House Prices

For many individuals, the decision about where to live is not primarily determined by the level of local public goods. Indeed, many residents don't even demonstrate the basic knowledge of local taxes and spending that is required for the Tiebout mechanism to operate.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the Tiebout mechanism requires not that all residents are willing to vote with their feet, but that enough residents are willing to do so to enforce the optimal provision of public goods. A town does not have to empty out completely before local officials get the message that the residents are unhappy with public goods provision; all that is required is that there be sufficient mobility among an informed minority in response to public goods decisions.

In fact, very little actual mobility is required for the Tiebout mechanism to operate because people not only vote with their feet, they also vote with their pocketbook, in the form of *house prices*. The Tiebout model predicts that any differences in the fiscal attractiveness of a town will be [\*\*capitalized into house prices\*\*](#). The price of any house reflects the cost (including local property taxes) and benefits (including local public goods) of living in that

house. Thus, towns that have a relatively high level of public goods, given taxes paid, will have more expensive housing; conversely, towns that have relatively high property taxes, given the public goods provided, will have less expensive housing. House pricing, therefore, represents voting with your pocketbook: people will pay more for a house in a town that more efficiently delivers local public goods.

#### house price capitalization

Incorporation into the price of a house the costs (including local property taxes) and benefits (including local public goods) of living in the house.

There is strong evidence for voting with the pocketbook, as reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box. Thus, even if some residents do not choose their location based on Tiebout factors, enough residents do make choices that way that it drives the pricing of housing across local communities.

## Optimal Fiscal Federalism

Although the Tiebout model is an imperfect description of reality, changes in local taxation and spending do affect mobility and house prices. Given these *positive* findings (i.e., they support the predictions of the model about behavior), what are the *normative* implications of the Tiebout model for the optimal design of fiscal federalism? That is, what does the Tiebout model imply *should be* the principles that guide the provision of public goods at different levels of government?

The Tiebout model implies that the extent to which public goods should be provided at the local level is determined by three factors. The first is **tax-benefit linkages**, the extent to which residents view their tax payments as directly tied to goods and services that they receive. Goods with strong tax-benefit linkages, such as local roads, should be provided locally. There is a direct tax-benefit linkage to spending on local roads: higher property taxes fund better-quality roads that benefit most residents of a town. Goods with weaker tax-benefit linkages, such as welfare payments to the lowest-income residents of a town, should be provided at the state or federal level. There is a very limited tax-benefit linkage to spending on welfare: the majority of residents in a town do not benefit from redistribution to low-income groups (unless they have altruistic preferences toward the local poor).

#### tax-benefit linkages

The relationship between the taxes that people pay and the government goods and services that they get in return.

If residents can see directly the benefits they are buying with their property tax dollars, they will be willing to pay local taxes. If they cannot see a benefit from their property tax payments, they will vote with their feet by moving to a town that has lower property taxes. If a town instituted a cash welfare program, higher-income residents would have an incentive to leave and move to a town that did not have such a program and had lower local property taxes as a result. The ability of individuals to vote with their feet is a fundamental limitation on a town's ability to pursue programs that benefit only a minority of residents.

The second factor that determines the optimal level of decentralization is the extent of positive externalities, or spillovers, in public goods provision. If local public goods have large spillover effects on other communities, the goods will be underprovided by any locality. In this case, higher levels of government have a role in promoting the provision of these public goods (e.g., through grants).

The third factor that determines the optimal level of decentralization is the economy of scale in the nature of public goods. Public goods that have large economies of scale, such as national defense, are not efficiently provided by many competing local jurisdictions; public

goods without large economies of scale, such as police protection, may be provided more effectively in Tiebout competition.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Evidence for Capitalization from California's Proposition 13*

There is a large literature in state and local public finance that tests for capitalization effects. Typically, this literature proceeds by regressing house prices on school quality or on local property tax rates and assessing whether higher-quality schools lead to higher house prices and higher taxes lead to lower house prices. These simple comparisons are potentially biased, however. For example, towns with better public schools may attract higher-income families, so finding that house prices are higher where schools are better does not prove that higher-quality schools are causing higher house prices. This correlation could just reflect that higher-income groups pay more for houses.

More convincing evidence for capitalization effects comes from [Rosen's \(1982\)](#) study of the effects of California's Proposition 13, a voter initiative that became law in 1978 and has proved to be one of the defining events of state and local public finance of the past half century. Proposition 13 was the first of a series of state laws that limit the ability of localities in a state to levy property taxes. Since its passage, nearly 40 statewide tax-limiting measures have been passed by voters in 18 states through the initiative process.

Proposition 13 mandated that the maximum amount of any tax on property could not exceed 1% of the "full cash value" of the property. The full cash value was defined as the value as of 1976, with annual increases of 2% at most, unless the property was sold, in which case its full cash value would just be its sale value.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Proposition 13 restricted local property tax collections in two ways. First, it limited the rate that could be charged: the rate could not exceed 1% of a home's assessed value. Second, despite the high inflation of the late 1970s, it limited the rate at which the tax base (the house's value) could be increased to 2% per year. This was a strict limitation: the typical Los Angeles home saw its property tax increase 80% between 1973 and 1977.<sup>14</sup>

[Rosen \(1982\)](#) studied more than 60 municipalities in the San Francisco metropolitan area, examining tax rates and housing prices six months before and six months after the vote on Proposition 13. He compared towns with high property tax rates before 1978 (the treatment group), which were mandated by Proposition 13 to have large reductions in their property tax rates, to towns with lower property tax rates before 1978 (the control group), which did not see much change in their property tax rates. So long as there was nothing else changing differently between treatment and control towns at this time, the passage of Proposition 13 provides a quasi-experiment for assessing the impact of property taxes on house values. Rosen found a strong association between reductions in property taxes and increases in house values: each \$1 of property tax reduction increased house values by about \$7. Given that buying a house means committing to a stream of future property tax payments, full capitalization of lower property taxes into house prices would imply that house prices should rise by the present discounted value of reduced future tax payments (the price should rise today to reflect the entire future benefit from lower property taxes). Mathematically, full capitalization would require that house prices rise by  $1/r$  for each dollar reduction in property taxes, where  $r$  is the interest rate (recall from [Chapter 4](#) that the present discounted value of a long future stream of payments is  $1/r$  times the payment). Interest rates at the time of Proposition 13 were about 12%, so a \$7 rise in house prices for each \$1 reduction in property taxes suggests close to full capitalization (with full capitalization, house prices would have risen by  $1/0.12 = \$8.33$  for each dollar reduction in property taxes).

This result implies very large capitalization of this policy change because, in principle, the fall in property taxes would result in a future reduction in public goods and services, which would lower home values. If, for example, each \$1 of taxes was going to finance public goods and services worth \$1 to residents, then house prices should not have changed because the gain of lower property taxes would be offset by falling local goods and services. The fact that house prices rose by almost the present discounted value of the taxes suggests that Californians did not think that they would lose many valuable public goods and services when taxes fell.

Rosen conjectured that Californians were not worried about falling public goods and services because the state used supplementary funds to offset the losses to local communities. Residents apparently perceived that these state offsets would continue or, alternatively, that the cut in taxes was simply reducing "wasteful" local spending. That optimism appears to have been unfounded, however. San Jose, a fairly prosperous area with good public services, found itself having to cut services dramatically in the wake of Proposition 13. The school district laid off art and music teachers in the elementary schools, cut bus transportation, fired school nurses and guidance counselors, and shortened the school day from six to five periods—all to no avail. In 1983, the district became the first American public school system in 40 years to declare bankruptcy. The rest of the town suffered, too, as library hours shortened, parks became overgrown, and mental health nurses were fired. A poll of San Jose residents showed that a majority believed that Proposition 13 had worked out "unfavorably" for most people.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of these factors, the Tiebout model predicts that local spending should focus on broad-based programs with few externalities and relatively low economies of scale, such as road repair, garbage collection, and street cleaning. Similarly, local communities should play a more limited role in providing public goods that are redistributive (such as cash welfare), have large spillovers (such as education), and have very large economies of scale (such as

national defense). The nature of fiscal federalism in the United States is largely consistent with this prediction. Public works are financed primarily at the local level, redistributive programs are financed at the state and federal levels, and defense is a national program. Education is roughly one-half financed by localities and one-half financed by higher levels of government (mostly state government), which is consistent with the spillovers associated with education. The only question here is whether the externalities from education are sufficiently large on a nationwide basis that the federal government, which currently provides less than 10% of educational spending, should play a larger role in financing education, as is true in most other industrialized nations.

This discussion has focused on the fiscal role of different levels of government, but similar issues arise through the regulatory role of governments as well: regulations that are focused on more tightly targeted local issues should be local, while regulations that impact spillovers, have large economies of scale, or are redistributive should be at a higher level of government. Recently, states have taken a much more aggressive role in limiting the ability of local governments to enact their own regulations, as discussed in [Grabar \(2016\)](#) or [Badger \(2017\)](#). States are restricting the ability of localities to have their own laws about the minimum wage, gun control, smoking bans, and transgender bathroom policies. In some cases, there are clearly large spillovers in localities having looser regulations than the rest of the state, such as with gun control (where a locality with looser rules could end up supporting smuggling of guns to other localities); but the spillovers from tighter regulations are less clear. In other cases, there are few obvious spillovers, such as with transgender bathroom policies. Grabar and Badger suggest that the type of political polarization discussed in [Chapter 9](#) may be causing us to deviate from Tiebout principles here.

## 10.3 Redistribution Across Communities

The Tiebout model provides a framework for considering one of the most important problems in fiscal federalism: Should there be redistribution of public funds across communities? There is currently enormous inequality in both the ability of local communities to finance public goods (the value of the property tax base) and the extent to which they do so. For example, in the commonwealth of Massachusetts, the town of Lakeville raises only \$13,932 in local tax revenue per public school student, while the town of Carlisle raises \$22,472.<sup>16</sup> Some of this difference comes from decisions about the level of local taxation: the tax per \$1,000 of property value is \$14.25 in Lakeville and \$17.68 in Carlisle. Most of the difference in revenue, however, comes from underlying differences in the values of taxed property: the median single-family home is worth \$367,000 in Lakeville and \$851,722 in Carlisle.<sup>17</sup> In the state of New York, one study found that the property values per public school student varied by a factor of almost six, with the poorest 10% of districts having property values per student of less than \$313,891 and the richest 10% of districts having property values per student of more than \$1,871,956.<sup>18</sup>

### Should We Care?

Should this inequality in revenue bases (as reflected in property values) or revenues raised (the product of property values and property tax rates) across communities concern public policy makers? Should higher levels of government mandate redistribution across lower levels of government to offset these differences? As noted earlier, such redistribution is an important feature of fiscal federalism in some nations, where the national government distributes grants to poorer communities that largely offset differences in revenues across communities.

The broad answer to the “Should we care?” question is that it *depends on the extent to which the Tiebout model describes reality*. In a perfect Tiebout world, we would *not* redistribute across communities: communities would have formed for the efficient provision of public goods, and any redistribution across them would impede efficiency. If a town has low revenues or low spending, it is because the residents of the town have chosen to provide a low level of public goods, and this is the efficient outcome given their tastes. Government redistribution in this case should focus on individuals, not on communities.

To the extent that Tiebout does not perfectly describe reality, however, there are two arguments for redistributing from high-revenue, high-spending communities to low-revenue, low-spending communities. The first is *failures of the Tiebout mechanism*. For example, suppose that there are reasons people cannot effectively vote with their feet, such as restrictive zoning rules that cause houses to be very large and expensive in communities with high public goods (e.g., each house must be on at least a one-acre lot). In this situation, there may be people who desire high levels of public goods but who cannot afford the high quality of house mandated by the zoning rules. These people could remain stuck in a town with low public goods provision, the only place where they can afford a house. In this case, it could be efficient to redistribute to the low public goods towns to help the individuals stuck in a situation where they are forced to underconsume public goods.

The second reason for redistribution is *externalities*. If a large share of local tax revenue is spent on local public goods with spillovers or externalities for other communities, there is a standard externality argument for higher levels of government to subsidize spending in the communities providing the externalities. For example, suppose that high-quality elementary

education in a town leads to lower crime rates in both that town and neighboring towns. In this case, it may be optimal for the state government to tax high-revenue towns and redistribute to low-revenue towns to ensure that low-revenue towns can provide a high-quality elementary education.<sup>19</sup>



## APPLICATION

### Barriers to Tiebout and the “Great Divergence”<sup>20</sup>

There is an enormous divergence in America today between a set of “superstar” cities that are riding the revolution in information technology and biotechnology to rapid growth, and much of the rest of the country that is getting left behind. In 2016, the top 20 cities in the United States had average earnings that were almost 50% more than that of all remaining U.S cities. Fourteen of these 20 cities were on the coasts. This is quite a contrast to 1980, when the top cities earned only about 25% more than the average city, and only 8 of the top 20 cities were on the coasts. This growing divergence between the “superstar” cities on the coasts and the rest of the country is explored in great depth in Enrico Moretti’s book, *The New Geography of Jobs* ([Moretti, 2013](#)).

Economists have always assumed that the market would resolve differences in economic opportunities across areas through personal mobility, leading to a natural convergence, or equaling out, over time. In the standard economic model, the high cost of living in successful cities and the reduction in communication barriers brought about by the Internet would lead individuals to move out of those cities and to new locations with a lower cost of living. Bogged down by their high costs, then, existing technology hubs should give way to new growth centers.

But Moretti argues that this no longer happening, due to the strong forces of *agglomeration* in the new knowledge economy: the arrival of more talented workers in an area raises the economic returns for other talented workers who settle in that same area. Therefore, cities that are able to initially attract talent earn high returns in the knowledge economy and grow faster. As Moretti says, “The success of a city fosters more success, as communities that can attract skilled workers and good jobs tend to attract even more. Communities that fail to attract skilled workers lose further ground.”

Agglomeration arises from forces such as sharing (resources such as transportation or personal amenities), matching (when more individuals are trying to match, matches are of higher quality, whether for employment or dating), and learning (economic innovation and growth comes from face-to-face interactions, so more people in an area leads to more opportunities for individuals to learn from each other). And, as Moretti shows, this results in divergent outcomes like faster growth in educational attainment among cities with the most educated residents, further splitting American cities between the haves and have nots.

But these facts raise another question: If some cities are doing so much better than others, then why doesn’t everyone just move there? Indeed, Moretti finds that everyone, not just the technology workers, do better in these highly educated cities. And the United States is a nation with historically high mobility, rich with stories of strong-willed pioneers striking out for new areas in search of riches. If anyone can easily point out the places where riches are to be made, why isn’t everyone in their modern-day equivalent of the covered wagon heading to those cities?

The answer is that there is an offsetting problem with living in these booming cities: they have the highest cost of living. The list of cities where the cost of living is the highest reads very much like the list of cities that have most benefitted from the knowledge economy: San Jose, San Francisco, Boston, New York, Washington DC, Los Angeles, and so on. This high cost of living forms a barrier deterring entry into the city and into its workforce. And the most significant difference in the cost of living across cities is the cost of housing; house prices in the “superstar cities” are more than twice the average in all other cities in the country.

If demand for housing is so high in these cities, why doesn’t supply respond? Because of the type of zoning restrictions discussed earlier, which make it impossible to create a sufficient supply of housing to meet demand. For much of U.S. history, local economic booms were matched by local building booms, but that era has ended. For example, in Manhattan, there were 13,000 new housing units permitted in 1960 alone, which is nearly two-thirds of the total permitted during the entire 1990s. The cost of constructing housing varies somewhat across areas (it is cheaper to build in the flat southwest than the hilly northeast), but this variation is very small relative to the enormous variation in house prices. Evidence suggests that local restrictions on constructing housing is the primary driver of house price variations.

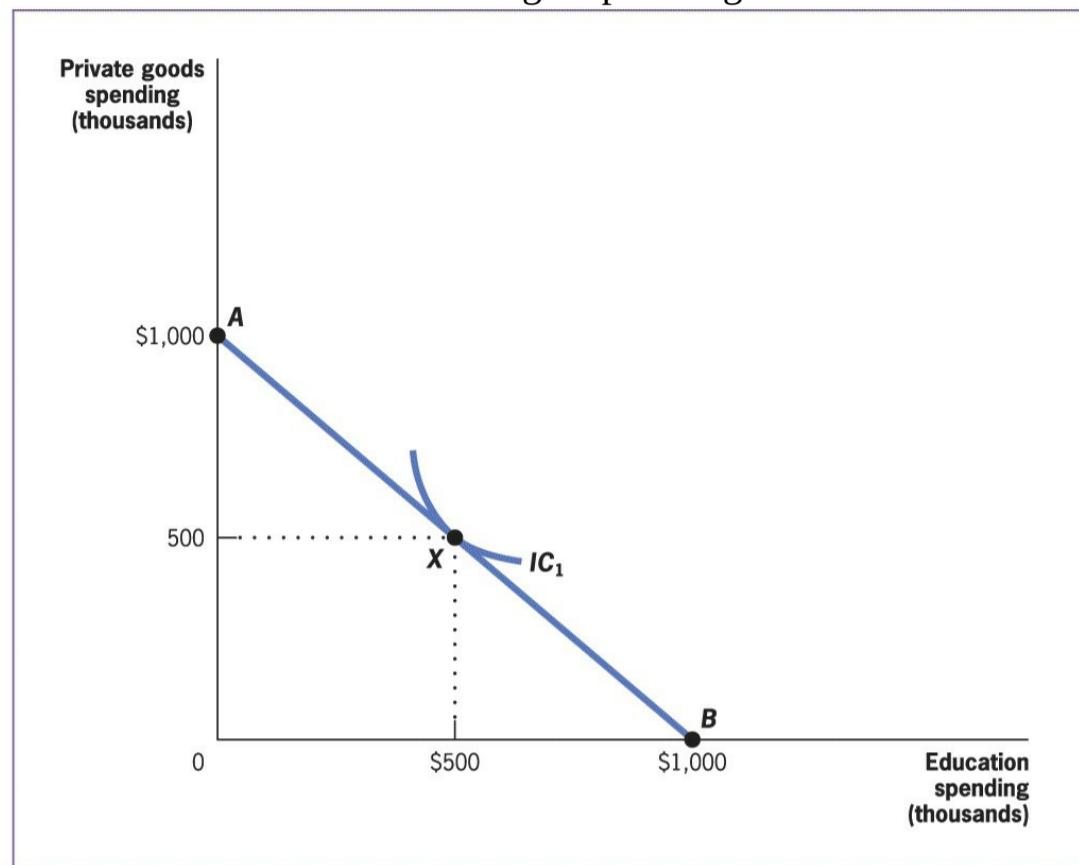
Consider in particular the example of Palo Alto, California, the epicenter of Silicon Valley. The technology industry in and around the city has grown spectacularly, but its housing stock has not. Low-slung, single-family housing dominates, even with thousands of students and young employees who might prefer smaller apartments. Single-family homes trade at a median price of \$2.6 million, and median rents have climbed from \$3,800 in 2011 to \$6,000 in 2017. Despite this, Palo Alto leadership has focused on restraining the growth rate of jobs rather than building more housing. In 2017, in an effort to slow development, the city planning commission approved an extension of the city’s recent restriction of new office development to no more than 50,000 square feet per year.

A key problem of constraints on local building is that the U.S. economy does not function as efficiently as possible. Income flows to a smaller set of cities, but individuals can’t afford to move to those cities to take advantage of the opportunities—and therefore get left behind in the places that aren’t benefitting from the agglomeration economies. Indeed, one recent study estimates that millions of workers are “missing” from the most productive cities in the economy, and the U.S. economy is 14% smaller than it should be because of this misallocation.<sup>21</sup> And there is a growing body of evidence highlighting the enormous disadvantage of growing up in poor cities for all groups, particularly minorities.<sup>22</sup> ■

## Tools of Redistribution: Grants

If higher levels of government decide for one of the two reasons stated to redistribute across lower levels of government, they do so through *intergovernmental grants*, which are cash transfers from one level of government to another. Grants are a large and growing share of federal spending. From 1960 to 2014, grants to lower levels of government grew from 7.6 to 17% of federal spending.<sup>23</sup> State governments, however, have always sent a large portion of the budget to local governments. From 1960 to 2002, state grants to local governments actually dropped slightly, from 34.1 to 28.1% of state spending, the bulk of which funded local education.<sup>24</sup> Higher levels of government use several different types of grants. In defining these types, we use the example of a state redistributing to local communities (although the same description applies to other forms of higher-to-lower level of government redistribution, such as national to state).

Suppose that the town of Lexington provides only one public good to its residents—education. It finances education through property taxes, and any money families have after taxation is spent on private goods (such as cars or clothing). [Figure 10-2](#) shows the situation in Lexington before any grant is provided. Residents of Lexington have a total budget of \$1 million to spend on education and other private goods, and we model how they choose to divide this budget. At point A, Lexington residents choose to spend nothing on education and spend their entire \$1 million budget on private goods. At point B, Lexington spends its entire budget of \$1 million on education and nothing on private goods.



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■ FIGURE 10-2

A Town’s Choice Between Education and Private Goods • With \$1 million to spend on some combination of education and private goods, Lexington chooses point X on its budget constraint AB, spending \$500,000 on each, at the point where its indifference curve,  $IC_1$ , is tangent to its budget constraint.

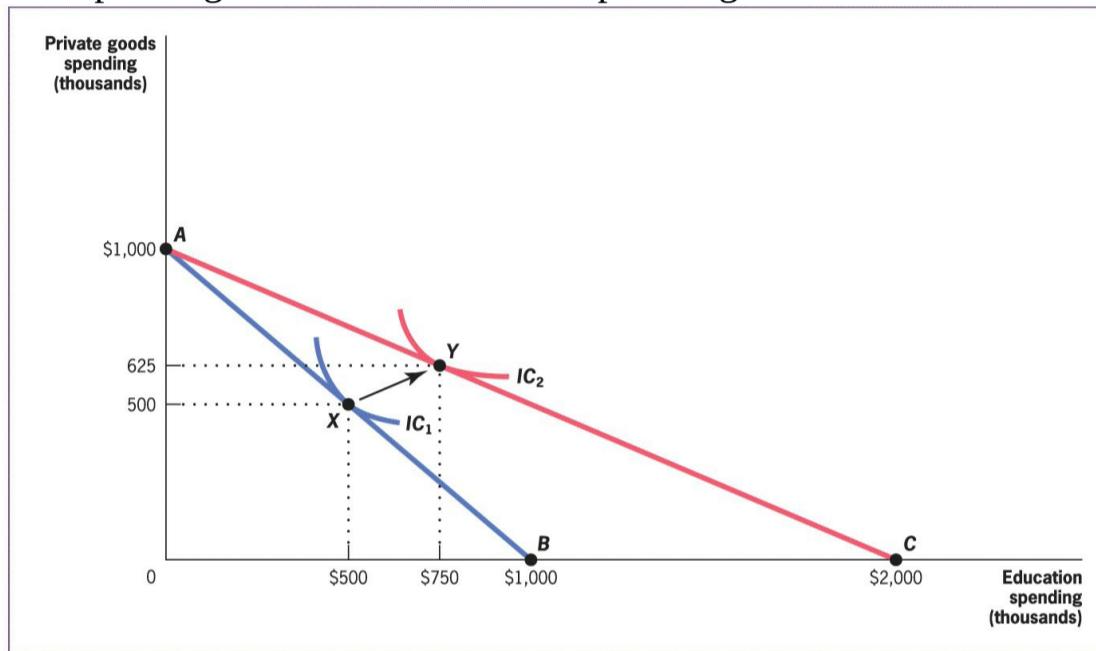
The voters of Lexington have some preferences for education and private goods that can be represented as an indifference curve  $IC_1$  between these two sets of goods. That is, we can analyze Lexington’s choice between education and private goods in the same way that we might analyze an individual’s choice between these same items;  $IC_1$  represents the aggregation of the indifference curves of the voters through a voting mechanism. Before there are any state grants in place, Lexington chooses to spend \$500,000 per year on education and \$500,000 per year on private goods. This spending combination is represented by point X, where the town’s indifference curve is tangent to its budget constraint.

## Matching Grants

One type of grant the state government might use is a [matching grant](#), which ties the amount of funds transferred to the local community to the amount of spending it currently allocates to public goods. For example, a one-for-one matching grant for education would provide \$1 of funding from the state for each \$1 of education spending by the local community. While we use a one-for-one match as the example here, match rates can vary from 0.01 to more than 1. [matching grant](#)

A grant, the amount of which is tied to the amount of spending by the local community.

This one-for-one matching grant reduces the price of education by half; each dollar of education spending now costs Lexington only \$0.50 because the commonwealth of Massachusetts provides the other \$0.50. This change pivots the budget constraint outward from  $AB$  to  $AC$  in [Figure 10-3](#). This grant unambiguously increases spending on education through both the income and substitution effects. In our example, total education spending increases from \$500,000 to \$750,000 at point  $Y$ . Lexington contributes \$375,000 toward education and receives the other \$375,000 in matching grants. Of its original \$1 million budget, Lexington now has \$625,000 to spend on private goods (the original \$500,000 it was spending plus the \$125,000 it no longer spends on education). As a result of the matching grant, then, total spending on both education and private goods has increased.



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■ **FIGURE 10-3**

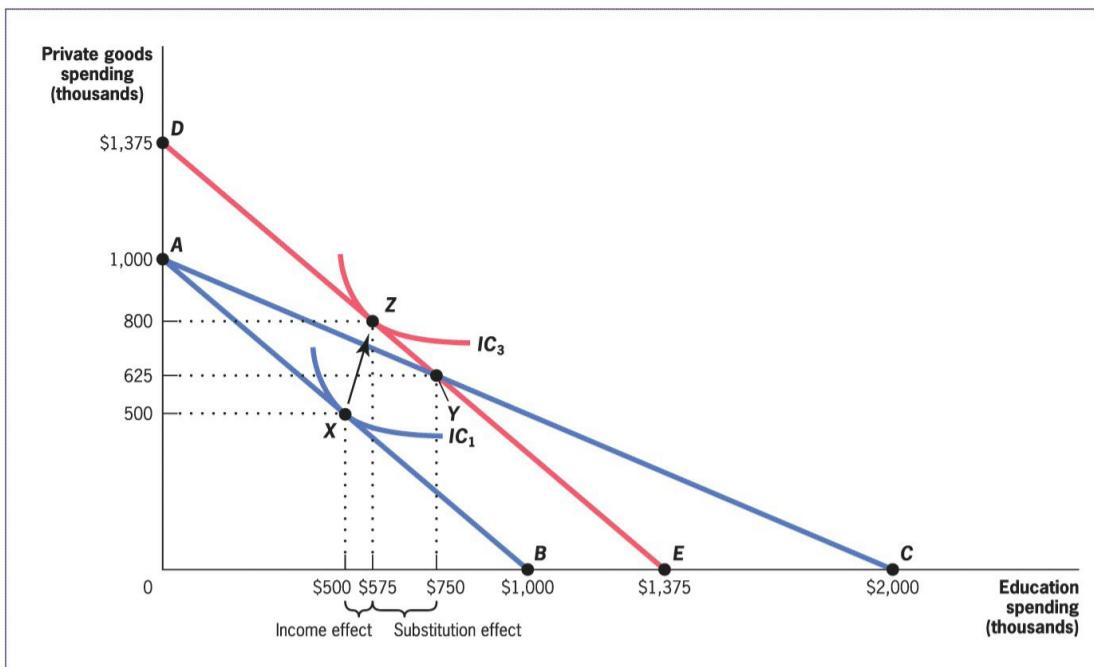
**The Impact of a Matching Grant on the Town’s Budget Constraint** • When Lexington is offered a matching grant for educational spending, with \$1 of grant for each \$1 of local spending, the budget constraint pivots outward from  $AB$  to  $AC$ . Lexington chooses point  $Y$  on  $AC$ , as it spends \$250,000 more on education (with education spending rising from \$500,000 to \$750,000) and \$125,000 more on private goods.

## Block Grant

Another option is a **block grant**, whereby the commonwealth simply gives the local community some grant amount  $G$  with no mandate on how it is to be spent. To keep the cost to the government constant, suppose that the government gives Lexington a \$375,000 block grant. Because the block grant makes Lexington wealthy enough to afford to spend up to \$1.375 million on either education or private goods, it shifts the budget constraint out from  $AB$  to  $DE$ , as [Figure 10-4](#) illustrates.

### block grant

A grant of some fixed amount with no mandate on how it is to be spent.



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**FIGURE 10-4**

The Impact of an Unconditional Block Grant on the Town’s Budget Constraint • When Lexington is offered an unconditional block grant of \$375,000, the budget constraint shifts outward from  $AB$  to  $DE$ . Lexington chooses point  $Z$  on  $DE$ , as it spends \$75,000 more on education (with education spending rising from \$500,000 to \$575,000) and \$300,000 more on private goods.

While Massachusetts is giving Lexington the same amount of money with the block grant, it has a very different effect on the town’s behavior. Some of this newfound wealth will be used to increase education spending, while some will be used to increase consumption of private goods. In this example, the town moves to point  $Z$ , raising education spending by only \$75,000 and private goods spending by \$300,000 (from \$500,000 to \$800,000).

The increase in education spending is lower with the block grant (\$75,000) than it was with the matching grant (\$250,000) because there is now only an income effect on education spending for Lexington, whereas the matching grant had both a substitution and an income effect. The income effect raises spending on education from \$500,000 to \$575,000, moving the town from point  $X$  to point  $Z$ . The substitution effect that is added with the matching grant then raises education spending by an additional \$175,000 to \$750,000, as reflected by the move from point  $Z$  to point  $Y$ .

On the other hand, Lexington has been made better off with the block grant than with the matching grant. This can be seen graphically by the fact that, with the new budget constraint under the block grant ( $DE$ ), the town *could have* afforded its choice at point  $Y$ , with education spending rising to \$750,000 and private goods spending rising to \$625,000, but it chose a different combination. Because the town chose point  $Z$  instead, it must be on a higher indifference curve. That is, given the freedom to spend its grant money as it likes, without the restriction of a matching condition, the town would rather spend most of the money on private goods and relatively little on education. The matching grant leads to more spending on education than the town would otherwise choose given that amount of money, so it leaves the town on a lower indifference curve.

Thus, the optimal choice of grant mechanisms for higher levels of government (such as states) depends on the goal of the grant program. If the goal is to maximize the welfare of the lower level of government, block grants will be most effective. If the goal is to encourage spending on public goods such as education, matching grants will be most effective because

they will put both income and substitution effects to work to increase town spending.

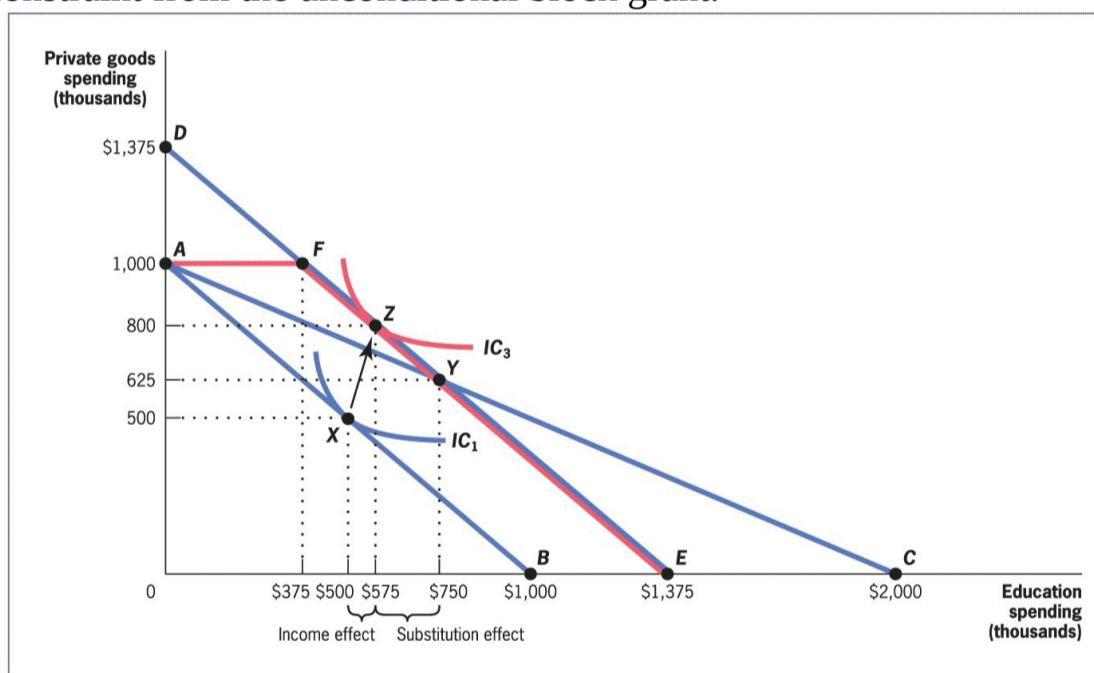
## Conditional Block Grant

Suppose that Massachusetts likes the fact that it has made Lexington better off with a block grant than with a matching grant, but it doesn't like the fact that education spending hasn't gone up as much. One way the commonwealth could try to remedy this is through a **conditional block grant**, a fixed amount of money distributed to the town with a mandate that the money be spent only on education. In this case, the commonwealth could provide Lexington with a \$375,000 block grant and mandate that it spend the entire grant on education.

### conditional block grant

A grant of some fixed amount with a mandate that the money be spent in a particular way.

The effect of this conditional block grant is illustrated in [Figure 10-5](#). Lexington can now spend up to \$375,000 (the grant amount) on education, while continuing to spend its original \$1 million budget on private goods. Thus, the first segment on the budget constraint is now *AF*. Once Lexington spends beyond \$375,000 on education, however, it faces the same trade-off between spending on education and spending on private goods that it did when it got the unconditional grant: the condition imposed on this grant doesn't matter if the town is already spending more than \$375,000 on education. The new budget constraint is, therefore, *AFC*. Beyond the \$375,000 point on the horizontal axis, this new budget constraint is the same as the budget constraint from the unconditional block grant.



■ FIGURE 10-5

**The Impact of a Conditional Block Grant on Town Spending** • When the town is offered a conditional block grant for education spending, it can spend up to \$375,000 on education while still spending \$1 million on private goods. Beyond point *F*, the conditional block grant operates like the unconditional block grant, so the budget constraint is *AFC*. For towns that already have high educational spending, like Lexington, the conditional grant has the same effect as the unconditional grant, causing education spending to rise by \$75,000.

As is clear from [Figure 10-5](#), adding this condition has *no effect* on Lexington's behavior: the town still chooses to spend the same \$575,000 on education that it spent with the unconditional block grant (at point *Z*). Because Lexington was already spending more than \$375,000 on education, this grant is effectively *not conditional* for the town—it has the same effect as if the commonwealth had simply given it \$375,000 to spend on anything. Thus, the town has undone the mandate to spend the money on education by reallocating existing

spending to meet the mandate. This is an example of the type of *crowd-out* that we discussed in [Chapter 7](#). The government gave the town \$375,000 to spend on education, but the town spent only \$75,000 net of that money on education; it spent the remaining \$300,000 on private goods. Thus, 80% ( $\$300,000/\$375,000$ ) of the commonwealth's spending was crowded out by the town's reaction. Despite a large state grant, local education spending rose by only a small amount.

The effect of a conditional block grant will differ from that of an unconditional block grant *only* if the town receiving the grant would have spent less than the grant amount without the condition being imposed. That is, adding the condition to the block grant would affect Lexington's behavior only if it would have chosen to spend less than \$375,000 on education with the unconditional block grant. In that case, making the block grant conditional would increase Lexington's educational spending by more than just \$75,000. If towns such as Lexington would spend more than \$375,000 on education regardless of this restriction, then there is no effect of imposing the restriction.

## Redistribution in Action: School Finance Equalization

Perhaps the most dramatic examples of attempts of higher levels of government to use grants to influence lower levels of government are [\*\*school finance equalization\*\*](#) laws that mandate redistribution across communities in a state to ensure more equal financing of schools. Local school districts in the United States receive about 44% of their funding from local sources, primarily from local property taxes.<sup>25</sup> This dependence on property taxes can lead to vast disparities in the revenue base from which towns fund education because of the wide variation in property values across towns. As a result of the disparity in property values, levels of education funding can differ substantially across localities within a state. In Texas, for example, the Tom Bean district spends \$10,116 per student, while the Borden district spends \$58,960, or more than five times as much.<sup>26</sup>

### **school finance equalization**

Laws that mandate redistribution of funds across communities in a state to ensure more equal financing of schools.

States can try to offset these inequities by using the types of grants just discussed. By collecting tax revenues from all communities, then redistributing the revenues in block or matching grants to particular communities with low property values or low education spending, the state can attempt to equalize education spending across districts. Since 1970, every state has made at least one attempt at school finance equalization, some prompted by state courts, others by the voting public.

### The Structure of Equalization Schemes

School finance equalization schemes can take very different forms. Some states have systems that attempt to completely or nearly completely equalize spending across school districts. California, for example, provides a base level of education financing for its school districts and prohibits differences between school districts of more than \$350 in per-pupil spending. Once a district is spending \$350 more than the lowest-spending district, all additional property taxes raised by the town are given to the state for distribution to other districts. Thus, under this scheme, a town receives no benefit from raising its own local property taxes because the extra revenue is divided among districts across the state.<sup>27</sup>

Less extreme are states that have instituted a statewide property tax that is redistributed in a way that guarantees a certain "foundation level" of per-pupil funding for each town. For

example, in the state of New Jersey, towns with property values above the 85th percentile of the property values in the state simply receive a small foundational grant from the state and have to raise other educational revenues locally. Towns with property values below the 85th percentile of the property values in the state receive a matching grant that is a multiple of their own educational spending, which thus gives towns an incentive to raise their spending.<sup>28</sup>

## The Effects of Equalization

A number of economics studies have evaluated the effects of school finance equalization. These studies generally agree that equalization laws have had the intended effect of equalizing school spending across communities, and spending equalization appears to have led to an equalization in student outcomes as well. [Murray, Evans, and Schwab \(1998\)](#), for example, concluded that court-ordered equalizations reduced in-state spending inequality by 19 to 34%. [Card and Payne \(2002\)](#) found that equalizations narrowed the gap in average SAT scores between children with highly educated and children with poorly educated parents by 8 points, or roughly 5% of the gap.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *The Flypaper Effect: Here, Gone, and Back Again?*

Block grants are simply income increases to communities if the grants are unconditional or if the grants are conditional but are below the town's desired level of spending on that public good. As a result, a community should react to a block grant in the same way Lexington did in the example, by substantially reducing its own contribution to the public good (a type of crowding out, as discussed in [Chapter 7](#)) so that spending on the public good goes up by only a fraction of the total grant amount.

This theory has been put to the test in the context of federal grants to states. Researchers have compared the spending of states that receive larger and smaller grants from the federal government to assess whether these federal grants largely crowd out the states' spending. In fact, this does not appear to be the case. [Hines and Thaler \(1995\)](#) reviewed the evidence on this issue and found that the crowd-out of state spending by federal spending is low and often close to zero (so that total spending rises by \$1 for each \$1 in federal grants). Referring to [Figure 10-5](#), towns such as Lexington appear unlikely to end up at point Z, as the theory implies, and instead seem to spend roughly the same amount on private goods (\$500,000 in that example) and to devote the entire block grant to education. Economist Arthur Okun described this as the flypaper effect because "the money sticks where it hits" instead of replacing state spending.

These studies suffer from potential bias, however. As [Knight \(2002\)](#) noted, states that value public goods the most may be the most successful at lobbying for federal grants. If this is true, then there would be a positive correlation between grants and spending—not because of a flypaper effect, but simply because states that get grants are the ones that like spending the most. Thus, states that don't get grants might not be a good control group for states that do because they might differ in their taste for public spending.

Knight proposed a quasi-experimental approach to solving this problem by noting that highway grants from the federal government to states are determined by the strength of the state's political representatives. Congresspersons and senators have more power to determine the nature of highway spending if they (1) are on the transportation committees of the House and Senate, (2) are in the majority party, and (3) have long tenures in Congress. In the type of vote-maximizing model discussed in [Chapter 9](#), congresspersons will use this power to bring grants to their states.

Knight compared the level of spending in treatment states that see increases in the power of their congressional delegations (e.g., because a senator from that state gets appointed to the Senate transportation committee or because the control of Congress changes to the party of the state's senator) with the level of spending in control states that see decreases in the power of their congressional delegations (e.g., because a congressperson with long tenure is not reelected). Knight found, as expected, that federal grants rose for states that saw increases in the power of their congressional delegations. He also found, as the standard model (but not the flypaper effect) would predict, that this grant money largely crowded out the state's own spending: each additional \$1 of federal grant money increase due to rising congressional power led to a \$0.90 reduction in the state's own spending (so that total combined state and federal spending rose by only \$0.10 per dollar of federal grant).

Knight's study therefore throws some doubt on the previous literature on the flypaper effect. Additional studies by [Gordon \(2004\)](#) and [Lutz \(2010\)](#) also found evidence inconsistent with the flypaper effect, suggesting that the traditional conclusion of substantial crowd-out from block grants is supported by the evidence.

But the flypaper effect may not be gone, according to a recent study by [Leduc and Wilson \(2017\)](#). They examined large open-ended block grants to states for highway infrastructure under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). They noted that the distribution of these grants was based on long-standing historical differences across states (such as the number of miles of highway in a state), which are uncorrelated with current economic trends. Therefore, they could compare states getting smaller and larger ARRA grants that are otherwise similar. They found that each dollar of

ARRA grant led to about 80 cents more spending on highways in the year after the grant, and a cumulative multiyear impact of more than \$2—a very strong flypaper effect for an open-ended grant to states. Thus, the bottom line on the flypaper effect is yet to be determined, and it may depend on the exact nature of the spending program and the economic conditions under which that program is carried out.

There is less agreement about whether this equalization has come about by raising spending among low-spending districts, lowering spending among high-spending districts, or both. A careful study of this question was provided by [Hoxby \(2001\)](#), who computed the [tax price](#) of school equalization schemes, the amount of revenue a local district would have to raise in order to gain \$1 more of spending. California districts face an infinite tax price: no matter how much revenue they raise through local taxation, they can't raise their local education spending to more than \$350 per pupil above the lowest district. New Jersey's districts mostly have tax prices of less than 1: a district might raise \$0.60 of its own revenue in order to receive \$0.40 in state aid for a total of \$1 in increased spending. This district would thus have a tax price of 0.6.

[tax price](#)

For school equalization schemes, the amount of revenue a local district would have to raise in order to gain \$1 more of spending.

Hoxby found that extreme equalization schemes with very high tax prices, such as California's, led to an overall reduction in per-pupil spending. Because any taxes that towns raise beyond the minimum level (plus \$350) are simply taken by the state and redistributed to other districts, there is an incentive to cut taxes and reduce spending. California's equalization caused a drop in per-pupil spending of 15%; New Mexico's spending dropped by 13%; and Oklahoma's, Utah's, and Arizona's spending each dropped by 10%. States like California equalized per-pupil spending but only by "leveling down"—that is, lowering the overall education spending across all districts. The result has been a general deterioration in the quality of public schools and a flight to private schools by students who can afford it. Equalization schemes with low tax prices, such as those in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, actually raised per-pupil spending by 7 to 8%; these states therefore managed to "level up." Thus, school finance equalization can achieve its intended effects of improving the educational spending of low-wealth districts only if the system is designed in a way that gives those districts incentive to raise their spending without excessively penalizing higher-wealth districts.<sup>29</sup>

[Jackson et al. \(2014\)](#) confirmed Hoxby's findings about the differential impacts of school finance reforms and then examined the implications later in life for children subject to these reforms. They found that there were little effects on non-poor families, but large effects on the poorest: a 20% rise in spending led to almost a full year more of schooling and 20% higher earnings, enough to eliminate most of the gap between children raised in poor and non-poor families.



#### APPLICATION

## School Finance Equalization and Property Tax Limitations in California

[William Fischel \(1989\)](#) asked a very interesting question about the property tax limitations under Proposition 13 in California: If residents perceived that property taxes were "too high" in California, why did they wait until 1978 to lower them? Indeed, earlier referenda in 1968 and 1972 proposing property tax limitations had failed. What had changed by 1978?

Fischel's answer is that Proposition 13 was actually a response to the court case (*Serrano v. Priest*) that led to school finance equalization in California in 1976. The key feature of this decision was that it broke the link between local property taxes and spending on schools by imposing the infinite tax price discussed earlier. As a result, Fischel notes, this ruling also *broke the Tiebout mechanism*. Under the Tiebout model, property taxes are essentially prices paid for local services. In this model, individuals shop across communities (much as they shop across goods) to find the package of prices and spending that best matches their tastes. They know that if they choose a community with high taxes, they will be getting a high level of spending as well. Thus, there is a full tax-benefit linkage: their higher taxes buy them better public services (primarily schooling).

The California equalization decision severed the link between taxes paid and benefits received. Taxes were no longer a price: they were just taxes. As a result, it was natural for communities to vote to lower taxes because they no longer perceived any benefit from them. Fischel claimed that wealthy voters would have opposed Proposition 13 in the absence of the school finance equalization because their high taxes were paying for schooling that they desired for their town without subsidizing anyone else's schooling. School finance equalization changed this so that wealthy property-tax payers saw that their taxes were paying for benefits accruing to other, poorer citizens in other towns. Thus, those wealthy taxpayers were happy to approve Proposition 13. ■

## 10.4 Conclusion

In every country, the central government collects only part of the total national tax revenues and does only part of the national public spending. The remainder of taxation and spending is done by subnational governments, such as state and local governments in the United States. Relative to other developed countries, the United States places a large share of governmental responsibilities on its subnational governments. This chapter presented a theory to explain why spending might be divided between national and subnational governments. When spending is on goods for which local preferences are relatively similar, and where most residents can benefit from those goods, the Tiebout model suggests that the spending should be done locally. When spending is for goods that benefit only a minority of the population, such as income redistribution, the Tiebout model suggests that it might be difficult to do this spending locally because the majority of people who do not benefit will “vote with their feet” and move elsewhere. These outcomes are consistent with the division of responsibility for spending on education and public safety (local) and redistribution (national). In addition, if spending has external effects on other communities, local provision may be inefficient as well, which is consistent with the financing of education in the United States shared between local and state governments, although it raises the question of whether the federal government should play a larger role.

Higher levels of government may not believe the conclusions of the idealized Tiebout model, in which case they will want to redistribute across lower levels of government. If the higher-level government decides that it wants to redistribute across lower levels, it can do so through several different types of grants. The appropriate choice depends on the goal (redistributing to offset Tiebout failures or redistributing to offset externalities).

## HIGHLIGHTS

- A large share of public spending and revenue raising is done at the subnational level in the United States, relative to other industrialized countries.
- The Tiebout model suggests that the provision of local public goods can be efficient if individuals “vote with their feet” by moving to towns with others who share their tastes for public goods.
- While the strict version of the Tiebout model is unlikely to hold, there is strong evidence that local spending and taxation respond to local preferences as reflected in mobility (voting with one’s feet) and that the value of local public goods and local tax differences are capitalized into house prices.
- The Tiebout model suggests that spending with strong tax-benefit linkages (such as public safety) should occur at the local level and that spending with weaker tax-benefit linkages (such as redistribution under cash welfare) should occur at higher levels of government.
- When higher levels of government want to redistribute to lower levels of government, they use grants. Matching grants (under which the grant amount matches the amount to be spent by the lower level of government) are the best way to encourage a certain behavior by subnational governments, but unconditional block grants (under which the grant is a fixed dollar amount) maximize the welfare gains to communities from redistribution.
- A classic example of redistribution across governments is school finance equalization efforts, which have reduced inequality in local school spending but at the cost in some cases of a reduction in overall educational spending.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. The (identical) citizens of Boomtown have \$2 million to spend either on park maintenance or private goods. Each unit of park maintenance costs \$10,000.
  1. Graph Boomtown's budget constraint.
  2. Suppose that Boomtown chooses to purchase 100 units of park maintenance. Draw the town's indifference curve for this choice.
  3. Now suppose that the state government decides to subsidize Boomtown's purchase of park maintenance by providing the town with 1 unit of maintenance for every 2 units the town purchases. Draw the new budget constraint. Will Boomtown purchase more or fewer units of park maintenance? Will Boomtown purchase more or fewer units of the private good? Illustrate your answer, and explain.
2. Why does the Tiebout model solve the problems with preference revelation that are present with Lindahl pricing?
3. Some have argued that diversity in communities and schools leads to positive externalities. What implications does this view have for the efficiency of a Tiebout equilibrium? What implications does it have for government policy?
4. [Brunner, Sonstelie, and Thayer \(2001\)](#) studied how home ownership and community income influenced votes on a proposed initiative in California to allow children to obtain their locally funded education at any public or private school rather than being districted to their local school. Think about how public services such as education are capitalized into house prices. Why would renters in high-income communities be more likely than owners to support this school-choice plan? Why would the reverse be true in low-income communities?
5. Think about two public goods—public schools and food assistance for needy families. Consider the implications of the Tiebout model. Which of the goods is more efficiently provided locally? Which is more efficiently provided centrally? Explain.
6. Describe, using the externalities argument, how investment in one community can distribute money to another. Provide an example of this kind of redistribution based on externalities.
7. The state of Minnegan is considering two alternative methods of funding local road construction, matching grants and block grants. In the case of the matching grant, Minnegan will spend \$1 for every \$1 spent by localities.
  1. What is the price of an additional dollar of local spending in each case?
  2. Which of the two methods do you think would lead to higher levels of local spending on roads? Explain your answer.
8. The commonwealth of Massachusetts recently ran an advertising campaign for the lottery that claimed, "Even when you lose, you win." The gist of the advertisement was that lottery revenue was used for particularly good ends like education. Suppose that lottery revenues are indeed earmarked for education. How would traditional economic theory evaluate the claim behind the ad campaign? How would an economist who believed in the flypaper effect evaluate it?
9. Why does California's school finance equalization policy have a high associated marginal tax price? Explain.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

10. Suppose that appetite for education is uncorrelated across generations: children with a thirst for learning can be born into families that don't share that bent, just as readily as a child born into a highly educated family may have no interest in school. Consider the public good of education from the perspective of students who will use their local education system as a way to invest in their future human capital. What potential implications will a mismatch in parent and student appetite for education have for the efficiency of a Tiebout equilibrium in the funding of schools through local property taxes?
11.  [Rhode and Strumpf \(2003\)](#) evaluated a century of historical evidence to investigate the impact of changes in moving costs within the Tiebout model.
1. What does the Tiebout model predict should happen to the similarity of residents within a community as the costs of moving fall?
  2. Rhode and Strumpf found that while mobility costs have steadily fallen, the differences in public good provision across communities have fallen as well. Does Tiebout sorting explain this homogenization of public good provision, or must other factors have played a larger role? Explain.
12. The state of Delaland has two types of towns. Type A towns are well-to-do, and type B towns are much poorer. Being wealthier, type A towns have more resources to spend on education; their demand curve for education is  $Q = 100 - 2P$ , where  $P$  is the price of a unit of education. Type B towns have a demand curve for education which are given by  $Q = 100 - 4P$ .
1. The cost of a unit of education is \$20 per unit. How many units of education will the two types of town demand?
  2. In light of the large discrepancies in educational quality across their two types of town, Delaland decides to redistribute from type A towns to type B towns. In particular, they tax type A towns by \$5 for each unit of education they provide, and they give type B towns \$5 for each unit of education they provide. What are the new tax prices of education in the two towns? How many units of education do the towns now purchase?
  3. Delaland wants to completely equalize the units of education across towns by taxing type A towns for each unit of education they provide and subsidizing type B towns for each unit of education they provide. It wants to do this in such a way that the taxes on type A towns are just enough to finance the subsidies on type B towns. If there are three type A towns for every four type B towns, how big a tax should Delaland levy on type A towns? How big a subsidy should they provide to type B towns?
13.  The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that states and localities provide appropriate education for all students identified as having special needs. States have responded by funding special education using several different mechanisms. Two of these mechanisms are “census” approaches (in which states estimate how many children should have special needs based on student characteristics and allocate money to localities based on these predictions) and “marginal subsidy” approaches (in which states pay localities a percentage of the amount of money that the localities say they spend on special education).
1. Research indicates that the marginal subsidy approach leads to more students being classified by their localities as needing special education than do census approach. Why might this be the case?
  2. Suppose that you analyze cross-sectional data on the level of subsidy and the number of students enrolled in special education. You find that, in cross section, states that reimburse localities the most for their special education students tend to have the highest rates of students enrolled in special education. Think of one possible problem with this analysis.
14. As described in the text, [Fischel \(1989\)](#) argued that California's *Serrano v. Priest* school finance equalization induced voters to limit property taxes in California. Following this argument, would an alternative school finance equalization that produced increased spending for low-wealth communities using state funds be more, less, or equally likely to

induce a property tax limitation in California? Explain.

15. There are two types of residents in the boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx, professors and students. Professors have an income of  $Y = 200$ ; students have an income of  $Y = 100$ . Both Brooklyn and the Bronx provide road repair services for their citizens. Professors value road repair more than students because they have nicer cars. In fact, the value of road repair to each individual takes the form  $((Y \times R)/10) - R^2/2$ . The *per-resident* cost of road repair is  $5R$ .

1. What is the marginal value of road repair for each type of individual? What is the marginal cost to each type of individual?
2. How much do professors want to spend on road repair? How much do students want to spend?
3. Assume that residents are distributed as shown in this table. If each borough uses majority voting to determine how much road repair to provide, how much will each borough provide? Are any residents unsatisfied with the amount of road repair?

	Brooklyn	Bronx
Professors	75	25
Students	25	75
4. Now assume that professors and students are able to migrate between Brooklyn and the Bronx. Which residents will choose to move? What will the equilibrium distribution of residents be? Are any residents unsatisfied with the amount of road repair now? Is the provision of road repair efficient? Why or why not?
5. Consider again the premigration equilibrium. The state of New York decides to pass a law about road repair. It requires that professors in the state must contribute 75 units toward road repair in their borough; students must contribute 25 units toward road repair in their borough. How much road repair will there be in each borough under the new regime? Will any residents want to move and, if so, where and why?
6. Now, suppose that a few of the professors, in spite of their high incomes, have low demand  $(10R - R^2/2)$ , and a few of the students have high demand  $(20R - R^2/2)$ . Given these new demands, where would people move now if each person in a borough pays the same amount toward road repair? If, on the other hand, road repair is funded by a tax that is proportional to income, how much road repair would different groups want, and where would they move?



- The icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# CHAPTER 11 Education



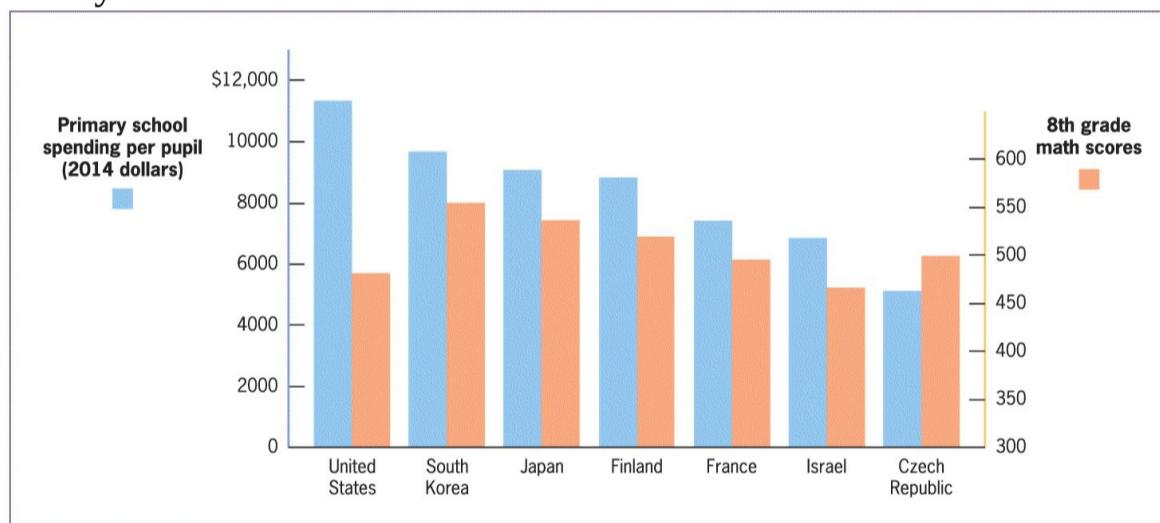
NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [11.1 Why Should the Government Be Involved in Education?](#)
- [11.2 How Is the Government Involved in Education?](#)
- [11.3 Evidence on Competition in Education Markets](#)
- [11.4 Measuring the Returns to Education](#)
- [11.5 The Role of the Government in Higher Education](#)
- [11.6 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- Why and how should the government be involved in the provision of education?
- What is the proper role of competition in education markets?
- What is the current role of the government in the provision of higher education, and should that be changed?

In the United States, education is the single largest expenditure item for state and local governments: they spend 28% of their budgets to provide their citizens with this service. In fact, the United States spends more money per pupil on education than nearly every other nation on Earth. Yet U.S. students perform only around the international average on tests of reading, math, and science ability. Even worse, U.S. eighth graders are less proficient in math and science than students in much less wealthy countries, such as Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovenia, which have a *combined* gross domestic product (GDP) that is 1.4% of the U.S. GDP. [Figure 11-1](#) compares the United States with other nations in terms of money spent per pupil and the resulting educational outcomes in mathematics for eighth graders. This comparison reveals that the United States spends much more per student to achieve outcomes that are generally worse than those in these other nations.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

### FIGURE 11-1

Education Spending and Outcomes Around the World • The United States spends more money per pupil than nearly every country on Earth, but its educational outcomes are only average.

Spending data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018b\)](#). Math scores data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2015\)](#).

While there is widespread agreement on the problematic state of education in the United States today, there is much less agreement about the causes of or solutions to its shortcomings. In 2009, President Obama appointed as his new secretary of education Arne Duncan, who, as chief executive officer (CEO) of the Chicago public school system, had earned a strong reputation as an educational reformer, including controversial closings of underperforming schools.<sup>1</sup> Duncan developed a plan to substantially broaden the federal role in local primary and secondary education through tougher requirements on students and teachers, intensified efforts to assist failing schools, and a growing focus on alternatives to the traditional public school model such as *charter schools*, which provide free public education but are not bound by many of the regulatory restrictions (and union obligations) of traditional public schools.



*"Big deal, an A in math. That would be a D  
in any other country."*

Mike Twohy/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

The first step in this action plan was taken as part of the stimulus bill passed in early 2009. This legislation sent almost \$54 billion to states over a two-year period to prevent layoffs, create jobs, and modernize school buildings and sent another \$25 billion to promote the education of disadvantaged students. To receive this aid, however, states had to meet a number of new requirements, including ensuring that the state's most talented teachers were assigned equitably to both rich and poor students; building sophisticated data systems that linked teachers to students and test scores, thus allowing authorities to measure teacher effectiveness; taking vigorous action to assist failing schools; and embracing charter schools as an educational alternative.

In addition, the bill set aside a \$4.4 billion Race to the Top fund that Duncan could use to reward states for educational innovations such as collaboration across schools or between schools and nonprofit organizations. States could also use this reward money for teacher pay-for-performance programs. In the first round of this program, 40 states applied and 2 (Delaware and Tennessee) won; in the second round, 47 states applied and 10 won. Over the course of phases one and two, 35 states and Washington, D.C., adopted new reading and math standards, and 34 states have "changed laws or policies to improve education."<sup>2</sup>

To supporters, these changes and Duncan's larger plan represent a needed first step toward fundamental educational reform. Representative George Miller, Democrat from California, then chair of the House Education Committee, said, "This is a very serious amount of money . . . both the President and the Secretary do not want to lose a year or two in the efforts to

achieve reforms that are necessary to create a modern, effective school system throughout this country.”<sup>3</sup> To critics, these aspects of the stimulus bill represented overreaching by the federal government into an area traditionally regulated by state and local governments. Particularly criticized were the aspects of the bill that favored charter schools. One such sticking point was the rule that states that did not embrace charter schools (often derided by the traditional public schools with which they compete) would not be eligible for any Race to the Top funds. Gerald Bracey, an associate at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, said, “[Duncan is] blackmailing states, saying you either have to have charters . . . or your stimulus money will be at risk. There’s no evidence out there [about the benefit of charter schools] to justify it.”<sup>4</sup>

Another controversy over education reform pertains to the 2008 introduction of the Common Core of educational standards, the federal government’s plan to improve the achievement levels of students across the country. The Common Core is a set of national academic standards that outline what children in grades K–12 ought to know about math and English language arts at the end of each grade.

When the Common Core was initially presented to states, it was fairly uncontroversial. During a 2009 Chicago meeting with governors and school chief officers, many agreed that it was the right thing to do.

The implementation of the Common Core was rough, however, partly because these national standards (which emphasize depth of knowledge and critical thinking) were more rigorous than standards that were already in place in a number of states. A number of states reacted negatively to their apparent worsening of scores with this new standard. In New York, for example, fewer than one-third of students were found to be up to Common Core English Language Arts standards in the 2012–2013 school year—down from 55% on non-Core standardized tests the previous year.<sup>5</sup> While 46 states adopted the Common Core under the Obama administration, states have been moving in the other direction in recent years. Eight states have repealed the Common Core, and 21 have made minor revisions to the standards.<sup>6</sup>

Opposition to the Common Core has been a centerpiece of President Trump’s administration and a focus of his Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, who in January 2018 said, “I agree—and have always agreed—with President Trump on this: ‘Common Core is a disaster.’ And at the U.S. Department of Education, Common Core is dead.”<sup>7</sup>

So was the approach pursued by Duncan and Obama the right one? Should we move to a more competitive and accountable education system? Or could educational improvement be achieved simply by investing more money in our existing system?

In this chapter, we review the public finance issues involved in providing education. We begin with the first question of public finance: Why should the government be involved in education at all? We discuss a number of rationales for public involvement and their implications for the second question of public finance: How should the government be involved? We address this question in two steps. First, we consider the structure of government involvement, showing that public provision of a fixed level of education can crowd out private education. This result implies that efficiency may be increased with vouchers that can be used at either public or private schools. We extensively review the debate over school choice and school vouchers, discuss the theoretical arguments for and against vouchers, and look at the limited empirical evidence available on this debate.

The second step of our analysis is to ask, for a given structure, how much should the government spend on education? A central determinant in answering the question is the return provided by this investment. We review the existing evidence on the returns to education and what they imply for government involvement. Finally, we turn to a discussion of higher education, a market that appears to work much better in the United States than elsewhere in the world but that still raises many difficult policy issues.

# 11.1 Why Should the Government Be Involved in Education?

In the United States, 90% of elementary and secondary students are in public educational institutions instead of privately financed institutions. Should the public sector be so dominant in the provision of education? What failure in the private education market justifies government's dominant role? Education is not a pure public good because it does not meet the conditions of non-rivalry (that my consumption of the good does not reduce your enjoyment of the good) and non-excludability (I cannot deny you the opportunity to consume or access the good). Education is clearly a rival good: having more children in a classroom may lower the quality of classroom instruction. Education is clearly also to some extent excludable: private schools can decide which students to accept.

At the same time, there are a number of public benefits (positive externalities) to education that might justify a government role in its provision.

## Productivity

The first potential externality from education is productivity. If a higher level of education makes a person a more productive worker, then society can benefit from education in terms of the higher standard of living that comes with increased productivity. As discussed in [Chapter 6](#), however, this higher standard of living is not an externality if the worker is the only one who reaps the benefits from his or her higher productivity. For example, if more education raises Sofia's marginal product of labor, but the increase is fully reflected in her receiving a higher wage from her employer, then there is no positive externality to society from Sofia's education.

Social benefits from higher productivity occur through one of two channels. The first is "spillovers" to other workers: Sofia's increased productivity could raise the productivity of her coworkers, thus raising their wages and well-being. Because Sofia herself is unlikely to be fully compensated for the rise in her coworkers' wages, this is a positive externality to her coworkers from her education. The second is through taxes: if Sofia's higher productivity is reflected in higher pay, then the government collects more tax revenues as a result.

## Citizenship

Public education may improve the quality of life in the United States in indirect ways as well. Education may make citizens more informed and active voters, which will have positive benefits for other citizens through improving the quality of the democratic process. Education may also reduce the likelihood that people turn to a life of crime, an outcome that has positive benefits for other citizens by improving their safety and reducing the public costs of policing. More generally, education may play a role in enabling immigrants, who are some of the most productive members of U.S. society, to establish themselves in the United States. These arguments are fairly compelling for public intervention in basic education such as elementary school, but they provide less rationale for public financing of secondary and especially higher education.

## Credit Market Failures

Another market failure that may justify government intervention is the inability of families to borrow to finance education. In a world without government involvement, families would have to provide the money to buy their children's education from private schools. Suppose, in

this private-education-only world, there is a poor family with a talented child, and this child could earn a comfortable living as an adult if properly educated. It would be socially optimal for this child to be educated, yet the family cannot afford the costs of education.

In principle, the family could borrow against the child's future labor earnings to finance the education. Yet, in practice, banks and other lenders are unlikely to make such loans because there is no source of collateral (assets owned by a person that the bank can claim if the person doesn't pay back the loan). If the family takes a loan to finance a home purchase (a mortgage), the collateral is their house; if they don't repay the loan, the bank can claim their house to offset its losses. Because the bank cannot claim the family's child if they don't repay the loan, banks may be unwilling to lend for education; after all, despite the family's claims, the bank can't really tell if their child is a good investment or not. This situation is an **educational credit market failure**: the credit market has failed to make a loan that would raise total social surplus by financing productive education.

#### **educational credit market failure**

The failure of the credit market to make loans that would raise total social surplus by financing productive education.

The government can address this credit market failure by making loans available to families to finance education. Yet the government in the United States and the governments of most industrialized nations do not play this role except in financing higher education (discussed later in the chapter). Instead of providing loans to finance elementary and secondary education, the government directly provides a fixed level of publicly funded education.

## **Failure to Maximize Family Utility**

The reason governments may feel that loans are not a satisfactory solution to credit market failures is that they are concerned that parents would still not choose appropriate levels of education for their children. In a world with well-functioning credit markets (or with government loans available), private education would probably still involve some sacrifice on the part of parents, such as paying the cost of schooling not covered by loans or making interest payments on the loans. Even if total family utility would rise with a more highly educated child, some parents may not be willing to reduce their consumption to finance their children's education because they care more about their own consumption than their children's future income. (As noted in [Chapter 6](#), evidence suggests that parents are not maximizing the utility of their entire family.) Children can be harmed by the unwillingness of their parents to finance their education, and making loans available to parents cannot solve that problem. In this case, public provision of education is a better alternative. Otherwise, smart children would be penalized for having selfish parents.

## **Redistribution**

A final justification for government involvement is redistribution. In a privately financed education model, as long as education is a normal good (demand for which rises with income), higher-income families would provide more education for their children than would lower-income families. Because more education translates to higher incomes later in life (as we show later in this chapter), this situation would limit income mobility because children of high-income parents would have the best opportunities. *Income mobility*, whereby low-income people have a chance to raise their incomes, has long been a stated goal for most democratic societies, and public education provides a level playing field that promotes income mobility.

In summary, then, there are various reasons for government involvement in education:

potential productivity spillovers, more informed and less criminally inclined citizens, failures in credit markets, failures of family utility maximization, and redistribution. We next turn to the question of how governments are involved in education and what effects their involvement has on educational attainment.

## 11.2 How Is the Government Involved in Education?

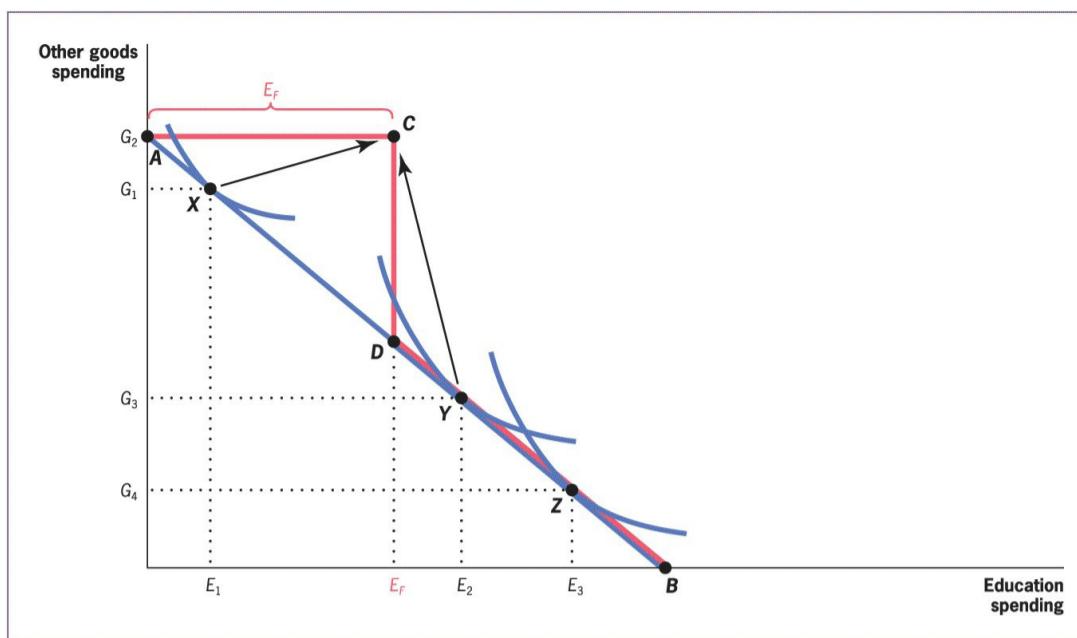
In [Chapter 5](#), we discussed two alternative means for governments to deal with positive externalities: the price mechanism and the quantity mechanism. In the context of education, the price mechanism approach is to offer discounts on private educational costs to students, and the quantity mechanism approach is to mandate that individuals obtain a certain level of education. In practice, the governments of most developed nations pursue neither of these approaches, and instead they provide a fixed level of education for no cost. In this section, we discuss the effects of providing free public education on the level of *educational attainment* (the amount and quality of education received by individuals) in society.

### Free Public Education and Crowding Out

We can model public education using the same approach we used to model the provision of a public good (fireworks) in [Chapter 7](#): education is a public good that is provided to some extent by the private sector. As such, an important problem with the system of public education provision is that it may *crowd out* private education provision. Indeed, as economist [Sam Peltzman argued in 1973](#), it is possible that providing a fixed amount of public education can actually *lower* educational attainment in society through inducing choice of lower-quality public schools over higher-quality private schools.<sup>8</sup>

In Peltzman's model, individuals are choosing how much to spend on their children's education. He assumes that the more individuals spend, the higher quality education they can buy for their children (later in the chapter, we review the evidence for the strength of this spending-quality link). The public sector provides some fixed level of expenditure and thus of quality. If parents want higher-quality education than that provided by the public sector, then they must send their children to private school.<sup>9</sup> By sending their children to private school, however, parents forgo their entitlement to free public education for their children. As a result, some parents who might desire higher-quality education for their children decide not to use private schools; they reduce their desired education to take advantage of free public education. For this group, free public schools have, therefore, lowered the quality of education they "purchase" for their children.

[Figure 11-2](#) illustrates the choice families face between spending on education and spending on all other goods. Before there is any provision of public education, families face the budget constraint *AB*, with a slope that is dictated by the relative prices of private education and other goods. Any money that is spent on a child's education reduces the family's budget for purchasing other goods.



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■ FIGURE 11-2

**Public Education Spending Crowds Out Private Spending** • When the government introduces free public education in the amount of  $E_F$ , the budget constraint changes from  $AB$  to  $ACDB$ . This leads families such as  $X$  to increase the amount of education they obtain from  $E_1$  to  $E_F$  and families such as  $Z$  to maintain their educational spending of  $E_3$ . Families such as  $Y$ , however, reduce their educational spending from  $E_2$  to  $E_F$ .

The government then provides free public education of a quality that costs  $E_F$ . For now, we ignore the financing of this educational expenditure (because all the policy alternatives we discuss involve financing as well, we discuss financing separately later in the chapter). The provision of free public education means that individuals can spend their full budget on other goods and still get educational spending of  $E_F$  (at point  $C$ ). To spend more than  $E_F$  on education, however, the family would have to entirely forgo the free public education; although the public education is free, it can be used only up to amount  $E_F$ . Thus, the new budget constraint runs from  $A$  to  $C$  (because education is free to a spending-quality level of  $E_F$ ), then drops down to point  $D$ , after which it is the same segment  $DB$  as the original budget constraint. What does the provision of free public education do to educational spending (and thus quality) choices?

In [Figure 11-2](#), we compare three families,  $X$ ,  $Y$ , and  $Z$ , all of whom have children. Before public schooling is introduced, these families choose different-quality (and thus different-cost) private schools. Family  $X$  initially chooses bundle  $X$ , the point at which their indifference curve is tangent to the private-market budget constraint  $AB$ . This bundle consists of relatively little education spending for their children (a low-quality private school) at  $E_1$  and relatively high spending on other goods of  $G_1$ . After the free public system is introduced, family  $X$  moves from point  $X$  to point  $C$ , a bundle that consists of higher levels of education spending ( $E_F$ ) and higher levels of spending on other goods ( $G_2$  at point  $A$ ). The family is on a higher indifference curve (indicating greater utility) at this kink in the budget constraint because its consumption of both education and other goods has increased.

Family  $Z$  initially chooses bundle  $Z$ , very high educational spending (a very high-quality private school at  $E_3$ ) and relatively low spending on other goods ( $G_4$ ). When the public system is introduced, there is no change in family  $Z$ 's spending on either education or other goods; this family wants such a high-quality education for its children that the public school option is irrelevant.

Family Y initially chooses a medium level of spending at point Y, with initial educational spending of  $E_2$  and spending on other goods of  $G_3$ . After free public education is introduced, however, the family moves to point C, a bundle in which their education spending has fallen a bit from  $E_2$  to  $E_F$ , but their consumption of other goods has increased greatly from  $G_3$  to  $G_2$ . Their utility has increased because point C is on a higher indifference curve than point Y is. Thus, the introduction of free public education has reduced family Y's spending on education. By spending somewhat less on education, the family can dramatically increase how much they can spend on other goods, and this is a trade-off they are willing to make. It is true that children in family Y would have gotten more education by staying in their original private school (level  $E_2$ ), but this would have required the family to forgo a lot of consumption of other goods; the family is better off by sacrificing a small amount of education to obtain a lot more consumption of other goods. For group Y, public educational spending has crowded out private spending on education as the family reduced their overall education spending levels in response to this free public option.

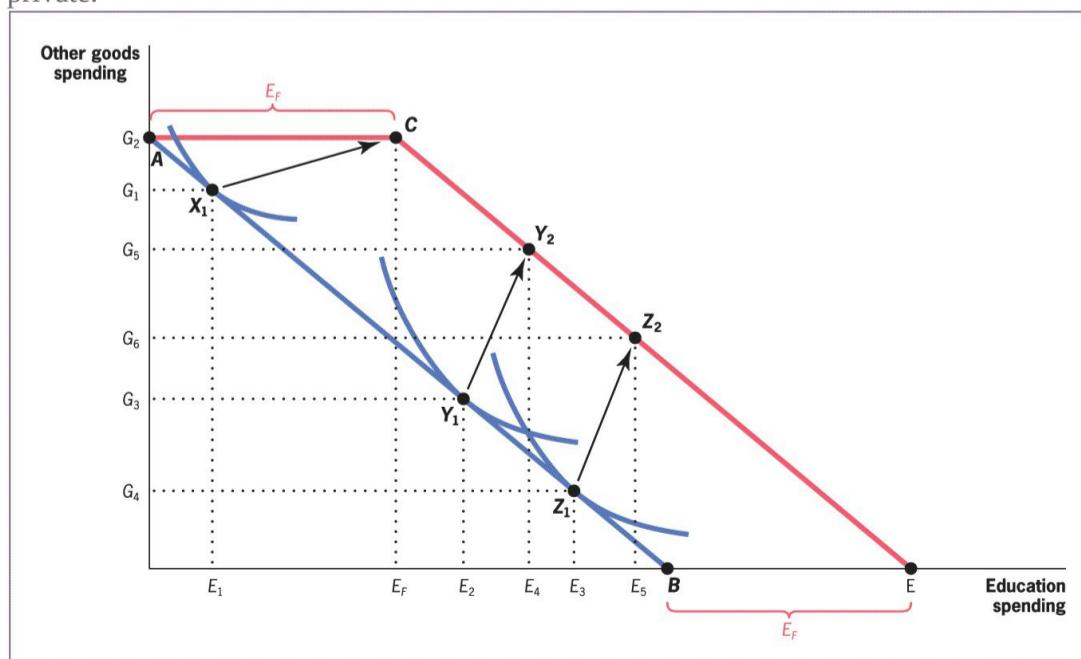
Thus, free public education increases educational quality for children in families such as X, lowers it for children in families such as Y, and has no effect on families such as Z. In principle, if group Y is big enough relative to group X, total educational spending (and thus educational quality) could actually fall when free public education is introduced.

## Solving the Crowd-Out Problem: Vouchers

One solution to the crowd-out problem is the use of **educational vouchers**, whereby parents are given a credit of a certain value (e.g., the average spending on a child of a given age in the public education system) that can be used toward the cost of tuition at any type of school, public or private. [Figure 11-3](#) illustrates how a voucher system could work: families would be given a voucher for an amount  $E_F$ , which they could either give to their local public schools in return for free education for their children or apply toward private school tuition. The availability of this voucher would lead to a new budget constraint ACE: families get an amount  $E_F$  to spend on education without lowering other consumption. The voucher has the same effect as a conditional lump-sum grant to local governments: it raises incomes but forces the families to spend a minimum amount on education.

### educational vouchers

A fixed amount of money given by the government to families with school-age children, who can spend it at any type of school, public or private.



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### ■ FIGURE 11-3

Vouchers Offset Public School Crowd-Out • When the government provides vouchers in the amount of  $E_F$ , the budget constraint changes from  $AB$  to  $ACE$ , leading all families to increase educational spending. Low-spending families like  $X$  will spend the full amount ( $E_F$ ) on public schools, families such as  $Y$  will switch from public education in an amount  $E_2$  to private education in an amount  $E_4$ , and higher-spending families like  $Z$  will also increase their educational spending somewhat (from  $E_3$  to  $E_5$ ) because the voucher increases their effective incomes.

With this system, educational spending (and therefore quality) would increase for all three types of families. Family  $X$  would still move to point  $C$ , at which both education and other consumption have increased. Once again, family  $X$ 's utility has increased, and they will be on a higher indifference curve at this point.

Family  $Y$  would no longer move to point  $C$  and purchase less education ( $E_F$  instead of  $E_2$ ) as they did in [Figure 11-2](#) because now they no longer have to forgo the public subsidy to get higher-quality private education. Now, they can move to a point such as  $Y_2$  in [Figure 11-3](#), using some of their higher income (from the voucher) to purchase more education ( $E_4$  instead of  $E_2$ ) and some to purchase more of other goods ( $G_5$  instead of  $G_3$ ). This is a preferred outcome to point  $C$  because they get both more education and more consumption of other goods.

Instead of continuing to purchase the same amount of education as they did in [Figure 11-2](#), family  $Z$  would now choose a point such as  $Z_2$  and use some of their higher income to purchase more education ( $E_5$  instead of  $E_3$ ) and some to purchase more of other goods ( $G_6$  instead of  $G_4$ ). Under the voucher program, total education has clearly increased.

This type of analysis motivates support for educational vouchers as a policy option in the United States. A number of analysts have proposed voucher systems whereby individuals are given the choice of either attending free public schools or applying their local public school spending to their private school education. Supporters of vouchers make two arguments in their favor, which mirror the two arguments in favor of free choice in most economic markets.

## Consumer Sovereignty

The first argument in favor of vouchers is that they allow individuals to more closely match their educational choices with their tastes. By forcing individuals either to choose free public education or to forgo this large public subsidy and choose private education, today's system does not allow people to maximize their utility by freely choosing the option that makes them best off. This restriction has the unintended consequence of crowd-out that could be solved with vouchers.

## Competition

The second argument in favor of vouchers is that they will allow the education market to benefit from the competitive pressures that make private markets function efficiently. Critics contend that the public education sector is rife with inefficiency. They point to the fact that per-pupil spending has more than doubled since 1970, yet the math and reading scores of twelfth graders have risen by only about 2% over that same time period. Furthermore, the number of administrative staff in public schools has grown by 91% since 1970, while the number of enrolled students has grown by only 9%.<sup>10</sup>

This inefficient bureaucracy has been allowed to grow, critics contend, because there is no competitive pressure to keep it in check. Vouchers would bring that pressure to bear on public

schools by making private schools a more affordable option. If students choose schools based on which delivers the best product, not based on the financial advantage of local public schools, then schools that are inefficient will not be chosen because they deliver less education per dollar of spending. If these schools are not chosen, they will be forced out of the education market, just as competition forces inefficient firms out of the market. Thus, competitive pressures will cause schools to serve the needs of students and parents rather than bureaucrats. Vouchers “level the competitive playing field” between private and public schools by removing the financial advantage currently held by public schools.

One response to this claim is to note that there is already competitive pressure on local schools through the Tiebout mechanism (voting with your feet to choose the right mix of property taxes and public goods provision for you). If local schools are inefficient, families will move to other towns where their property-tax dollars are spent more efficiently to produce better education for their children. Indeed, one study found that areas with more school districts from which parents can choose (e.g., many small suburbs) feature both better educational outcomes and lower school spending than do areas with fewer school districts (just several large suburbs).<sup>11</sup> This finding is consistent with Tiebout pressures on schools to improve their educational productivity.

It is unlikely, however, that the Tiebout mechanism works perfectly in this case. Individuals choosing towns are choosing a bundle of attributes, not just educational quality. Vouchers allow for Tiebout unbundling. Individuals can live in a town they like for noneducation reasons while sending their children to any public or private school they like.

## Problems with Educational Vouchers

The consumer sovereignty and competition arguments provide strong support for the use of educational vouchers. However, a number of compelling arguments can be made against using education vouchers as a means to improve the quality of education in the United States.

### Vouchers May Lead to Excessive School Specialization

Many of the arguments in favor of public financing of education relate to the externalities that come from having a common educational program, particularly at the elementary school level. The first argument made here for vouchers, that schools will tailor themselves to meet individual tastes, threatens to undercut the benefits of a common program. In principle, a free educational market could produce “football schools,” with little educational provision but excellent football programs, or “art schools,” with little education other than in the arts. By trying to attract particular market segments, schools could give less attention to what are viewed as the central elements of education (such as basic reading, writing, and math skills).<sup>12</sup>

In principle, this problem could be dealt with through regulations that require all schools to provide a certain set of common skills. These regulations could also be supported by testing regimes to ensure that students at each school are maintaining an acceptable level of achievement in basic skills.



*"I'm taking my voucher and  
going to circus school."*

Charles Barsotti/The New Yorker © Conde Nast.

In practice, however, such regulation could become so onerous and costly to enforce that it would defeat the purpose of school choice. Moreover, as we discuss later, such efforts to hold schools accountable for student performance often have unintended side effects. Ultimately, what determines the optimal level of uniformity across schools is the value to society of educational conformity at each level of schooling. If this value is low, which may be true at the high school level, there will be large gains from free choice. If this value is high, which may be more common at the elementary school level, public provision may be more efficient than private competition with regulation.

## Vouchers May Increase School Segregation

A major achievement over the past 60 years in the United States, in the eyes of many, is the reduction in segregation in education. A public education system that once provided black students and other minority students with separate and unequal educational quality has become more integrated, so in principle, all citizens have the right to high-quality public education. Critics of voucher systems argue that vouchers have the potential to reintroduce segregation along many dimensions, such as race, income, or child ability. These critics envision a world where children of motivated parents move to higher-quality private schools, while children of disinterested or uninformed parents end up in low-quality public schools. If the children of interested and motivated parents differ along the lines of race or income from those of uninterested and unmotivated parents, segregation could worsen.

Supporters of vouchers note that, in fact, vouchers may serve to reduce the natural segregation that already exists in our educational system. Currently, students are trapped by the monopoly that their local school system has over education production. Vouchers allow motivated students and their parents to choose a better education and end the segregation imposed on them by location. In a famous example, Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman pointed out that it is unfair that inner-city children who want to use their money to

buy a new car can do so, but if they want to use that same money to buy better education, they cannot do so without giving up their public education subsidy.

Both sides of this argument make valid points. It is true that, despite progress, segregation remains a significant problem in the U.S. educational system. Although white students are only just over half of the student population, the typical white student attends a school that is 75% white. Forty percent of black students and 41% of Latino students attend intensely segregated schools, where 90 to 100% of students are from minorities.<sup>13</sup> California is among the states with the most segregated schools, 48% of black students and 56% of Hispanic students attending schools that are 90–100% minority.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, supporters of vouchers are undoubtedly correct in pointing out that some individuals would benefit from using vouchers to locate alternative education options.

At the same time, vouchers might increase segregation by student skill level or motivation. As the motivated and high-skilled students flee poor-quality public schools for higher-quality private schools, the students left behind will be in groups that are of lower motivation and skill. That is, school choice is likely to reduce segregation along some dimensions (e.g., by allowing students with greater ability and motivation at high-poverty schools to mix more with students at higher-quality schools) but increase it along others (e.g., by separating the education system into higher- and lower-ability/motivation schools).

## Vouchers May Be an Inefficient and Inequitable Use of Public Resources

One issue that was set aside in the theoretical discussion about the effects of vouchers was the financing of education and of vouchers. Education is financed mostly by local property taxes and state taxes. If the current financing were replaced by vouchers, total public-sector costs would rise because the government would pay a portion of the private school costs that students and their families are currently paying themselves.

For children from families such as  $X$  in [Figures 11-2](#) and [11-3](#), costs would not increase. The children would stay in public school, so costs to the public sector for educating the children in family  $X$  would remain at  $E_F$ . Children from families such as  $Y$  would move to private schools, thus spending more on education, but the cost to the public sector would still only be  $E_F$  because this is the amount of the voucher that is provided; the families are paying the extra costs of the private school. For children such as those from family  $Z$ , however, public-sector costs would increase. Previously, family  $Z$  was paying the entire cost of their children's private education, but now because family  $Z$  receives a voucher, the local government is picking up a portion,  $E_F$ , of this cost. This increased government spending is associated with only a very small rise in their educational attainment, the rise from  $E_3$  to  $E_5$ , which occurs because the families are richer by the amount of the government transfer ( $E_F$ ).

Thus, one cost of substantially increasing the level of education chosen by families such as  $Y$  is the cost incurred by providing large new subsidies to families such as  $Z$  who don't much change their educational attainment. That is, crowd-out of private educational spending has been reduced for  $Y$ , but it has been introduced for  $Z$ . If vouchers are most used by families (like family  $Z$ ) who were already paying for private school for their children on their own, then this is a fairly inefficient use of public resources. On the other hand, if the vouchers are most used by families (like family  $Y$ ) who are switching from public education to much higher private levels of education (from  $E_F$  in [Figure 11-2](#) to  $E_4$  in [Figure 11-3](#)), this may be

an efficient use of public resources. The goal of government policy here is to direct resources to the currently undereducated (such as the children in family Y); if most of the gain from the use of vouchers goes to families such as Z, the goal is not being met.

Equity considerations further strengthen this point. Income and use of private schools are strongly positively correlated; families like Z are much more likely to be high income than families such as Y. Granting much of the voucher expenditure to higher-income families who are already sending their children to private schools is an inefficient and inequitable use of public funds.

Ideally, the government could solve this problem by identifying whether families are in group Y or Z and directing more resources to those in group Y (whose use of more education we want to encourage). Unfortunately, the government cannot perfectly identify which group families are in, so it cannot carry out this type of targeting exactly. One way to approximate this targeting would be to target the voucher's value to the family's income. Having vouchers for which the value falls as the family's income rises would accomplish three goals. First, such a program would target resources to groups who are most likely to use them to increase educational attainment. Second, it would reduce the inequity of a system that mostly benefits higher-income private school attendees. Finally, to the extent that lower-income children are "left behind" in public schools by their higher-ability and more motivated peers, it would provide resources for the remaining public schools to succeed (because income-targeted vouchers would provide higher levels of funding to low-income schools through their larger voucher amounts).

## The Education Market May Not Be Competitive

The arguments of voucher supporters are based on a perfectly competitive model of the education market. Yet the education market is described more closely by a model of *natural monopoly*, in which there are efficiency gains to having only one monopoly provider of the good. Economies of scale in the provision of education mean that it may not be efficient to have many small schools competing with one another for students; it may be much more (naturally) efficient to have one monopoly provider instead.

The fact that education markets may be natural monopolies can lead to failures in the educational market. If a large inner-city school closes due to lack of demand, for example, what happens to its core of unmotivated students who have not taken advantage of choice to enroll elsewhere? There may not be a small school in the city that can meet their needs, and the closing of their school would potentially leave them without educational options. Similarly, how could a rural area without much population density support enough schooling options to effectively introduce competition?

Given these problems, it is unlikely that the government would actually allow certain schools to go out of business and leave local students without educational options. Yet if schools know that they are "too important to fail," the competitive pressure on the schools would be mitigated: Why should a school work hard to improve its efficiency if it knows it will retain its funding regardless of performance? Thus, there is a tension between government efforts to ensure educational opportunities for all and the ability of the educational market to put pressure on underperforming schools.

## The Costs of Special Education

In the type of voucher system described here, each child would be worth a voucher amount that represents the average cost of educating a child in that town in that grade, but all children do not cost the same to educate. Children with diagnosed disabilities, for example, have much

higher costs associated with their need for **special education**, and programs for educating disabled children require extra resources (such as trained teachers, smaller classes, or special equipment). In the United States, 6.43 million students aged 3–21 are provided with special education services, and the average student with a disability costs about \$12,700 a year to educate, more than twice the cost of educating a student without a disability. The United States spends about \$50 billion a year on special education, or 14% of total elementary and secondary education spending.<sup>15</sup>

**special education**

Programs to educate disabled children.

The higher cost of special education students raises problems in the context of a voucher system because schools will have an incentive to avoid special education students. These students bring vouchers of the same amount, yet they cost much more to educate. Schools will want to take only the students who can be educated effectively for the voucher amount and will shun the highest-cost special education students. This student selection by schools will reduce the options available to special education students. In principle, the government could use antidiscrimination regulations to deal with this problem, but, in practice, schools may have many subtle ways of deterring applications from such students. They might, for example, institute a very low-quality special education program that would deter special education students from applying.

The government could address this problem by making the voucher amount for any child match the cost of educating that child. Children with special education needs who cost more to educate could receive larger voucher amounts to offset the extra costs associated with educating them. Because it is very hard to adjust voucher amounts for the specific educational needs of each child, however, this potential problem with vouchers will remain.

# 11.3 Evidence on Competition in Education Markets

In the previous section, we discussed the theory of how vouchers may or may not improve the efficiency with which education markets function in the United States. There is substantial uncertainty about the ultimate effects of vouchers. In this section, we review the evidence on the effects of competition in education markets in an effort to understand what impact the widespread use of vouchers might have in the United States and other nations.

## Direct Experience with Vouchers

Several small-scale voucher programs have been put in place in the United States in recent years, with mixed evidence on their effectiveness, as reviewed in the Empirical Evidence Box. Studies of larger-scale voucher programs in other nations have suggested more positive effects. These effects might be much larger with widespread adoption of vouchers, which would put competitive pressure on all schools to improve their performance.<sup>16</sup>

## Experience with Public School Choice

Some school districts have not offered vouchers for private schools but have instead allowed students to choose freely among public schools. In some cases, students are allowed to choose any local school, not just the one nearest them. Evidence on these programs comes from the fact that the best schools are oversubscribed when there is choice, so they must use a lottery to allocate slots. This process allows researchers to assess differences in outcomes between comparable lottery winners (who attend better schools) and lottery losers (who are otherwise identical but do not get to attend such schools). Results from these programs are mixed, suggesting that the effects may vary depending on the nature of the local public school geography and quality differences.<sup>17</sup>

Other possible choices for public school include **magnet schools**, special public schools set up to attract talented students or students interested in a particular subject or teaching style, and **charter schools**, small, independent public schools that are not subject to many of the regulations imposed on traditional public schools, including restrictions on teacher qualifications. A larger literature has emerged suggesting that charter schools in particular may be effective at improving student performance in both New York City ([Dobbie and Fryer, 2013](#); [Hoxby and Murarka, 2009](#)) and Massachusetts ([Angrist et al., 2013](#)). This literature suggests that the two key features distinguishing particularly successful schools are rigorous standards and the provision of intensive tutoring ([Chabrier et al., 2016](#)).

### **magnet schools**

Special public schools set up to attract talented students or students interested in a particular subject or teaching style.

### **charter schools**

Small, independent public schools that are not subject to many of the regulations imposed on traditional public schools, including restrictions on teacher qualifications.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Estimating the Effects of Voucher Programs*

A number of studies, both in the United States and abroad, have attempted to estimate the impact of voucher programs on student achievement. The earliest studies focused on a voucher program in Wisconsin. Starting in 1990, the state allowed families with income no more than 175% of the poverty line to apply for a voucher worth about \$3,200 that could be used for tuition at any nonsectarian (not religiously affiliated) private school.

[Rouse \(1998\)](#) studied the effect of this voucher program in the city of Milwaukee on the achievement of students who used their vouchers to finance a move to private schools.<sup>18</sup> She noted that one cannot directly compare students who do and do not use vouchers because they may differ along many dimensions; for example, students who take advantage of a voucher program may be more motivated than those who do not. This selective use of vouchers would bias any comparison between

the groups. An important feature of the Milwaukee program, however, is that participating private schools had to accept all students who applied unless the school was oversubscribed (too many applicants for the available slots). Oversubscribed schools had to select randomly from all applicants, using a lottery.

This administrative solution has the benefit of approximating the type of randomized trial that is the gold standard in empirical research. The randomized lottery allowed Rouse to form a control group (students who applied to oversubscribed schools but were randomly rejected) and a treatment group (students who applied to the same schools and were randomly accepted). These groups should be comparable, except that the treatments go to the private schools rather than remaining in the public schools like the controls. Rouse found that the treatment group saw an increase in academic performance: there was a rise in math test scores of 1 to 2% per year relative to the control group, although there was no difference in reading scores across the two groups. A series of follow on studies of similar small scale voucher programs in New York, Washington, D.C., and Dayton, Ohio, found generally positive but small effects as well.<sup>19</sup>

Another study by [Abdulkadiroglu et al. \(2015\)](#) found very different effects for a new voucher program in the state of Louisiana. The authors used the same randomized acceptance approach that Rouse used in Milwaukee, but they found a sizeable reduction in academic outcomes for winners compared to losers. Particularly notable is the contrast with evidence on successful public school choice mechanisms in New Orleans.<sup>20</sup> In addition, a series of other recent studies have shown negative effects of school choice programs ([Carey, 2017a](#)). These negative recent results may reflect the fact that public school choice and accountability have lowered the achievement gap between private and public schools, or the fact that private schools can decide whether or not to join the voucher program; in Louisiana, the schools that opted into the voucher program had declining enrollment before opting in, consistent with their being the lowest-quality private schools.

In the United States, about 10% of students are enrolled in private schools, a proportion that doubles or triples in the low-income developing world, where public schools may be of particularly low quality. Introducing a voucher program may, therefore, have a great effect in developing countries, where private schools are a closer substitute for public schools, than in developed countries. [Angrist et al. \(2002\)](#) studied a Colombian voucher program called PACES that gave more than 125,000 pupils vouchers that covered somewhat more than half the costs of private secondary school. Many of the vouchers were distributed by lottery, thus allowing Angrist and colleagues to compare the randomly selected lottery winners (the treatment group that received vouchers) and losers (the control group that did not receive vouchers).

The study found that students who won vouchers were 10% more likely than lottery losers to finish eighth grade, primarily because they didn't repeat as many grades before the age of school leaving. The study also found that lottery winners scored significantly higher on standardized achievement tests than did losers. Winners were also less likely to be married or cohabiting and worked 1.2 fewer hours per week, suggesting an increased focus on schooling among lottery winners. The study concluded that the vouchers cost the government \$24 per winner, yet the improved schooling attainment and quality increased the wages earned by this group by between \$36 and \$300 per year, making this an enormously successful program.

Results from other nations support this view. [Neilson \(2013\)](#) studied the effects of a widespread voucher program in Chile, and also found very large positive effects for poor children who had access to this program; he estimated that school vouchers reduced the achievement gap between poor and non-poor students by about one-third. More recently, Chile reformed this program to provide larger vouchers to disadvantaged students, which appears to have lowered the test score gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students by about one-third ([Murnane et al., 2017](#)).<sup>21</sup> In addition, [Muralidharan and Sundararaman \(2015\)](#) studied the lottery-based allocation of students to private schools in India and found modest improvements in test scores at much lower educational cost.

## Experience with Public School Incentives

Although the United States has limited experience with vouchers and school choice, it has a lot of experience with another aspect of educational reform: school accountability. Any move to an increase in school choice in the United States would bring with it an increased use of testing to ensure that schools are held accountable for meeting educational standards. As of 2002, 25 states explicitly linked student promotion or graduation to performance on state or local assessment tests, 18 states rewarded teachers and administrators on the basis of successful student performance on exams, and 20 states penalized teachers and administrators on the basis of subpar student exam performance. This approach to school accountability was codified in federal law through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Making schools accountable for student performance can provide incentives for schools to increase the quality of the education they offer. By some measures, accountability requirements have had this intended effect. Several studies have found that implementing strong accountability programs have led to improvements in test scores. [Deming et al. \(2016\)](#) used a long-run follow-up of Texas students to show that students in schools at risk of facing sanctions for low performance were more likely to have attended and completed college and

to have obtained a four-year degree.

At the same time, accountability programs can have two unintended effects. First, they can lead schools and teachers to “teach to the test”—that is, to narrowly focus their teaching on enabling students to perform well on the test that determines school accountability, not on a broadly improved education. [Jacob \(2005\)](#) and [Dee and Jacob \(2011\)](#) found evidence of students performing better on accountability tests per se than on broader measures of student ability. More generally, [Reback et al. \(2014\)](#) found that schools distort their resources toward specialists and targeted teachers and away from whole-class instruction, leading to less satisfied teachers, but still resulting in higher test scores, even on more general examinations. Indeed, targeting resources toward the students who need the most help on the test may hurt other students. [Deming et al. \(2016\)](#) found that the positive effects of accountability in the long run is concentrated among worst-performing students, and that better-performing students may even see a negative long-run effect.

A second unintended effect of accountability programs is that schools can manipulate the pool of test takers and the conditions under which they take tests to maximize success. For example, [Jacob \(2005\)](#) and [Figlio and Getzler \(2002\)](#) found that the introduction of accountability in Chicago and Florida led schools to reclassify low-skilled students as special education or disabled students (and thus exempt from testing) to raise average school scores. [Figlio and Winicki \(2005\)](#) found that schools even manipulated their cafeteria menus around testing time, increasing calories to improve student energy levels and test scores! Teachers may even cheat to improve test scores; [Jacob and Levitt \(2003\)](#) found that a teacher is more likely to provide the answers to standardized tests to students if the teacher has more at stake (through accountability regimes).

## Bottom Line on Vouchers and School Choice

While the evidence reviewed in this section is mixed, it suggests that an increase in school accountability, in school choice (in particular, through charter schools), and in the use of vouchers may improve student outcomes. Yet voucher systems raise serious concerns about equitable treatment of the students who might get left behind as their higher-ability, higher-motivation friends move on to better schools. Some sort of guarantee of educational access must be provided to ensure that every student has the option of at least one educational alternative, even if this reduces the pressure of competition on schools that will not be allowed to fail.

## 11.4 Measuring the Returns to Education

Whether education is public or private, the government must still make some decision about the share of its budget to devote to education. The decision about how much to invest in education involves the type of cost-benefit analysis we discussed in [Chapter 8](#). Measuring the costs associated with education is fairly straightforward by using the techniques of opportunity cost introduced in [Chapter 8](#). Measuring the benefits, however, is much trickier. There is an enormous economics literature devoted to measuring the [returns to education](#), that is, the benefits that accrue to society when individuals get more schooling or when they get schooling from a higher-quality environment (such as one with better-qualified teachers or smaller class sizes).

### **returns to education**

The benefits that accrue to society when students get more schooling or when they get schooling from a higher-quality environment.

## Effects of Education Levels on Productivity

The topic that has received the most attention from economists studying education is the effect of education on worker productivity. In a competitive labor market, workers' wages equal their marginal product, so wages are typically used as a proxy for productivity. The idea of these studies is to let the market reveal whether education has raised productivity: if individuals are more productive as a result of being more highly educated, then firms should be willing to pay more to employ them.

There is a large literature that shows that more education leads to higher wages in the labor market. A typical estimate, which comes from comparing the earnings of those with more and less education, is that each year of education raises earnings by about 7%. There is little controversy over the question of whether those with more education earn more. There is substantial controversy, however, over the implications of this correlation. Two very different interpretations have been offered for this result.

### Education as Human Capital Accumulation

The typical view of education is that it raises productivity by improving worker skills. Just as firms invest in physical capital, education is the individual's means of investing in [human capital](#). More education raises a worker's stock of skills and allows the individual to earn more in the labor market.

### **human capital**

A person's stock of skills, which may be increased by further education.

### Education as a Screening Device

An alternative view is also consistent with the correlation between higher levels of education and higher levels of earnings. In the [screening](#) model, education acts only to provide a means of separating high-ability people from low-ability people and does not actually improve skills. In this model, more highly educated workers would be more productive and have higher wages, but it would not be because education has improved their human capital. Rather, it would be because only those who turn out to be the most productive workers have the *ability* to pursue higher levels of education, so the very fact of having more education has signaled their high ability (and productivity). The school system in this model is not adding any value in terms of raising productivity; its only value is in screening for the most able and productive workers, who can obtain the most education.

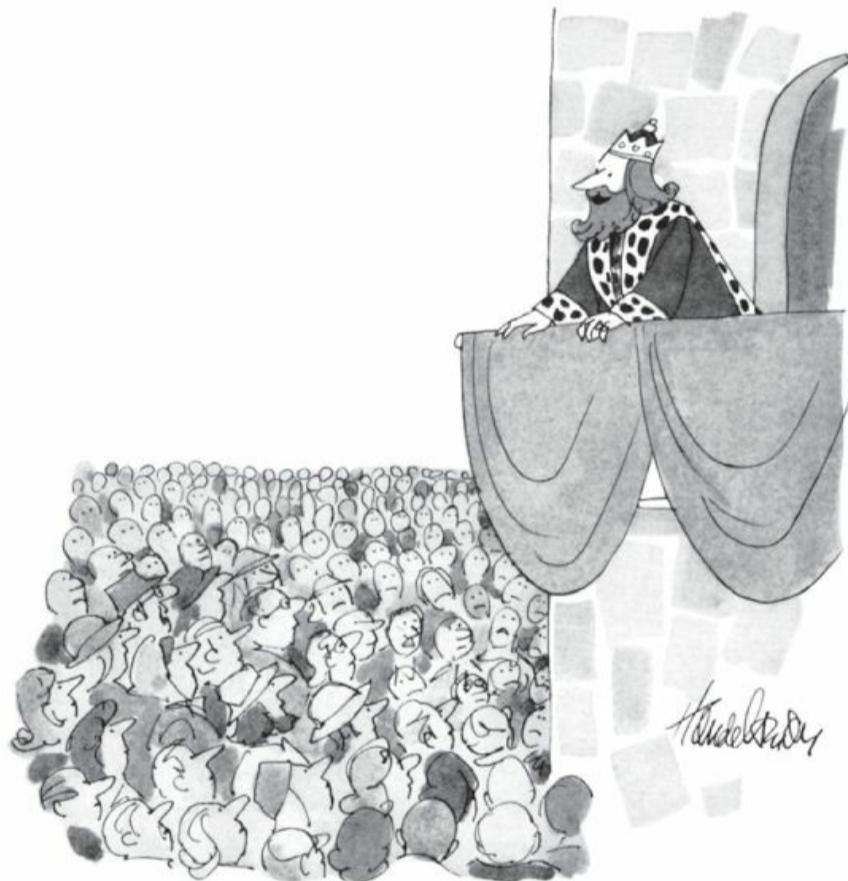
### **screening**

A model that suggests that education provides only a means of separating high-ability individuals from low-ability individuals and does not actually improve skills.

Thus, in the screening model, employers pay more to more highly educated workers *not* because education has raised their productivity, but because education is serving as a signal of underlying motivation by screening out unmotivated workers. In the human capital model, more educated workers earn more because education has raised their marginal product; in the screening model, more educated workers earn more because their education has signaled high ability.

## Policy Implications

The human capital and screening models may have the same prediction for the correlation between wages and education, but they result in very different recommendations for government policy. Under the human capital model, government would want to support education or at least provide loans to individuals so that they can get more education and raise their productivity. Under the screening model, however, the government would *not* want to support more education for any given individual. In this model, the returns to education are purely private, not social. Higher education serves as a signal that a person is more productive, but it does not improve social productivity at all. In fact, by getting more education, a given worker exerts a negative externality on all other educated workers by lowering the value of their education in the labor market. In the accompanying cartoon, the King's declaration would lower the signaling ability of a degree because all of the productive workers who worked hard to actually earn a degree would suffer when unproductive workers were able to raise their education level.



*"It is my wish that this be the most educated country in the world, and toward that end I hereby ordain that each and every one of my people be given a different diploma."*

J.B Handelsman/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

At the same time, education does play a valuable social role as a screening device in the

screening model, allowing the labor market to recognize and reward the most able workers. Thus, the appropriate government policy in this model would be to support the establishment of educational institutions, if they are the best screening device, but not to subsidize an individual to get the education because this has no social return and simply lowers the value of education to others.

## Differentiating the Theories

While these theories have radically different policy prescriptions, in practice, it is hard to tell the theories apart. An enormous literature in labor economics has proposed a wide variety of approaches to differentiating the theories, and the conclusion is very clear: most of the returns to education reflect accumulation of human capital, although there may be some screening value to obtaining a high school or higher education degree. The details of these studies are reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Estimating the Return to Education*

A simple approach to estimating the return to a year of education in terms of higher wages is to compare people with more education (the treatment group) to people with less education (the control group), but this approach suffers from the type of bias problems discussed in [Chapter 3](#): people who obtain more education may be of higher ability than people who obtain less. Thus, the estimated difference in wages between these groups can arise either from human capital accumulation or from the underlying ability differences in the groups.

Two methods try to control for this bias in estimating the true human capital effects of education. The first tries to control directly for underlying ability in a wage regression so that any remaining effect of education represents true productivity effects. Researchers include, for example, standardized test scores of students as youths to try to control for their ability. The problem with this approach is that this crude measure of the differences between individuals does not take into account unobserved factors such as motivation (e.g., Dick can be less intelligent than Jane, but because he studies harder, he is still of higher ability).

The other approach to control for bias in estimating the human capital returns to education has been quasi-experimental studies that try to find treatment and control groups that are identical except for the amount of schooling they receive. One quasi-experimental approach was taken by [Duflo \(2004\)](#), who studied the impact of a large-scale public school construction project in Indonesia. Between 1973 and 1978, more than 61,000 new primary schools were opened in Indonesia, with more schools in some areas than in others. Duflo studied students who were of primary schooling age when schools were built. The treatment group of students lived in areas with more school construction; the control group of students lived in areas with less school construction. Because Duflo was worried that these areas might differ for other reasons, she also contrasted the young people in each area with older people in those same areas who were educated before the school construction project to remove the effects of any differences between regions that persisted over time. She found that education rose in areas where schools were constructed much more than in areas where they were not. Years later, she found that the adult wages of people young enough to have benefited from the new schools were higher relative to their older counterparts who did not benefit from school construction in the treatment areas compared to the control areas. This study uses the “difference-in-difference” strategy discussed in [Chapter 3](#) to show that there was a true productivity gain from “increased education.”

Another example is the use of the quasi-experiment provided by the passage of mandatory schooling and child labor laws in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Before this time, there was no requirement that children attend school and no limit on child labor. These laws set up the minimum age at which children had to start school, the minimum age at which they could drop out, and the minimum number of years of education required before children could engage in full-time work. Studies have shown that mandatory schooling and child labor laws significantly increased the level of education attained by students in the United States. These studies compare individuals born in states where schooling/child labor laws changed to require more education (the treatment group) to those born in states where laws did not change (the control group). Once again, these groups were of similar ability other than the laws that affected their mandatory level of schooling. Later in life, however, the people who received more (mandatory) education had higher wages than the control group, showing once again that more education raised productivity relative to another group with the same level of ability.

Although all of these approaches have some limitations, the result of the analysis is surprisingly consistent: each year of education raises wages by 7 to 10%. This is strong evidence for the human capital model of educational attainment.

This is not to say that there is no screening effect in educational attainment. There is a large literature on the “sheepskin effect”: getting a degree from high school, college, or graduate school. Some studies ([Tyler, Murnane, and Willet, 2000](#); [Jaeger and Page, 1996](#)) find that students earning a degree relative to students with similar test scores and years of schooling earn 10 to 25% more. A novel recent study examined the long-run effects of teacher discretion in grading high school math exams in Sweden ([Diamond and Persson, 2016](#)). The authors found that teachers used their discretion to move students from “nearly passing” to “passing” the exam. Despite the fact that this simple recoding didn’t increase student human capital at all, it had a significant positive effect on long-run outcomes like going to college and having higher earnings.

# Effects of Education Levels on Other Outcomes

As discussed earlier in this chapter, a major motivation for government intervention in education is the externality generated by more education. A number of studies have assessed the impact of increased education on external benefits. Key findings include the following:<sup>22</sup>

- Higher levels of education are associated with an increased likelihood of participation in the political process and more awareness of current policy debates ([Milligan et al., 2004](#); [Dee, 2004](#)).
- Higher levels of education are associated with a lower likelihood of criminal activity ([Lochner and Moretti, 2004](#)).
- Higher levels of education are associated with improved health of the people who received more education and the same for their children ([Currie and Moretti, 2004](#); [Lleras-Muney, 2005](#); [Chou et al., 2010](#)).<sup>23</sup>
- Higher levels of education of parents are associated with higher levels of education of their children ([Oreopoulos et al., 2003](#)).
- Higher levels of education among workers are associated with higher rates of productivity ([Moretti, 2004](#)).
- Higher levels of education lead to lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking and heavy drinking ([Jensen and Lleras-Muney, 2012](#)).

These findings, along with the findings that more education results in higher wages, suggest that there are large private and public returns to increasing human capital through increasing years of education.

## The Impact of School Quality

A smaller but growing literature has investigated a different question: What is the impact of higher-quality schools on the returns to education? This literature must initially grapple with the question of how to define school quality. The most common measures used are average class size (the ratio of students to teachers within a school) and school spending per student.

As reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box, a number of approaches have been taken to estimate the impact of school quality on student test scores. Experimental evidence from Tennessee suggests that smaller class sizes lead to much higher student test scores. Yet an attempt to dramatically reduce class sizes in California did not have the expected positive effects, perhaps because the associated rapid rise in the number of classes required led the state to hire underqualified teachers. These findings suggest that the outcomes of efforts to improve school quality can be very dependent on the approach taken to improvements.

Studies of effective charter schools have suggested looking beyond measures such as class size. In particular, analyses of what makes charter schools most effective suggest that the keys to more successful schools include longer school days and a longer school year, teachers who receive frequent feedback, and instruction driven by data on student performance. [Fryer \(2011\)](#) discusses recent attempts to take these lessons to traditional public schools in Houston with promising first-year results. Other studies have suggested additional ways to improve educational quality. For example, [Collins and Gan \(2013\)](#) studied variation across schools in student “tracking” (sorting by ability) and found that schools that sort students more

aggressively improve the test scores of both high- and low-performing students.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Estimating the Effects of School Quality*

A major focus of research in labor economics is estimating the impact of school quality on student outcomes. Studies in this area have recognized that we cannot simply compare school districts with better and worse schools and look at the resulting implications for students. Districts with better schools (the treatments) differ in many ways from districts with worse schools (the controls). For example, residents in the treatment districts are likely to be the ones who provide a better home environment for their children. Therefore, it is necessary to find an approach that allows researchers to identify the effects of school quality alone on educational outcomes.

Two approaches have been used to address this issue. The first is using experimental data. The state of Tennessee implemented Project STAR in 1985–1986, randomly assigning 11,000 students (grades K–3) to small classes (13–17 students), regular classes (22–25 students), or regular classes with teacher's aides. [Krueger \(1999\)](#) analyzed the data from this experiment and found that there was a large improvement on standardized test scores for the first year and a slight improvement for each year thereafter in a small class. These effects were largest for poor and minority students. [Krueger and Whitmore \(2001\)](#) found that small class size effects persisted later in life; that is, being in a small class for those four years increased test scores in middle school and increased the likelihood of taking a college entrance exam. Overall, their estimates imply that the real rate of return to smaller class sizes (doing a standard cost-benefit analysis of the experiment) is roughly 5.5% per year.

The other approach is a quasi-experimental analysis of changes in school resources. An interesting example is California, which by the mid-1990s had the largest class sizes in the nation (29 students per class on average). The California state government in 1996 provided strong financial incentives for schools to reduce their class size to 20 students per class in grades K–3, at a cost of more than \$1 billion per year. [Bohrnstedt and Stecher \(2002\)](#) reviewed the evidence on the impacts of this major reform, using variation across schools in the rate at which they implemented smaller class sizes. Schools that implemented smaller class sizes quickly were the treatment group, while schools that went more slowly were the controls. They found that there was little beneficial impact of smaller classes on student outcomes, perhaps because the state hired underqualified teachers to fill the extra classes or perhaps because the state was forced into educationally unproductive approaches such as combining different grades in one class. Thus, there remains some controversy about the returns to increased public-sector investments in school inputs.

[Jackson et al. \(2018\)](#) provide a more direct estimate of the impact of school spending on student outcomes by looking at the result of school district spending cuts due to the fiscal pressures of the Great Recession. They find that much of the spending cuts induced by the economic downturn was to “non-core” operations like administration, but that the core spending on instruction fell as well. This drop in spending resulted in both lower test scores and lower graduation rates, further illustrating that school spending does matter.

# 11.5 The Role of the Government in Higher Education

The focus of our discussion thus far has primarily been on elementary and secondary education, yet there is an enormous higher education sector in the United States, 3,011 four-year colleges, and 1,616 two-year degree-granting institutions. Institutions of higher education spend about \$559 billion per year, almost 43% of total educational spending.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, in contrast to other levels of education, the higher education system in the United States is viewed as an enormous success. U.S. research universities are consistently rated as the best in the world. The clear market evidence for the success of higher education in the United States is the vast inflow of foreign students to U.S. institutions of higher education: 1.21 million foreign students each year spend more than \$39 billion to enroll in American colleges and universities. The number of foreign students studying here has risen by almost 200% in the past 20 years and now represents 5.9% of all higher-education enrollment in the United States. This compares to only 60,292 American students who are pursuing full degrees abroad.<sup>25</sup>

The major difference between higher education and primary/secondary education in the United States is the degree of private provision and competition. Only 10% of students are enrolled in private elementary/secondary schools, and public schools typically have a local monopoly.<sup>26</sup> In higher education, 39% of students attend private institutions, and students have free choice over the entire nation of where to go to college.<sup>27</sup> The relative success of higher education, where the United States is the world leader, and primary/secondary education, where the United States performs relatively poorly, provides some evidence for the power of competition to improve educational performance. As noted in our discussion of privatization, even with a minority of students enrolled in private schools, the competition from the private schools can lead to efficiency in the public sector.

## Current Government Role

The U.S. government currently intervenes in the higher education sector through four channels.

### State Provision

The primary form of government financing of higher education is direct provision of higher education through locally and state-supported colleges and universities. These institutions offer subsidized low tuition for in-state students and somewhat less subsidized costs for out-of-state students. Currently, state and local governments spend about \$94.5 billion per year on their institutions of higher education.<sup>28</sup>

### Pell Grants

The Pell Grant program is a subsidy to higher education administered by the federal government that provides grants to low-income families to pay for their educational expenditures. For a student from a family with annual income below \$15,000, the Pell Grant program provides a grant of \$5,775. For a somewhat higher-income student, the grant amount is reduced according to parental income and assets and student income and assets. The Pell Grant program currently provides \$30 billion per year in grants to about 7 million students.

### Loans

The federal government also makes loans available to students for higher education expenditures through the [direct student loan](#) program. For students who qualify on income

and asset grounds, the government subsidizes the loan cost to students by (1) guaranteeing a low interest rate (the 2018–2019 rate for the 10-year loan was 5.05%, compared to 15-year home mortgage rates, the cost to the private sector of borrowing, of about 4.12% over that period) and (2) allowing students to defer repayment of the loan until they have graduated. Students who do not qualify can still receive loans at the same low interest rate but must start repaying them immediately rather than deferring them until their education is complete. A dependent undergraduate can borrow up to \$31,000 (\$23,000 in subsidized loans) per degree program, an independent undergraduate can borrow up to \$57,500 (\$23,000 in subsidized loans), and a graduate or professional student up to \$138,500 (\$65,500 subsidized). The total amount of loans made each year under the direct loan program is \$94.9 billion.<sup>29</sup>

#### direct student loans

Loans taken directly from the U.S. Department of Education.

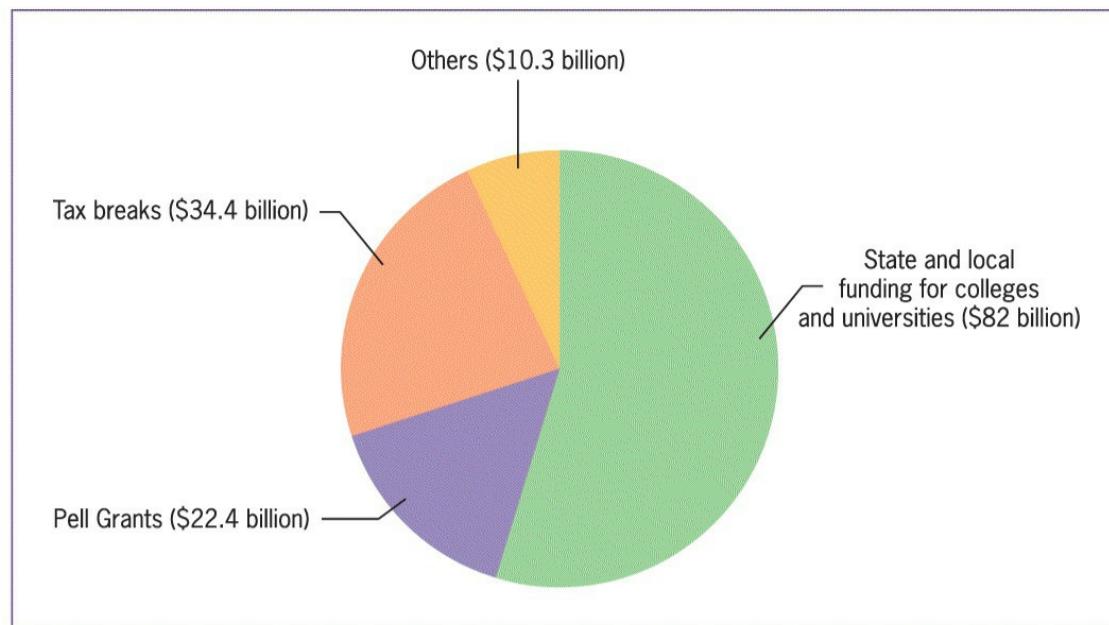
## Tax Relief

The final way in which the government finances higher education is through a series of tax breaks for college-goers and their families. The largest of these are the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit (LLTC), put into place in 1998, and the American Opportunity Tax Credit (AOTC), an expansion of the HOPE credit since 2009. The LLTC provides tax credits to lower- and middle-income families of up to \$2,000 per year per person for the costs of higher education, and the AOTC provides a credit of up to \$2,500. Alternatively, individuals can deduct from their taxable income up to \$4,000 per year in higher education expenses. Interest paid on student loans is also tax deductible, as is some scholarship and fellowship income, and there are tax-free savings accounts for higher education as well. These tax breaks add up to about \$19.5 billion per year in forgone government revenue.

## What Is the Market Failure, and How Should It Be Addressed?

The arguments discussed earlier to motivate public intervention in education markets, such as provision of a common set of values, apply much less strongly in the context of higher education. The major arguments for government intervention in higher education are twofold. The first is public returns. There is significant evidence of public returns from higher education; many of the studies cited above about positive returns to education apply to higher as well as lower educational attainment (such as studies of improved health or productivity spillovers). And there is a large literature showing that the publicly financed research that is carried out at universities is critical for innovation and economic growth.<sup>30</sup>

The second is failures in the credit market for student loans. As noted at the start of this chapter, it is much harder to get a loan to finance education than it is to obtain a loan to finance the purchase of a car or a home because there is no collateral for banks to repossess if the loan is not repaid. As a result, in the absence of government intervention, banks may be unwilling to loan money to finance higher education. Government intervention is motivated by the need to ensure credit to students for higher education so that they can obtain higher education if it is productive for them to do so. Sun and Yannelis (2016) found that financial deregulation in the U.S., which made it easier to get bank loans, significantly increased college attendance and completion. And [Marx and Turner \(2017\)](#) showed that notifying students of loan eligibility significantly increased their odds of going to college. The major source of government expenditure on higher education is not through loans (see [Figure 11-4](#)), however; are these other types of spending justified? For example, work by [Marx and Turner \(2015\)](#) suggested that Pell Grants largely crowd out borrowing for college so that on net there is little increase in funding available to pay for education.



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■ FIGURE 11-4

Government Spending on Higher Education, 2017 • Of the roughly \$149 billion the government spends annually on higher education, 55% is in the form of state and local funding for colleges and universities. The remainder is split among Pell Grants and tax breaks; student loans, while large in volume, are not a net cost to the government.

Data from: [Pew Charitable Trusts \(2017\)](#).

At the same time, other studies have found that having grants rather than loans can affect the nature of education. For example, [Field \(2006\)](#) studied a program at New York University law school where admitted students were randomly assigned either loans or grants of the same financial value. Students who were randomly assigned grants were twice as likely to enroll at that university as those assigned loans, and students assigned grants were also about 40% more likely to take low-paying public interest jobs after graduation rather than higher-paid private-sector legal work. Another study of a selective undergraduate institution that replaced loans with grants found that students were more likely to turn down higher-salaried jobs in favor of low-paid “public interest” jobs ([Rothstein and Rouse, 2007](#)). These findings suggest that moving from grants to loans can have real effects on behavior.

There is no real rationale for providing subsidies only to the higher-income individuals who benefit from tax deductions. Indeed, [Bulman and Hoxby \(2015\)](#) found little effect of these tax credits on actual college attendance.

What about the largest source of spending on higher education, public state universities? Presumably, states provide public education to improve the skill level of their workforce. This goal is undercut, however, by the mobility of college graduates to other states. A study by [Bound et al. \(2004\)](#) found that for every ten students educated by state schools, only three of the state school graduates remained in the state in the long run. Given that the major market failure for higher education is in credit markets, shifting state resources away from direct provision and toward loans or grants may improve efficiency. In addition, cuts in public education financing over the past two decades have led to an ever-growing burden of student interest debt, as discussed in the application.



## APPLICATION

### Addressing Student Loan Debt in the United States

While student loans may be the theoretically optimal means of addressing credit market constraints for higher education, in practice, such loans have led to a potentially unsustainable burden on recent graduates. The total burden of student debt in the United States is over \$1.4 trillion.<sup>31</sup> For college graduates in 2007–2008 who had not pursued further education, 24% were delinquent on at least one payment, 5% had defaulted on their debts, and 22% had debt repayments which amounted to more than 12% of their income, a level considered by experts to be burdensome.<sup>32</sup>

This large debt burden is not a problem if it reflects optimal financial investments by young people in their education. But there is reason to believe that may not be the case because students have inadequate information about the value of their education at different institutions.

In particular, a large share of college debt and default is due to students attending for-profit institutions that have been found to falsely advertise their benefits. For example, one such institution, ITT Technical Institute, ran aggressive ad campaigns on TV and radio for decades. A government investigation found that these commercials were dishonest and unfairly targeted low-income students and veterans with access to student loans. The government sued ITT for pressuring students to take out high-cost private loans that they were likely to default on. When ITT closed 137 campuses across the country in 2016, it left 35,000 students with their debt and no diploma to show for it. The federal government ended up forgiving about \$500 million in ITT student loans.<sup>33</sup>

More generally, only 34% of students attending for-profit colleges have graduated within eight years, and the student loan default rate at these institutions is four times the national average.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, when for-profit institutions are forced to close, most students move on to community colleges that have a much higher eight-year graduation rate of 60%.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, some for-profit institutions have been innovators in the education space, particularly those that promote online learning.<sup>36</sup> One study found that relative to other institutions, for-profit colleges educate a larger percentage of minority and disadvantaged students, and have had a high first-year retention rate.<sup>37</sup>

These factors suggest three approaches to improving the performance of the student loan program in the United States. The first is improving the quality of information available to students deciding whether to take out loans to finance their education at particular institutions. The Obama administration created the College Scorecard, a Department of Education website that allows prospective students to investigate the financial feasibility of schools they are thinking about attending, including information on affordability and whether students are likely to be able to pay off loans when they graduate.

A more aggressive strategy pursued by the Obama administration was to deny eligibility for student loans to colleges whose graduates don't earn enough to pay off their student debt. This is a controversial idea because some of these colleges are providing educational opportunities for some students, while others are clearly overstating their promises. Under the Trump administration, the Department of Education is delaying the implementation of this strategy, and has further disassembled the team within the department responsible for investigating fraud within for-profit colleges.<sup>38</sup>

A second approach is to more fully embrace the “income-contingent” loan repayment option used in many other nations such as the United Kingdom and Australia, where student

loans remain unpaid until earning reaches a minimum threshold. At that point, repayment becomes a function of earned income. This approach would protect students against errors in estimating their ability to repay their student loans. It might also reduce the effect of loans on decisions to shift out of lower-paying but potentially socially valuable jobs. The United States does have such a program option, but it is optional rather than mandatory, and is used by only about 25% of college attendees.<sup>39</sup> Rather than expand this option, the Trump administration has moved in a different direction, proposing to end loan forgiveness for students who enter low-paying public service jobs. The administration has also drafted proposals to alter the repayment schemes for contingent repayment programs and end the program that pays the interest on loans taken out by low-income students while they are in school. In sum, these proposals amount to \$200 billion in cuts to student financial aid.<sup>40</sup>

Third, and finally, is a proposal on the part of some politicians to make college education free or reduce the cost significantly. In March 2018, Sen. Brian Schatz (Dem-HI), introduced a bill to make public two-year and four-year universities free for all students by covering not only tuition, but also housing, meal plans, and books for financially qualified students, thereby eliminating the potential for debt. His bill proposes the creation of voluntary partnerships between states and the federal government, with a dollar-for-dollar match of funds that each state designates for public colleges and universities.<sup>41</sup>

Any of these plans would go a long way toward addressing the student loan debt problem, but each would come at a high price tag. For example, the Schatz plan is estimated to cost the government \$80 billion in the first year, rising to almost \$100 billion per year. ■

## 11.6 Conclusion

The provision of education, an impure public good, is one of the most important governmental functions in the United States and in countries around the world. Because of external returns, market failures, or redistribution, governments have traditionally decided to be the majority providers of educational services. In this chapter, we learned that one cost of the government role can be a reduction in the level of educational attainment of children. Voucher systems can address this problem, but they raise a host of additional issues about segregation and the feasibility of private educational markets. The optimal amount of government intervention in education markets depends on the extent of market failures in private provision of education and on the public returns to education. A large literature suggests sizeable private returns to education, with some evidence of public returns as well.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Education is primarily provided by state and local governments in the United States, and only a small share of students go to private schools.
- The rationales for public intervention in education include positive externalities, failures in credit markets, failures of family utility maximization, and redistribution.
- Publicly provided free education may crowd out the educational attainment of those who want to choose higher levels of education but don't want to forgo the free public good.
- Vouchers might solve this crowd-out problem by allowing people to choose the optimal level of education for themselves, as well as injecting competition into the education market.
- At the same time, vouchers may lead to increased educational stratification, and the education market may face difficulties in implementing competition.
- Existing evidence suggests that private school choice through vouchers can move students to better schools, but a much richer evaluation of the total social effects of vouchers is needed before policy conclusions can be drawn.
- There is a sizeable private return to additional schooling that appears to reflect increased human capital accumulation rather than screening. There is also some evidence of public returns in terms of outcomes such as increased voting and better health.
- The government supports higher education through direct spending, grants, loans, and tax breaks.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. State and federal governments actively support education at the primary, secondary, and collegiate levels. But they *mandate* education at the primary and secondary levels, while merely providing subsidies and loan guarantees at the collegiate level. Of the key rationales for public provision of education described in [Section 11.1](#) of the text, which do you think underpins this differential treatment?
2. Consider two metropolitan areas, one that has many small school districts and one that has only a few large school districts. How are the efficiency and equity effects of introducing a voucher system likely to differ across these two areas?
3. Some have argued that introducing a voucher system would be particularly beneficial for two groups of students: those who are the worst off under the current system, and many of the students who are the best off under the current system. Why might this be the case?
4. In an environment in which all education is privately provided, suppose that a family with one child has \$20,000 per year to spend on private goods and education. Draw this family's budget constraint. Suppose now that an option of free public education with spending of \$4,000 per pupil is introduced to this family. Draw three different indifference curves corresponding to the following three situations: (a) a free public education would increase the amount of money that is spent on the child's education; (b) a free public education would decrease the amount of money that is spent on the child's education; (c) a free public education would not affect the amount of money spent on the child's education.
5. A study by [Harris and Larsen \(2015\)](#) examined decision making by New Orleans parents selecting schools for their children. In New Orleans, all parents sending their children to public schools are required to rank schools in order of preference as a part of a centralized matching system. The researchers found that while academic quality is important in parental choice, just as important in decision making is the distance of the school from the family home. Parents were willing to sacrifice an entire school "letter grade" (the measure of school quality in New Orleans) in order to have their child attend a school three-quarters of a mile closer to home. In other words, they would prefer their child to attend a C– school across the street instead of a B– school less than a mile away. The importance of logistics relative to academic performance was highest for poor families. How might these findings inform the policy debate over school choice, especially the debate over vouchers and charter schools?  
 6. Empirical evidence suggests that highly educated adults donate more to charity than adults with similar income levels but who have fewer years of schooling. Why might this evidence justify public subsidization of education? What potential biases might make it difficult to interpret this empirical relationship?
7. Several researchers have found evidence of sheepskin effects, in which the labor market return to twelfth grade is higher than the return to eleventh grade and the return to the fourth year of college is higher than the return to the third year of college. Why does this evidence of sheepskin effects bolster the screening explanation for the relationship between education and earnings?
8.  What are the advantages of comparing twins to investigate the relationship between education and earnings? What are the drawbacks of doing so?
9.  Suppose you want to evaluate the effectiveness of vouchers in improving educational attainment by offering a voucher to any student in a particular town who asks for one. What is wrong with simply comparing the educational performance of the students receiving vouchers with those who do not receive vouchers? What would be a better way to study the effectiveness of vouchers?

10.  [Abdulkadiroglu et al. \(2011\)](#) studied the effectiveness of charter schools in the Boston area using a clever research strategy. They utilized the fact that many charter schools in the area are oversubscribed, and thus must assign enrollment slots to students using a randomized lottery. The researchers compared winners and losers of the lottery to estimate the effect of charter school attendance on student achievement, finding large and significant score gains for charter students compared to their peers who lost the lottery.

Based on the results of this experiment, one policy maker has argued that all schools in the state of Massachusetts should be replaced by charter schools. In what ways does the experiment support this policy maker's proposal? Now, considering the other side of the debate, what are some specific reasons for proceeding with caution when applying the results of the experiment to this proposal?

11.  The U.S. Department of Education publishes the biannual "Nation's Report Card," also called the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which monitors and reports on nationwide student achievement in mathematics and reading, and in other subject areas. The Report Card produces estimates of overall national achievement, and conducts demographic subgroup analysis by state, gender, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity, by administering one- to two-hour tests to randomly selected students from randomly selected schools nationally. Navigate to the Nation's Report Card Data Explorer, which can be found at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/nudecore/xplore/nde>. Consider the eighth grade mathematics assessment to respond to these questions.

1. In the most recent year for which data is available, in which state was white students' eighth grade mathematics achievement the lowest? The highest? In which state was black students' eighth grade mathematics achievement the lowest? The highest? Provide mean scores for each case.
  2. In the most recent year for which data is available, in which state was girls' achievement the lowest? The highest? What about for boys? Provide the mean scores for each case.
  3. Nationally, what is the achievement gap between white and black students? What is the achievement gap between male and female students?
12. Consider school accountability reforms like the "Common Core" and "No Child Left Behind" in the context of the results found by [Deming et al. \(2016\)](#), discussed in the chapter. How might Deming's results explain the high level of political controversy surrounding these two reforms?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

13. [Epple and Romano \(2008\)](#) describe theoretical evidence that school vouchers will lead to “cream-skimming,” where private schools will pick off the better students and leave public schools with lower-ability average students. They propose targeted vouchers, in which different-sized vouchers go to different groups of students, to combat this potential concern. How would you design a targeted voucher system that would lead to a reduced level of cream-skimming?
14. The town of Greenville has three families, each with one child, and each of which earns \$20,000 per year (pre-tax). Each family is taxed \$4,000 per year to finance the public school system in the town, which any family can then freely attend. Education spending is \$6,000 per student in the public schools. The three families differ in their preferences for education. Though families A and B both send their children to the public school, family B places a greater value on education than family A. Family C places the greatest relative value on education and sends their child to private school.
1. Graph the budget constraints facing each of the three families and draw a possible indifference curve which could correspond to the choice each family makes.

The town is considering replacing its current system with a voucher system. Under the new system, each family would receive a \$6,000 voucher for education, and families would still be able to send their children to the same public school. Since this would be more costly than the current system, they would also raise taxes to \$6,000 per household to pay for it.
  2. Draw the budget constraint the families would face under this system.
- Suppose that, when the new system is introduced, family A continues to send their child to public school, but family B now sends their child to private school (along with family C's child).
3. Explain how you know that family C is made better off and family A is made worse off by the voucher policy.
  4. Using a diagram, show that family B could be made better or worse off by the voucher policy.
15.  Suppose you are a researcher designing a study on the returns to education using an education bill passed by your state legislature in 1985. The bill, once law, substantially increased education funding for all elementary schools. Your treatment group will be children born between 1981 and 1991 and your control group will be children born from 1965 to 1975. You will study both groups' wages as adults, which you have obtained from your state's Department of Revenue.
1. What *economic* rationale for government involvement in the provision of education might undermine your research design?
  2. Consider [Duflo \(2004\)](#), discussed in the chapter. How might you draw inspiration from the design of that study to improve your own research design?
16. One way to structure a student loan repayment plan is to make it income-contingent—that is, to relate the amount that a student would have to repay in any given month to how much income he or she earns. How might the existence of such a plan alter a student's choice of college major? Would such a repayment system be socially efficient?

The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# Chapter 12 Social Insurance: The New Function of Government



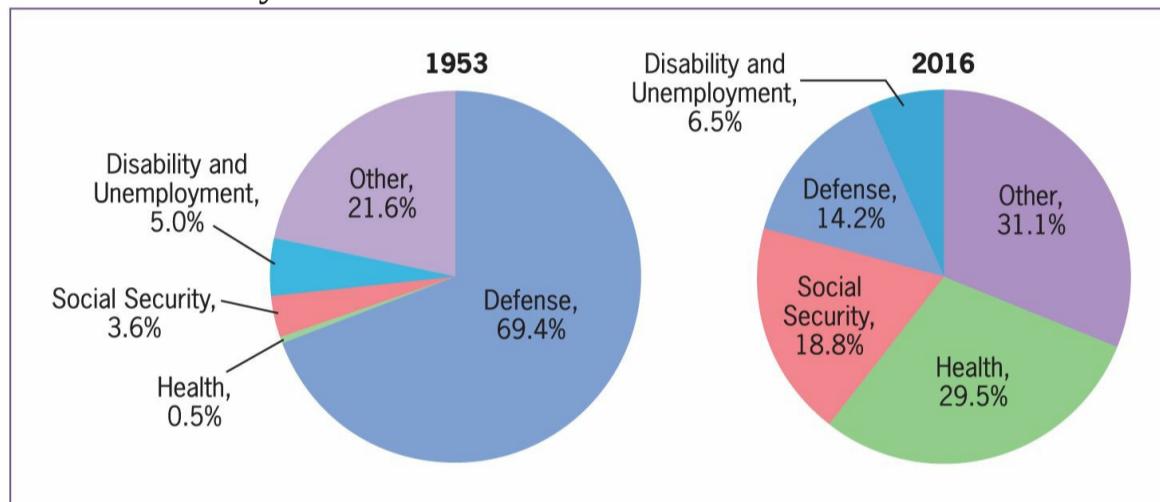
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## Questions to keep in mind

- What market failures justify the provision of public social insurance?
- Do individuals always need public social insurance to smooth their consumption?
- What is the moral hazard cost of social insurance, and why is it economically important?

In the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, the framers wrote that they were uniting the states in order to “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” For most of the country’s history, one of those goals, “common defense,” was the federal government’s clear spending priority. In 1953, for example, 69¢ of each dollar of federal government spending went to fund national defense ([Figure 12-1](#)). Another 4¢ went to pay for Social Security, a 17-year-old program that provided only 18% of the income of the typical elderly household. Only 0.4¢ out of each dollar of federal government spending was devoted to providing health care to U.S. citizens, and less than 5% was spent on benefits for unemployment or disability.



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### FIGURE 12-1

Government Spending by Function, 1953 and 2016 • Government today devotes a much larger portion of its budget to social insurance than it did 50 years ago.

Data from: [Office of Management and Budget \(2014\)](#); [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2017\)](#), Table 3.16.

Since then, the government’s spending priorities have shifted dramatically, away from “common defense” and toward promoting “the general welfare.”<sup>1</sup> By 2016, only 14¢ of each dollar of federal government spending went to fund national defense (second panel of [Figure 12-1](#)), and 19¢ was paid for Social Security, which now represents 67% of the income of the typical elderly household.<sup>2</sup> Another 30¢ was devoted to health care spending, primarily on two programs that did not exist in 1953: the Medicare program, which provides universal health insurance coverage to the elderly, and the Medicaid program, which provides free health insurance to many poor and disabled people. The dramatic shift in spending led economist Paul Krugman to observe that “loosely speaking, the post-cold-war federal government is a big pension fund that also happens to have an army.”<sup>3</sup>

This radical change in the nature and scope of government spending is one of the most fundamental changes in public policy in the United States over the past 65 years. The

programs that have grown are labeled collectively as **social insurance programs**, government interventions to provide insurance against adverse events. In this chapter, we discuss social insurance programs in the United States in general terms. The following chapters focus on specific social insurance programs, such as:

- *Social Security*, which provides insurance against earnings loss due to death or retirement.
- *Unemployment insurance*, which provides insurance against job loss.
- *Disability insurance*, which provides insurance against career-ending disability.
- *Workers' compensation*, which provides insurance against on-the-job accidents.
- *Medicare*, which provides insurance against medical expenditures in old age.

#### **social insurance programs**

Government interventions in the provision of insurance against adverse events.

Social insurance programs have several common features. Workers participate by “buying” insurance through payroll taxes or through mandatory contributions that they or their employers make. These contributions make them eligible to receive benefits if some measurable event occurs, such as disability or on-the-job injury. Program eligibility is conditioned only on making contributions and on the occurrence of the adverse event. Eligibility is typically not **means-tested**; that is, eligibility does not depend on one’s current means, the level of one’s current income or assets.

#### **means-tested**

Refers to programs in which eligibility depends on the level of one’s current income or assets.

Throughout the next several chapters, we discuss particular social insurance programs, but before we get into the details of these programs, we need to understand the general economics of insurance markets. This chapter begins by explaining the nature of insurance and why it is a product that is valued by consumers. We then discuss the potential failures in the private insurance market that might warrant government intervention. Foremost among these is the problem of *adverse selection*: the fact that the insured individual knows more about her risk level than does the insurer might cause insurance markets to fail. As we have discussed throughout this book, market failures potentially warrant government intervention.

The value of government intervention is mitigated, however, by the availability to individuals of *self-insurance*: to the extent that individuals can insure themselves against risks (e.g., by saving or borrowing), government intervention may not have large benefits and may serve only to *crowd out* that self-insurance. Moreover, social (or any type of) insurance carries with it the important problem of *moral hazard*: when you insure individuals against adverse events, you can encourage adverse behavior. If individuals are insured against on-the-job accidents, they might be somewhat less careful on the job; if individuals are insured against long unemployment spells, they might not work very hard to find new jobs; if individuals are insured for their medical costs, they might overuse their doctors.

Moral hazard problems will occur naturally whenever individuals are insured against adverse events. Thus, in this chapter we lay out the *central trade-off with social insurance programs*: governments can improve efficiency by intervening when insurance markets fail (due, e.g., to adverse selection) and individuals are not self-insured against such risks, but those interventions themselves have offsetting efficiency costs (moral hazards) that undercut their goals.

## 12.1 What Is Insurance and Why Do Individuals Value It?

Any discussion of government insurance provision must start with an understanding of what insurance is and why it is so valuable to consumers.

### What Is Insurance?

Insurance is provided for a wide variety of different circumstances, but it has a common structure. Individuals, or those acting on their behalf (their employers or their parents, for example), pay money to an insurer, which can be a private firm or the government. These payments are called **insurance premiums**. The insurer, in return, promises to make some payment to the insured party, or to others providing services to the insured party (such as physicians or auto repair shops). These payments are conditioned on a particular event or series of events (e.g., an accident or a doctor's visit).

**insurance premiums**

Money that is paid to an insurer so that an individual will be insured against adverse events.

This broad definition covers the wide variety of private insurance products that exist in the United States. A sampling includes:<sup>4</sup>

- *Health insurance*: Individuals and employers pay \$917 billion of premiums each year to insure against health problems and the medical bills associated with them.
- *Auto insurance*: Drivers pay \$175 billion in premiums each year to insure against the cost and physical damage of auto accidents and theft.
- *Life insurance*: Individuals and employers pay \$103 billion in premiums each year to provide income to the heirs of those who die.
- *Casualty and property insurance*: Individuals and businesses pay \$481 billion in premiums each year to insure their homes, cars, and other properties and possessions against fire, natural disasters, accidents, and theft.

### Why Do Individuals Value Insurance?

Insurance is valuable to individuals because of the principle of *diminishing marginal utility* discussed in [Chapter 2](#). Recall that we typically assume that the marginal utility derived from consumption falls as the level of consumption rises: the first pizza means a lot more to you than the fifth. This intuitive assumption means that, given the choice between (1) two years of average consumption and (2) one year of excessive consumption and one year of starvation, individuals would prefer the former. Individuals prefer two years of average consumption because the excessive consumption doesn't raise their utility as much as the starvation lowers it.

For example, given the utility functions that we typically use in economics, having consumption of \$30,000 in both year one and year two delivers a higher utility level than having consumption of \$50,000 in year one and \$10,000 in year two. The gain in utility from raising consumption from \$30,000 to \$50,000 in year one is much smaller than the loss in utility from lowering consumption from \$30,000 to \$10,000 in year two. Thus, individuals desire **consumption smoothing**: they want to translate consumption from periods when it is high (so that it has a low marginal utility) to periods when it is low (so that it has a high

marginal utility).

#### consumption smoothing

The translation of consumption from periods when consumption is high, and thus has low marginal utility, to periods when consumption is low, and thus has high marginal utility.

When outcomes are uncertain, people want to smooth their consumption over possible outcomes, or **states of the world**, just as they want to smooth their consumption over time. And, just as utility is maximized by having the same consumption in year one and year two in the previous example, utility is maximized by having the same consumption regardless of the outcome of some uncertain event.

#### states of the world

The set of outcomes that are possible in an uncertain future.

Imagine that, over the next year, there is some chance that you will get hit by a car, and as a result, you will have high medical expenses. There are two possibilities, or states of the world, for the next year: you get hit by a car or you don't get hit by a car. Your goal is to make a choice today that determines your consumption tomorrow in each of these states of the world, so that your utility across the two states of the world (accident, no accident) is maximized.

Individuals choose across consumption in states of the world by using some of their income today to *buy insurance against an adverse outcome tomorrow*. By buying insurance, individuals commit to make a payment regardless of the state of the world in return for getting a benefit if the uncertain outcome is negative (an accident). The larger the payment to the insurer (the insurance premium), the larger the benefit in the negative outcome case (the insurance payout). Thus, by varying the amount of insurance they buy, individuals can shift their consumption from one state of the world to another. For example, by buying a lot of insurance, an individual shifts consumption from the positive outcome state of the world (when she only pays premiums) to the negative outcome state of the world (when she also gets benefits).

The fundamental result of basic insurance theory is that individuals will demand *full insurance in order to fully smooth their consumption across states of the world*. That is, in a perfectly functioning insurance market, individuals will want to buy insurance so that they have the same level of consumption regardless of whether the adverse event (such as getting hit by a car) happens or not. Given diminishing marginal utility, this course of action gives individuals a higher level of utility than does allowing the accident to lower their consumption. The intuition is the same as the example over time at the start of this section: it is better to have constant consumption in all states of the world than to have consumption that is high in one state and low in another.

## Formalizing This Intuition: Expected Utility Model

To better understand this difficult intuitive point, it is useful to turn to the standard mechanism that economists use for modeling choices under uncertainty: the **expected utility model**. This model is similar to the consumer choice model that we introduced in [Chapter 2](#), but it allows individuals to maximize utility across states of the world rather than across bundles of goods. In particular, suppose that there is an uncertain outcome, with some probability  $p$  of an adverse event. Then expected utility is written as

$$EU = (1 - p) \times U(\text{consumption with no adverse event}) + p \times U(\text{consumption with adverse event})$$

**expected utility model**

The weighted sum of utilities across states of the world, where the weights are the probabilities of each state occurring.

We can use this model to examine an individual's decision over how much insurance coverage to buy. For example, suppose there is a 1% chance ( $p = 0.01$ ) that Mimi will get hit by a car next year and that her injuries will result in \$30,000 in medical expenses. Mimi has a choice of insuring some, none, or all of these potential medical expenses, but this will cost her  $m\%$  in insurance premiums per dollar of expenditures covered. Thus, if Mimi buys an insurance policy that pays  $\$b$  if she is hit, her premium is  $\$mb$  (e.g., if she fully insures the risk, then she pays  $\$m \times 30,000$ ). If Mimi buys insurance, in the state of the world where she doesn't get hit by the car, she will be  $\$mb$  poorer than if she doesn't buy the insurance. In the rare state of the world where she does get hit by the car, she will be  $\$b - \$mb$  richer than if she hadn't bought the insurance (because she paid the  $\$mb$  premium and the insurance covered  $\$b$  of expenses). Thus, purchasing insurance is the way Mimi can effectively translate consumption from periods when consumption is high and, therefore, has low marginal utility (doesn't get hit) to periods when consumption is low and, therefore, has high marginal utility (does get hit).

Mimi's interest in translating consumption from the no-accident state to the accident state will depend on the price that is charged for insurance. A starting point is to assume that insurance companies charge an **actuarially fair premium**; that is, they charge a price equal to the insurer's expected payout. This assumption implies that insurers have no administrative costs and make no profits; they simply recycle their premium payments into insurance claims. If, for example, there is a 1% chance that the insurer must pay out \$30,000, then its expected payout is  $0.01 \times 30,000 = \$300$ . Therefore, the premium that the insurer charges will be \$300. At that premium, given the 1% chance of an accident, the insurer breaks even, collecting \$300 from each person and paying out \$30,000 to 1 in 100 people (\$300 each on average). More generally, for any amount of coverage  $\$b$  and an odds of payout of  $p$ , the insurance companies will charge premiums equal to  $\$p \times b$ .

**actuarially fair premium**

An insurance premium that is set equal to the insurer's expected payout.

## Full Insurance Is Optimal

The central result of expected utility theory is that *with actuarially fair pricing, individuals will want to fully insure themselves to equalize consumption in all states of the world*. This point is illustrated in [Table 12-1](#). Suppose that Mimi's income, which she fully consumes, is \$30,000 per year. That first row shows the case where Mimi doesn't buy any insurance to pay her medical bills if she is in a car accident. There is a 99% chance that Mimi will have consumption of \$30,000 next period and a 1% chance that she will have consumption of zero because she will have to pay \$30,000 in medical bills if she has an accident. Suppose also that

her utility function is of the form  $U = \sqrt{C}$ , where  $C$  denotes her consumption, which is equal to her income. (There are no savings.) With no insurance, Mimi's expected utility is, therefore,

$$(0.99 \times \sqrt{30,000}) + (0.01 \times \sqrt{0}) = (0.99 \times 173.2) + (0.01 \times 0) = 171.5$$

TABLE 12-1 The Expected Utility Model

If Mimi . . .	And Mimi is . . .	Consumption (C)	Utility $\sqrt{C}$	Expected Utility
Doesn't buy insurance	Not hit by a car ( $p = 99\%$ ) Hit by a car ( $p = 1\%$ )	\$30,000 0	173.2 0	$0.99 \times 173.2 + 0.01 \times 0 = 171.5$
Buys full insurance (for \$300)	Not hit by a car ( $p = 99\%$ ) Hit by a car ( $p = 1\%$ )	\$29,700 \$29,700	172.34 172.34	$0.99 \times 172.34 + 0.01 \times 172.34 = 172.34$
Buys partial insurance (for \$150)	Not hit by a car ( $p = 99\%$ ) Hit by a car ( $p = 1\%$ )	\$29,850 \$14,850	172.77 121.86	$0.99 \times 172.77 + 0.01 \times 121.86 = 172.26$

Mimi has a choice over how much insurance to buy against the risk of getting hit by a car. This table shows the consumption and associated utility for the states of the world where Mimi is and is not hit by a car. Expected utility, the weighted average of utility in the two states of the world (weighted by the odds of each state of the world), is higher with the purchase of insurance.

Suppose instead that Mimi buys insurance that pays all of her medical bills if she is hit by a car. This insurance costs Mimi \$300, which she pays regardless of whether she gets hit. If she is hit, however, she doesn't have to spend her \$30,000 of income on medical bills. With insurance, Mimi's expected utility becomes

$$(0.99 \times \sqrt{30,000 - 300}) + (0.01 \times \sqrt{30,000 - 300}) \\ = (0.99 \times 172.34) + (0.01 \times 172.34) = 172.34$$

Mimi's utility is higher if she buys the insurance, even though she will almost certainly end up paying the premium for nothing. This is because Mimi wants to use insurance to smooth her consumption across both states of the world, due to the principle of diminishing marginal utility. Moreover, Mimi will prefer this full insurance for \$30,000 to any other level of benefits  $b$ . For example, suppose that Mimi were to choose only \$15,000 of coverage, half the costs if there is an accident. In that case, Mimi would pay premiums only half as large, \$150 per year. But her utility would fall to 172.26, below the level of utility that she gets from purchasing full insurance.

Thus, even if insurance is expensive, so long as its price (premium) is actuarially fair, individuals will want to insure themselves fully against adverse events. This intuition is formalized mathematically in the appendix to this chapter. The key lesson here is that *with actuarially fair premiums, the efficient market outcome in the insurance market is full insurance, and thus full consumption smoothing.*<sup>5</sup>

## The Role of Risk Aversion

One important difference across individuals is the extent to which they are willing to bear risk, or their level of **risk aversion**. Individuals who are very risk averse are those with a very rapidly diminishing marginal utility of consumption; they are very afraid of consumption falling and are happy to sacrifice some consumption in the good state to insure themselves from large reductions in consumption in the bad state.<sup>6</sup> Individuals who are less risk averse are those with slowly diminishing marginal utility of consumption; they aren't willing to sacrifice very much in the good state to insure themselves against the bad state. Individuals

with any degree of risk aversion will want to buy insurance when it is priced actuarially fairly; so long as marginal utility is diminishing, consumption smoothing is valued. When insurance premiums are not actuarially fair, as in some cases that we describe next, those who are very risk averse may be willing to buy insurance even if those who are not very risk averse are unwilling to buy, because the former group is willing to sacrifice more in the good state to insure the bad state.

**risk aversion**

The extent to which individuals are willing to bear risk.

## 12.2 Why Have Social Insurance? Asymmetric Information and Adverse Selection

If the world functioned as described in [Section 12.1](#), there would be no need for government intervention in insurance markets: individuals would insure themselves fully in the private market at actuarially fair prices. Yet such government intervention is enormous and growing. In this section, we review the most common motivation suggested by economists for government intervention in insurance markets: asymmetric information between insured and insurer, which leads to the problem of *adverse selection*.

### Asymmetric Information

Insurance markets may be marked by **information asymmetry**, which is the difference in information that is available to sellers and to purchasers in a market. Information asymmetry can arise in insurance markets when individuals know more about their underlying level of risk than do insurers. This asymmetry can cause the failure of competitive markets.

**information asymmetry**

The difference in information that is available to sellers and to purchasers in a market.

The intuition of the market failure caused by information asymmetry is best illustrated using the market for used cars, the example used by Nobel Prize-winning economist George [Akerlof in 1970](#).<sup>7</sup> Sellers of used cars know their vehicles' problems, while potential buyers may not. Individuals selling a car may be doing so because they have a "lemon," a car that has major, serious defects. Buyers of cars don't know whether they are getting a lemon, and they can't necessarily trust the information provided by sellers because sellers will want to dump their lemons on unsuspecting buyers. Therefore, buyers might avoid the used car market altogether. As a result, overall demand in the used car market is low, and sellers of used cars on average receive less for their cars than they are worth. Even if you have a car in excellent condition, and even if you are willing to attest to that fact, buyers will not pay enough for it because they can't be sure that you are being honest. You may be unwilling to sell your high-quality used car for a low price, so the used car sale may not be completed.

This outcome is a market failure because some trades that are valued by both parties may not be made due to the asymmetry of information. Buyers might be perfectly happy to pay a high price for a high-quality used car, and sellers might be perfectly happy to sell at that high price. The fact that buyers are wary of getting a lemon, however, stops that trade from happening.

In the used car market, the imperfection arises from the fact that sellers know more than buyers, making buyers wary of the market. In insurance markets, the information asymmetry is reversed: the purchasers of insurance may know more about their insurable risks than the seller (insurer) does. In this case, the insurer will be reluctant to sell insurance because she will be worried that only those with the insured-against problems will demand insurance; the insurer will worry that only the sick demand health insurance, for example, or only those about to lose their job will demand unemployment insurance. As a result, insurers will charge higher than actuarially fair premiums, or they may not sell insurance at all if they are particularly suspicious about someone's risk status. The next sections use a health insurance market example to formalize this intuition.

### Example with Full Information

Imagine that there are two groups, each with 100 persons. One group is careless and

absentminded and doesn't pay attention when crossing the street. As a result, members of this group have a 5% chance of being hit by a car each year. The other group is careful and always looks both ways before crossing the street. Members of this group have only a 0.5% chance of being hit by a car each year. What effect would the existence of these two different types of pedestrians have on the insurance market? The effect depends on what we assume about the relative information available to the individuals and to the insurance company.

For example, suppose that the insurance company and the street crossers have full information about who is careful and who is not. In this case, the insurance company would charge different actuarially fair prices to the careless and careful groups. The people in the careless group would each pay 5¢ per dollar of insurance coverage, while those in the careful group would each pay only 0.5¢ per dollar of insurance coverage. At these actuarially fair prices, individuals in both groups would choose to be fully insured (as proved in [Section 12.1](#)), with the careless paying  $\$30,000 \times 0.05 = \$1,500$  per year in premiums and the careful paying  $\$30,000 \times 0.005 = \$150$  per year in premiums. The insurance company would earn zero profit, and society would achieve the optimal outcome (each group is fully insured).

The first row of [Table 12-2](#) illustrates the full information example, with separate prices for the two groups of consumers. At these premiums, the 100 careful people pay a total of \$15,000 in premiums, and the 100 careless people pay a total of \$150,000. Total premiums paid are \$165,000. The insurer expects to have 0.5 accidents among the 100 careful consumers, for a payout of \$15,000 ( $0.5 \times \$30,000$  cost per accident), and 5 accidents among the careless consumers, for a payout of \$150,000 ( $5 \times \$30,000$ ). So the total expected insurance payout is \$165,000, and the insurance company will break even.

**TABLE 12-2 Insurance Pricing with Separate Groups of Consumers**

Information	Pricing Approach	Premium per Careless (100 people)	Premium per Careful (100 people)	Total Premiums Paid	Total Benefits Paid to Out	Net Profits to Insurers
Full	Separate	\$1,500	\$150	\$165,000 ( $100 \times \$1,500 + 100 \times \$150$ )	\$165,000	0
Asymmetric	Separate	\$1,500	\$150	\$30,000 ( $0 \times \$1,500 + 200 \times \$150$ )	\$165,000	-\$135,000
Asymmetric	Average	\$825	\$825	\$82,500 ( $100 \times \$825 + 0 \times \$825$ )	\$150,000	-\$67,500

If the insurer has full information about whether insurance purchasers are careful or careless (first row), then he will charge \$1,500 to the careless and \$150 to the careful, making a net profit of zero. If the insured know whether they are careless or careful, and the insurer does not, then the insurer may try setting separate premiums for the groups (second row) or one common premium for all individuals (third row). In either case, the insurer loses money due to adverse selection, so the insurer will not offer insurance, leading to market failure.

## Example with Asymmetric Information

Now suppose that the insurance company knows that there are 100 careless consumers and 100 careful consumers, but it doesn't know in which category any given individual belongs. In this case, the insurance company could do one of two things.

First, the insurance company could ask individuals if they are careful or careless, and then offer insurance at separate premiums, as in the second row of [Table 12-2](#): the premium would be only \$150 if you say you are careful when you cross the street, and \$1,500 if you say you are careless. In this case, however, *all consumers* will say that they are careful so that they can buy insurance for \$150 per year: why voluntarily pay ten times as much for insurance?

From the consumers' perspective, this is a fine outcome because everyone is fully insured and paying a low premium. But what about the insurer? The company is collecting \$30,000 in total premium payments ( $200 \text{ persons} \times \$150 \text{ per person}$ ). It is, however, expecting to pay out 5 claims to the careless and 0.5 claims to the careful, for a total cost of  $5.5 \times 30,000$ , or \$165,000. So the insurance company, in this example, loses \$135,000 per year. Companies will clearly not offer any insurance under these conditions. Thus, the *market will fail*: consumers will not be able to obtain the optimal amount of insurance because the insurance will not be offered for sale. This outcome is summarized in the second row of [Table 12-2](#).

Alternatively, the insurance company could admit that it has no idea who is careful and who is not, and then offer insurance at a *pooled*, or average, cost. That is, on average, the insurer knows that there are 100 careless and 100 careful consumers, so that on average in any year, the insurer will pay out \$165,000 in claims. If it charges each of those 200 persons \$825 per year, then, in theory, the insurance company will break even.

Or will it? Consider the careful consumers, who are faced with the decision to buy insurance at a cost of \$825 or to not buy insurance at all. Careful consumers would view this as a bad deal, given that they have only a 0.5% chance of being hit. So they would not buy insurance. Meanwhile, however, all of the careless consumers view this as a great deal, and they would all buy insurance. The insurance company ends up collecting \$82,500 in premium payments (from the 100 careless customers), but paying out  $\$30,000 \times 5 = \$150,000$  in benefits to those careless customers. So the insurance company again loses money. Moreover, half the consumers (the careful ones), who would ideally choose to insure themselves fully against getting hit by a car, end up with no insurance. Once again, the *market has failed* to provide the optimal amount of insurance to both types of consumers. This outcome is shown in the third row of [Table 12-2](#).

## The Problem of Adverse Selection

The careful/careless pedestrian example in the previous section is an example of an asymmetric information problem that plagues insurance markets, the problem of **adverse selection**: the fact that insured individuals know more about their risk level than does the insurer might cause those most likely to have the adverse outcome to select insurance, leading insurers to lose money if they offer insurance. The general operation of the adverse selection problem is illustrated by our example. Only those for whom the insurance is a fair deal will buy that insurance. With one price that averages the high- and low-expense groups, only those in the high-expense group will find the insurance to be a fair deal. (For them, it's actually better than a fair deal.) If only the high-expense (highest risk of adverse outcome) group buys (selects) the insurance, the insurance company loses money because it charges the average price but has to pay out the high expected expenses of careless individuals. If the insurance company knows that it will lose money when it offers insurance, it won't offer that insurance. As a result, in this case no insurance will be available to consumers of any type.

### adverse selection

The fact that insured individuals know more about their risk level than does the insurer might cause those most likely to have the adverse outcome to select insurance, leading insurers to lose money if they offer insurance.

Adverse selection can, therefore, lead to failure in the insurance market, and perhaps the eventual collapse of the market. This might occur because it may not be in the interest of any individual company to offer insurance at a single, pooled price, so that no companies offer the insurance. For example, in the 1980s, the California health insurer HealthAmerica Corporation was rejecting all applicants to its individual health insurance enrollment program who lived in San Francisco on the belief that AIDS was too prevalent there. According to the

San Francisco district attorney, HealthAmerica would pretend to review San Franciscans' applications but would actually place them in a drawer for several weeks before sending them rejection letters.<sup>8</sup>

This is a market failure because, with full information, individuals from San Francisco were likely to buy insurance at the actuarially fair premium, even if that premium was higher due to the risk of AIDS.

## Does Asymmetric Information Necessarily Lead to Market Failure?

Are insurance companies destined to fail whenever there is asymmetric information? Not necessarily. First of all, most individuals are fairly risk averse. Risk-averse individuals so value being insured against bad outcomes that they are willing to pay *more* than the actuarially fair premium to buy insurance: they are willing to pay a **risk premium** above and beyond the actuarially fair premium. In our example, it is possible that the careful individuals are so risk averse, and therefore so afraid of being uninsured, that they are willing to buy insurance even at the average price. That is, even if the actuarially fair price for the careful is \$150, and the market is charging \$825, so that their risk premium is \$675 ( $\$825 - \$150$ ), they will still buy insurance. This situation is technically called a **pooling equilibrium**, a market equilibrium in which all types buy full insurance even though it is not fairly priced to all individuals. The pooling equilibrium is an efficient outcome: both types are fully insured, and the insurer is willing to provide insurance.

**risk premium**

The amount that risk-averse individuals will pay for insurance above and beyond the actuarially fair price.

**pooling equilibrium**

A market equilibrium in which all types of people buy full insurance even though it is not fairly priced to all individuals.

Even if there is no pooling equilibrium, the insurance company can address adverse selection by offering *separate products at separate prices*. Think about the source of the adverse selection problem in our example: careless individuals are pretending to be careful in order to get cheap insurance. The insurance company would like to get individuals to reveal their true types (careless or careful), but the company faces the type of preference revelation problem we saw with public goods. Even if individuals aren't willing to voluntarily reveal their types, however, they might make choices that involuntarily reveal their types.

Suppose that the insurance company offered two policies: full coverage for the \$30,000 of medical costs associated with accidents, at \$1,500 (the actuarially fair price for the careless), and coverage of up to \$10,000 of medical expenses, at a price of \$50 (the actuarially fair price for that level of coverage for the careful). If these two products were offered, it is possible that the careless would purchase the more expensive coverage and the careful would purchase the less expensive coverage. This outcome occurs because the careless don't want to bear the risk of having only \$10,000 of coverage, given their relatively high odds of having an accident; they would rather pay a high price to make sure they have full coverage. The careful can take that risk, however, because of their very low odds of having an accident. By offering different products at different prices, the insurance company has caused consumers to reveal their true types. This market equilibrium is called a **separating equilibrium**.

**separating equilibrium**

A market equilibrium in which different types of people buy different kinds of insurance products designed to reveal their true types.

Sound far-fetched? Consider what happened in health insurance markets 30 years ago. At that time, insurance companies were offering very generous insurance to all consumers at one

high price. As health insurance costs began to escalate, however, companies could no longer make profits with this strategy. In response to the higher costs they faced, insurance companies began to offer two products: a traditional insurance plan, and a new product called the health maintenance organization (HMO). HMOs offered care that was much more tightly monitored, typically featuring much less access to medical specialists, for example. But HMOs also had a much lower premium. The result was a major shift by largely healthy consumers to this new, relatively low-cost/low-benefit option: a classic separating equilibrium.

Unlike the pooling equilibrium, however, the separating equilibrium still *represents a market failure*. The careless are getting what they would get in a model of full information: full coverage at a high price, which they are willing to pay. The careful are not getting their first choice, however, which would be full coverage at a lower, actuarially fair price. To address this market failure, insurers have forced the careful to choose between full coverage at a very high price and partial coverage at a lower price. Because many of the careful will choose the partial coverage, this is not the optimal solution: the optimum is full coverage for both groups, at different prices that reflect each group's relative risks of injury. Thus, even with separate products, adverse selection can still impede markets from achieving the efficient outcome.



## APPLICATION

### Adverse Selection and Health Insurance “Death Spirals”

A particularly compelling example of the damage done by adverse selection in health insurance markets comes from a study of Harvard University by [Cutler and Reber \(1998\)](#). Harvard offered its employees a wide variety of health insurance plans, some much more generous than others (e.g., covering more expensive procedures). The prices charged to the university by the insurance companies for these plans were a function of how much each plan's enrollees made use of the medical care paid for by the plan. If a plan had many sick enrollees, for example, then its costs were higher, and the insurance companies would charge the university higher premiums. Such a pricing system is called **experience rating**: charging a price for insurance that is a function of realized outcomes. This is the “ex post” equivalent of actuarial adjustments: while actuarial adjustment charges a price based on *expected* experience, experience rating charges a price based on *actual* or *realized* experience.

#### experience rating

Charging a price for insurance that is a function of realized outcomes.

Health insurance plan costs were shared by Harvard University and its employees. Traditionally, the university shielded its employees from the fact that some plans were more expensive than others by paying a larger share of the more generous, more expensive health insurance plans and leaving employees with similar costs, whichever plan they chose. Thus, from the employees' perspective, there was relatively little penalty for choosing a more expensive, more generous insurance plan. In 1995, however, Harvard moved to a system in which the university paid the same amount for each plan, regardless of the plan's cost, so that employees had to pay more for the more generous and expensive health plans.

Cutler and Reber found that this new system greatly increased the extent of adverse selection across Harvard health insurance plans. Before 1995, many healthy individuals would choose the generous and expensive plan because prices were so similar—there was a

*pooling equilibrium*, with both sick and healthy choosing generous (full) insurance. When employees had to pay much more for the generous plan, however, some healthy enrollees chose cheaper plans, and the less healthy employees continued to choose the more generous plans; that is, the insurance group moved to a *separating equilibrium*, with the healthy getting less generous insurance at cheaper prices and the less healthy getting more generous insurance at high prices.

Because these less healthy employees used much more medical care, however, the experience-rated premiums (which reflect the average medical utilization of enrollees) of the more generous plans increased substantially. Given Harvard's new system (the university picked up a flat amount of costs, regardless of the total cost of the plan), the rising costs of these generous plans were borne completely by plan enrollees, which caused even more healthy employees to leave the generous plans for ones that were more affordable. This led to a spiral of higher premiums, causing the healthy to give up the generous plan, leading to even higher costs for that plan (because the remaining enrollees were sicker on average), which led to even more of the healthy leaving the plan. This spiral continued until, by 1998, the most generous plan had gotten so expensive that it was no longer offered. Adverse selection had led to a "death spiral" for this plan.

This was clearly an inefficient outcome because individuals who wanted very generous insurance could no longer buy it at *any* price. The insurance market had failed for Harvard employees; a product that was demanded at (or above) its cost of production was no longer available. This case study illustrates how adverse selection can produce market failure. ■

## How Does the Government Address Adverse Selection?

There are many potential government interventions that can address this problem of adverse selection. Suppose that, in the careful/careless pedestrian example, the government mandated that everyone buy full insurance at the average price of \$825 per year. This plan would lead to the efficient outcome, with both types of pedestrians having full insurance. This would not be a very attractive plan to careful consumers, however, who could view themselves as essentially being taxed in order to support this market, by paying higher premiums than they should based on their risk. That is, at a premium of \$825, many careful consumers would prefer to be uninsured rather than being mandated to buy full insurance, so the government is making them worse off.

Another option is public provision: the government could just provide full insurance to both types of consumers so that all consumers have the optimal full insurance level. Alternatively, the government could offer everyone subsidies toward the private purchase of full insurance to try to induce (optimal) full coverage. These government interventions would have to be financed, however. If the interventions were financed by charging all consumers equally, then the situation would be the same as that with the mandate: careful consumers would be paying more than they would voluntarily choose to pay for the full insurance (now in the form of tax bills rather than insurance premiums). Thus, the government can address adverse selection, and improve market efficiency in a number of ways, but they involve redistribution from the healthy to the sick, which may be quite unpopular.

## 12.3 Other Reasons for Government Intervention in Insurance Markets

Adverse selection is the most common but far from the only reason offered for government intervention in insurance markets. Other rationales include the following.

### Externalities

A classic case for government intervention in insurance markets is the negative externalities imposed on others through underinsurance. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), your lack of insurance can be a cause of illness for me, thereby exerting a negative physical externality. Alternatively, if you don't have auto insurance, and you injure me in an auto crash, then my insurer and I bear the cost of my injury, a negative financial externality. Just as the government intervened to solve externalities in [Chapters 5](#) and [6](#), it can do so in insurance markets as well by subsidizing, providing, or mandating insurance coverage.

### Administrative Costs

The administrative costs for Medicare, the government-run national insurance program for the elderly, are around 2% of claims paid. Administrative costs for private insurance, on the other hand, average about 12.4% of claims paid.<sup>9</sup> Why does this matter? Return to the case of perfect information, where the insurance company can appropriately price insurance for the careless and careful consumers. As we noted, the insurance company in this case would charge \$150 to the careful consumer and \$1,500 to the careless consumer, and at those prices, all consumers would insure themselves fully against injury. If the insurance company has administrative expenses of 15% of premiums, however, it would have to charge \$172.50 to the careful consumer ( $\$150 \times 1.15 = \$172.50$ ) and \$1,725 to the careless consumer ( $\$1,500 \times 1.15 = \$1,725$ ) in order to break even. At those higher (actuarially unfair) prices, some not-very-risk-averse consumers may decide against buying insurance. In this way, administrative inefficiencies can lead to market failure because not all people will be fully insured, as is optimal.

### Redistribution

With full information, the optimal outcome is for the careless consumer to pay ten times as much for his insurance as the careful consumer. This outcome may not be very satisfactory to many societies from a distributional point of view. Governments may want to intervene in insurance markets, perhaps by taxing the low-risk individuals and using the revenues to subsidize the premiums paid by high-risk individuals, thereby achieving a more even distribution of insurance costs.

Interestingly, technologies that make private insurance markets work better are also the ones that worsen the redistribution problem. Genetic testing, for example, may ultimately allow insurers to remove many problems of asymmetric information via the testing of individuals to predict their health costs accurately. Such testing has the implication, however, that those who are genetically ill fated will pay much higher prices for insurance than those who are genetically healthy. Will modern societies tolerate an insurance market that charges many times more for insurance to individuals who happen to have been born with the wrong genes?

### Paternalism

Paternalism is another major motivation for all social insurance programs. Governments may

simply feel that individuals will not appropriately insure themselves against risks if the government does not force them to do so. This motivation for intervention has nothing to do with market failures. Instead, it has to do with the failure of individuals to maximize their own utility. Thus, governments may insist on providing social insurance for individuals' own good, even if the individuals would choose not to do so themselves in a well-functioning private insurance market.



## APPLICATION

### Flood Insurance and the Samaritan's Dilemma

Another social insurance rationale goes by the name of the *samaritan's dilemma*. Compassionate governments find it difficult to ignore individuals who have suffered adverse events, especially when the events are not the fault of the individual. When a disaster hits, the government will transfer resources to help those affected to get back on their feet. Because individuals know that the government will bail them out if things go badly, they will not take precautions against things going badly (leading to the moral hazard problem that we will learn about shortly). As a result, the Good Samaritan government foots the bill for risky behavior.

Insurance against flood damage to homes is an example of the samaritan's dilemma. There should be, in principle, a well-functioning market for flood insurance: because insurers know as much if not more than homeowners about the flood risks that each household faces, adverse selection would not be a major concern in this market. Yet, until the late 1960s, few homeowners had flood insurance for their homes, even in the most dangerous, flood-prone areas. Because individuals and businesses knew they would receive federal disaster assistance if they were flooded, there was no reason for them to insure themselves against that eventuality. This government safety net, therefore, led people to continue to develop residential communities in areas at high risk for flooding and other natural disasters.

To reduce taxpayer-funded federal expenditures on flood control and disaster assistance and to shift some of the burden onto the beneficiaries themselves, the federal government established the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) in 1968.<sup>10</sup> Under the NFIP, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) maps areas along floodplains across the United States that are known as special flood hazard areas (SFHAs)—areas with a 1% chance of flooding in any given year. Communities located in SFHAs are given the option of buying flood insurance through the program, but only if they adopt and enforce federal floodplain management regulations. If a community agrees to enroll in the NFIP, the responsibility then falls upon individual homeowners and business owners in the community to assess their own risk and to determine whether or not to buy a flood insurance policy. Most policies are written by major property insurance companies, which collect the premiums and return them, minus the fee paid for their involvement in the program, to the National Flood Insurance Fund. The financial responsibilities of NFIP are met using these premium revenues; in emergency situations, however, the NFIP is also allowed to borrow from the U.S. Treasury.<sup>11</sup>

Since 1969, FEMA asserts that the NFIP has paid out \$51.1 billion in losses that otherwise would have been paid through taxpayer-funded disaster assistance or borne directly by the victims themselves. In addition, they claim that NFIP floodplain management regulations have significantly reduced the frequency and severity of flood-related damages: structures built according to NFIP criteria generally experience 80% less damage, and these building

restrictions are estimated to save \$1 billion per year.<sup>12</sup>

However, the myriad failures of the NFIP following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 have made it clear that the program has failed to deliver on many of its original goals. In the weeks after the hurricane, it was revealed that nearly half of the victims did not have flood insurance. Moreover, the \$25 billion of claims from those who did have flood insurance bankrupted the program, which brings in a mere \$2.2 billion in premiums each year. In the end, FEMA was forced to borrow \$17.5 billion from the Treasury to cover its obligations.<sup>13</sup>

The failures of the NFIP have many sources. First among these is that even within communities who are members of the NFIP, many individuals opt out of paying for insurance.<sup>14</sup> According to Linda Mackey, flood program manager at the Independent Insurance Agents and Brokers Association, “After every catastrophic event, we see more requests to quote flood insurance. Typically, they finally see that they could be at risk and buy coverage only to let it lapse again until the next disaster and they rush to buy it again.”<sup>15</sup> This is a classic example of the samaritan’s dilemma in practice: If the government is going to continue to help individuals in disasters, and people are not required by law to buy flood insurance, then why buy it? Indeed, the federal government continues to repair coastal infrastructure along hurricane-prone areas, among which are Louisiana, New Jersey, Florida, and Massachusetts.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of the failures of this program to meet the needs of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, Congress passed the Flood Insurance Reform and Modernization Act of 2007. This bill forgave the debt that FEMA owed to the Treasury and allowed FEMA to increase flood insurance premiums by up to 25%, including higher premiums in higher-risk areas. While this legislation moved government policy in a more sensible direction, the fundamental problem of only partial participation by homeowners remains (and could worsen with higher premiums). As [Evans \(2007\)](#) wrote, “so far, Congress has done little more than raise the program’s borrowing limit, essentially handing taxpayers a series of shaky IOU’s.”

In the summer of 2012, Congress passed the Biggert-Waters Flood Act, with bipartisan support. This legislation sought to repair the problems to the NFIP after Hurricane Katrina bankrupted the program and its many flaws were exposed. Homes that were considered to be “repetitive loss properties” (those that flooded repeatedly) saw higher insurance premiums, and a Technical Mapping Advisory Council was formed to more accurately conduct floodplain mapping. Many praised the legislation as a way to shift the burden of costs away from taxpayers to the private market, cut government spending, and accurately assess the costs of climate change and rising sea levels. Others were concerned, however, by the rise in flood insurance premiums, which would disadvantage homeowners in targeted areas and might cause them to avoid purchase altogether. As a result, the Homeowners Flood Insurance Affordability Act (HFIAA) was passed by Congress less than two years later in March 2014. This law repealed various aspects of the Biggert-Waters Flood Act. It lowered some previous rate increases, while providing a refund from the repealed ones. Rates may still go up, but incrementally as opposed to immediate full increases.

The ongoing problems with our flood insurance program were manifested in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, which hit Houston and southeast Texas in 2017, causing \$125 billion in damage—often to properties at obvious risk of flooding. Indeed, in one zip code alone, consisting of 71 homes, at least 5 floods since 2001 have cost FEMA more than \$12 million.<sup>17</sup> Proposals to address this problem have ranged from introducing more competition

into flood insurance markets, to government buy-back of properties in flood prone areas.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, the debate over flood insurance is far from over and will continue to revolve around the goals of protecting the federal costs of flood bailouts against the high costs that would be imposed in flood plain areas with fairly priced insurance. ■

## 12.4 Social Insurance Versus Self-Insurance: How Much Consumption Smoothing?

The arguments just presented suggest a number of reasons private insurance markets may not make it possible for a risk-averse individual to satisfy his or her desire for consumption smoothing. Yet they do not suggest that consumption smoothing is completely unavailable because individuals may have other private means to smooth consumption: their own savings, the labor supply of family members, borrowing from friends, and so on. The justification for social insurance depends on the extent to which social insurance is necessary, given consumers' use of private forms of consumption smoothing. For ease of exposition, we call these other forms of consumption smoothing **self-insurance**, although most of these forms are not actually insurance. If people have extensive self-insurance against adverse risk, the benefits of social insurance will be reduced.

### self-insurance

The private means of smoothing consumption over adverse events, such as through one's own savings, the labor supply of family members, or borrowing from friends.

### Example: Unemployment Insurance

To better understand how self-insurance might work, let's consider the case of unemployment insurance (UI), which provides income to workers who have lost their jobs. Individuals do not generally have a private form of unemployment insurance upon which they can draw, but they do have other potential means to smooth their consumption (self-insurance) across unemployment spells:

- They can draw on their own savings.
- They can borrow, either in *collateralized* forms (such as borrowing against the equity they have in their homes) or in *uncollateralized* forms (e.g., on their credit card).
- Other family members can increase their labor earnings.
- They can receive transfers from their extended family, friends, or local organizations, such as churches.

The importance of social insurance programs as a source of consumption smoothing depends on the availability of self-insurance. If there is no self-insurance, then social insurance will provide an important source of consumption smoothing. Once we allow for private forms of consumption smoothing through self-insurance, we have a problem similar to that raised in [Chapter 7](#) in the context of public goods: public intervention (social insurance) can crowd out private provision (self-insurance). If social insurance simply crowds out self-insurance, there may be no net consumption-smoothing gain to social insurance. Given that there is an efficiency cost to raising government revenues (see [Chapter 20](#)), government insurance market interventions that do not provide consumption-smoothing gains (that simply crowd out private sources of support) are harder to justify.

For example, imagine three different scenarios for someone who loses his job. At one extreme he has no self-insurance when he loses his job—no savings, no credit cards, no friends to loan him money. With no unemployment insurance, this person's consumption will drop to zero. Each dollar of unemployment insurance raises his consumption by \$1. In this case, UI plays a full consumption-smoothing role: there is no crowd-out of self-insurance (because there is no self-insurance); each dollar of UI goes directly to reducing the decline in

consumption from unemployment.

At the other extreme is someone who has complete self-insurance. There might be, for example, a private unemployment insurance product sold at an actuarially fair price, or the unemployed worker might have rich parents who would happily lend him as much money as he needed. We know from the insurance theory explained earlier in the chapter that individuals, in the absence of government intervention, will choose full insurance if it is available. This implies that the individual will choose to fully smooth his consumption when he becomes unemployed, either from private sources if there is no public insurance or from public insurance if it is available. In this case, even with a zero replacement rate (no UI), the unemployed worker's consumption does not fall at all when he becomes unemployed; self-insurance allows him to fully maintain his desired consumption. Each dollar of additional UI would not change consumption smoothing because it is already at its desired level. (At any level of UI generosity, the change in consumption is always zero.) Rather, the only effect of increases in UI benefits is a reduction in the extent to which the individual purchases private insurance or borrows from his parents. In this situation, UI plays no consumption-smoothing role and plays only a crowd-out role: each dollar of UI simply means that there is one less dollar of self-insurance.

This example, while hypothetical, is not implausible. My wife's aunt worked for a large midwestern manufacturing company that closed its operations every summer but essentially promised to hire its workers back the following fall. During the year, she saved for this event out of her earnings and was pleased to spend her summers as a state champion softball pitcher! As UI generosity increased over time in her state, she simply saved less, maintaining her desired level of consumption smoothing. UI did nothing to help her smooth her consumption; it only reduced (crowded out) the amount of saving that she needed to do during the year to ensure constant consumption throughout the year.

Finally, consider a third individual who has "imperfect" or "partial" self-insurance. For example, she can borrow money, but only at a higher interest rate, or she has parents who will loan her money, but the more money she borrows, the more guilty her parents will make her feel. In the absence of UI, this person will only use some of her self-insurance because it is imperfect. Thus, she will be able to smooth consumption to some extent, but not fully (as she would with perfect self-insurance), because this self-insurance is costly. In this case, what happens as UI increases? The unemployed worker would use part of each dollar of UI to increase consumption smoothing. But part of each dollar would be used to reduce this imperfect self-insurance. There will be crowd-out of self-insurance, but only partial. The mix between using the next dollar of UI to smooth consumption, versus reducing self-insurance, will depend on the relative value of consumption versus the cost of self-insurance.

To summarize, the effect of UI on both consumption smoothing and crowd-out depends on the extent of self-insurance. If there is no self-insurance, UI plays a 100% consumption-smoothing role: each dollar of UI translates directly into a dollar of consumption. Likewise, with no self-insurance, UI does no crowding out, because there is nothing to be crowded out by the government program. As self-insurance grows, the amount of consumption smoothing provided by UI falls, because individuals have self-insurance they can rely on instead.

Thus, the availability of self-insurance determines the value of social insurance to individuals suffering adverse events. If self-insurance is incomplete or very costly, then social insurance is valuable, providing extensive consumption smoothing. If self-insurance is nearly complete and not very costly, then social insurance is less valuable, because it serves to

crowd out that self-insurance.<sup>19</sup>

## Lessons for Consumption-Smoothing Role of Social Insurance

While the example we used was specific to unemployment insurance, the lessons are general for all of the social insurance programs we look at in the next few chapters. For example, as we discuss in [Chapter 13](#), an important source of self-insurance for retirement is one's own savings. To what extent does the Social Security program, which provides retirement income, simply crowd out savings that individuals would do on their own for retirement, and to what extent does it provide consumption smoothing across the years between working and retirement? We deal with these specific issues in the next chapter.

In general, the importance of social insurance for consumption smoothing will depend on two factors:

- *Predictability of the event:* Social insurance plays a smaller consumption-smoothing role for predictable events because individuals can prepare themselves for predictable events through other channels (such as savings). Thus, the benefits of social insurance are highest when events are not predictable.
- *Cost of the event:* Savings and borrowing are possible channels of consumption smoothing for a few weeks of unemployment, but may be much less feasible when a person is out of work for years due to a long-term or permanent disability. Thus, the benefits of social insurance are highest when events are most costly.

Understanding the extent of consumption smoothing provided by any social insurance program is important for evaluating the central trade-off mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. The benefits of social insurance are measured by the amount of consumption smoothing provided by the program. Next, we turn to measuring the costs.

## 12.5 The Problem with Insurance: Moral Hazard

When we discussed externalities in [Chapter 5](#), the analysis was straightforward: there was a failure in the market and, in principle, the government could achieve efficiency by forcing the relevant actors to internalize the external costs (or benefits) that they were imposing. When governments intervene in insurance markets, however, the analysis is one step more complicated because of another asymmetric information problem called **moral hazard**, which is the adverse behavior that is encouraged by insuring against an adverse event. Moral hazard is a central feature of insurance markets: if families buy fire insurance for their homes, they may be less likely to keep fire extinguishers handy; if individuals have health insurance, they may be less likely to take precautions against getting ill; if workers have unemployment insurance, they may be less likely to search hard for a new job. As Shakespeare wrote in Act III, Scene 5 of *Timon of Athens*, “Nothing emboldens sin so much as mercy.”

### **moral hazard**

Adverse actions taken by individuals or producers in response to insurance against adverse outcomes.

The existence of moral hazard means that it may not be optimal for the government to provide the full insurance that is demanded by risk-averse consumers. Consider the example of workers’ compensation insurance, a \$62 billion program that insures workers against injury on the job (discussed in detail in [Chapter 14](#)).<sup>20</sup> Clearly, getting injured on the job is a bad thing, and individuals would like to insure against it. There is a big problem with workers’ compensation insurance, however: it is difficult to determine whether individuals are really injured and whether that injury occurred on the job. Many injuries are impossible to diagnose precisely, particularly chronic problems like back pain or mental impairment, and it is hard to tell whether injuries, particularly chronic injuries, have occurred on the job or during a weekend softball game.

The difficulty of assessing injuries is a problem because it can be quite attractive to qualify for the workers’ compensation program. Workers’ compensation benefits include payment of the medical costs of treating an injury and cash compensation for lost wages, which can amount to two-thirds or more of a worker’s pre-injury wages. Recall that in standard economic models we assume that leisure is a normal good and that, all else equal, individuals would rather be home than at work. If you can claim that you have an on-the-job injury, even if you really don’t, you can stay home from work and continue to take home two-thirds of what you earned when working. Thus, the existence of this program may actually encourage individuals to fake injury.

By trying to insure against an adverse event (true injury), the insurer may encourage individuals to pretend that the adverse event has happened to them when it actually hasn’t. This scenario is a primary example of moral hazard. Imagine how bad this problem would be if, as in the Social Security systems of some European countries we study in the next chapter, you actually receive as much (or more) money from staying home than you do from working!



### APPLICATION

#### The Problems with Assessing Workers’ Compensation Injuries

Excellent examples of the difficulties in assessing whether a worker is truly injured come from stories of workers who are collecting workers’ compensation when they are clearly not injured:

- Paul Hebert began collecting workers' compensation in 2010. A third-generation tuna fisherman, he filed for Social Security, claiming that he could not work at any job due to physical disability and that he lived alone and had no financial resources. But two years later, Hebert began starring in National Geographic's reality TV show *Wicked Tuna*, captaining his boat and reeling, spearing, and lifting bluefin tuna (which can weigh up to 2,000 pounds!). In July 2015, he was indicted on four counts of fraud, allegedly having accepted more than \$44,000 in Social Security payments between 2010 and 2014.
- In 2015, Donald Ray Simmons Jr. claimed that a severe arm injury suffered on his construction job left him unable to work. He had received \$52,000 in insurance payments before investigators made a startling discovery: since leaving his construction job he had been earning income as a tandem skydiving instructor. They videotaped Simmons handling heavy gear, jumping out of an airplane strapped to a paying customer, and operating a parachute without issue—all requiring strenuous use of the allegedly injured arm.<sup>21</sup>
- In 2017, Sheyla Veronica White was working on her computer in a Ft. Lauderdale office when she noticed that a ceiling sprinkler had fallen onto her desk. She picked up the sprinkler, looked it over, and hit herself in the head with it, apparently to give her employer the impression that the sprinkler had fallen directly on her, causing injury. She subsequently filed a workers' compensation claim. However, the whole episode was caught on tape. Her employer reviewed their security footage, revealing the fraud, and she never received her workers' compensation (instead she received 18 months of probation).<sup>22</sup>

Moral hazard is an inevitable cost of insurance, private or social. Because of optimizing behavior by individuals and firms, we increase the incidence of adverse events simply by insuring against them. The existence of moral hazard problems, therefore, creates the *central trade-off of social insurance*: by fixing failures in private insurance markets, the government can worsen the underlying problem that is being insured against. ■

## What Determines Moral Hazard?

The extent of moral hazard varies with two factors. The first factor is how easy it is to observe whether the adverse event has happened. If an employer truly knows whether a worker has been injured on the job, the moral hazard problem with workers' compensation is greatly diminished. The second factor is how easy it is to change behavior in order to establish the adverse event. When it is neither easy nor attractive to change behavior in order to qualify for insurance, such as in the case for insurance against death, moral hazard is unlikely to be a problem. When the insurance is for an adverse event that is easily and costlessly attained (or faked), however, moral hazard may be a larger problem.

The extent to which it is worth undertaking an ordeal for financial gain may differ across individuals. Perhaps the most extreme example is Vernon, Florida, which gained renown in the late 1950s and 1960s when investigators noticed that more than two-thirds of all loss-of-limb accident claims in the United States came from this area of Florida. It turned out that a group of individuals had decided that the personal cost to them of losing a limb was less than the benefit of the insurance money that they could collect. As a result, many insurance claims were filed by people such as a man who sawed off his own left hand at work, a man who shot off his foot while protecting chickens, and a man who lost his hand while trying to shoot a

hawk. Nearly 50 men in the area collected insurance for these so-called accidents, leading the town to be known as “nub city” ([Lake, 2007](#)).

## Moral Hazard Is Multidimensional

Moral hazard can arise along many dimensions. In examining the effects of social insurance, four types of moral hazard play a particularly important role:

- *Reduced precaution against adverse events.* Examples: because you have medical insurance that covers illness, you reduce preventive activities to protect your health, or because you have workers’ compensation insurance, you aren’t as careful at work.
- *Increased odds of entering the adverse state.* Examples: because you have workers’ compensation, you are more likely to claim that you were injured on the job, or because you have unemployment insurance, you are more likely to become unemployed.
- *Increased expenditures when in the adverse state.* Examples: because you have medical insurance, you use more medical care than you otherwise would, or because you have workers’ compensation, you don’t work hard to rehabilitate your injury.
- *Supplier responses to insurance against the adverse state.* Examples: because you have medical insurance, physicians provide too much care to you, or because you have workers’ compensation, firms aren’t as careful about protecting you against workplace accidents.

In the next few chapters, we often will not draw a strong distinction between these different types of moral hazard, but it is important to recognize the alternative dimensions along which it can exist.

## The Consequences of Moral Hazard

Why is moral hazard a problem? Even if social insurance encourages individuals to, for example, spend more time at home pretending to be injured than being at work, why is that an important cost of social insurance?

Moral hazard is costly for two reasons. First, the adverse behavior encouraged by insurance lowers social efficiency, for example, because it reduces the provisions of socially efficient labor supply. In a perfectly competitive labor market, a worker’s wage equals his marginal product, the value of the goods he is producing for society. With no workers’ compensation, workers will supply labor until their wage (their marginal product) equals their marginal valuation of the next hour of leisure time (such as their value of watching TV). If the wage is above the value of leisure time, it is socially efficient for individuals to work, since the benefit of work (the marginal product of that labor) exceeds the cost (the value of the foregone TV).

When workers’ compensation is introduced, the value of leisure rises: each hour of leisure not only provides one hour of TV, but also a workers’ compensation payment. Thus, individuals will supply labor only until the wage equals their marginal value of leisure *plus* the workers’ compensation income they can receive by pretending to be injured. This will lead individuals to work less than is socially efficient: even if the wage (and therefore the marginal product) is above the value of watching TV, individuals may still choose not to work because of the promise of workers’ compensation benefits.

This moral hazard cost arises in any insurance context, such as health insurance. In the case

of health insurance, individuals should use medical care only until the point where the marginal benefit to them (in terms of improved health) equals the marginal cost of the service. If individuals are completely insured, however, and don't pay any costs for their medical care, they will use that medical care until the marginal benefit to them is zero (their marginal cost, which is zero with full insurance). This will lead to an inefficiently high level of medical care if the true marginal cost is greater than zero.

The second cost for social insurance due to moral hazard is revenue raising. Whenever the government increases its expenditures, it must raise taxes to compensate (at least in the long run). As we discuss at length in the tax chapters, there are efficiency costs associated with government taxation through the negative impacts that it has on work effort, savings, and other behaviors. Thus, when social insurance encourages adverse events, which raise the cost of the social insurance program, it increases taxes and lowers social efficiency further.

## 12.6 Putting It All Together: Optimal Social Insurance

There are four basic lessons from the discussion in this chapter. First, individuals value insurance because they would ideally like to smooth their consumption across states of the world. That is, they would like to have the same consumption whether or not an adverse event such as unemployment or injury befalls them. Second, there are a number of reasons the market may fail to provide such insurance, most notably adverse selection. Third, even if the market fails to provide such insurance, the justification for social insurance depends on whether other private consumption-smoothing mechanisms are available. The key question is the extent to which the social insurance provides new consumption smoothing versus just crowding out existing self-insurance. Fourth, expanding insurance coverage has a moral hazard cost in terms of encouraging adverse behavior.

These lessons have a clear policy implication: *optimal social insurance systems should partially, but not completely, insure individuals against adverse events.* As with all government policies in this book, the appropriate role for the government in providing social insurance reflects the trade-off between the benefits and costs of such intervention. The *benefit of social insurance is the amount of consumption smoothing provided by social insurance programs.* If individuals become injured on the job and the government smooths their consumption by insuring that injury, social efficiency rises because a market failure has been fixed. If, on the other hand, people are fully self-insured and the government provides no consumption smoothing with social insurance, there is less benefit to the intervention (although perhaps some benefit if self-insurance was itself inefficient).

The *cost of social insurance is the moral hazard caused by insuring against adverse events.* If individuals join a workers' compensation program even when they are not in fact injured, social efficiency falls for two reasons. First, these individuals are not employed, so social product is smaller than is efficient. Second, the government must raise more tax revenues to pay for their workers' compensation benefits, and higher taxes also lower social efficiency.

Thus, higher social insurance improves social efficiency by fixing a market failure but reduces social efficiency by reducing production and raising taxes. As with most trade-offs in economics, the resolution of this full insurance–adverse behavior trade-off will generally be somewhere in the middle, optimally providing some insurance against adverse events, but not full insurance.

## 12.7 Conclusion

Asymmetric information in insurance markets has two important implications. First, it can cause *adverse selection*, which makes it difficult for insurance markets to provide actuarially fair insurance to those who would demand it if it were available to them. Second, it can cause *moral hazard*, whereby the provision of insurance encourages adverse behavior in those purchasing the insurance. The ironic feature of asymmetric information, therefore, is that it simultaneously motivates *and* undercuts the rationale for government intervention through social insurance.

In the remainder of this section of the book, we investigate the role of the government in insuring several major life events: unemployment, on-the-job injury, career-ending disability, retirement, and illness. In each case, we see that there is a trade-off between the benefits of completing imperfect insurance markets and the costs of encouraging adverse behavior. The extent of this trade-off will vary with the nature of the adverse events being insured. The purpose of these chapters will be to assess how the extensive literature on these social programs can inform policy makers of appropriate reforms to the programs.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The largest and fastest-growing function of the government is the provision of social insurance against adverse events such as retirement, unemployment, injury, or illness. Social insurance programs are mandatory, contribution-based systems that tie the payout of benefits to the occurrence of a measurable event.
- Insurance is demanded because it allows individuals to smooth their consumption across various states of the world; with actuarially fair premiums, the optimal outcome is for individuals to insure themselves fully against adverse events.
- The major motivation for government-provided social insurance is the failure in private insurance markets caused by adverse selection. Adverse selection causes insurance markets to fail because imperfect information leads insurers to be unable to offer full insurance to different types of consumers.
- Other motivations for social insurance include externalities, administrative inefficiencies in the private insurance market, the desire for redistribution, and paternalism.
- The consumption-smoothing benefits of social insurance are determined by the ability of individuals to use other forms of self-insurance to smooth their consumption.
- Moral hazard is an offsetting cost to the benefits of social insurance. By insuring individuals against adverse events, we may increase the incidence of these events among the insured.
- Full insurance is unlikely to be optimal: the optimal social insurance benefit level trades off moral hazard costs against consumption-smoothing benefits.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. A number of websites, such as [quickquote.com](http://quickquote.com), offer instant quotes for term life insurance. Use one such website to compare annual premiums for a \$1 million, 10-year, term life insurance policy for a 50-year-old man and a 50-year-old woman. Assume each is in exceptional health and does not use tobacco. Explain the difference in quotes for the man and the woman. Suppose that the U.S. government were to pass a nondiscrimination law requiring insurers to offer the same prices for men and women. What effect would you expect this law to have on prices and insurance coverage?
2. What is consumption smoothing? How does insurance help people smooth consumption?
3. Suppose that you have a job paying \$50,000 per year. With a 5% probability, next year your wage will be reduced to \$20,000 for the year.
  1. What is your expected income next year?
  2. Suppose that you could insure yourself against the risk of reduced consumption next year. What would the actuarially fair insurance premium be?
4. Small companies typically find it more expensive, on a per-employee basis, to buy health insurance for their workers, as compared with larger companies. Similarly, it is usually less expensive to obtain health insurance through an employer-provided plan than purchasing it directly from an insurance company—even if your employer requires you to pay the entire premium. Use the ideas from this chapter to explain these observations.
5. The problem of adverse selection in insurance markets means that it is generally a bad deal for companies to offer insurance at the same price for all potential customers. Why then do we observe some insurance companies (such as those selling “trip insurance” that refunds money to people who purchase trips that they are unable to take) do exactly this?
6. Why might government provision of insurance lead to a larger number of insurance claims than private provision of insurance would?
7. Why does the government mandate individuals to purchase their own insurance in some cases—such as automobile liability insurance—but directly provide insurance to people in other situations—such as health insurance?
8. Your professor is paid only nine months out of the year (really!!). Suppose that she were fired each spring and rehired each fall, and thereby was eligible for unemployment insurance benefits. (After all, all those students going away for the summer creates economic hardship for your university!) Do you think that would affect her consumption smoothing over the year, relative to what she does right now, when she is not fired annually? Explain your answer.
9. Currently, in order to receive workers’ compensation, a claimant’s injury claims must be verified by a physician of the claimant’s choosing. Suppose that the workers’ compensation policy changed so that only government-assigned physicians could verify injury claims. What is likely to happen to the rate of reported on-the-job injury? Explain.
10. Describe the dimensions along which moral hazard can exist. Can you think of ways in which the government can reduce the prevalence of moral hazard along each dimension?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS



11. Suppose you think that poorly educated families are less able to smooth consumption in the absence of unemployment insurance than are well-educated families. How would you empirically test this supposition? What types of data would you want to use?
12. There are two types of drivers on the road today. Speed Racers have a 5% chance of causing an accident per year, while Low Riders have a 1% chance of causing an accident per year. There are twice as many Speed Racers as there are Low Riders. The cost of an accident is \$12,000.
1. Suppose an insurance company knows with certainty each driver's type. What premium would the insurance company charge each type of driver?
  2. Now suppose that there is asymmetric information, so the insurance company does not know with certainty each driver's type. Would insurance be sold if:
    1. Drivers self-reported their types to the insurance company?
    2. No information at all is known about individual driver's types?

If you are uncertain whether insurance would be sold, explain why.

$$U = \sqrt{C},$$

13. Your utility function is  $U = \sqrt{C}$ , where  $C$  is the amount of consumption that you have in any given period. Your income is \$40,000 per year, and there is a 2% chance that you will be involved in a catastrophic accident that will cost you \$30,000 next year.
1. What is your expected utility?
  2. Calculate an actuarially fair insurance premium. What would your expected utility be were you to purchase the actuarially fair insurance premium?
  3. What is the most that you would be willing to pay for insurance, given your utility function?

14. Hayden has utility of  $U = \log(C)$ , while Pat has utility of  $U = \sqrt{C}$ . Which person is more risk averse? Which person would pay the higher insurance premium to smooth consumption?
15. Chimnesia has two equal-sized groups of people: smokers and nonsmokers. Both types of people have utility  $U = \sqrt{C}$ , where  $C$  is the amount of consumption that people have in any period. So long as they are healthy, individuals will consume their entire income of \$16,000. If they need medical attention (and have no insurance), they will have to spend \$12,000 to get healthy again, leaving them with only \$4,000 to consume. Smokers have a 10% chance of requiring major medical attention, while nonsmokers have a 2% chance.

Insurance companies in Chimnesia can sell two types of policies. The “low-deductible” (L-) policy covers all medical costs above \$2,000, while the “high-deductible” (H-) policy covers only medical costs above \$10,000.

1. What is the actuarially fair premium for each type of policy and for each group?
2. If insurance companies can tell who is a smoker and who is a nonsmoker and charge the actuarially fair premiums for each policy and group, show that both groups will purchase the L-policy.

Suppose that smoking status represents *asymmetric information*: each individual knows whether or not they are a smoker, but the insurance company does not.

3. Explain why it is impossible, at any price, for both groups to purchase L-policies in this setting. Which groups, if any, do you expect to buy L-policies, and at what price?
  4. Show that it is possible for both groups to purchase insurance, with one group buying L-policies and one group buying H-policies.
16. The country of Adventureland's two citizens, Bill and Ted, both earn \$1,000 per week working the same job at the

same company. Bill and Ted each face some risk of being laid off due to bad market conditions next year, in which case they will have an income of only \$250 from an alternative part-time job that they would fall back on. There is a 10% probability that Bill will be laid off, and a 30% probability that Ted will be laid off. Bill and Ted have the same utility function  $U = \ln(C)$ .

The government is considering providing some social unemployment insurance. In particular, they are considering two plans: the first would pay any worker who loses his job \$100, and the second would pay any worker who loses his job \$600. Both would be financed by collecting a tax from any worker who *keeps* his job.

1. Under each plan, how high would the government have to set the tax so that it would not expect to lose money on the plan?
2. Assuming it sets the tax rate you found in part a, compute the well-being of Bill and Ted under each of the plans. How do Bill and Ted rank the three possibilities (the two policies and the *status quo*)? Explain the pattern that you see in terms of *redistribution* and *risk aversion*.
3. Which plan is best if the society has a utilitarian social welfare function? A Rawlsian social welfare function? (See [Chapter 3](#) if you need a reminder about social welfare functions!)



- The icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 12 Mathematical Models of Expected Utility



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

This appendix presents the mathematical model of expected utility that underlies the discussion in [Chapter 12](#). This model illustrates the consequences of adverse selection in insurance markets.

# Expected Utility Model

The model is described by the following parameters:

- You are hit by the car with some probability  $p$ .
- Your income is  $W$ , regardless of whether you get hit or not.
- However, if you get hit, you incur medical costs  $\delta$ .
- You can buy insurance, with premium  $m$  per dollar of insurance.
- That insurance will pay you  $b$  if you are hit by the car.
- In this case, we can write your expected utility ( $EU$ ) as

$$EU = (1 - p) \times U(W - mb) + p \times U(W - \delta - mb + b)$$

The problem with this expression is that we have one equation, with two unknowns ( $m$  and  $b$ ). To solve this equation, we need to add one more condition: that insurance is priced in an actuarially fair manner, so that insurance companies make zero expected profits (we assume, for now, zero administrative costs). In that case, the zero expected profit ( $E\pi$ ) condition for the insurer is

$$E\pi = m \times b - p \times b = 0$$

The expected profit of the insurer, which equals premiums received minus expected benefits paid out, equals zero. This, in turn, implies that the premium equals

$$m = p$$

That is, if the risk is 10%, then  $m = 10\%$  per dollar of insurance. We can now go back and maximize expected utility by plugging in  $b$  from this equation. As in the example in the text, we assume that utility is of the form  $U = \sqrt{C}$ . So

$$\text{Maximize } EU = (1 - p) \times \sqrt{(W - b \times p)} + p \times \sqrt{(W - \delta - bp + b)}$$

Maximizing this equation with respect to  $b$ , we obtain

$$-(1 - p) \times p / \sqrt{(W - bp)} + p \times (1 - p) / \sqrt{(W - \delta - bp + b)}$$

Setting this equal to zero and solving for the optimal level of insurance benefits ( $b^*$ ), we get  $b^* = \delta$ . That is, individuals should buy enough insurance so that if they have the adverse outcome, their benefits exactly offset their costs: individuals should buy *full insurance* to smooth their consumption across states. Another way to see this is to plug the optimal benefit level ( $b^* = \delta$ ) back into the utility function:

$$\begin{aligned} EU &= p \sqrt{(W - p\delta)} + (1 - p) \sqrt{(W - \delta - p\delta + \delta)} \\ &= p \sqrt{(W - p\delta)} + (1 - p) \sqrt{(W - p\delta)} \end{aligned}$$

That is, we obtain the result that *consumption is equalized* (at  $W - p\delta$ ) in both states of the

*world.* This result motivates the key conclusion of this chapter: facing actuarially fair insurance markets, individuals will want to insure themselves fully against risk.

# Adverse Selection

To understand more formally the implications of adverse selection, we now consider two groups, the careful and the careless, where the probability of accident for the careful is  $p_c$ , and the probability of accident for the careless is  $p_a > p_c$ .

As discussed in this chapter, if there is full information, then the insurance company charges prices such that  $m_a = b \times p_a$  for the careless, and  $m_c = b \times p_c$  for the careful. The former premium is higher, since  $p_a > p_c$ ; those who are more likely to have an accident have to pay more for insurance.

But if there isn't full information, so that insurance companies know only the proportions of types in the population, then there are two possible pricing strategies. One is to assume that individuals are honest and charge them according to their reported types. As discussed in the chapter, however, this strategy will lead all individuals to claim that they are careful. In this world, the profits earned on the careful are:

$E\pi = m_c - b \times p_c = b \times p_c - b \times p_c = 0$ ; that is, the insurance company breaks even on the share of the population that is careful. However, the profits earned on the careless are

$E\pi = m_c - b \times p_a = b \times p_c - b \times p_a < 0$ , since  $p_a > p_c$  profits are negative overall and insurance is not offered.

The other strategy considered in this chapter was to offer insurance at an average price,  $m_v$ , that is based on the average of the accident probabilities  $p_a > p_v > p_c$ . At this price, insurance is a good deal for the careless but a bad deal for the careful, and may be bought only by the careless. In that case, the expected profits of the insurer are again negative:

$$E\pi = m_v - b \times p_a = b \times p_v - b \times p_a < 0, \text{ since } p_a > p_v$$

It is possible, however, that the careful still would buy full insurance (the pooling equilibrium). For example, they would buy insurance if expected utility with insurance (at the unfair price) is still higher than expected utility without insurance; that is, if

$$\begin{aligned} EU(\text{with insurance}) &= (1 - p_c) \times U(W - p_v \delta) + p_c \times U(W - p_v \delta) > \\ EU(\text{no insurance}) &= (1 - p_c) \times U(W) + p_c \times U(W - \delta) \end{aligned}$$

Whether this inequality holds or not will depend on two things: the extent of risk aversion of the careful individuals and the relationship between  $p_c$  and  $p_a$ . If the careful individuals are more risk averse, they will be more willing to buy insurance (even at an unfair premium) to guard against the odds of being left with low consumption. And the closer the average risk is to the risk faced by the careful, the closer the premium is to being actuarially fair, and the more likely it is that the careful individuals will buy the insurance.

# CHAPTER 13 Social Security



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [13.1 What Is Social Security, and How Does It Work?](#)
- [13.2 Consumption-Smoothing Benefits of Social Security](#)
- [13.3 Social Security and Retirement](#)
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## Questions to keep in mind

- How does Social Security work, and how does it end up redistributing income across society?
- What effect does Social Security have on consumption smoothing and early retirement?
- How might we reform Social Security to address its budget shortfall?

During a debate among Republican presidential candidates in September 2011, former Texas governor Rick Perry voiced his problems with the federal government's **Social Security** program, which taxes workers to provide income support to the elderly. Over the next several decades, the aging of the huge "baby boom" cohort that was born in the United States in the wake of World War II will lead to a large rise in the number of retired elderly relative to the number of workers. Because there will be more elderly to be supported by fewer workers, the Social Security program faces a stark financing problem: over the next 75 years, the program has promised \$13.2 trillion more in benefit payments than it plans to collect in taxes from workers.<sup>1</sup>

### Social Security

A federal program that taxes workers to provide income support to the elderly.

During the debate, Governor Perry called the Social Security program a "monstrous lie" to future generations. Perry claimed that young people are paying for a program that will not "be there for them" when they reach old age.<sup>2</sup> He proposed a return to how the Social Security program operated before 1983, when state and local workers were free to opt out of Social Security and instead pay into state or locally run retirement programs. Other parts of his plan involved creating individual savings accounts within Social Security for younger workers and gradually raising the retirement age—policies that have been widely proposed by other politicians and are often well backed.<sup>3</sup>

Opposing Republican candidate Mitt Romney rebutted Perry's opposition to the status quo by saying, "You can't say that to tens of millions of Americans who have lived on Social Security." Romney, whose own twofold approach to Social Security reform involves increasing the retirement age by a year or two as well as slowing benefit growth for higher income recipients,<sup>4</sup> concluded his remarks on the issue by saying, "Under no circumstances will I ever say . . . [Social Security] is a failure."<sup>5</sup>

Perry's opt-out policy also stands in contrast to the proposal of former President Obama's bipartisan debt-reduction commission, which would enroll all newly hired state and local government workers in Social Security after 2020. Alan Simpson, a member of the commission and former Republican senator of Wyoming, says that this policy would improve the financial position of Social Security while protecting state employees who face public pension funds that may not be there for them when they retire. He and others point to examples like the pension fund for public school teachers in the state of Illinois, which in 2010 returned only 48 cents of every dollar promised.<sup>6</sup>



*“Forget about me—save Social Security.”*  
Robert Weber/The New Yorker © Conde Nast.

Over the past decade, little progress has been made on Social Security reform. For example, a 2001 presidential commission examined the system and issued a report with a number of recommendations, but no politician has been willing to pursue any of the options seriously. Reforming Social Security is difficult because the program is the largest single source of income for the elderly population in the United States: 61% of beneficiaries derive more than half their income from Social Security, and for almost 33%, it provides more than 90% of their income.<sup>7</sup> Any reform that is perceived as reducing the generosity of this program is therefore subject to withering political attack.

Politicians are wary of making changes to Social Security, not only because it is the single largest government expenditure today, but also because it is the nation’s largest social insurance program. By making payroll tax payments to the Social Security program, workers purchase insurance against earnings loss when they die or retire. Thus, the tools we used in the previous chapter to analyze the benefits and costs of social insurance programs help us evaluate the role that Social Security should play in the United States.

This chapter begins with a review of the institutional features of Social Security and then turns to a discussion of why the government would want to intervene to provide income security to the elderly. Following our discussion in the previous chapter, we then discuss the ability of individuals to self-insure through savings against income loss in retirement and the extent to which Social Security crowds out that self-insurance. We then examine the cost of providing such income security, and the possibility that it might encourage adverse behavior in terms of early retirement, and review the theory of and evidence for this moral hazard. Finally, we look at possible reforms for Social Security, including options that propose

changes to the existing program and options that change the nature of the program itself.

# 13.1 What Is Social Security, and How Does It Work?

In this section, we discuss the basic structure of Social Security.<sup>8</sup> This program began in 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, during which asset values had plunged, wiping out the lifetime savings of many elderly. One major motivation for the establishment of Social Security was to provide a means of income support for this unfortunate generation of the elderly.

The basic operation of the program is straightforward. Workers pay a tax on their earnings, and the money from this tax is deposited into a trust fund that is invested in government bonds. Checks written on this trust fund are paid to those who enroll in the Social Security program, which is open to most people over age 62. Checks are paid until the recipient dies, and, if there is a surviving spouse, he or she receives a payment until his or her own death.

## Program Details

There are a variety of details on how the Social Security program operates in practice. Descriptions of some of the most important details follow. Note that all numbers and eligibility requirements described in this section reflect the Social Security program in place in 2018.

### How Is Social Security Financed?

Almost all workers in the United States pay the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) tax on their earnings. This tax is currently 6.2%. In addition, their employers (or the workers themselves, if they are self-employed) pay a 6.2% tax on these same earnings, for a total tax burden of 12.4%. This tax is levied only on the first \$128,400 of earnings.<sup>9</sup>

### Who Is Eligible to Receive Social Security?

To be eligible to collect Social Security benefits, a person must have worked and paid this payroll tax for 40 quarters over his lifetime (the equivalent of 10 years) and must be age 62 or older.

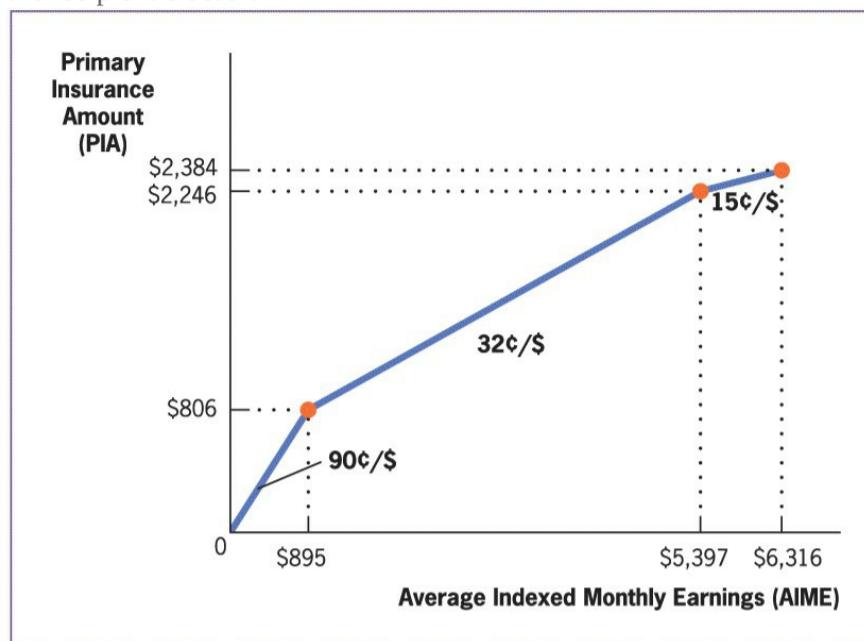
### How Are Social Security Benefits Calculated?

When eligible, the Social Security claimant receives an **annuity payment**, that is, a payment that lasts until the recipient's death. The amount of this annuity payment is a function of the recipient's average lifetime earnings, where each month's earnings are expressed in today's dollars by inflating their value for increases in the wage level since the earnings occurred. In particular, the government averages a person's earnings over the person's 35 highest earning years. If a person has worked for fewer than 35 years—say, for 30 years—the formula just treats those missing years as years of zero earnings, so the benefit would be based on averaging 30 years of earnings and 5 years of zeros. If a person has worked for more than 35 years, the lowest earnings years are thrown out when computing the average. This 35-year average of real monthly earnings is called the *Average Indexed Monthly Earnings*, or AIME. Benefits are then calculated as a *redistributive function of past earnings*, whereby low earnings are more strongly translated to higher benefits than are high earnings. This point is illustrated in [Figure 13-1](#), which shows the formula for translating the AIME into the monthly benefit, also known as the *Primary Insurance Amount* (PIA). Workers who have an AIME of \$895 or less per month receive \$0.90 in benefits for every dollar of AIME. For \$895 to \$5,397 of AIME, workers receive only \$0.32 in benefits for every dollar of AIME. Beyond an AIME of \$5,397, they receive only an additional \$0.15 in benefits for each dollar of AIME.

The result of these two criteria is that (1) workers who earn more get higher benefits, but (2) benefits do not rise nearly as fast as earnings. This is what is meant by a *redistributive function of past earnings*: past earnings are translated to increased benefits at a slower rate as earnings rise.

#### annuity payment

A payment that lasts until the recipient's death.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

#### FIGURE 13-1

Social Security Benefits as a Function of Earnings • Social Security's Primary Insurance Amount (PIA) is a redistributive function of Average Indexed Monthly Earnings (AIME). Figures in bold show the benefits increment per dollar of AIME in that range of AIME. For example, if your AIME is between \$5,397 and \$6,316, you receive \$0.15 in additional benefits for each additional dollar of AIME.

Data from: [Social Security Administration \(2018a\)](#).

A key measure of social insurance program generosity is the **replacement rate**, which is the ratio of benefits received to earnings prior to the entitling event. For Social Security, the replacement rate represents the ratio of benefits to preretirement earnings because retirement is the event that entitles one to receive benefits. For the average person on Social Security, benefits are roughly 40% of preretirement earnings.<sup>10</sup> For the typical low-income worker, this replacement rate is closer to 60%, while for high-income earners, the replacement rate is only 27% on average because a smaller share of high earnings is translated into benefits ([Figure 13-1](#)). After individuals retire and receive a benefit, that benefit is adjusted upward for inflation each year by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to protect the elderly against rising prices.

#### replacement rate

The ratio of benefits received to earnings prior to the entitling event.



#### APPLICATION

### Why Choose 35 Years?

The choice of a 35-year averaging period by Social Security reflects the trade-off of two considerations. First, individuals should not be penalized for years of part-time work or particularly low earnings. If you graduate and earn a large salary for 35 years, you should not have your benefits reduced because you worked at a low-wage job when you were in high

school.

Second, if the averaging period is too short, it can have perverse incentives for behavior by older workers. A classic example of such behavior is the case of a 61-year-old subway driver for the Boston MBTA who fell asleep at the wheel, causing a crash in which 18 people were injured.<sup>11</sup> An investigation revealed that this driver had been working 25 hours straight in an effort to maximize his overtime pay. This was partly because the pension that the driver would be able to claim was a function of his earnings during his last five years of work. As the chairman of the MBTA stated in the wake of this accident, “Unfortunately, a system has developed which provides a double incentive; overtime income now, more pension income in the future. . . . Neither the seniority system nor the pension system was originally designed to tempt a man to work himself to exhaustion for retirement income, which shortens his life expectancy and jeopardizes public safety.” In the wake of this accident, the MBTA changed its pension plan to no longer reward such excessive work at the end of one’s career.

A similar problem arose in Brazil, whose pension scheme for civil servants was among the most generous in the world. This was due in part to the fact that pension benefits were determined as 100% of a worker’s last month’s salary. The World Bank found that as a result of this stipulation “it was not uncommon for public-sector workers to receive ample promotions in the months just before they retire.” In recent years, Brazil has attempted to address this problem by calculating the pension as 80% of the best monthly earnings between 1994 and the date of retirement, so that, over time, they are creating a longer averaging period.<sup>12</sup> ■■■

## How Are Social Security Benefits Paid Out?

Individuals can receive their PIA starting at age 66 and 4 months, which is the [\*\*Full Benefits Age \(FBA\)\*\*](#) for those born in 1956. As a result of 1983 legislation (discussed in more detail later in this chapter), the FBA was raised to age 67 for those born in 1960 or later.<sup>13</sup>

**Full Benefits Age (FBA)**

The age at which a Social Security recipient receives full retirement benefits (Primary Insurance Amount).

It is possible to receive benefits as early as age 62, which is the [\*\*Early Entitlement Age \(EEA\)\*\*](#). For each year of benefits claimed before the FBA, however, there is an *actuarial reduction* in benefits of 6.67% per year (for the three years before the FBA) or 5% per year (for earlier months). Individuals who claim their benefits at age 62 today receive about 30% less in benefits than those who claim benefits at the FBA. This is called an “actuarial” reduction because it is designed to compensate for the fact that individuals who take benefits early receive them for more years. That is, if you and a friend are the same age, and your friend claims benefits at age 62 and you claim them at age 66, and you both live to age 75, then your friend gets three more years of benefits than you do. The reduction in benefits that your friend receives each year is designed to compensate for the fact that he gets three additional years of benefits. With the actuarial adjustment, you can both expect to get the same total amount of benefits in your retirement years. Similarly, if you decide to wait past full benefits age to claim benefits, you receive a Delayed Retirement Credit (DRC), which raises your benefits for each year of delay by 8%.

**Early Entitlement Age (EEA)**

The earliest age at which a Social Security recipient can receive reduced benefits.

## Can You Work and Receive Social Security?

Another key feature of Social Security is the *earnings test*, which reduces the benefits of 62- to 64-year-olds by \$0.50 for each dollar of earnings they have above \$17,040. This reduction is popularly viewed as a tax on benefits for the elderly with earnings. In fact, this is not true:

these benefits are not lost to the worker but are returned later (with interest, in the form of an actuarial adjustment) when the worker's earnings fall below this threshold. Thus, the earnings test is actually not a tax but a "forced savings" mechanism that takes benefits from workers when they have high earnings and returns these benefits when the workers are truly retired. Because this program is so misunderstood by the public, many people believe that the program causes the elderly to reduce their earnings, or even retire altogether, rather than subject themselves to this "tax"; we will review evidence on this point shortly.

## Are There Benefits for Family Members?

Social Security claimants aren't the only ones who derive benefits from this program. Spouses of claimants also receive benefits equal to the higher of their own benefit (based on their earnings) or half of the benefit of their spouse (the spousal benefit). So spouses who have low earnings (or who didn't work the 40 quarters required to qualify for Social Security) can benefit by receiving half of their spouse's benefit level. Children of deceased workers are also entitled to a share of benefits as well, but the total family benefit level cannot exceed 188% of the worker's benefit amount. In addition, surviving spouses are entitled to Social Security benefits. Spouses who survive a Social Security recipient receive whichever is higher: their own benefit or the deceased's benefit.



Quick Hint That was a lot of acronyms! To review:

- AIME is Average Indexed Monthly Earnings, a measure of lifetime average earnings.
- PIA is the Primary Insurance Amount, which determines benefit levels.
- FBA is the Full Benefits Age (currently age 67) at which one can claim benefits and get one's PIA.
- EEA is the Early Entitlement Age (currently age 62), the earliest age at which one can claim benefits.
- DRC is the Delayed Retirement Credit amount (currently 8%) by which the PIA is increased if one delays retirement beyond the FBA (if one starts receiving benefits at the EEA, there is a corresponding downward actuarial adjustment in the PIA).

## How Does Social Security Work over Time?

The best way to think about the operation of Social Security is to contrast it to a private pension plan. Private pension plans are **funded** plans: savings today are invested in assets such as government bonds, corporate bonds, or stocks, and the accumulated assets pay for (fund) the future benefits promised by the pension. Social Security, on the other hand, has traditionally been an **unfunded** plan. Taxes collected from a worker today go directly to today's retirees rather than being saved to pay for benefits when the taxed worker retires (this is often referred to as a pay-as-you-go process).

### funded

Refers to retirement plans in which today's savings are invested in various assets in order to pay future benefits.

### unfunded

Refers to retirement plans in which payments collected from today's workers go directly to today's retirees, instead of being invested in order to pay future benefits.

There is no guarantee, however, that the system will actually work this way. What if the Social Security program goes bankrupt, or if workers in 40 years refuse to pay their taxes to fund retirees' benefits? If this were to occur, retirees would be out of luck. They would have

paid into the program but would be getting nothing back from it. In contrast, with a funded plan that is based on accumulated assets, retirees would be assured that there are assets that can be sold to finance their retirement income.

In other words, the promises of a funded private pension plan are backed by the actual assets held by that plan. The promises of Social Security are backed by the policies of the government. It seems highly unlikely that the government would break those promises. Yet, as we noted in [Chapter 4](#), the United States (and other nations) face a very large long-term fiscal imbalance that will have to be met somehow, and lower Social Security benefits are one way to meet that imbalance. It is perhaps for this reason that, when polled, half of young people (18–29) believe that Social Security will no longer exist by the time they retire.<sup>14</sup>

As some of you may know, Social Security today is not an unfunded system but rather a *partially funded* system. The taxes collected from today's workers finance not only the benefits to today's retirees but also a Social Security trust fund that is invested in U.S. government bonds. As we discuss later in the chapter, that trust fund is a temporary solution to the financing problems that face the Social Security system over the next half century. Yet, by 2033, this trust fund is projected to run out of money, so Social Security will return to a purely unfunded system.

## How Social Security Redistributes Income

The unfunded nature of Social Security has important implications for the redistribution of income across generations, as the following example illustrates. Consider the simplified world illustrated in [Table 13-1](#), in which people live for two periods. In the first period, when they are young, they work and pay a tax to support the Social Security program. In the second period, when they are old, they retire and live on their Social Security benefits. In each period, the number of young people grows by 5% (population growth), and their wages go up by 5% (due to productivity increases).

**TABLE 13-1 Social Security in a Two-Period World**

Period	Number of Young Workers	Earnings per Young Worker	Taxes Paid for Young Worker	Total Taxes Paid	Number of Old Retirees	Benefits to Old Retirees	Taxes Paid by Old Retirees	Rate of Return
1	100	\$20,000	0	0	0	0	—	—
2	105	\$21,000	\$2,100	\$220,500	100	\$2,205	0	Infinite
3	110	\$22,050	\$2,205	\$242,550	105	\$2,310	\$2,100	10%
4	115	\$23,153	\$2,315	\$266,225	110	\$2,420	\$2,205	10%
5	121	\$24,310	0	0	115	0	\$2,315	-100%

In this two-period model, workers in period 1 pay no taxes when young but do receive benefits when old in period 2. In period 2, young workers pay \$2,100 in taxes each, so each retiree receives \$2,205 in benefits—an infinite rate of return. In periods 3 and 4, the retirees pay taxes when young, so they receive a 10% rate of return, which is determined by population and wage growth. In period 5, the last generation pays in when young but get nothing when old, so there is a rate of return of -100%.

In period 1, 100 young people work, and there is no Social Security program. Each young person earns \$20,000 per period.

In period 2, the 100 initial young people are now retirees, and an unfunded Social Security program has been established that is financed by a 10% payroll tax. The taxes are collected from workers today and are paid immediately to today's retirees.

There are 105 young workers in period 2, each of whom earns \$21,000 and pays a 10% payroll tax of \$2,100. The tax collection of \$220,500 ( $105 \times 2100$ ) is then spent on the 100

older people in that period, for a benefit of \$2,205 per retiree. Because these older people paid no taxes when they were young, their rate of return is infinite: they get a benefit without having paid anything in. Thus, the *initial generation is the big winner from an unfunded Social Security system* because they receive retirement benefits, even though they contributed relatively little during their working lives. As previously noted, this was the explicit goal of the U.S. Social Security system when it was established in 1935.

In period 3, the elderly are the first generation that paid taxes when they were young in period 2. These retirees paid \$2,100 per person in taxes when they were working but receive \$2,315 in benefits when they are old, roughly 10% more than they paid in. Where does this extra money come from? First, there is the *wage growth effect*: each current worker is earning more than these retirees did when they were young, due to higher productivity. Because taxes are paid on the higher earnings of the period 3 young, there are more funds to be paid as benefits to the retirees. Second, there is a *population growth effect*: because more workers are paying taxes, there are more funds to be paid as benefits to retirees.

In our example, we have assumed that population and wages each grow by 5% in each period. In the real world, however, these growth rates vary, and the impact of an actual Social Security system on the “middle generations” of recipients is ambiguous. The impact depends on the size of this population and on wage growth effects. If both are large, beneficiaries can receive a high rate of return on the taxes they’ve paid in. If either or both are small or negative, the beneficiaries can receive a very poor rate of return on their tax payments.

In periods 3 and 4, retirees earn a 10% rate of return on the amount of money they put into the system when they were young. Imagine, however, that in period 5, the young workers decide that they no longer want to participate in the Social Security program. They haven’t yet paid taxes, so there is no cost to them if they leave the system. Who bears the cost of this decision? The period 5 retirees bear this cost because they paid \$2,315 per person in taxes when they were working in period 4 but receive no benefits in return now that they are retired. Thus, the *final generation is hurt by unfunded Social Security*.



#### APPLICATION

### Ida May Fuller<sup>15</sup>

The very first beneficiary of Social Security was Ida May Fuller. Ida May was born on September 6, 1874, on a farm in Vermont and attended school with future president Calvin Coolidge. Ida May worked for only three years after the establishment of the Social Security system and paid a total of \$24.75 in Social Security taxes. On November 4, 1939, she dropped by the Social Security office in Rutland, Vermont; as she later said, “It wasn’t that I expected anything, mind you, but I knew I’d been paying for something called Social Security, and I wanted to ask the people in Rutland about it.” Ida May’s case was the first one processed by the new Social Security Administration, and so the first Social Security check in U.S. history was issued to her on January 31, 1940, for \$22.54.

Ida May went on to live for 35 more years, dying at age 100 in 1975. Over those 35 years, she collected a total of \$22,888.92 in Social Security benefits. Quite a return on her \$24.75 investment! Ida May is a striking example of the first generation of Social Security beneficiaries who were the big winners under this new social program. ■

## Lessons Learned

To summarize, this example illustrates two points. First, the rate of return provided by an unfunded Social Security to “middle generations” depends on the rates of population and wage growth. Second, unfunded Social Security carries with it what [Diamond and Orszag \(2004\)](#) call a **legacy debt**. The unfunded transfers to the Ida Fullers and others in the first generation of retirees receiving Social Security put the system immediately into a large debt. If society decided to end the Social Security program, the existing generation of older workers and retirees, who paid the taxes to support the program, would receive no benefits, and so their past tax payments would end up paying off the debt.

### legacy debt

The debt incurred by the government because early generations of beneficiaries received much more in benefits than they paid in taxes.

It seems unlikely that the political process would allow a single generation of workers to be held accountable for this large debt. Thus, any reforms to the Social Security system must grapple with the fact that this debt must be somehow paid before we can bring our unfunded Social Security system into balance.

## How Does Social Security Redistribute in Practice?

The example in [Table 13-1](#) shows how an imaginary Social Security system can lead to redistribution across generations: the first generation was a big winner, middle generations got a rate of return determined by wage and population growth, and the final generation, if there ever is one, is the big loser. Reality is more complicated than this simple example. In this section, we look at the evidence on the actual redistribution due to the Social Security system in the United States. Which generations have won from the existence of this system, which have lost, and by how much?

We measure redistribution by computing the **Social Security Wealth (SSW)** accruing to different generations in the United States. SSW is the expected present discounted value of future Social Security benefits over a person’s lifetime minus the expected present discounted value of payroll taxes that the person will pay. SSW is computed as follows:

- Calculate the entire future stream of benefits that a person expects to receive before he or she dies, accounting for the fact that the date of death is not certain (which is why this is the *expected* present discounted value), by multiplying each period’s benefits by the odds that the individual will live to receive them (e.g., benefits at age 68 are valued much more highly than those at age 80 because the odds of living to receive the benefits at age 80 are lower).
- Use a discount rate to calculate the present discounted value (PDV) of that stream of benefits (as discussed in [Chapter 4 on page 103](#)).
- Calculate the entire future stream of taxes that a person expects to pay before he or she dies.
- Compute the PDV of that stream of taxes.
- Take the difference between these two to get the SSW.

### Social Security Wealth (SSW)

The expected present discounted values of a person’s future Social Security payments minus the expected present discounted

value of a person's payroll tax payments.

[Table 13-2](#) shows the SSW for unmarried males turning age 65 in 1960, 1995, and 2030 (i.e., born in 1895, 1930, and 1965). For each age group, the table also shows the SSW separately for low-, medium-, and high-earning workers. The figures in each cell in the table are the SSW for the group indicated on the top and to the left of the table. An average wage earner turning 65 in 1960, for example, would have received \$99,640 more in benefits than he paid in taxes. An average wage earner turning 65 in 1995 would have received \$26,141 more in benefits than he paid in taxes. An average wage earner turning 65 in 2030 can expect to receive \$69,321 less in benefits than he pays in taxes.<sup>16</sup>

TABLE 13-2 Redistribution Under Social Security for a Single Male

Earnings Level	Retirees Turn 65 in 1960	Retirees Turn 65 in 1995	Retirees Turn 65 in 2030
Low earner	\$70,024	\$47,340	\$21,986
Average earner	\$99,640	\$26,141	-\$69,321
High earner	\$106,874	-\$196	-\$205,882

Data from: Stuerle and Quackenbush (2013).

The Social Security Wealth of single males varies both across generations, with older generations getting more than recent generations, and within generations, with the rich first getting more, and more recently less, than the poor.

Why do we see this redistribution from those born later to those born earlier? First, the oldest retirees in the table (those who are 65 in 1960) benefit somewhat from the same feature we saw in period 2 of [Table 13-1](#). These retirees were born in 1895. If they began working in 1913 (when they were 18), they would have worked for 24 years without paying any Social Security tax because Social Security tax payments didn't start until 1937. Thus, these retirees paid into the system for only part of their lives but received benefits throughout their retirement.

Second, over much of the life of the Social Security program, not only were there population and wage growth effects (as in the earlier example), there was also a *tax rate growth effect*; that is, the size of the payroll tax has risen throughout the years (in our earlier example, the payroll tax remained fixed at 10%). In 1937, the payroll tax rate used to finance the Social Security system was 2%; today, it is 12.4%. When the tax rate grows along with population and wages, the benefits of this system to early generations also increase.

For those turning 67 in the twenty-first century, Social Security has generally become a losing proposition, for three reasons. First, unlike those turning 65 in 1960, these workers did have to pay taxes their entire working lives to finance their benefits. Second, slowing tax rate growth meant that they received a much smaller tax rate growth effect. Finally, there has been a very significant reduction in the wage and population growth effects, beginning in the early 1970s. Before 1973, for example, the population growth effect averaged 1.5% per year, and the wage growth effect averaged 2.5% per year. Since 1973, the population growth effect has averaged only around 1% per year, and the wage growth effect has averaged only 0.6% per year.<sup>17</sup> Those turning 65 in 2030 have the worst outcome because payroll taxes are no longer rising at all, and wage and population growth are slow.

In addition to showing how the Social Security system has treated different generations, this table also shows how the system has treated workers with different levels of earnings. In particular, the Social Security system has shifted from one that favored the rich, with a higher SSW for the rich than for the poor, to one that favors the poor, with a higher SSW for the

poor than for the rich. The reason for this change is that higher income earners pay more money into the system through payroll taxes. So when the returns to Social Security are high (through high wage growth, population growth, and tax rate growth), they benefit more than lower income earners. But when the returns to Social Security are low, higher income earners have more of their income in an underperforming asset, and they are worse off than low-income earners. This effect is being partially offset over time, however, by the growing gap in life expectancy between the richest and poorest Americans; [Auerbach et al. \(2017\)](#) project that life expectancy for those born in 1960 will increase 7–8 years relative to those born in 1930 for the richest Americans, but that there will be no increase for the lowest income Americans. This means that the rich will benefit more over time from annuity-based programs like Social Security, although not necessarily enough to offset the overall progressive bent of the programs just shown.

The treatment of different earnings levels is only one example of the redistribution that Social Security causes across different groups within any generation. Some examples of how SSW varies within groups that are the same ages include the following:

- Females have more SSW than males: they pay the same taxes but receive a larger stream of benefits because they live longer.
- Married couples have more SSW than single people: spouses of workers are automatically entitled to 50% of the workers' benefits, and surviving spouses receive 100% of the workers' benefits. So a married worker who pays Social Security tax is purchasing not only his or her benefits but those for a spouse as well, which provides a higher return.
- Single-earner couples have more SSW than two-earner couples: a couple in which only one person has worked gets 150% of the earner's benefit, even though the nonworking spouse has paid no taxes. Both earners of a two-earner couple have to pay taxes on their full earnings, even though they may not get much more in benefits than the single-earner couple.<sup>18</sup>
- The gains to the poor relative to the rich from Social Security are overstated because the length of life rises with income so that the rich generally receive their benefits for more years than the poor. While sizeable, this effect is not large enough to overturn the basic conclusion that the poor win and the rich lose from the current Social Security system.

## 13.2 Consumption-Smoothing Benefits of Social Security

The fundamental motivation for Social Security is the notion that the elderly will not have sufficient income to support themselves in retirement or to support their dependents when they die. Evidence on this front is reviewed by [Poterba \(2014\)](#), who shows, for example, that for those in the bottom half of the income distribution there is little source of retirement support other than Social Security. As a result, the government needs to force workers to provide for their retirement years by paying taxes when working that entitle them to benefits when retired.

### Rationales for Social Security

Given that retirement is an anticipated event that is largely the decision of the individual, why does the government need to be involved in providing retirement income? What is the argument for social insurance when the event is highly predictable?

There are basically two rationales offered for Social Security, along the lines of our discussion in [Chapter 12](#). The first rationale is that there are market failures in the *annuities market*. A pure annuity is a contract whereby a person pays some amount of money up front to an insurance company, and in return, the insurance company pays the person a fixed payment until he dies. Annuities should be valued by consumers facing an uncertain date of death because they facilitate the type of consumption smoothing we described in [Chapter 12](#).<sup>19</sup> That is, they allow people facing an uncertain date of death to smooth their consumption over their remaining years, solving the problem of saving too little (and therefore going hungry in old age) or too much (and therefore not fully enjoying their wealth).<sup>20</sup>

Yet adverse selection can lead the annuities market to fail. Recall that adverse selection can cause insurance market failure when the insured party has an informational advantage over the insurer. This is clearly the case with annuities because individuals know more about their potential life expectancy than do insurers: they know more about their family's health history (did all their ancestors live to be over 100?) and about outside behaviors they engage in that are likely to result in a particularly short or long life (do they follow a healthy diet and never drive over the speed limit?). The longer a person lives, the less money the insurer makes from an annuity contract. Insurance companies will therefore be reluctant to sell annuities for fear that they will be purchased only by the longest lived individuals (adverse selection). This reluctance could lead to such a high price for annuities that most potential buyers would not want to buy them.<sup>21</sup> By providing public annuities, Social Security can solve this market failure.<sup>22</sup>

Although annuities market failure is the classic economic rationale for Social Security, the true reason that most policy makers favor the program is *paternalism*; that is, they are concerned that people won't save enough for their own retirement. A study by [Hurd and Rohwedder \(2012\)](#) used preretirement consumption to assess whether individuals age 66 to 69 are adequately prepared to maintain their standard of living into retirement. They found that most individuals are adequately prepared, but that a substantial minority is not. For example, 80% of married couples and 89% of college graduates are prepared, but only 55% of singles and 70% of those without a high school diploma are prepared.

### Does Social Security Smooth Consumption?

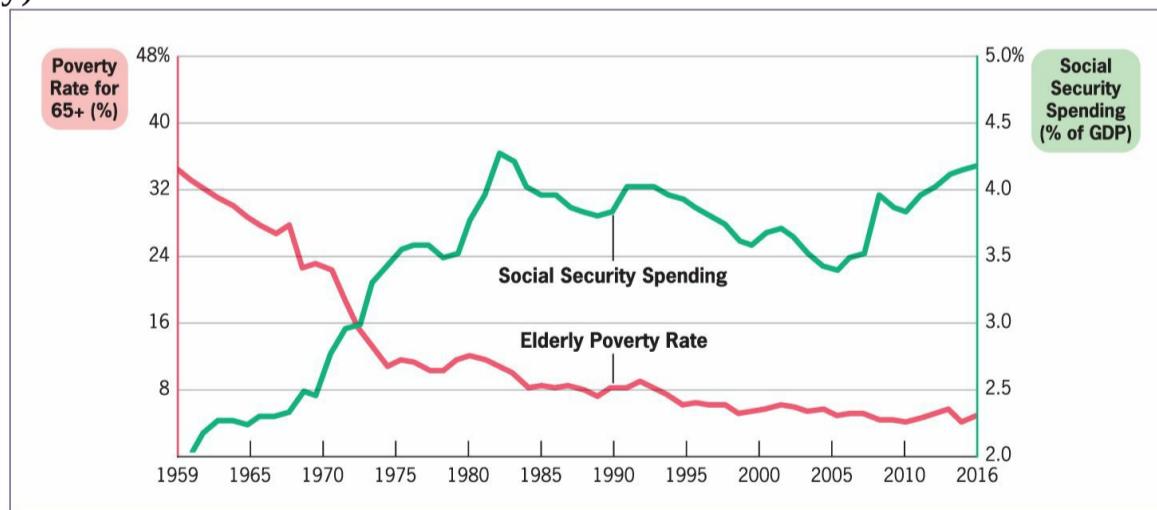
Regardless of the reason, market failure in the annuities market or paternalism, Social Security's existence is motivated by the notion that individuals are not appropriately protected for their retirement consumption. Whether this leads to a failure of consumption smoothing, and thus a need for government intervention, is an open question. On the one hand, once workers retire, they have many years of consumption to finance. On the other hand, retirement is generally a very predictable event for which most workers can readily prepare. So it is not clear how important Social Security is for smoothing consumption across the working life and retirement years. In particular, all that Social Security may be doing is crowding out the savings that individuals would otherwise set aside for their retirement. The important question of the extent to which Social Security provides real insurance, as opposed to just crowding out savings, has been the subject of many studies in two different areas.

## Social Security and Private Savings

The major form of self-insurance for retirement is private savings. In a world without Social Security, people would have to rely on their own savings (either as individuals or through firm pension plans) to finance their retirement. Social Security might crowd out that private savings by allowing people to count on a government transfer to support their income in old age. The larger this crowd-out is, the less consumption smoothing Social Security provides for retired individuals. Existing research suggests that each dollar of Social Security wealth crowds out \$0.30 to \$0.40 of private savings, so that crowd-out exists, but it is partial.

## Living Standards of the Elderly

The other piece of evidence on Social Security and consumption smoothing comes from examining the living standards of the elderly. [Figure 13-2](#) shows the poverty rate of the elderly from 1959 through 2016. The poverty rate is the percentage of a population whose income is below the poverty level, which is the amount of income required to buy a "minimum acceptable" bundle of food, housing, and other goods (this concept is defined in more detail in [Chapter 17](#)). For a family of four, the poverty level in 2016 was \$24,300. The elderly poverty rate is graphed against the size of the Social Security system, as a share of GDP. In 1960, 35% of the elderly lived in poverty (compared to only 21% of the non-elderly); by 2016, only 9.3% of the elderly were living in poverty (compared to 13.3% of the non-elderly).



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■ FIGURE 13-2

Elderly Poverty and Social Security, 1959–2016 • There is a striking negative correspondence over time between the poverty rates of the elderly (which have fallen) and the size of the Social Security program (which has risen).

Data from: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2018a\)](#), Table 3, and [Social Security Administration \(2017a\)](#).

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

## *Measuring the Crowd-Out Effect of Social Security on Savings*

The effect of Social Security on private savings has been the subject of a large number of studies over the past 45 years. [Feldstein \(1974\)](#) used a time series analysis of Social Security Wealth and private savings to suggest that Social Security was lowering the private savings rate in the United States by 50%; however, subsequent analyses found flaws in this approach and have produced mixed results. Moreover, this application is a classic example of the difficulties of time series analysis. Movements in national savings over time are driven by a number of factors, of which Social Security is only one. With few distinct changes in Social Security at a particular point in time, it is difficult to tease out any effects on savings from time series alone.

Another approach to modeling the impact of Social Security on savings is cross-sectional regression analysis of the type discussed in [Chapter 3](#). A number of articles have looked at whether people who are entitled to higher Social Security benefits in the future save less today. Such articles typically find some reduction in savings from higher Social Security benefits, although the reduction is much less than one for one.

But recall the key issue raised in [Chapter 3](#): results of empirical analyses can be biased by the inability to find comparable treatment and control groups. To get a valid measure of the impact of Social Security on savings from econometric analysis, there must be a way to compare people with different levels of Social Security benefits who are otherwise identical. Social Security benefits are largely determined by individual characteristics: average lifetime earnings, marital status, age, and retirement age. Thus, any two people with different benefits are also likely to differ along some or all of these dimensions. Because factors such as earnings and age are likely to be correlated with individual tastes for savings, it is difficult to assume that any association between Social Security benefits and savings is due to the program itself.

To answer this question requires some type of quasi-experiment that allows us to compare people with similar characteristics but very different levels of Social Security benefits. Such a quasi-experiment has proven hard to find in the United States because Social Security is a national program that applies to almost all workers; very similar people usually have very similar benefits. However, three studies have provided quasi-experimental evidence on the impact of Social Security-like programs on private savings in Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom.<sup>23</sup> Each study focused on reforms to the social security systems that changed the SSW of some types of workers, but not others.

In Italy, for example, reforms in 1992 substantially reduced the benefits, and thus future SSW, for younger workers in the public sector, while reducing much less the benefits of older workers and those in the private sector. This change set up a natural quasi-experimental analysis in which the researchers could assess whether the savings of younger workers in the public sector rose to offset the fall in future SSW. The authors compared the change in savings of young public-sector workers (the treatment group) before and after the reforms to the change in savings of older public-sector and private-sector workers (the control groups) at the same time. This allowed the authors to remove any bias arising from other time series changes in savings (the “difference-in-difference” estimate of [Chapter 3](#)). According to the authors’ estimate, 30 to 40% of the reduction in SSW was offset by higher private savings.

The results of studies from the United Kingdom (which also compared employment groups) and Poland (which compared those born in different years who saw radically different changes in SSW) were similar. That is, social security did crowd out private savings to some extent, but not fully.

This change corresponds closely to the evolution of the Social Security system; the steepest reductions in poverty were during the 1960s and 1970s, when the program grew the fastest. Indeed, [Engelhardt and Gruber \(2006\)](#) analyzed how poverty fell for birth cohorts that particularly benefited from expansion of Social Security, relative to those that did not, and concluded that the expansion of Social Security can explain the entire reduction in poverty among the elderly over this period. That Social Security’s growth had such a dramatic effect on elderly poverty suggests that individuals were not, in fact, protecting themselves appropriately for their retirement so that there were large consumption-smoothing benefits to the program. Taken together, both pieces of evidence point to only very partial crowd-out of private savings by the Social Security program.

Evidence from Mexico in [Galiani et al. \(2016\)](#) further supports the important consumption smoothing role of Social Security. They studied a cash transfer program to rural elderly in Mexico and found that there was a large increase in consumption expenditures for elders receiving the transfers, with little evidence of anticipatory reductions in self-insurance. And research by [Slavov et al. \(2017\)](#) showed little effect of U.S. changes to Social Security parameters on savings decisions.

## 13.3 Social Security and Retirement

The fundamental motivation for Social Security is to insure against the adverse events of dying or being too old to work by providing income support to those who are retired or to the survivors of deceased workers. This goal leads to a natural moral hazard problem: workers may retire early to start collecting their benefits. As noted earlier, there is no need to retire at an early age to start collecting benefits in the United States: you can keep working, have your benefits reduced by the earnings test, and receive those benefits back (with actuarial adjustment) when you do fully retire. Yet almost all people (wrongly) perceive the earnings test as a tax on their earnings and feel that benefits collection must be associated with full retirement. Thus, as with the moral hazard examples discussed in [Chapter 12](#), insuring against the adverse event of retirement may encourage that adverse event, which lowers social efficiency and raises program costs (and associated taxes).

### Theory

In theory, there are two effects of Social Security on retirement decisions. The first is the *implicit taxation* that Social Security may levy on work at older ages by reducing the value of Social Security benefits if retirement is delayed. [Gruber and Wise \(1999\)](#) define the implicit tax rate from Social Security as the reduction in SSW (the expected present discounted value of Social Security benefits received minus the expected present discounted benefits of taxes paid) if one continues working another year relative to the wage that could be earned by working that year. The numerator for this variable is calculated by computing the SSW at a possible age of retirement and then measuring how it changes if the person works another year. Consider, for example, a 62-year-old worker. If he works until 63, instead of retiring at 62 and claiming his Social Security benefits, four things happen through the Social Security system:

- He pays an extra year of payroll taxes on his earnings.
- He receives one year less of Social Security benefits.
- He gets a higher Social Security benefit level through the actuarial adjustment.
- Earnings generally rise with age, so he gets to replace a low-earnings year with a high-earnings year in the 35-year benefits average.

The first two factors reduce the return to working that extra year, and the second two increase the return. If the first two factors dominate (as we will show in the next section to be the case in most countries), there will be an implicit tax on work and thus more retirement. The system designed to protect individuals from income loss in retirement will actually be inducing them to retire.

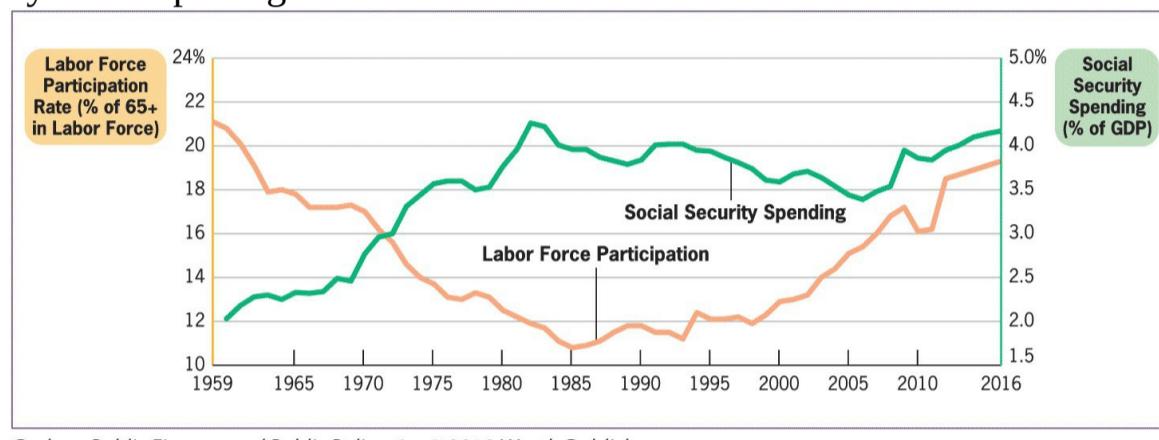
The second effect of Social Security on retirement is through the redistribution discussed earlier. This system results in some groups becoming richer over their life and others becoming poorer. These changes in wealth will have income effects on retirement as the groups that are richer use some of their wealth to buy themselves more retirement and the groups that are poorer work longer.

### Evidence

Three types of evidence suggest that Social Security is a powerful determinant of retirement decisions. This evidence is largely focused on males because the rapid increase in labor force

participation by females since World War II has made it difficult to discern an effect of Social Security on retirement for women.

The first piece of evidence is time series evidence, as illustrated in [Figure 13-3](#). The Social Security program grew rapidly through the 1960s and 1970s, with a corresponding reduction in elderly labor force participation (LFP) rates, the percentage of the elderly population that is either working or looking for work. Then, when program growth flattened out in the mid-1980s, LFP flattened out as well (although with a several year lag). On its own, however, this evidence is not fully convincing because many other factors were changing over this period, and these other factors could explain the changes in elderly LFP. Moreover, in the most recent years, both Social Security spending and LFP are rising for the elderly, highlighting the difficulty of interpreting this kind of time series evidence.



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### ■ FIGURE 13-3

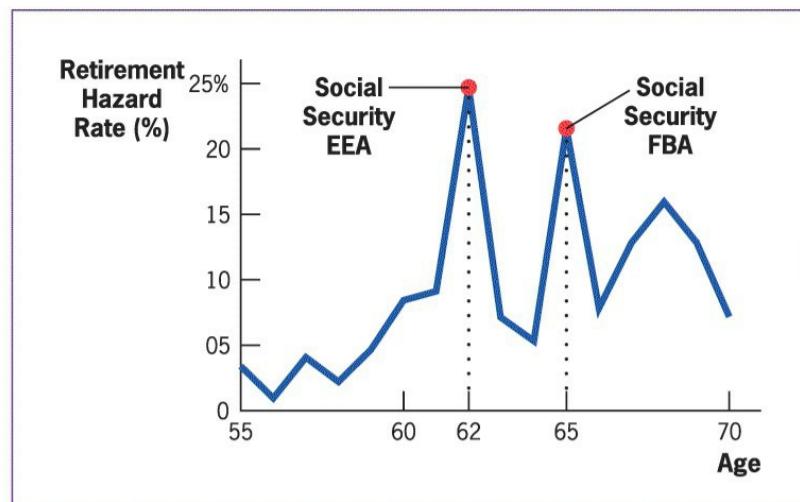
Elderly Work and Social Security, 1959–2016 • There is a striking negative correspondence over time between the labor force participation (LFP) rates of the elderly (which have fallen) and the size of the Social Security program (which has risen).

Data from: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), Table 3.3.

The second piece of evidence that Social Security matters for retirement behavior comes from examining the age pattern of retirement in the United States. [Figure 13-4](#) shows the **retirement hazard rate**, the rate at which workers of a certain age retire. The retirement hazard rate rises slowly until age 62, at which point it jumps up and then rapidly falls back down. At age 61, 10% of workers retire, and at age 63, only about 8% retire; but at age 62, the retirement rate is 25%. Recall that age 62 is the Early Entitlement Age (EEA), the age at which benefits can first be claimed. There is then another spike at age 65, the Full Benefits Age (FBA) for the program at the time. That workers happen to retire in large numbers at these particular ages is not evidence that Social Security *caused* this behavior; people may have other reasons for choosing these ages to retire. As [Figure 13-5](#) shows, however, there was no such spike at age 62 in 1960, before the EEA was introduced. The spike emerged slowly, with a small spike in 1970, and a larger one by 1980. This pattern suggests that it was the introduction of the EEA in 1963 that led to the evolution of this spike. More recently, [Behaghel and Blau \(2012\)](#) showed that the spike in retirement at age 65 has been diminished by the rise in the FBA. Most interestingly, they find that a new spike has emerged at the new FBA for those with higher cognitive skills (i.e., a larger capacity for learning and remembering) but that those with lower cognitive skills do not appear to have adjusted as quickly to the new FBA in their retirement behavior.

#### retirement hazard rate

The percentage of workers retiring at a certain age.

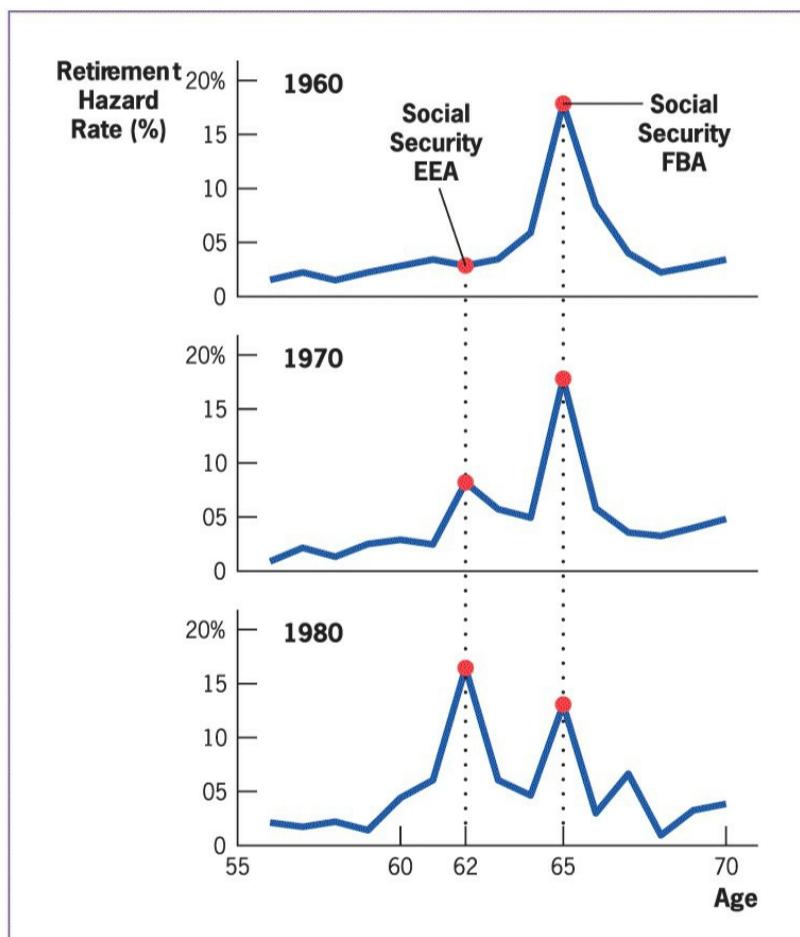


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■ FIGURE 13-4

Hazard Rate of Retirement for Males in the United States • The male hazard rate, or exit rate at each age given that a man has worked to that age, has a distinct spike at age 62 (the Early Entitlement Age, EEA) and 65 (the previous Full Benefit Age, FBA), which are key ages for the Social Security system.

Source: [Diamond and Gruber \(1999\)](#), Figure 11.12.



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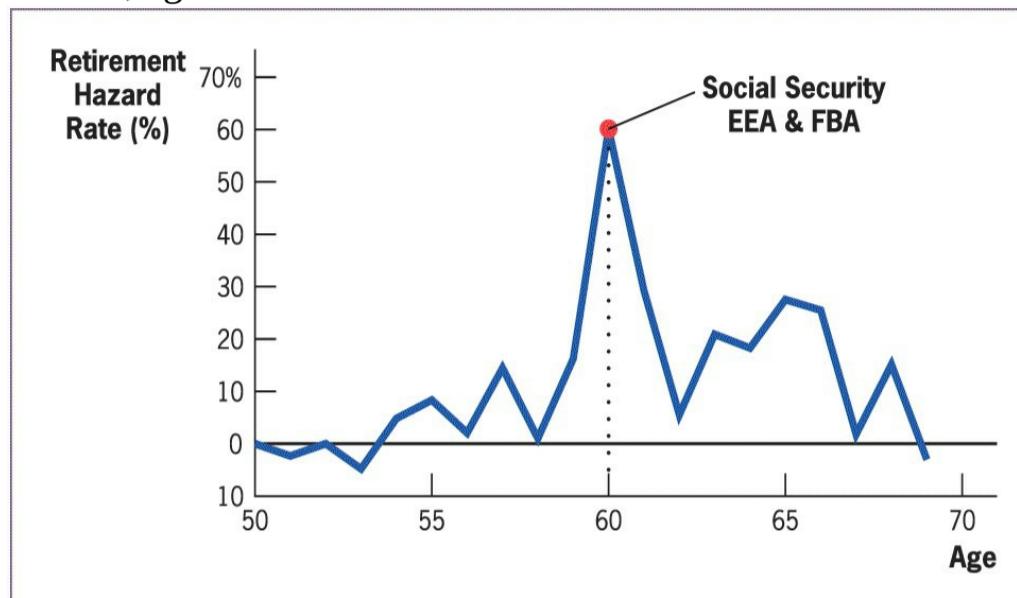
■ FIGURE 13-5

The Evolution of the U.S. Male Retirement Hazard • In 1960, before the EEA of 62 was introduced for men, the hazard rate for men was highest at age 65 (the FBA), with no spike at age 62. By 1970, the spike at 62 had begun to emerge, and by 1980, it was larger than the spike at age 65.

Data from: [Gruber and Wise \(1999\)](#), Figure 12.

The third, and most compelling, type of evidence that Social Security matters for retirement decisions comes from international comparisons. There are enormous spikes in other countries at their early and normal retirement ages that mirror closely what we see in

the United States. Perhaps the most compelling example comes from France, where age 60 is both the age at which you can first claim benefits and is the full benefits age. As [Figure 13-6](#) shows, there is an enormous spike in the hazard rate of retirement at age 60 in France: 60% of those working when they turn 60 retire during the next year. Once again, what is striking about this example is that 30 years ago, when retirement at age 60 was not an option, only about 10% of those working at age 60 retired at that age; retirement was concentrated at the EEA/FBA at that time, age 65.



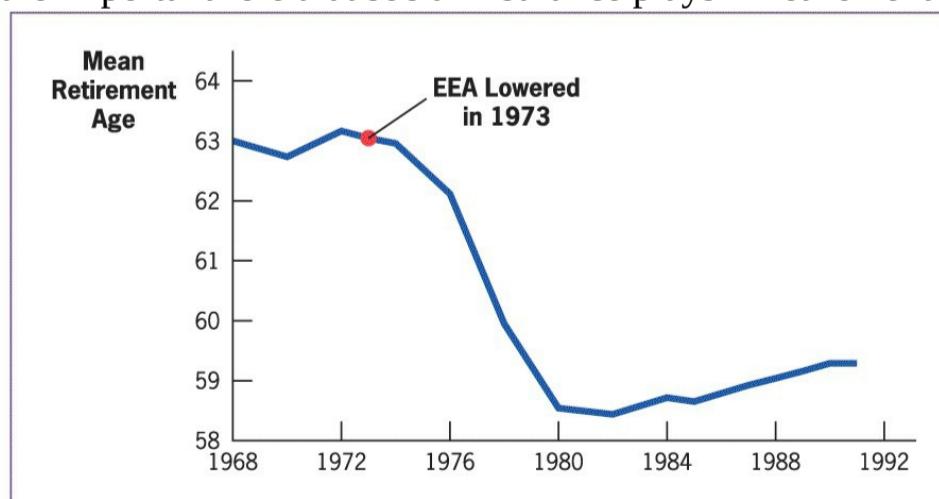
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#### ■ FIGURE 13-6

Hazard Rate of Retirement in France • In France, there is an enormous exit rate from the labor force at age 60, which is both the EEA and FBA.

Data from: [Gruber and Wise \(1999\)](#), Figure 11.

Germany provides another compelling example of the effects of social insurance on retirement age. In 1973, Germany lowered the early entitlement age for benefits from 65 to 60. [Figure 13-7](#) shows that, within seven years, the average retirement age in that nation had fallen by five years, from 63 to 58. This is a striking change in a short period of time and further confirms the important role that social insurance plays in retirement decisions.<sup>24</sup>



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#### ■ FIGURE 13-7

Change in Average Retirement Age in Germany from 1968 to 1992 • Germany lowered its age of social insurance entitlement by five years (from 65 to 60) in 1973; within seven years, the average age at which individuals retire had fallen from 63 to 58.

Data from: [Gruber and Wise \(1999\)](#), Figure 5.



## APPLICATION

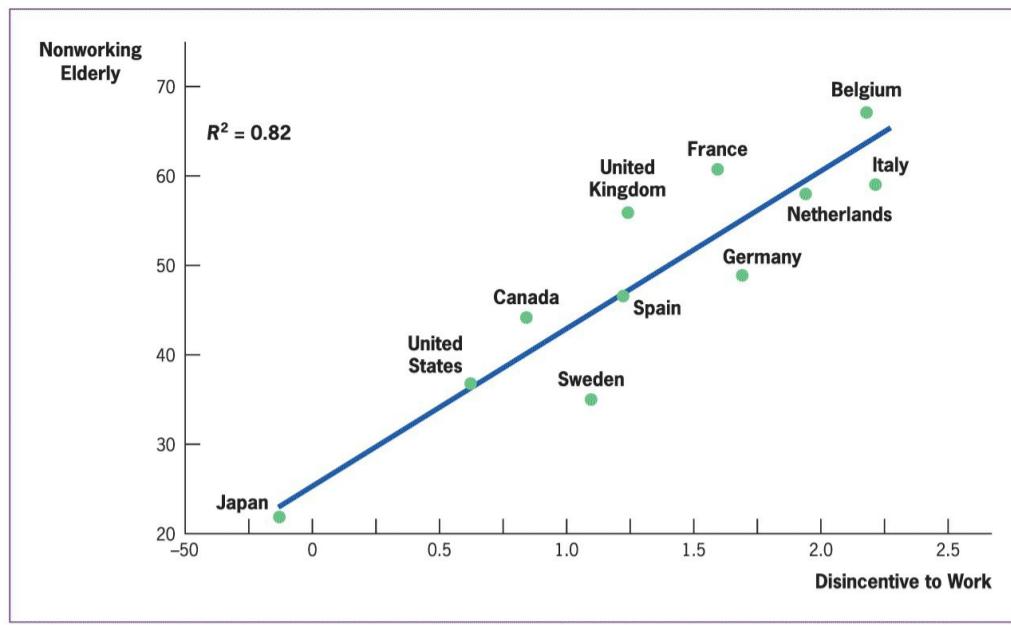
### Implicit Social Security Taxes and Retirement Behavior

[Gruber and Wise \(1999\)](#) presented data from a series of countries on the implicit taxes from Social Security, computed as previously described. For the United States, they found there was a zero implicit tax on working another year at age 62: the fact that (1) the worker had to pay one extra year of payroll taxes and (2) the worker received one less year of benefits was exactly canceled out by the fact that (3) benefits were higher when the worker did retire and (4) the worker's benefit was based on a higher earnings average.<sup>25</sup> The implicit tax is effectively zero through the FBA. At that point, the implicit tax becomes positive because the reward for getting one less year of benefits (which, past the FBA, is the Delayed Retirement Credit [DRC]) is not large enough to offset the loss of one year of benefits.

Contrast what happens in the United States to what occurs in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, at the early retirement age of 60, there is a 91% replacement rate—that is, benefits amount to 91% of what individuals would earn if they work that year. Moreover, there is *no actuarial reduction for early claiming* so that working past age 60 simply means that you receive one less year of benefits, without a compensating rise in benefit levels (as in the United States). Think of it this way: if you work at age 60, you get a wage; if you retire at age 60, you get 91% of that wage without working and with no other penalty.

There is even one more benefit to early retirement in the Netherlands. To finance the generous retirement system, the Netherlands must impose a very high payroll tax on workers. By retiring, you can also avoid paying this tax. The net result of these factors is that people in the Netherlands *lose money by working past age 60*: the net wage, after taxes, that they take home from working is less than their benefit if they retire. What would you do in this situation? Probably what most do in the Netherlands: quit work by age 60!

Indeed, across the nations in the Gruber and Wise study, there is a strong relation between these “implicit taxes” and decisions to work. [Figure 13-8](#) shows on the horizontal axis the disincentive to work in each nation due to implicit taxation.<sup>26</sup> The vertical axis measures the extent of nonwork at older ages: the percentage of the population that was not working, on average, from ages 55 to 65. There is a striking positive correspondence between the two. In nations such as the United States, Sweden, and especially Japan, there is little implicit tax (i.e., the system doesn't penalize work past the early retirement age), and there is relatively little nonwork. In nations such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Italy, there is a large implicit tax, and the vast majority of people did not work at older ages. The variation in this one measure of implicit taxes can explain 82% of the variation in the rates of nonwork across this sample of nations. ■



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■ FIGURE 13-8

**Implicit Taxes on Work and Nonwork** • There is large variation across nations in the social security disincentives to work at older ages. The disincentive to work is measured here as the natural logarithm of the sum of implicit taxes on work at older ages. Those nations with greater disincentives to work tend to have much higher nonwork among older workers.

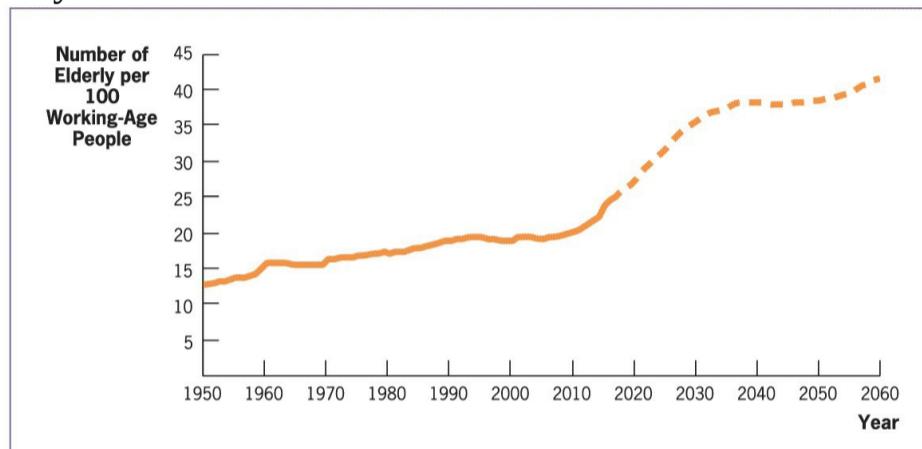
Data from: [Gruber and Wise \(1999\)](#), Figure 17.

## Implications

This evidence suggests that it is potentially very costly to design Social Security systems that penalize additional work beyond the retirement age. Systems such as those in Europe that do not increase benefits for additional years of work appear to have led to a mass exodus from the labor force by older workers. Adjusting systems to more fairly reward work at old ages can mitigate much of the moral hazard effect of Social Security.

## 13.4 Social Security Reform

Social Security is currently facing a major fiscal imbalance. In the United States in 1950, there were 12 people over the age of 65 for every 100 people of working age. By 2060, as [Figure 13-9](#) shows, it is projected that there will be almost 42 people over the age of 65 for every 100 working-age people. This rise is due to the aging of the enormous baby boom generation that was born in the wake of World War II. These numbers may seem abstract, but think of them this way: by the year 2030, the share of elderly people in the United States will be larger than it is in Florida today! As noted earlier, over the next 75 years, the present discounted value of the program's obligations exceeds the present discounted value of the taxes it will collect by \$13.2 trillion.<sup>27</sup>



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■ FIGURE 13-9

Ratio of Elderly to Working-Age Population, 1950–2060 • The number of persons over age 65 per working-age person age 15 to 64 more than triples over the century, from 13 per 100 in 1950 to 42 per 100 in 2060.

Data from: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2017\)](#), Table 1.

Three factors are coming together to cause this fiscal imbalance. The first factor is the dramatic improvement in life expectancy that was ongoing throughout the twentieth century, which means that the elderly receive a larger number of years of benefits. The second factor is a reduction in birthrates so that there are fewer workers to support the increased number of elderly. Finally, the growth in wages has slowed dramatically. Thus, returning to our discussion of [Table 13-1](#), we have promised benefits to retirees based on a high rate of wage and population growth, so the slower actual rates of growth leave us unable to meet that promise. In addition, the Social Security system continues to carry the “legacy debt” that was built up by our unfunded payments to the first generation of Social Security recipients, which adds a major component to the long-run fiscal imbalance of the system. The problem of Social Security underfunding is not just a problem of the baby boomer cohorts retiring but instead a much longer-run problem due to those factors previously listed. The Social Security Administration projects the cost of Social Security will be 6.1% of the GDP in 2092.<sup>28</sup>



*"I had another dream about Social Security."*

Michael Maslin/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

## Reform Round I: The Greenspan Commission

The United States first faced up to this Social Security financing problem in 1983, when it was projected that the Social Security trust fund would run out of money to pay its claims in July of that same year. The government established the Greenspan Commission, headed by former Council of Economic Advisors chair (and future Federal Reserve Chairman) Alan Greenspan.<sup>29</sup> The commission's primary recommendation was that the Social Security system should move away from an unfunded system to some extent and that the government should accumulate savings in the Social Security trust fund so that when the baby boomers retire and there are fewer workers to support them, there would be enough money to pay their benefits. To increase the trust fund, the Greenspan Commission made a number of changes, including speeding up increases in payroll taxes that were scheduled for the future and cutting benefits.



### APPLICATION

## The Social Security Trust Fund and National Savings

In theory, one benefit of the partial funding of Social Security through the buildup of the trust fund is an increase in national savings, with the associated benefits for the capital stock and productivity growth highlighted in [Chapter 4](#). In practice, however, the trust fund may not actually add to national savings. This trust fund is, by law, “off budget,” meaning that the government is supposed to consider its other revenue and spending obligations distinct from the trust fund. But this has not traditionally been the case. When the government reports its budget deficit or surplus for each year, it typically reports the “unified budget,” which

incorporates off-budget categories. For example, for 2017, the federal government reported a deficit of \$665 billion. This number reflects an on-budget deficit of \$714 billion and a Social Security *surplus* of about \$49 billion, meaning that the true deficit (\$414 billion) is about 7% more than that popularly reported.<sup>30</sup>

Suppose, as seems to be the case, that the government ignores the distinction between on-budget and off-budget and just pays attention to the unified deficit. Suppose further that the government, and the public to which it is accountable, has some budget target, such as a balanced budget. By allowing policy makers to hide deficits in other areas, the Social Security trust fund is displacing other government savings. That is, in the absence of the trust fund, to get the budget to balance, policy makers would have to save more, which would require either tax increases or spending cuts, neither of which are very popular.

By hiding the deficit, the trust fund allows policy makers to avoid these tough decisions—but the bill is coming due. As the baby boomers retire, the trust fund is starting to get drawn down, and this is starting to contribute to our large budget deficit. Thus, if policy makers only pay attention to the unified budget, then the trust fund is not new savings—it just displaces other government savings. The trust fund isn't necessarily increasing national savings by \$49 billion in 2017; it may simply be enabling the government to avoid tough decisions that would raise national savings by this amount.<sup>31</sup> ■

## Incremental Reforms

While the 1983 commission staved off Social Security's financing problems to some extent, these financial problems will come back with a vengeance as the baby boomers age. What can we do to move beyond the 1983 reforms and deal with the long-term funding problem? There are several approaches. In this section, we review approaches that build on the existing structure of the system, before turning to more fundamental changes in the nature of the program.

### Raise Taxes Further

While the problems of financing Social Security are large, they are not insurmountable. Increasing the payroll tax by 2.83 percentage points, from 12.4% to 15.23%, is projected to solve the financing problem for the next 75 years, and raising it by 4.23 percentage points is projected to solve the financing problem forever.<sup>32</sup>

### Extend the Base of Taxable Wages

Another tactic would be to try to delay the pain by extending the base of wages that can be taxed by Social Security to finance retirement benefits. Because the problem is that the number of elderly is growing rapidly relative to the number of young, we could try to increase the number of young who pay into the system. For example, many state and local government workers are now excluded from Social Security (because they were given the option to enroll instead in their state or local pension plans); we could mandate that they come into the system. Or we could ease immigration restrictions for young workers. These expansions improve the finances of the system in two ways. First, they raise the base on which payroll taxes can be collected in the short run. Second, the system now is charging workers, on average, more in payroll taxes than they will ultimately expect to collect in benefits. So new workers who can be pulled into the system represent a net gain in the financial position of the program (and a net loss for the workers).

Another means of extending the base of taxable wages is to increase the maximum income on which the payroll tax that finances Social Security is paid. In 2018, workers pay the

payroll tax on income up to \$128,700 per year. Because the system is progressive, such a change would once again improve the finances of the system both in the short run and the long run. We will discuss how to evaluate such tax changes in [Chapters 20](#) and [21](#).

## Raise the Retirement Age

Relative to life expectancy, the Social Security Full Benefits Age has been falling. In 1950, males who were age 65 could expect to live 12.7 more years on average; today, that figure is 19.3 years. For females, life expectancy at age 65 has risen from 15 years in 1950 to 21.7 years today.<sup>33</sup> It seems sensible that, as people live longer, they should work longer as well so that they don't have an increasingly long retirement to finance. Yet the FBA remained fixed for many years at 65 and has only slowly moved to age 67 for those born after 1960. Expenditures on the Social Security program could be significantly reduced by either speeding up or increasing the rise in the FBA.

It is important to recognize that the FBA is simply the point at which individuals are entitled to their full Primary Insurance Amount (PIA). This so-called normal retirement age is no longer normal; in fact, many more people retire at the EEA of 62 than at the FBA of 66 for those born between 1943 and 1954. So raising the FBA simply means cutting benefits at any age. Because the actuarial reduction penalizes people for each year that they claim benefits before the FBA, as the FBA moves out, a claimant at a given age faces a larger penalty. For example, those retiring at age 62 today receive 75.4% of their PIA; due to the increase in the Full Benefits Age, those retiring at age 62 in 2025 or later are scheduled to receive only 70.4% of their PIA. So increases in the FBA are most accurately viewed as a benefits cut, as opposed to a radical restructuring of the program.

A much more radical option would be to raise the EEA past age 62. Evidence from the United States and other countries suggests that this could significantly reduce retirement rates because there are such high retirement rates right at the EEA. This change could thereby save the government money by reducing the years of benefits received by older people. But the trade-off here is that there may be people who have a very difficult time working past age 62, and they would be excessively burdened by raising this age.



### APPLICATION

## Early Entitlements: Liquidity Versus Behavioral Biases

One of the enduring mysteries facing the U.S. Social Security system is “excess retirement” at age 62. As noted earlier, there is little net financial incentive in the United States for working versus retirement at age 62. Yet this is the modal age of labor force exit. What can explain this spike if there is no particular financial incentive at that age?

There are two competing theories. One is liquidity constraints. Many individuals may wish to retire before age 62, but they are unable to do so because they do not have the savings to finance their retirement—and because individuals, by law, cannot borrow against their Social Security entitlements. As a result, individuals must wait until age 62 to finance their retirement. The other is behavioral biases through which individuals do not appreciate the financial benefits of delaying retirement—perhaps because they have self-control problems when faced with the option of receiving Social Security benefits today versus the future.<sup>34</sup> As a result, individuals may retire at 62, even though it would be optimal to retire later.

Disentangling these explanations is critical for Social Security policy. If the problem is

liquidity constraints, then it suggests that welfare could be improved by making Social Security benefits available even earlier. If the problem is behavioral biases, it suggests that welfare might be improved by constraining individuals to wait until later to collect their benefits.

Unfortunately, there is not a strong evidence base on which to differentiate these views. A recent study in Singapore appears to support both explanations.<sup>35</sup> Individuals in Singapore are allowed to withdraw 10–30% of their pension savings at age 55. Upon turning 55, many individuals take advantage of this option, and the effect is largest for liquidity-constrained consumers. At the same time, there appears to be “overspending” in response to this extra liquidity among constrained consumers, and individuals appear to invest money withdrawn from their retirement accounts in bank accounts with a much lower rate of return. Within the United States, [Clark et al. \(2017\)](#) find that public employees who have the option of increasing their pension before age 62, in return for receiving a lower pension after age 62, are more likely to express regret with this choice than with other options. And [Engelhardt et al. \(2018\)](#) find that those men who retired earlier after the early retirement option was made available in the early 1960s were more likely to live in poverty later in life.

This same type of debate plays out in discussions of reforming the earnings test. As already noted, even though the earnings test is effectively a forced borrowing program, seniors may perceive it as a tax, and as a result change their labor supply in response to the test. Past evidence on whether the earnings test actually lowers labor supply is mixed, as reviewed in [Haider and Loughran \(2008\)](#). Most recently, Gelber et al. (2018) used a regression discontinuity approach to show that elderly employment did respond strongly to the earnings test-imposed kink in the budget constraint. At the same time, [Gruber and Orszag \(2003\)](#) found that removing the earnings test caused individuals to claim benefits much earlier, and [Figinski and Neumark \(2015\)](#) found that this resulted in higher poverty later in life. Once again, we face the trade-off of reducing efficiency through taxing elderly labor supply against insuring elders against excessive early claiming and later life poverty increases. ■

## Lower Benefits

Another option is to just lower the benefit amounts paid by Social Security. There are different ways this can be accomplished. Benefits can just be cut, for example, by lowering the rates at which the AIME is translated to PIA. Alternatively, the government could reduce the indexation rate of Social Security benefits. Currently, benefit levels for recipients rise each year by the increase in the cost of living, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). If we reduced that adjustment, say, to 1% below the CPI increase, this would significantly reduce expenditures—in a way that is less obvious to the voting public (and thus more attractive to politicians).

Although this is politically advantageous, it would be much better policy to cut benefits across the board than to reduce indexing. When indexing is reduced, it has its biggest impact on those who live the longest because benefits fall every year relative to what they were before the reform.<sup>36</sup> But if there remains a group of elderly that still face poverty problems, it is exactly the “oldest old,” particularly widows. Of the elderly over age 80, 12% live in poverty, compared to 8% between ages 65 and 69.<sup>37</sup> A straight benefits cut would affect all groups equally, but a reduction in inflation adjustment would have a much more pernicious effect on the neediest group of the elderly.

## Reduce Benefits for Higher Income Groups

Another alternative to an across-the-board cut in benefits is a reduction in benefits only for

higher income groups. After all, more than one-third of benefits are paid to those in families with incomes of more than \$50,000 per year so that some reduction in their benefits would be unlikely to impose great hardship.<sup>38</sup>

A simple means of accomplishing this would be to increase the taxation of Social Security benefits. Under current law, Social Security income is taxed only if an individual's other income plus one-half of Social Security income exceeds \$25,000. As a result, only about half of recipients are taxed on their benefits, and only 2% of Social Security benefit dollars are returned to the federal government in the form of taxes.<sup>39</sup> It is unclear why an elderly person with \$25,000 of income should pay less in taxes than a younger family with the same income, particularly because many of the major expenditures that must be financed out of income (home mortgage, child's education) are largely behind the elderly family.

Another alternative that has gathered significant attention is the “progressive price indexing” proposal of [Pozen \(2005\)](#). As noted earlier, Social Security benefits are based on historical earnings inflated to today by using increases in the wage level. Pozen suggested that for higher income workers, earnings be inflated by using the rate at which the price level increases instead, which is typically below the rate at which wages increase. Over time, this change would reduce benefits for higher-earning workers relative to lower-earning workers, and in the process could save enough in benefit payments to meet 75% of the 75-year shortfall in Social Security.

Opponents of reducing benefits only for the wealthy fear that doing so would endanger the widespread support for the Social Security program. Should the program become viewed as a “welfare program” for the poor, rather than a universal entitlement for all retirees, it would likely not be defended by such a uniform block of elderly voters. It seems unlikely, however, that the types of changes just proposed are enough to cause this change in attitude about Social Security.

## Invest the Trust Fund in Stocks

One problem with the Greenspan Commission’s solution in 1983 was that the trust fund is very inefficiently invested. Consider an individual planning for his retirement. He has a choice of two investment options that are very different: stocks and bonds. Stocks are an investment that is much riskier over the short run, but over long time periods (e.g., 30 years), they consistently yield a higher rate of return. Thus, when saving for retirement, most experts recommend that individuals, particularly when young, have the majority of their assets in stocks. Because they won’t need to access the assets for many years, and stocks have traditionally done much better in the long run, this compensates for the higher short-term risk of investment in stocks.

By this logic, because the Social Security trust fund is, in essence, savings for future generations of retirees, it should be at least partially invested in stocks; however, 100% of the assets in this trust fund are held in government bonds. Thus, it is inefficiently invested. Any private pension manager who had invested his private pension 100% in government bonds would be immediately fired! A slow investment of the trust fund in the stock market, with a limit of 40% of the trust fund in the market, could cover half or more of the 75-year projected deficit in the system.<sup>40</sup> So why not just invest the trust fund in the stock market, earn higher long-run returns, and reduce the long-run fiscal imbalance in the program?

There are two serious concerns with such an approach. First, if we can’t keep the politicians out of the cookie jar, why put more cookies in the jar? If the trust fund is going to

be used to finance other government projects, Social Security's long-term problems will not be solved by investing in the market.

Second, do we want the government investing such huge sums in the private stock market? If the government invested half the trust fund in the stock market, it would own almost 6% of the entire stock market, and that share could grow substantially over time as the trust fund grows. Thus, there is a legitimate concern that the government might abuse its position to manipulate capital markets for its own good. For example, politicians who didn't like nonunion labor could vote to have the government sell all stock in nonunion firms, or politicians who didn't like smoking could vote to sell all stock in tobacco-producing firms. As Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan testified in 1999, "Investing a portion of the Social Security trust fund assets in equities, as the Administration and others have proposed, would arguably put at risk the efficiency of our capital markets and thus, our economy. Even with Herculean efforts, I doubt if it would be feasible to insulate, over the long run, the trust funds from political pressures—direct and indirect—to allocate capital to less than its most productive use."<sup>41</sup>

In theory, both of these concerns could be addressed by appropriate design of the investment strategy. The government could place the earnings from stock investments off-budget in a more "iron-clad" manner than it does with the current trust fund. And it could establish an independent, Federal Reserve-like institution to manage those stock holdings and to immunize the holdings from political pressure. Indeed, such safeguards appear to have been successfully implemented for the Railroad Retirement trust fund, a smaller but similar retirement trust fund that has successfully invested in equities in recent years. In practice, however, it is not clear how successful these safeguards would be for the larger and more politically charged Social Security program.

## Fundamental Reform: Privatization

Finally, the most radical alternative for reform is **privatization**, whereby we move toward a fully funded system with individually controlled accounts. That is, Social Security would become like a private pension, where individuals invest their payroll taxes and receive those taxes back with interest when they retire.

### privatization

A proposal to reform Social Security by allowing individuals to invest their payroll taxes in various assets through individually controlled accounts.

Such an approach has two major advantages. First, the system would be funded by individual savings, thereby increasing the capital stock and long-run well-being of the United States.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, because the capital would be in an individual's hands, and not in the government's hands, it would be truly "off-budget" so that the government would not be tempted to spend against this account. Second, such an approach would respect consumer sovereignty with respect to their investment decisions. Some consumers are very risk averse and would like to invest their retirement savings conservatively. Others would like to take risks and invest their retirement savings aggressively. By forcing people to invest in the same way, the Social Security program potentially reduces welfare by restricting their choices.

In spite of its positive attributes, this approach also has major problems. The most pressing, of course, is the following: How can we have individuals save money for their own retirement, while at the same time continuing to support the existing generation of retirees? If we privatize the system, we still have to pay off the legacy debt from the first generation of recipients, which requires either enormous double taxation of existing generations or huge

deficits. If the latter course is chosen, then it completely offsets the savings benefits promised by privatization! That is, if we pay off the existing retirees by building up a large debt, we are simultaneously increasing national borrowing and saving, with no net effect on the capital stock.

This point relates to a claim commonly made by proponents of privatization: that privatization will allow individuals to earn a higher rate of return on their Social Security payroll taxes. As many have noted, the Social Security system pays a much lower rate of return (the sum of the wage and population growth effects) than the rate of return provided by private savings. The return on Social Security is currently only about 2%, while the historical real return on stock investment is about 7%. Thus, a strong argument in favor of privatization has been the ability to allow individuals to take their money out of poorly performing Social Security investments and put it into more efficient private investment opportunities.

[Geanakoplos et al. \(1999\)](#) argued, however, that once we account for the need to pay back the legacy debt, a privatized Social Security system *would not* provide a higher rate of return than our current system. They considered a move to a privatized system where all future generations pay an additional tax to pay off the legacy debt. They demonstrated that this tax is sufficiently large to *exactly offset* the higher returns from private investment. So we would move from a system where people are forced to save inefficiently to one where they can save efficiently but have to pay taxes owed on the legacy debt that offset any efficiency gains. There is no net gain in investment efficiency for participants in the Social Security program.

Another problem with privatization is that such a system could have much higher administrative costs. The Social Security program has very low administrative costs in terms of both investing (because the trust fund simply buys government bonds) and in terms of annuitization (due to the large pool of recipients over which the fixed costs of annuitization can be spread). The total administrative costs of the Social Security program (\$6.2 billion) are only 0.227% of the program's asset balances (\$2,732.5 billion).<sup>43</sup>

Nations that have privatized all or part of their social insurance systems have much higher administrative costs. In the United Kingdom, for example, the cost of administering the investment accounts alone is 1.24% per year. These higher costs result from the administrative inefficiencies of smaller investment pools, the profits earned by private administrators, and the advertising expenditures associated with competition for individual retirement accounts. This may not seem like a very big difference, but earning 1.24% less each year adds up to a large effect when investing for the long term. For example, an administrative cost of 1.24% per year on a 40-year investment results in an account that is only two-thirds as large as one with administrative costs of 0.19% per year.<sup>44</sup>

The United Kingdom is not an unusual example; in Chile, for example, the administrative costs of its privatized system were initially more than 5% per year, and even after 30 years of program operation, the costs have fallen only to about 1% per year.<sup>45</sup> The private pension fund system in Mexico has administrative costs of about 2% of payroll.<sup>46</sup> In the U.S. context, with our sophisticated mutual fund and life insurance industries, it is possible that administrative costs could be much lower, but international evidence is not very heartening on this front.

A third problem with privatization is that policy makers may not *want* to respect consumer sovereignty with respect to retirement savings. After all, the main motivation in most policy makers' eyes for having the Social Security program is that individuals are too shortsighted or

uninformed to save for their own retirement. Yet privatization would suggest that individuals *can be trusted* with the much more complicated decision of how to optimally invest their (forced) retirement savings. This seems a clear contradiction—and seems very unlikely given existing evidence that, for example, seniors “lack even a rudimentary understanding of stock and bond prices, risk diversification, portfolio choice, and investment fees” ([Lusardi et al., 2009](#)). Just as the government may have a paternalistic role in forcing consumers to save, it may also have a role in telling them how to save.



## APPLICATION

### Company Stock in 401(k) Plans

An important feature of retirement savings in the United States has been the growth of 401(k) plans. These plans, discussed in more detail in [Chapter 22](#), allow individuals to save for their own retirement in self-directed investment choices. A number of recent studies have documented problems, however, with how these choices are made, illustrating the hazards of allowing individuals to direct their Social Security investments.

One option in many company 401(k) plans is to invest money in company stock. But it is an option that almost never makes sense, particularly for large parts of one’s retirement portfolio. There are two major sources of financial uncertainty in a worker’s life: their job security and the performance of their savings. Investing in company stock *binds these sources of uncertainty together*. If the company does well, the worker will do very well. But if the company does badly, the worker is both out of a job and out of savings. Once again, given our desire for smooth consumption, we should much prefer an outcome where these two aspects of uncertainty are unrelated: a middle path is always preferred to a feast-or-famine outcome.

Despite this logic, investing in company stock is a popular option for 401(k) account holders. Of people with 401(k)s, 38% have the option of investing in company stock, and in total, company stock makes up one-fourteenth of aggregate 401(k) assets. Of those workers who have the option to invest in company stock, 6% have more than 80% of their assets invested in company stock.<sup>[47](#)</sup>

The hazards of this approach are illustrated by the experience of workers at Enron, once one of the largest energy companies in the world. When large accounting irregularities were exposed at Enron in 2001, the company went bankrupt, more than 4,000 workers lost their jobs in a single day, and more had their retirement savings wiped out. Sixty-two percent of Enron’s 401(k) assets had been invested in its own stock, which lost more than 99% of its value over the course of the year surrounding its bankruptcy.<sup>[48](#)</sup> Fortunately, these workers still had Social Security to support them in their retirement, but if privatized Social Security had been invested as poorly as their 401(k) funds, those Social Security benefits would have disappeared as well. ■

## The Trade-Offs Between Fundamental Reforms

To summarize, there is a clear and important trade-off between equity investment of the trust fund and individual accounts. Government equity investment is likely more efficient than individual private accounts because it reduces administrative costs and solves the failures of optimization that appear to mark individual retirement savings decisions. But it is risky to give the government such a large stake in private equity markets, and it doesn’t solve the

problem of the government spending the trust fund surplus.

One potential middle ground is *government-regulated accounts*. Under such a plan, each person would get an account, but the government would limit investment choices and force annuitization. In the Application, we review the nature of such “mixed” proposals. As with most middle grounds, however, this approach may leave no one happy: it is too risky for the traditionalists and not private enough for the privatizers. Thus, Social Security reform remains one of the most daunting problems facing our nation today and in the future.



## APPLICATION

### Mixed Proposals for Social Security Reform<sup>49</sup>

In 2001, President Bush appointed a commission to propose solutions to Social Security’s long-term fiscal problem. This commission proposed three plans, each of which included government-regulated individual accounts. None of the plans proposed fully replacing the existing pay-as-you-go Social Security system with a system of private accounts; rather, each proposal reflected a hybrid between the current structure and a privatized structure. Under one of the options, for example, workers would have the choice of investing up to 2% of their wages in a personal account. If they chose this option, they would then see their future Social Security benefits reduced by the amount of wages they invested in personal accounts, assuming an interest rate of 3.5%. Thus, if people could earn a rate of return in excess of 3.5%, they might choose to opt out of part of the traditional Social Security plan.

Each of the three plans tried to address some of the concerns about privatization, for example, by suggesting government-regulated investments in personal accounts. But the major issue facing all of the plans is their cost. Because all of the plans divert some payroll tax revenues away from the Social Security program and into private accounts, offsetting revenue increases need to be found so that the Social Security benefits we are currently obligated to pay can be paid. Under one plan, these revenues would come purely from other sources; other plans propose that the financing would come partly from decreases in Social Security benefits.

A more recent mixed proposal comes from [Lieberman et al. \(2005\)](#). This proposal represents a consensus plan drawn up by three people who have advised politicians at very different points in the political spectrum. This plan has four key elements. First, cut Social Security benefits by (1) reducing the values of the rate at which the PIA is converted to the AIME (as shown in [Figure 13-1](#)) to 67.6, 15, and 7.5 and (2) raising the Full Benefits Age to 68 and the Early Entitlement Age to 65. Second, raise new revenue through (1) a 1.5%-of-payroll mandatory contribution into personal retirement accounts and (2) an increase in the maximum earnings that can be taxed so that 90% of all earnings is taxed (in current terms, that would imply an increase to \$204,000, or roughly a doubling of the current maximum). Third, establish individual retirement accounts with the following rules: a 3%-of-earnings contribution rate, investment options restricted to five broad options provided by no more than 15 companies (to restrict administrative costs and the possibility of poor investment choices), and mandatory annuitization. Lieberman et al. (2005) estimated that this plan would break even, although it would deliver larger benefits to higher earners.

Perhaps reflecting the partisan nature of our current political debates, recent proposals for reforming Social Security have tended to move away these type of bipartisan mixed

proposals. In 2016 Representative Sam Johnson, a Republican and chair of the House Ways and Means subcommittee on Social Security, proposed legislation that would reform Social Security through benefit cuts. It would raise the retirement age to 69 and start using a more conservative COLA formula. On the other side, Democratic Representative John Larson introduced reforms that would increase taxes while also increasing benefits. The proposal, supported by 80% of house democrats, would increase benefits by increasing minimum benefits to 25% above the poverty line, increase benefits by 2% for all recipients, and use a more generous cost-of-living adjustment. The bill would pay for this and fix the deficit by increasing the payroll tax rate to 7.4% for employees and companies by 2042. Additionally, taxes would recommence on income higher than \$400,000. ■

## 13.5 Conclusion

Social Security is the largest social insurance program in the United States and the largest single expenditure item of the federal government. Not surprisingly, this program has major implications for the standard of living of the elderly, as well as for the non-elderly who pay the taxes to support this program. Social Security faces a long-run financing problem to which there are no easy solutions. The question of how to resolve this problem will be one of the most contentious sources of political debate in the years to come.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Social Security is the largest social insurance program in the United States.
- Social Security is financed by a tax on earnings and pays benefits to retired workers. These benefits are a redistributive function of the workers' average lifetime earnings.
- Social Security is an unfunded system that has paid excessive returns to early generations. As a result, Social Security has a "legacy debt" that must be paid back.
- The government provides Social Security to remedy failures in private annuity markets and to paternalistically ensure that workers are saving appropriate amounts for their retirement.
- The Social Security program crowds out savings to some extent, but the consumption-smoothing value of this program to the elderly is shown by the dramatic reduction in elderly poverty rates over the past 40 years.
- At the same time, Social Security has been shown to significantly increase retirement rates in the United States and other nations.
- The system faces a major shortfall over the next 75 years because people are living longer, birthrates are falling, wages are growing more slowly, and payroll taxes are not scheduled to rise.
- There are a variety of options for reforming the Social Security program to move it to more sound financial footing, ranging from the basic (raising payroll taxes further) to the radical (privatizing the system).

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. The government of Westlovakia has just reformed its social security system. This reform changed two aspects of the system: (1) It abolished its actuarial reduction for early retirement, and (2) it reduced the payroll tax by half for workers who continued to work beyond the early retirement age. Will the average retirement age for Weslovakian workers increase or decrease in response to these two changes, or can't you tell? Explain your answer.
2. Congressman Jones has proposed a bill that would increase the number of years of earnings counted when computing the Social Security Average Indexed Monthly Earnings amount from 35 to 40. What would be the effects of this policy change on the retirement behavior of workers? Would the Social Security trust fund balance increase or decrease? Why?
3. Suppose the Social Security payroll tax was increased today to 16.4% to solve the 75-year fiscal imbalance in the program. Explain the effect of this change on the value of the Social Security program for people of different ages, earning levels, and sexes.
4. Senator Deal proposes to offer a choice to future retirees: if you retire before age 70, the benefits are calculated on the last 35 years of income; if you retire at age 73, however, you receive benefits calculated on only the last 15 years of income. Which option will high-income workers likely choose? Low-income workers? Why?
5. Consider two households, the Romeros and the Pereiras. The Romeros are a two-earner household: both Audrey and Jaime Romero work and earn the same amount each year. The Pereiras are a one-earner household: Isabela Pereira works while Jonathan Pereira is a homemaker and stay-at-home dad. Use the way spousal benefits are treated in the Social Security system to address the following:
  1. How do the relative rates of return on Social Security payroll taxes compare for the two families?
  2. After the kids go off to college, Jonathan considers taking a small part-time job. How might the Social Security system of taxes and benefits affect his decision?
  3. Suppose that both families have retired and have started to receive Social Security benefits. By what fraction will these benefits fall for each of these families if one member of the household dies? What implications does this have for relative consumption smoothing in these two households?
6. Senator Dare suggests lowering Social Security benefits by reducing the rate at which Average Indexed Monthly Earnings are converted to the Primary Insurance Amount for future retirees. Senator Snow instead proposes reducing the rate at which benefits are indexed to inflation so that when the Consumer Price Index rises by one percentage point, Social Security benefits rise by less than 1%. Which proposal will be worse for current retirees? For future retirees?
7. What are the political and economic ramifications of investing a large part of the Social Security trust fund in the stock market, as has been recently proposed?
8. Prior to 1982, college-age children of deceased workers received college tuition subsidies as benefits of the Social Security program. Drawing on the lessons of [Chapter 11](#), what do you think the rationale for such a program was?
9. Dominitz, Manski, and Heinz (2003) present survey evidence suggesting that young Americans are extremely uncertain about the likelihood that they will receive any Social Security benefits at all. How might demographic trends in the United States contribute to this concern?
10. The Social Security Administration website has a link to a publication titled *Social Security Programs Throughout the World*, which is available at <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/progdesc/ssptw/> or by searching for “Social Security Programs Throughout the World.” Using the report for the most recent year available, find the summary tables that compare the attributes of retirement systems of all European countries, and in particular, examine the table containing ages for each country at which a person may begin to take a pension from the Social Security program. Based on this

table, which of countries do you think will have the greatest rate of early retirement, in which individuals exit the workforce prior to becoming eligible for Social Security? Why?

1

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. Lalaland is an extremely stable country with 200,000 residents, half of whom are young workers and half of whom are retirees. At the end of each year, the 100,000 retirees die, the 100,000 young workers retire, and 100,000 new young workers are born. Workers earn a total of \$8,000 for the year. Lalaland operates a pay-as-you-go social security system, where each current worker is taxed \$3,000 and the revenue collected is used to pay a \$3,000 pension to each retiree. The neighboring country, Gogovia, is larger and more dynamic. Gogovia has an active stock market that Lalalandians can invest in and earn a 10% rate of return. It also has an active banking sector, which will gladly lend the Lalalandian government money, charging it 10% interest per year. Lalaland is considering moving to a system of personal accounts, where each Lalalander would take her \$3,000 and invest it in Gogovian markets (and earn a much higher rate of return!). The government would borrow \$300 million ( $\$3,000 \times 100,000$ ) from Gogovian bankers to pay for current retirees. It would then tax retirees each year by just enough to pay the interest on this debt. Would this new system be better or worse for Lalaland?
12. Compare and contrast the Social Security retirement program, which provides income support to the elderly, with Unemployment Insurance, which provides income support for a period after job loss. Explain how well each program meets the criteria for a social insurance program that should be provided by the government in order to smooth consumption, instead of being addressed by individuals self-insuring against the event?
13. Edwards and Edwards (2002) described evidence that, following a social security reform in Chile that reduced the implicit tax on working in the formal sector, informal sector wages rose. What do you think is the mechanism at work here?
14.  Suppose that you had information about the amount of private savings during the years before and after the introduction of the Social Security program. How might you carry out a difference-in-difference analysis of the introduction of the Social Security program on private savings?
15.  Suppose you find evidence that workers who have dropped out of high school are more likely to retire at age 62 than college-educated workers are. You conclude that the workers without a college education do this because they are more liquidityconstrained than other workers. Can you think of alternative explanations for this finding?
16. Consider an economy that is composed of identical individuals who live for two periods. These individuals have preferences over consumption in periods 1 and 2 given by  $U = \sqrt{(C_1)} + \sqrt{(C_2)}$ . They receive an income of 45 in period 1 and an income of 20 in period 2. They can save as much of their income as they like in bank accounts, earning an interest rate of 10% per period. They do not care about their children, so they spend all their money before the end of period 2.

Each individual's lifetime budget constraint is given by  $C_1 + C_2 / (1 + r) = Y_1 + Y_2 / (1 + r)$ . Individuals choose consumption in each period by maximizing lifetime utility subject to this lifetime budget constraint.

1. What is the individual's optimal consumption in each period? How much saving does he or she do in the first period?
2. The government has decided to set up a social security system. This system will take \$10 from each individual in the first period, put it in the bank, and transfer it to each person with interest in the second period. Write out the new lifetime budget constraint. How does the system affect the amount of private savings? How does the system affect national savings (total savings in society)? What is the name for this type of social security system?
3. Suppose instead that the government uses the \$10 contribution from each individual to start paying out benefits to current retirees (who did not pay in to a social security when they were working). It still promises to pay current workers their \$10 (plus interest) back when they retire using contributions from future workers.

Similarly, it will pay back future workers interest on their contributions using the contributions of the next generation of workers. An influential politician says: “This is a free lunch: we help out current retirees, and current and future workers will still make the same contributions and receive the same benefits, so it doesn’t harm them, either.” Do you buy this argument? If not, what is wrong with it?

17. For each of the following proposed reforms to the Social Security program, briefly discuss the pros and cons of the reform, paying attention in particular to efficiency implications (through potential behavioral responses to the change) and equity implications (who wins and who loses). Note that all reforms are intended to save the system money, so do not list this as a benefit.
1. Increase the number of years used to calculate benefits from 35 to 40.
  2. Reduce benefits for beneficiaries with high asset levels (wealth).
  3. Add new state and local government workers to the pool of covered workers (i.e., they pay payroll taxes now and receive benefits when they are old).
  4. Gradually increase the normal retirement age (NRA) from 65 to 70 (under current laws, the NRA will gradually rise to 67 by 2022; the proposal is to speed up this process so that the NRA will be 70 by 2022).

- The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# CHAPTER 14 Unemployment Insurance, Disability Insurance, and Workers' Compensation



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [14.1 Institutional Features of Unemployment Insurance, Disability Insurance, and Workers' Compensation](#)
- [14.2 Consumption-Smoothing Benefits of Social Insurance Programs](#)
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## Questions to keep in mind

- How do the unemployment insurance, disability insurance, and workers' compensation programs fit within our general social insurance framework?
- What are the consumption-smoothing benefits and moral hazard costs of these programs?
- How does the evidence on behavioral responses suggest that these programs be reformed?

In October 2009, 15.1 million Americans were out of work, and the unemployment rate had reached 9.8%, a level not seen since mid-1983. Many of the unemployed were receiving unemployment benefits under their state unemployment insurance (UI) programs, but such benefits typically ended after 26 weeks.

In July 2008, Congress recognized that 26 weeks might not be enough time to find a job in a sluggish economy and passed a temporary federal benefits program, Extended Unemployment Compensation (EUC). EUC was available to claimants who had exhausted all regular UI benefits, and the program was scheduled to expire at the end of 2009.

As the recession dragged on into the fall of 2009, unemployment rates rose more than expected, and many workers began running out of UI benefits. By the end of October 2009, 314,000 workers were expected to run out of UI benefits and more than a million by the end of the year.

As the end of 2009 approached, there was tremendous controversy over how to address the high levels of unemployment and expiring UI benefits. A proposal in the House to grant an additional 13 weeks of benefits to high-unemployment states passed, but in the Senate, the bill faced significant hurdles. Senate Democrats pushed a more generous bill that would extend EUC benefits by 14 weeks nationwide, with an additional 6 weeks for those in states where unemployment rates topped 8.5%. Senate Republicans pushed back, using a variety of procedural tactics to stall the bill.

On November 6, 2009, the Worker, Homeownership, and Business Assistance Act of 2009 was signed into law, extending the EUC program by 14 weeks. A provision of the law provided 6 additional weeks of benefits depending on state of residency; thus, a worker could obtain unemployment benefits for up to 79 weeks.<sup>1</sup> The EUC program was extended again through the Unemployment Compensation Extension Act of 2010 and the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012. EUC program benefits lasted until the end of 2013, creating the guarantee of up to 99 weeks of unemployment benefits, depending upon enrollment time and state.<sup>2</sup>

When extended benefits ran out at the end of 2013, however, returning the maximum benefit duration to 26 weeks, there was no consensus for extending them further. A bipartisan group of senators were able to pass legislation through the Senate to extend benefits back to 73 weeks, but the legislation was unable to pass the House. Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said in response to the bill being defeated upon entering the House, "To help Americans looking for work, we should provide the lifeline of unemployment insurance to those who have lost their job through no fault of their own. We are one Republican vote away."<sup>3</sup>

In return, Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) said, "I do support unemployment benefits for the 26

weeks that they're paid for. If you extend it beyond that, you do a disservice to these workers. When you allow people to be on unemployment insurance for 99 weeks, you're causing them to become part of this perpetual unemployed group in our economy.”<sup>4</sup> Despite several attempts since 2013, there have been no additional federal extensions of unemployment insurance, and the term for unemployment insurance benefits remains at 26 weeks.

This debate illustrates that public provision of insurance for unemployment is considered an important role for government in the United States. [Chapter 12](#), however, taught us that public finance economists must step back and ask why there is a role for the government in providing this insurance. We must also consider whether the benefits of extending UI (the additional consumption smoothing for displaced workers) exceed the costs (the moral hazard effects on unemployment).

In this chapter, we discuss in detail the issues that arise in providing UI and two other major forms of social insurance: workers' compensation insurance against on-the-job injury and disability insurance (DI) against career-ending disabilities. These are three of the largest social insurance programs in the United States, and they share many common features. Benefits are conditioned on the occurrence of some adverse event (unemployment, disability, injury) and are based on past earnings on the job. Most important, benefits are based at least partly on unobservable or difficult-to-verify conditions, such as job search effort and the true inability to work due to disability or injury. The unobservability of some aspects of the adverse event raises moral hazard problems that must be considered in program design.

We begin the chapter by describing the structure of these three programs and comparing their similarities and differences. The next section presents the empirical evidence on the costs and benefits of these programs and uses the framework from [Chapter 12](#) to discuss the implications for optimal program benefit levels. We then look at the impact of these programs on employer decision making over issues such as worker layoffs and workplace safety. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for program reform.

# 14.1 Institutional Features of Unemployment Insurance, Disability Insurance, and Workers' Compensation

As with Social Security, it is difficult to discuss the economic implications of these social insurance programs without first understanding how they work. In this section, we provide a brief overview of the institutional features of these three programs.

## Institutional Features of Unemployment Insurance

**Unemployment insurance (UI)** is a federally mandated program that is administered by each of the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, which are free to set their benefit levels and other aspects of the program.<sup>5</sup> That UI is administered by the states is an excellent feature of this program for the purposes of empirical economics because economists can learn about the consumption-smoothing and moral hazard effects of UI by studying how these effects vary as the generosity of state benefits vary. Indeed, the large empirical literature discussed in this chapter derives its success from the wide variation in UI programs across the states.

**unemployment insurance (UI)**

A federally mandated, state-run program in which payroll taxes are used to pay benefits to workers laid off by companies.

Unemployment insurance is financed by a payroll tax that is levied on employers and averages 0.56% across the states.<sup>6</sup> As with the Social Security payroll tax, this tax is paid only on earnings up to a certain level, a fairly low level in most states. The UI payroll tax is **partially experience-rated**; that is, it rises as firms have more layoffs, but not on a one-for-one basis. Thus, firms with twice as many layoffs do not typically pay twice as much in payroll taxes.

**partially experience-rated**

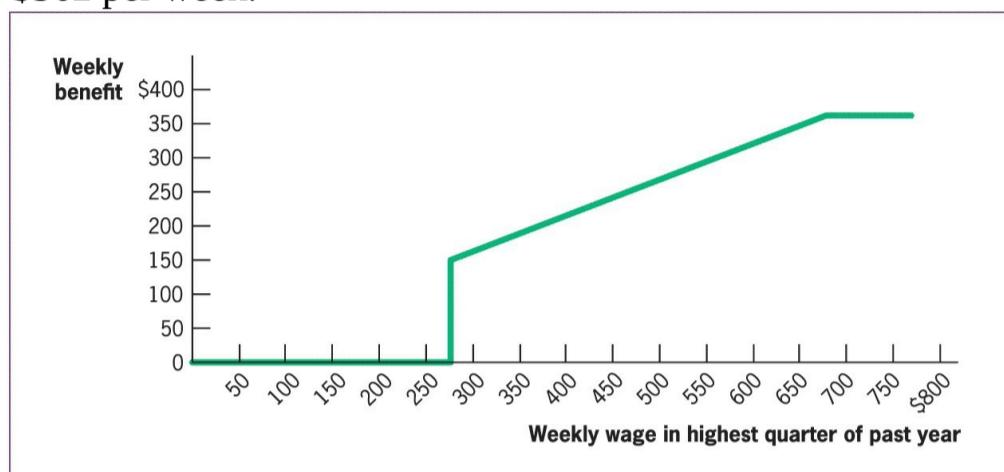
The tax that finances the UI program rises as firms have more layoffs, but not on a one-for-one basis.

An important feature of UI is that not all those out of work qualify for benefits. To be eligible, workers must meet three criteria. First, workers must have earned a minimum amount over the previous year; in most cases, states require minimum earnings in several previous calendar quarters before individuals are eligible for benefits. Second, workers cannot quit or be fired for cause; UI is available only to those who are laid off from their jobs for economic reasons. Third, workers have to be actively looking for work and willing to accept a job comparable to the one they lost. Even if eligible, individuals don't receive benefits automatically. They must go to the UI office and enroll in the program, and they must show evidence that they are looking for a new job.

Between eligibility requirements and the effort required to claim UI, only 20% of unemployed workers actually receive UI benefits.<sup>7</sup> Even among those eligible, take-up of benefits is only about two-thirds ([Blank and Card, 1991](#)). The reasons for this lack of participation among those eligible for benefits are unclear, but they are usually divided into two issues. The first is information: some individuals may not understand that they are entitled to UI when they lose their jobs. The second is the stigma attached to being unemployed: individuals may be reluctant to sign up for what they see as a government handout, particularly because they would actually have to go to a public office and state that they can't find a job.

Once an individual qualifies for UI, she receives a benefit that is a function of pre-unemployment earnings, which is typically measured by the average weekly wage in the

quarter of the past year when earnings were highest. The benefits schedule for a typical state, Michigan, is shown in [Figure 14-1](#). There is a minimum benefit level of \$147 per week for all workers who earned more than \$276 per week on average in their highest-earning quarter of the past year. If earnings were less than \$276 per week on average during the quarter, no benefits are paid. Benefits are increased by \$0.53 for each dollar of pre-unemployment earnings (4.1% of wages earned in their highest-earning quarter), until reaching a maximum benefit level of \$362 per week.<sup>8</sup>



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■ FIGURE 14-1

Unemployment Benefit Schedule for Michigan • In the state of Michigan, no unemployment benefits are paid to those earning less than \$276 per week in the highest quarter of the past year. Once the \$276 level has been reached, unemployment benefits rise with the weekly wage in the highest quarter of the past year, with a maximum benefit of \$362.

Data from: [Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency \(2018\)](#).

As with Social Security, a key measure of the generosity of the UI program is the *replacement rate*, the extent to which benefits replace pre-layoff earnings. The replacement rate under the UI system in the United States is high for the lowest-paid workers but can be low for higher-earning workers because their benefits are capped at the maximum benefit level (such as \$362 per week in Michigan). Replacement rates also vary substantially across states. Replacement rates average 46% nationally, but unemployed Alaskans have an average replacement rate of only 32%, while unemployed Pennsylvanians average about 53%.<sup>9</sup> Unlike most other social insurance programs, the benefits received from UI are taxed as if they were wage income.

The other key aspect of benefit payments under UI is their duration. Benefits generally last for 26 weeks, with some exceptions. First, workers who have sporadic work histories can qualify for benefits, but only for a shorter period of time. Second, there is an automatic extended UI program that goes into effect whenever a state's unemployment rate exceeds some (fairly high) threshold; when this program is in effect, individuals are entitled to 13 more weeks of benefits. Finally, in recessionary periods, the federal government has typically intervened to mandate further extensions in UI availability, as seen in the example at the start of this chapter. In the early 1980s, during the deepest recession since World War II, the combination of state-extended benefits programs and federal extensions led to a maximum entitlement of 65 weeks, or 2.5 times the typical benefits availability period. During the recent recession, federal UI benefits were extended up to 99 weeks, but they have since returned to their pre-recession duration of 26 weeks.

## Institutional Features of Disability Insurance

The [disability insurance \(DI\)](#) program was introduced in 1957 to provide insurance against

career-ending disabilities. Along with Social Security, DI is part of the Old Age Security and Disability Income (OASDI) program. The DI program currently has benefits expenditures of \$145.8 billion, more than 15.3% of the total OASDI budget.<sup>10</sup> It is financed by a portion of the Social Security payroll tax. The program is administered at the federal level, with uniform nationwide benefits, but the initial decision on qualification for this program is made at the state level.

#### **disability insurance (DI)**

A federal program in which a portion of the Social Security payroll tax is used to pay benefits to workers who have suffered a medical impairment that leaves them unable to work.

To apply for DI, individuals must have a medical impairment that leaves them unable to work. In order to prove disability, the DI program mandates that individuals cannot receive benefits until they have been disabled for five months; that is, individuals who want to receive DI must first go five months without working to demonstrate that they are truly disabled. DI applications go to state medical determination boards for a decision, and these boards are fairly stringent in awarding benefits. The DI acceptance rate—the share of those applying who are accepted into the program—is only about one-third.

If awarded benefits, workers receive the same amount they would have received if they retired at the Full Benefit Age of 66 under the Social Security program (their Primary Insurance Amount). As with Social Security, these benefits are largely untaxed. Two years after disability, workers also qualify for health insurance coverage under the Medicare program available to all Americans over the age of 65. If rejected for DI, individuals can appeal their cases through the court system. Ultimately, because of successful appeals, about half of those applying for DI receive benefits. Once receiving DI, individuals are very unlikely to leave the program and eventually move into the old-age portion of OASDI at age 66.

While the disability evaluations are made by trained professionals, it is nevertheless difficult to perfectly assess disability. An illustration of these problems is provided by [Parsons \(1991\)](#), who reported on a study in which a set of disability claims was initially reviewed by a state panel and then, one year later, resubmitted to the same panel, but as anonymous new claims. He found that the panel switched its decision frequently: 22% of those who had initially qualified for DI were rejected one year later, and 22% of those initially rejected for DI were found to be qualified one year later. That the same set of experts cannot provide a consistent judgment of disability for such a large share of cases highlights the difficulties in assessing true disability.

## Institutional Features of Workers' Compensation

[\*\*Workers' compensation \(WC\)\*\*](#) differs from UI and DI in that it is not publicly provided insurance. Instead, state governments *mandate* that all employers buy insurance against on-the-job accidents. WC insurance is typically provided by private companies, but in some states, the state government may sell WC insurance as well. The nature of this program, including benefits determination, varies greatly across the states (similar to UI). The premiums that firms pay for this insurance are experience-rated more tightly than with UI, however: for most large firms, WC premiums are based purely on their past history of WC claims. (For small firms, there is less experience rating at the firm level.)

#### **workers' compensation (WC)**

State-mandated insurance, which firms generally buy from private insurers, that pays for medical costs and lost wages associated with an on-the-job injury.

WC insurance has two components. The first is medical coverage for the costs associated

with the injury. The second is cash payments to compensate the worker for lost wages during recuperation from the injury. In most states, WC systems are designed to replace two-thirds of workers' wages, but, unlike UI, WC benefits are not taxed by the federal income tax system.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the after-tax replacement rate can be considerably higher: a worker with a tax rate of 25% (roughly the median) can work and receive \$0.75 of each dollar earned (net compensation after tax), or the worker can receive WC and get \$0.67 tax-free, so that the after-tax replacement rate is actually 89% (67/75).

Workers' compensation benefits vary significantly across the country, as shown in [Table 14-1](#), which shows the compensation under WC systems in ten states for permanent impairment to different body parts. Losing a leg in Washington, D.C., entitles a worker to nearly four times as much compensation as in the state of Mississippi, for example (\$326,716 versus \$83,886).<sup>12</sup> Most benefits payments are made for what are called "temporary total injuries," which keep the worker from working, but only for a short period of time. Classic examples of temporary total injuries include lacerations or back sprains. The problems in consistently diagnosing these types of injuries are even harder than those faced by the DI program. Temporary injuries are typically harder to diagnose than permanent disabilities, and it is often even more difficult to assess whether an injury is truly work-related.

**TABLE 14-1 Maximum Indemnity Benefits Paid to Selected Types of Work Injuries in 2015**

**Type of Permanent Impairment**

State	Arm	Hand	Eye	Leg	Foot	Temporary Injury (10 Weeks)
Georgia	\$122,141	\$86,856	\$81,428	\$122,141	\$73,285	\$5,355
Hawaii	\$253,570	\$198,305	\$130,036	\$234,375	\$166,608	\$7,453
Illinois	\$454,813	\$288,659	\$243,600	\$416,795	\$235,151	\$12,616
Indiana	\$208,920	\$149,734	\$120,140	\$179,327	\$120,140	\$6,640
Michigan	\$228,080	\$182,294	\$137,357	\$182,294	\$137,357	\$7,914
Mississippi	\$95,870	\$71,903	\$47,935	\$83,886	\$59,919	\$7,925
Missouri	\$119,013	\$89,773	\$71,819	\$106,189	\$76,948	\$7,954
New Jersey	\$278,128	\$168,946	\$106,088	\$265,487	\$140,980	\$7,946
New York	\$260,877	\$204,102	\$133,783	\$240,809	\$171,409	\$5,355
Washington, D.C.	\$353,943	\$276,802	\$181,509	\$326,716	\$232,936	\$13,795

Data from: [Grabell and Berkes \(2015\)](#).

The benefits for different types of injuries differ greatly across this sample of states. The last column shows the benefits (from 2008, given in 2018 dollars) over 10 weeks for a temporary total injury that leaves the worker unable to work.

A key feature of WC is that it provides [no-fault insurance](#) against accidents. Prior to the creation of WC systems at the beginning of the twentieth century, if workers were injured on the job, they had to sue their employers for compensation. This system was viewed as unfair because injured low-income workers may not have had the resources to bring suit against employers. Moreover, there was substantial deadweight loss involved in using the courts as a means to settle injury claims. Because all that was at stake was a transfer of money from employers to employees, all the costs associated with these cases (such as lawyers' fees and other court costs) were a waste to society.<sup>13</sup> WC, in contrast, does not assign blame for injuries: regardless of whose fault it is, workers are entitled to insurance benefits if they are injured on the job. As a result of this approach, the transaction costs of the transfer are greatly reduced by the existence of no-fault WC.

### **no-fault insurance**

When there is a qualifying injury, the workers' compensation benefits are paid out by the insurer regardless of whether the injury was the worker's or the firm's fault.

That said, there is a movement in some states away from government mandated WC. For many years, Texas has had an optional WC program, and a substantial share of firms opt out of the program and offer their own substitute WC coverage instead, although typically at a level that is much less generous than the state-mandated benefit level.<sup>14</sup> Oklahoma adopted a similar policy and currently 1.5 million employees in the two states are in non-mandated plans. States such as Tennessee and South Carolina are currently considering similar policies.

## Comparison of the Features of UI, DI, and WC

[Table 14-2](#) compares the major features of these three programs. UI provides benefits that are the least generous and have the shortest duration. The event of unemployment is easy to verify, but confirming whether an individual is actually searching for a job is close to impossible. The benefits under DI are somewhat more generous and are of indefinite length. Disability for DI is somewhat difficult to verify. WC has the most generous benefits of all, and the duration of benefits is as long as a physician is willing to say that the worker is not recovered. Injury for this program is often much harder to verify than for DI.

**TABLE 14-2 Comparing Unemployment Insurance, Disability Insurance, and Workers' Compensation**

Characteristic	UI	DI	WC
Qualifying event	Unemployment and job search	Disability	On-the-job injury
Duration	26 weeks	Indefinite	Indefinite (with medical verification)
Difficulty of verification	Unemployment: Easy Job search: Nearly impossible	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
Average after-tax replacement rate	47%	60%	89%
Variation across states	Benefits and other rules	Only disability determination	Benefits and other rules

Data from: [U.S. Department of Labor \(2004\)](#), Chart A.17; [National Academy of Social Insurance \(2005\)](#); [Hunt \(2004\)](#).

UI, DI, and WC differ along many dimensions, such as the qualifying event, the duration of benefits, the difficulty of verifying eligibility for the program, the average after-tax replacement rate, and the extent to which the program varies across states.

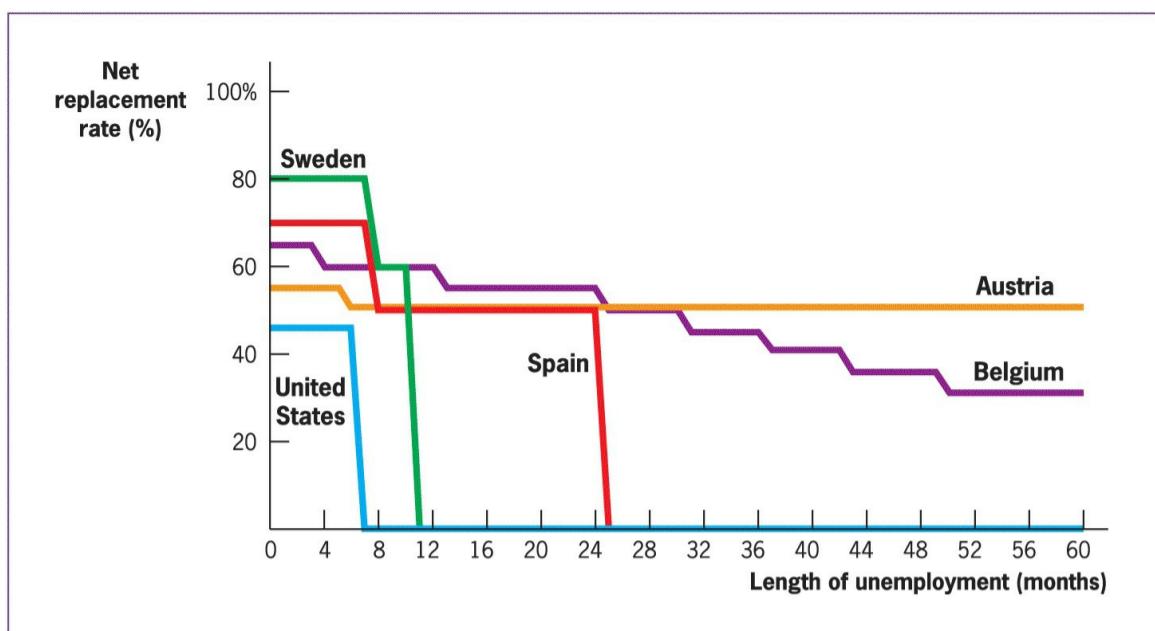


### APPLICATION

## The Duration of Social Insurance Benefits Around the World

The three U.S. programs we study in this chapter have very distinct time patterns: UI is paid out for a limited period of time (usually 26 weeks); DI is paid out indefinitely, with relatively little effort to reassess the readiness of the disabled individual to work again; and WC is paid out for as long as the injury can be medically verified. These are not the only time patterns possible. For example, for UI, we could simply pay out a lump-sum amount when individuals lose their jobs. Or, we could follow Europe's example, which is illustrated for several representative nations in [Figure 14-2](#). The typical European nation features both a higher replacement rate and much longer UI durations. Indeed, European nations such as Austria and Belgium do not simply cut off benefits when the UI time limit is reached. Instead, workers are moved to a welfare system that usually features lower benefits for an indefinite period of

time.



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#### FIGURE 14-2

**Duration of UI Benefits** • In most European countries, UI benefits are available for much longer than the six months (26 weeks) available in the United States. The United States is the only nation in this sample that leaves workers with no benefits entitlement within five years (60 months) of unemployment.

Data from: [European Commission \(2018\)](#).

The appropriate time pattern for benefits under social insurance programs must balance the trade-off among three considerations. The first consideration is moral hazard: the longer benefits last, the longer individuals will choose leisure over work. This is the motivation for the relatively short (compared to Europe) duration of UI benefits in the United States, which are paid for only six months (26 weeks).

The second consideration has to do with consumption smoothing. As noted in [Chapter 12](#), individuals will be more able to self-insure their consumption over shorter adverse events than longer ones. As the duration of unemployment grows, the ability of individuals to self-insure their consumption falls, for example, as their savings run out.<sup>15</sup> This consideration would suggest that benefits should rise, rather than fall, with duration.

The final consideration has to do with targeting the benefits to those who need them the most. Workers away from work (due to either unemployment or injury) for the longest period may be most in need of assistance from the government in finding a new job; if they could readily find one, they would have done so already. Under this logic, cutting benefits off after some fixed time is exactly the wrong thing to do. Given these three considerations, the optimal duration of social insurance benefits is difficult to compute, which may explain the differences in structures across similar industrialized nations.

[Kolsrud et al. \(2018\)](#) incorporate these effects into the context of UI duration in Sweden. They use the fact that the replacement rate available to individuals in Sweden varies with the length of the unemployment spell to show how both consumption smoothing and moral hazard vary with spell duration. In fact they find that moral hazard is larger for benefits paid earlier in the spell, and that consumption smoothing grows as the spell lengthens. This finding strongly suggests that the optimal time pattern of UI benefits would not be falling, and may even be rising, over time. ■

## 14.2 Consumption-Smoothing Benefits of Social Insurance Programs

As discussed in [Chapter 12](#), one determinant of the optimal size of social insurance programs is the extent to which they crowd out self-insurance rather than providing consumption smoothing. Unfortunately, there is relatively little evidence on the consumption-smoothing implications of these programs. The most direct study is that of [Gruber \(1997\)](#), who measured the consumption-smoothing benefits of UI. He found that individuals are not fully insured by other sources against the income loss of unemployment, that their consumption falls significantly when they lose their jobs, and that higher levels of UI do lessen the negative effects of this fall. Gruber's study also found, however, that the role of UI in consumption smoothing is limited: each dollar of UI benefits only reduces the fall in consumption by about \$0.30. UI smooths consumption in a limited way because other forms of self-insurance enable unemployed workers to maintain part of their pre-unemployment consumption.

Another way to phrase this conclusion is that UI *crowds out* other forms of income support when people are unemployed. Other research shows directly that crowd-out occurs: when individuals face more generous UI benefits, they save less, and their spouses are less likely to work when they lose their jobs. These studies estimate that crowd-out of UI is about \$0.70 on the dollar, consistent with the consumption findings just noted. That is, these findings imply that, of each dollar of UI, \$0.30 goes to increase consumption, and \$0.70 crowds out other forms of insurance that individuals were using for their unemployment spells.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the extent of consumption smoothing varies across individuals based on the extent to which they can self-insure. [Rothstein and Valletta \(2017\)](#) studied those who had run out of extended unemployment insurance, so that they had been unemployed for a long time and likely had depleted their self-insurance. For this population, they found much more consumption smoothing, with a large rise in poverty and even an increase in self-reported disability following exhaustion of benefits.

Evidence of this type for disability insurance is provided by [Autor et al. \(2015\)](#). They examined the case of Norway and looked at the impacts on consumption of being denied disability insurance. They found that about 60% of the reduced income from being denied DI was translated to lower consumption; that is, about 40% of DI benefits were crowded out. The researchers also found that most of the crowd-out occurred through increased spousal labor supply when DI was not available. These findings indicate that there is some crowd-out for DI but that it is much less than for UI. This is consistent with evidence in [Meyer and Mok \(2018\)](#), who showed that those who become disabled see a sizeable drop in consumption, particularly if the disability is a severe one, with only partial and incomplete self-insurance.

There is no parallel evidence on the consumption-smoothing properties of WC, and it is unclear what to expect for this program. On the one hand, true on-the-job injuries are probably even more unexpected than is unemployment and can often last longer. On the other hand, many claimed on-the-job injuries are not true injuries and therefore not a "surprise," according to the moral hazard evidence presented next, so individuals may be well prepared to smooth their consumption.

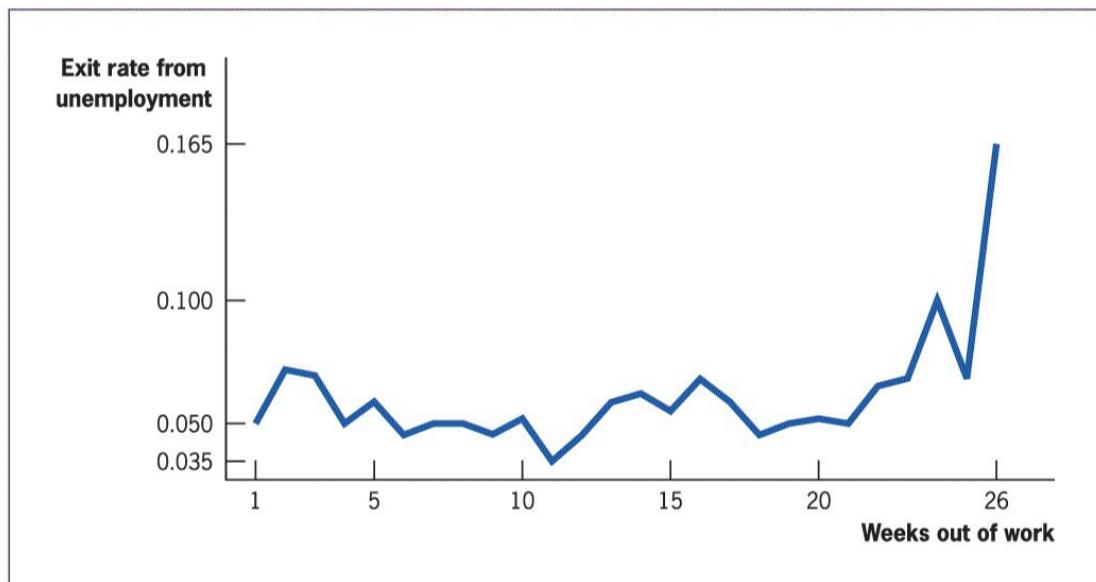
## 14.3 Moral Hazard Effects of Social Insurance Programs

In contrast to the small amount of research that has been done on consumption-smoothing effects of these social insurance programs, there is a large literature on their moral hazard effects. In this section, we review that evidence.

### Moral Hazard Effects of Unemployment Insurance

The major moral hazard effect of UI is seen in the duration of unemployment spells. The question of how UI affects the odds of becoming unemployed is a separate one that we take up when discussing the behavior of firms later in this chapter.

There is a voluminous economics literature on the effect of UI benefit levels on unemployment durations. The literature is motivated by facts such as those illustrated by [Figure 14-3](#). This figure shows the hazard diagram for exiting unemployment (akin to our hazard diagrams for retirement from the previous chapter); that is, the percentage of unemployed workers exiting unemployment each week. There is a fairly steady exit pattern through the first 25 weeks of unemployment spells, with 5 to 7% of unemployed workers exiting each week. However, in the 26th week (when UI benefits run out), the exit rate jumps to 16.5%. This pattern suggests that UI benefits are a key factor in a person's decision about when to return to work.



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■ FIGURE 14-3

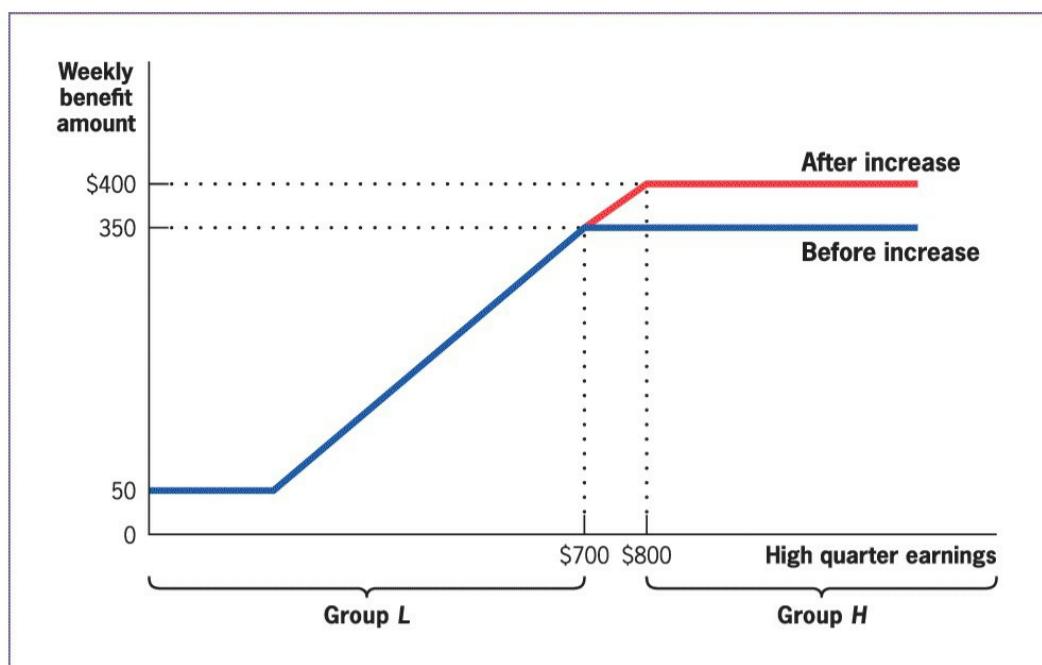
Unemployment Hazard Rate • Each point on this graph represents the hazard rate of unemployed workers, the rate at which they exit unemployment. Workers in the United States are much more likely to leave unemployment in the 26th week, the week that UI benefits end, than in any earlier week.

Data from: Adapted from [Meyer \(1990\)](#), Table 4.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### Moral Hazard Effects of Unemployment Insurance

Perhaps the best illustration of the quasi-experimental approach to studying the moral hazard effects of UI is [Bruce Meyer's \(1989\)](#) classic study ([Figure 14-4](#)). Suppose the UI program in New Jersey pays a maximum benefit of \$350 per week, and that any worker with earnings above \$700 per week is eligible for the maximum benefit. New Jersey then changes its UI program so that the maximum benefit is \$400 per week. After the change, any worker with earnings above \$800 per week (workers in group H) is eligible for the new maximum benefit. Workers with earnings above \$800 per week have therefore seen an increase in their benefits of \$50 per week.



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■ FIGURE 14-4

Quasi-Experiments for Studying the Effect of UI Benefits on Unemployment Durations • The treatment state of New Jersey originally provides a maximum benefit of \$350 for workers earning more than \$700 per week. It then raises its maximum benefit to \$400, which applies to all workers earning more than \$800 per week (group *H*). Workers earning less than \$700 per week (group *L*) are not affected by this policy change.

Data from: Adapted from [Meyer \(1989\)](#), Table 1.

This policy change sets up a natural quasi-experiment. Workers in group *H* in New Jersey (the treatment group) can be compared to workers with the same earnings (\$800 or more per week) in another state that did not increase benefits, such as Pennsylvania (the control group). By doing this comparison, we can control for any changes over time that might affect unemployment durations, for example, a recession that affects both New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The change in unemployment duration in the control state (Pennsylvania) is a measure of how much the change in duration is due to the recession. The difference between the treatment state and the control state accounts for the recession effect and provides a causal estimate of the impact of the benefit change on the duration of unemployment spells.

To accomplish this analysis, Meyer computed the difference-in-difference estimate shown here:

$$\text{Duration (treatment, after)} - \text{Duration (treatment, before)} = \text{Treatment effect} + \text{Recession effect}$$

$$\text{Duration (control, after)} - \text{Duration (control, before)} = \text{Recession effect}$$

$$\text{Difference} = \text{Treatment effect}$$

By comparing the change in duration in the treatment state to that in the control state, Meyer rid the estimates of the impact of changes over time, such as a recession. In doing so, he found that a 10% rise in benefits led to an 8% increase in the length of durations.

As Meyer noted, however, this difference-in-difference approach may not provide a truly causal estimate. Suppose that the recession has a different effect in different states; in particular, New Jersey is hit hardest, which may even be the reason that it raised its benefits. In this case, using Pennsylvania as a control would not be sufficient to eliminate any bias because unemployment durations in New Jersey would have risen more due to the steeper recession in New Jersey, not due to higher benefits. If the treatment and control states are affected differently by the recession, bias would continue to be a problem in this cross-state comparison.

To try to eliminate the remaining bias in this comparison, Meyer suggested an additional control: group *L* in [Figure 14-4](#), low earners in New Jersey, for whom benefits did not change. Because this group is in the same state as group *H*, they are subject to the same (New Jersey-specific) recession and, thus, to the same source of potential bias from that recession. So, we can compute a similar difference-in-difference estimate to Meyer's original, but using workers in group *L* in New Jersey as the control, rather than using group *H* in Pennsylvania as the control. Meyer undertook both these checks on his results (comparing group *H* to both group *L* within the same state and to group *H* in other states), and his conclusions were unchanged. (Note that it is possible to use both checks simultaneously in an effort to rid the estimates of bias; this approach is described in detail in the appendix to this chapter.)

There is also some randomized trial evidence to draw on in evaluating the impact of UI benefits on unemployment durations. In the 1980s, a number of states pursued "reemployment bonus experiments," in which a treatment group of

individuals on UI was offered a bonus if they found a job more quickly and in which a control group of UI recipients was not offered this bonus. For example, in the Illinois experiment, treatment UI recipients were offered cash bonuses of \$500 (equivalent to 4 weeks of UI benefits for the typical worker at that time) if they found a job within 11 weeks of filing for UI. These experiments generally showed a significant decline in unemployment durations of treatments, relative to controls, when the bonuses were offered; on average, across experiments, the offer of such bonuses caused unemployment durations to decline by about half a week, or 3% of average duration.<sup>17</sup> Thus, we can confirm from a randomized trial that unemployment durations do indeed respond to benefit levels.

The most convincing studies in this literature use the quasi-experimental approach discussed in [Chapter 3](#). In particular, because UI programs differ so much across states, researchers can use differences in benefits across state UI systems to measure the response of unemployment durations to benefit levels. Such analyses have suggested that higher benefits lead to a large increase in unemployment durations; the best estimate, reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box, suggests that each 10% rise in the amount of UI benefits leads to unemployment durations that are 8% longer.

## Normative Implications of Longer Durations

The clear conclusion from empirical research is that higher UI benefits have a significant causal effect on unemployment durations. The normative implications of this positive finding are unclear, however, and depend on what the worker is doing during a longer unemployment duration. Suppose that unemployed workers can find jobs relatively easily but that when benefits are high enough, they delay taking those jobs while they take extra weeks of leisure in front of the TV. This outcome would imply that the increase in duration is inefficient—both because workers are not being productive when sitting at home and because higher taxes must be levied on productive workers to finance these benefits.

If workers spend this time looking for better jobs, however, longer durations might be an efficient outcome of UI. The productivity of any worker in any job will depend on how well the worker is suited to that particular job. Workers who are highly productive in some jobs may be unproductive in others. Moreover, when workers with specialized skills lose their jobs, it may take them some time to find new ones. Taking the first job that they are offered could be inefficient. Society's productivity will clearly not be maximized if brain surgeons end up working in the fast-food sector! If UI is increasing duration by subsidizing effective (but time-intensive) job searches, then society may gain from the improved [job match quality](#).<sup>18</sup>

### job match quality

The marginal product associated with the match of a particular worker with a particular job.

How can we distinguish whether UI subsidizes unproductive leisure or productive job searches? The best way to do so is to study the quality of the post-UI job matches. If higher UI benefits are leading to longer durations because of more productive job searches, then we should see higher benefits leading to better job matches. But if higher UI benefits are simply subsidizing leisure, then there will be no better job matches when benefits increase because individuals will just take jobs they would have taken without the benefits increase (with the benefits increase simply raising the amount of leisure before that job is taken).



*"I do intend to seek employment, but it will be at a time  
and place of my own choosing."*

Frank Cotham/The New Yorker © Conde Nast.

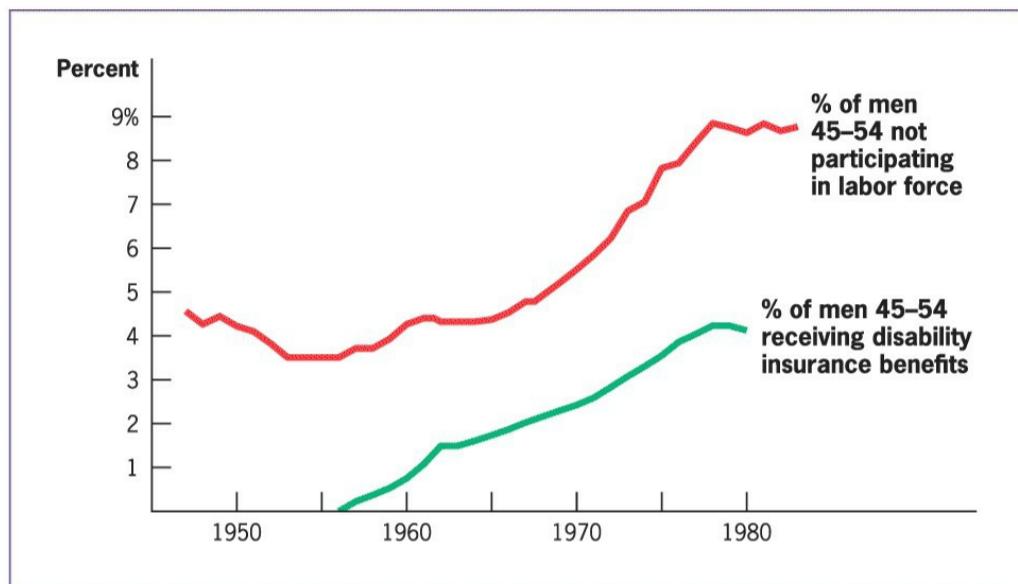
While it is difficult to measure the quality of job matches, jobs' wage rates should be some indication of their quality. A finding that higher UI leads to higher post-unemployment wages would indicate that job matches are better. In fact, however, a series of international studies have shown that this is not the case.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it appears that higher UI benefits are not leading to better job matches, and that UI has a significant moral hazard cost in terms of subsidizing unproductive leisure.

## Evidence for Moral Hazard in DI

There have been a number of studies on the degree of moral hazard in the DI program. While these studies take different approaches, as reviewed below, the common thread is assessing whether a more generous DI program, relative to other labor market opportunities, leads to more use of the program and/or less labor force participation. If there is no moral hazard, and individuals using these programs are truly disabled, then use of the programs (and labor supply) should be unaffected by program generosity; individuals are either too disabled to work or not. If program generosity has a significant effect on the incidence of disability and the level of work effort, then these programs may have moral hazard effects.

The literature on moral hazard in DI grows out of the facts shown in [Figure 14-5](#) from [Parsons \(1984\)](#). From 1957—when the DI program was introduced—until 1980, there was a tremendous concurrent expansion in the number of males age 45 to 54 receiving DI benefits

and the number of men in that age group dropping out of the labor force. This striking correspondence suggests that DI plays a large role in reducing labor force participation, which is consistent with moral hazard. It is hard to draw strong conclusions from this evidence, however, because many other things were changing in the 1960s and 1970s that may have led older men to work less. For example, many of the disabled could have been World War II veterans who, because of their war injuries, may have been less physically able to work at older ages and so would have dropped out of the labor force even if there were no DI program. In addition, the growth of private pension programs over this period may have made retirement more attractive.



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■ FIGURE 14-5

Labor Force Nonparticipation of Older Men and Growth in DI • There is a striking correspondence between the growth in the DI program from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s and the rise in nonparticipation rates of men age 45 to 54 during this same period. This correspondence may indicate that the availability of DI induced older men to leave the labor force, but other factors may also explain the correspondence.

Data from: [Parsons \(1984\)](#), Figure 1.

A second source of evidence for a moral hazard effect of DI comes from the role of the business cycle. A number of studies have documented that disability applications rise sharply during recessions; one recent study found that the Great Recession led to a 6.7% rise in DI applications.<sup>20</sup> It seems highly unlikely that more individuals become disabled in recessions than in other times, so this finding is consistent with a moral hazard effect: workers are out of work anyway due to the recession, so the five-month waiting period for DI is less of a barrier, and they are willing to take a chance at applying even if they are not truly disabled.

A third source of evidence for moral hazard in DI is that individual labor supply and DI application decisions depend on the stringency of screening in the DI program. If individuals applied only when truly disabled, then the stringency of screening should affect the rate of DI acceptance, but not the decision to leave the labor force and apply. Yet a number of U.S. studies have found that both rates of application ([Parsons, 1991](#)) and rates of labor force exit ([Gruber and Kubik, 1997](#)) rise when screening is more lenient. A study of a large-scale experiment in the Netherlands, where screening intensity was increased in 2 regions and not in 24 others, found that more intense screening reduced both long-term absenteeism and DI applications ([van der Klaauw, 2006](#)). Recent studies, reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box, show that there is very substantial work capacity remaining in those who are denied disability insurance.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### Disability Insurance Screening and Labor Supply

As we've seen, the most difficult issue facing disability insurance systems is determining who is truly disabled. Countries take different approaches to answering this question. But recent evidence from multiple nations reveals a consistent conclusion; those who are denied DI are often capable of gainful employment.

Assessing the work capacity of those denied DI is very difficult because, as long as screening is somewhat effective, those denied DI will be in better health than those who remain on the program. Thus, there is a clear bias in comparing those who receive DI and those who are denied. Two recent studies, however, have posed clever quasi-experimental methods to overcome this limitation.

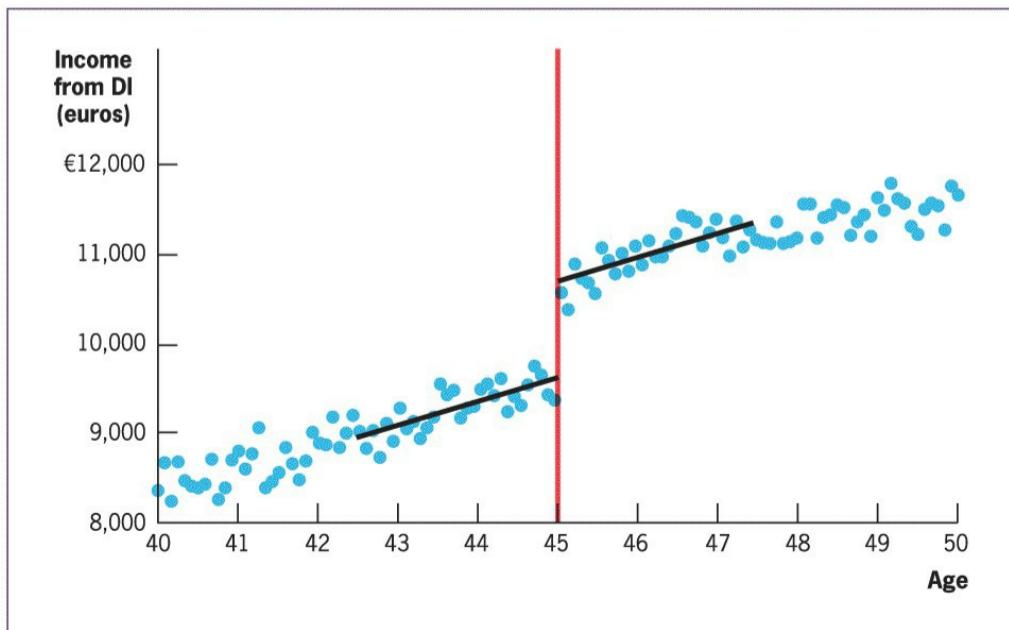
For the United States, evidence comes from [French and Song \(2014\)](#). When individuals appeal their initial DI decisions, they go before an administrative law judge (ALJ) for a redetermination of their initial case. French and Song noted that there is substantial variation in the rate at which ALJs do and do not approve appeals: being assigned to a judge who is one standard deviation more lenient leads to a 15.3% rise in the odds of the application being allowed.<sup>21</sup> Most importantly, assignment to judges is completely random and unrelated to the severity of the injury or other characteristics of the applicant. Therefore, individuals who are assigned to "tough" judges are randomly more likely to end up without DI. These variations in the DI system allowed French and Song to ask: If an applicant is denied DI, due to random assignment to a tough judge, are they more likely to end up working? If those who apply for DI are truly unable to work, then there should be no effect on work; those denied should be no more able to work than those who are approved to receive the DI.

French and Song found that being assigned to a tougher judge led to a higher rate of denial—and a higher rate of working. Those who were randomly denied were 26 percentage points more likely to be working compared with those who were approved. This finding suggests that a substantial minority of those receiving DI could be working if denied the insurance benefit.

[Borghans et al. \(2014\)](#) used an alternative approach to study a major DI reform in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has a more generous DI program than the United States, with more lenient standards of receipt (i.e., the applicant does not have to be as significantly disabled to be approved for benefits) and higher benefits. In addition, benefits vary by measured level of disability, with the most disabled getting higher benefits. In 1993, the system was reformed to reclassify disabilities as less severe than previously classified; some individuals with severe disabilities were reclassified as less severe (and therefore received lower benefits), while others with less severe disabilities were reclassified as not disabled. All individuals on DI were to be reexamined as part of the reform, but these new tougher standards would apply only to those age 45 and younger. This sets up a "regression discontinuity" design of the type discussed in [Chapter 6](#): we can examine whether there is a noticeable change in behavior exactly at age 45.

The results of this analysis are illustrated in [Figures 14-6](#) and [14-7](#), first for DI benefit amounts and then for earnings. Each point in the figure represents the average benefits/earnings for a birth cohort at a given age (e.g., for those born in 1944 at age 45). The x axis in each figure shows ages, while the y axis shows either DI benefit amounts ([Figure 14-6](#)) or earnings ([Figure 14-7](#)), euros. The solid lines on either side of age 45 show a regression prediction of the relationship between age and benefits/earnings separately for those below and above that age.

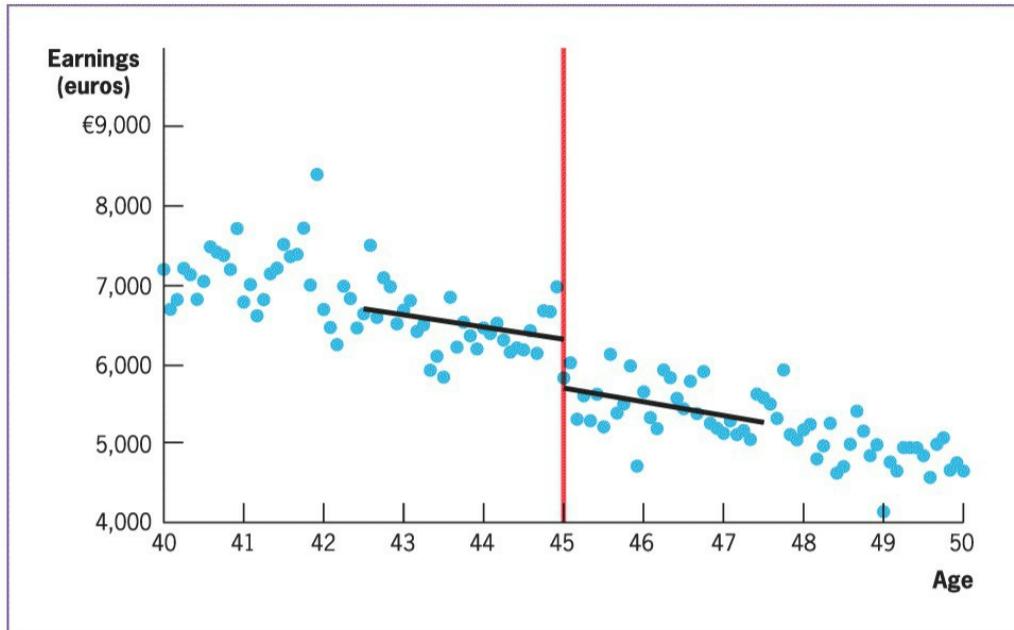
[Figure 14-6](#) shows that DI benefits rose with age, as would be expected from rising disability, but that there was a discrete jump at age 45: those over age 45 had benefits that were about 1,100 euros higher, consistent with the looser screening that was in place at that age. [Figure 14-7](#) shows that there was an exactly corresponding decline in earnings at age 45; there is a discrete reduction in the slope of the line to the right of age 45 compared to the left. The results imply a substantial rebound in earnings for those who lost their DI benefits: their earnings rose by 62 euros for each 100 euros in reduced DI benefits.



## FIGURE 14-6

DI Benefit Amount by Age • As people grow older, they are more likely to receive disability insurance benefits, so that their expected benefit amount rises. But at age 45, there is a jump in benefit amounts that is equivalent to about 1,100 euros. This is likely due to looser screening standards for those older than 45.

Data from: [Borghans et al. \(2014\)](#).



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## FIGURE 14-7

Earnings by Age • Earnings before the age cutoff are €624 per year higher at the cutoff age than after. This suggests that labor income is crowded out by DI income, which is more easily accessible after turning 45.

Data from: [Borghans et al. \(2014\)](#).

Taken together, these studies suggest that there is significant moral hazard in DI: many of those relying on DI could be working if the program were not available.

A final test of moral hazard, which most closely parallels work in UI and DI, is to assess how changes in the generosity of DI benefits affect work effort. The most recent available evidence on this topic found that labor supply does respond to benefits generosity, but fairly modestly, with an elasticity of labor supply with respect to benefits of 0.3 to 0.5.<sup>22</sup> This is much lower, for example, than Meyer's estimate of an elasticity of 0.8 for unemployment durations with respect to UI benefits. This suggests that at least along the dimension of benefits responsiveness, moral hazard is less of an issue in the DI program than it is in the UI program.

## Evidence for Moral Hazard in WC

There is much evidence that points to a major moral hazard effect of the WC program. The first is [Krueger's \(1990\)](#) study of the incidence of injuries, which asked: Does the rate of reported injury on the job depend on the generosity of the WC system? Krueger answered this question by using the fact that benefits for WC vary across the states and looking at how reported rates of on-the-job injury change when states increase their WC benefits. In the absence of moral hazard, there would be no reason for the injury rate to rise just because a state increased its benefits. In fact, however, that is exactly what Krueger found: every 10% increase in benefits generosity led to a 7% rise in the rate of reported injury (a large elasticity of 0.7).

The second piece of evidence comes from [Krueger's \(1991\)](#) study of the impact of WC benefits on injury durations, which is similar to earlier studies of the impact of UI on unemployment durations. In this study, reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box, Krueger found enormous impacts of benefits on injury durations, with each 10% rise in benefits leading to durations that were 17% longer! This is a much larger response than for UI, where 10% higher benefits led to 8% longer unemployment durations.

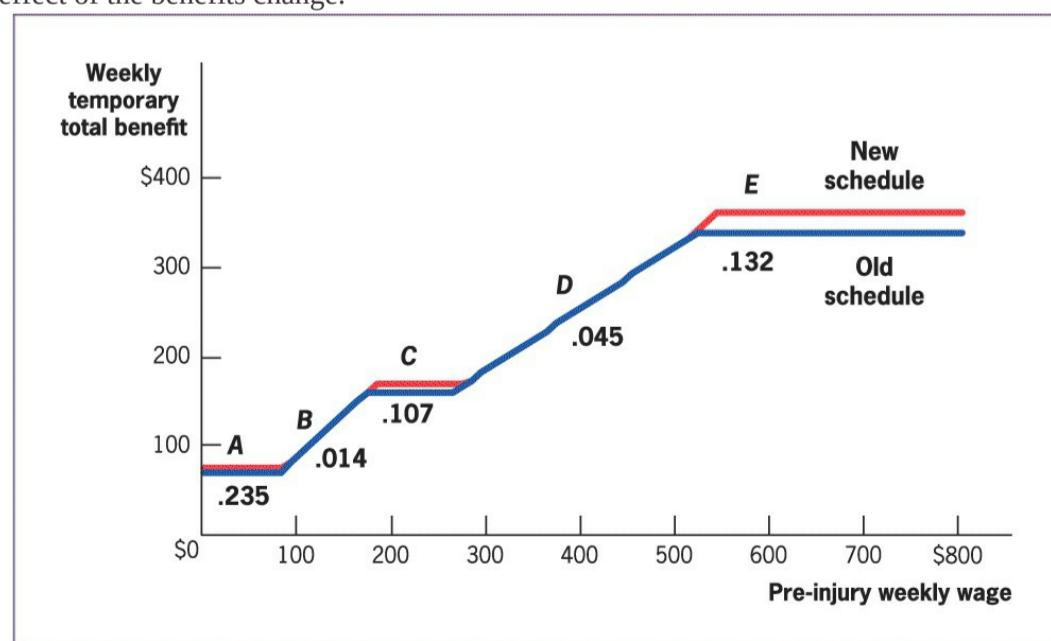
Additional evidence for moral hazard in WC comes from the *types of injuries* reported. Recall that the problem of moral hazard is a problem of *unobservability* of true injury status. Unobservability implies that moral hazard would be worse for injuries that are hard to observe or verify, such as sprains or strains, and less of a problem for verifiable injuries, such as lacerations or broken or missing limbs. In fact, [Krueger \(1991\)](#) found that the response of injury durations to benefits increases was much stronger for hard-to-verify injuries than for easier-to-verify injuries. That is, a rise in benefits caused a very large increase in reported back sprains, for example, but a smaller increase (or none at all) for lacerations.

A final interesting piece of evidence for the moral hazard effects of WC comes from the infamous “Monday effect.” By examining the types of claims made for WC by day of the week, one sees that on Mondays, there is a large rise in sprains and strains compared to lacerations.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that many of the reported injuries on Mondays may actually arise from injuries incurred over the weekend and then claimed on Monday in order to qualify for WC. If you strain yourself riding your bike on Sunday, it may be easy to pretend that it happened at work on Monday; but if you cut yourself with a power saw on Sunday, it will be much harder to pretend that this was a work accident on Monday!

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Moral Hazard Effects of Workers' Compensation*

[Figure 14-8](#) illustrates the excellent quasi-experiment for the state of Minnesota used by [Krueger \(1991\)](#). Minnesota had a WC program with three flat rates, along with two sloped segments connecting these flat rates. On October 1, 1986, the state increased the benefits along each of the flat-rate portions but left the slopes unchanged. This policy change set up three treatment groups, the workers on each of the flat-rate portions (groups A, C, and E), and two control groups, the workers on the sloped portions (groups B and D). It seems unlikely that there were other factors changing that affected only the three treatment groups and not the two control groups, except for the benefits change that affected the treatments but not the controls. Thus, the treatment and control groups should be comparable; this condition made it possible for Krueger to estimate a causal effect of the benefits change.



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■ FIGURE 14-8

**WC Benefits Changes and Injury Duration** • On October 1, 1986, the state of Minnesota raised benefits for workers on segments *A*, *C*, and *E* of this schedule, while leaving benefits unchanged for segments *B* and *D*. Krueger found a sizeable rise in the duration of workplace injuries for workers at segments *A*, *C*, and *E*, but not for workers at segments *B* and *D*. Numbers below segments of the curve are differences [in log (weeks of benefits received)] between workers injured before and after the benefits change.

Data: Adapted from [Krueger \(1991\)](#), Figure 2.

The numbers along each segment of this schedule show the percentage change in injury durations from before October 1, 1986, to after that date. For groups *A*, *C*, and *E* (for whom benefits increased), there were large rises in injury durations: 23.5% for group *A*, 10.7% for group *C*, and 13.2% for group *E*. For groups *B* and *D* (for whom benefits did not increase), however, the rise in injury durations was negligible (1.4% for group *B* and 4.5% for group *D*).<sup>24</sup> Thus, increases in benefits appear to be associated with increases in injury duration. The estimated response of injury duration to increased benefits is enormous, with an implied elasticity of 1.7; that is, each 10% rise in benefits led to an injury duration that was 17% longer.

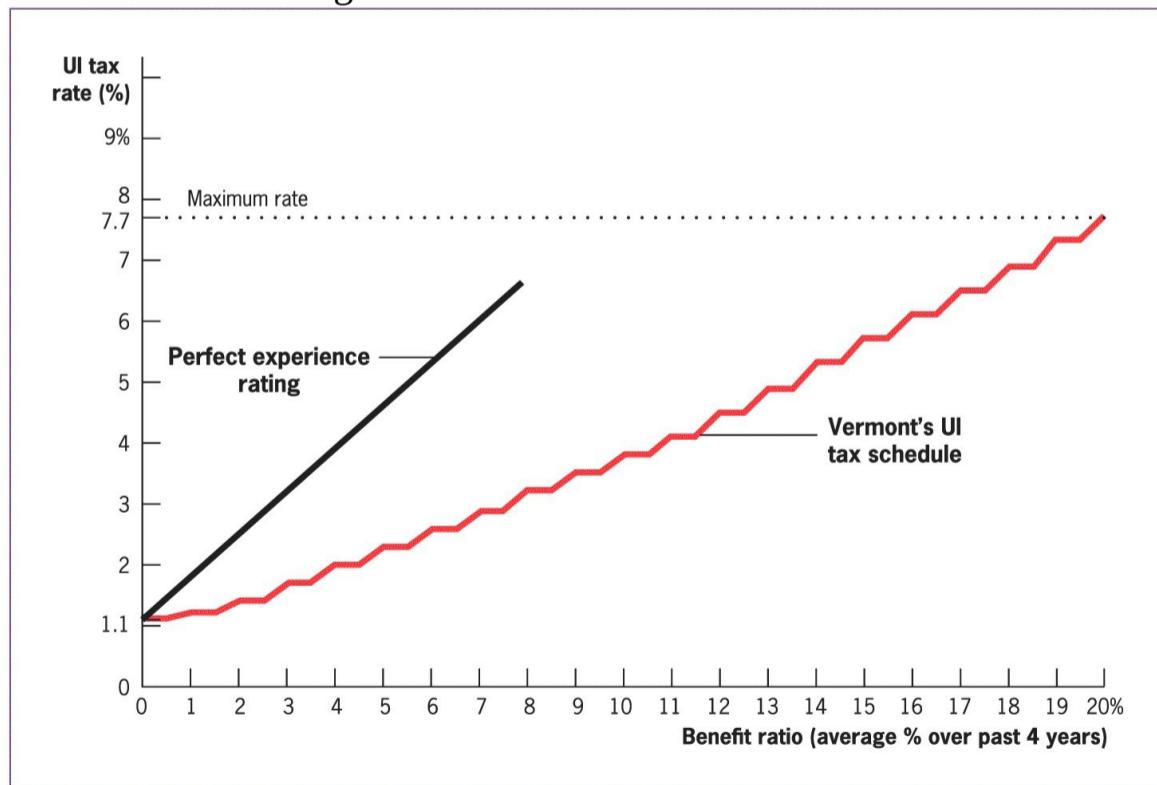
## 14.4 The Costs and Benefits of Social Insurance to Firms

Thus far, our analysis has focused on the impact of the social insurance programs on workers. Yet because employers play an important role in both layoffs and work injuries, both UI and WC programs can have important effects on firms' decision making as well. We first discuss the impact of UI on firms and then turn to the impact of WC.

### The Effects of Partial Experience Rating in UI on Layoffs

The key feature of UI from the firm's perspective is that it is *partially experience-rated*. A fully experience-rated system would be one in which a firm pays additional tax each time it lays off a worker. The amount collected through the tax would equal the expected UI benefits paid to that worker. In the current UI system, payroll taxes do rise with past layoffs, but much less than one for one.

The degree of partial experience rating is illustrated in [Figure 14-9](#), which shows the relationship between the UI payroll tax rate and past layoffs in Vermont, which has a typical state experience-rating system. There is a minimum payroll tax rate of 1.1% paid by all firms in the state. Beyond that point, the payroll tax rate rises with what is called the *benefit ratio*, the ratio of the payments made by the UI system to the firm's laid-off workers, relative to the size of the firm's payroll, averaged over the past four years. Thus, a benefit ratio of 10 means that UI paid benefits equal to 10% of the firm's payroll on average over the past four years. Once this measure of past layoffs reaches a particular level, the payroll tax rate climbs, continuing to ratchet upward in this fashion until it reaches a maximum rate of 7.7% for firms with a benefits ratio of 20 or higher.



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FIGURE 14-9

Experience-Rating Schedule for Vermont • In Vermont, as in most states, the UI tax rate paid by employers rises as past layoffs rise, as measured by the benefit ratio, which is the ratio of UI benefits paid to the firm's workers relative to the firm's payroll. This rise is not on the one-for-one basis, however, that would follow the perfect experience rating line. As a result,

high-layoff (high-benefit ratio) employers are relatively subsidized by the system.

Data from: Tax rates taken from the [Vermont Department of Labor \(2018\)](#).

## Partial Experience Rating Subsidizes Layoffs

A fully experience-rated system would follow the path of a 45-degree line from the origin, which would indicate a one-for-one increase in tax payments for each increase in benefits payouts. Relative to full experience rating, the Vermont system causes firms with a low level of layoffs to pay too much (because the actual schedule is above the 45-degree line), and firms with many layoffs to pay too little (because the actual schedule is below the 45-degree line). Thus, relative to a full system of experience rating, partial experience rating *subsidizes firms with high layoff rates*. This conclusion is best illustrated by the maximum condition: once firms reach the maximum UI tax rate, there is no additional tax cost to them for additional layoffs. This is a general phenomenon in states across the nation: high-layoff firms are subsidized for additional layoffs, relative to a fully experience-rated system.

How is this a subsidy? Think about the firm and the worker as making a joint decision about whether to place the worker on *temporary layoff*, where the worker spends some time laid off but with a promise (explicit or implicit) to be hired back after the layoff is over (like my wife's aunt in the example in [Chapter 12](#)). From the worker's perspective, a temporary layoff is some time off at a partial wage—a partially paid vacation. From the firm's perspective, the attractiveness of a temporary layoff depends on the extent of experience rating. If there is no experience rating, the firm pays nothing when a worker is temporarily laid off. So this is a vacation for workers, paid for by the government—a good deal for both firms and workers.

Contrast this with full experience rating. In that case, the benefits paid to the worker would be exactly canceled by the taxes paid by the firm so that, on net, there would be no money flowing from the government to this worker–firm pair. Thus, if the worker wants a paid vacation, the firm has to pay for it; there is no subsidy to layoffs from the government because the firm pays the full costs of any layoffs.

## Evidence on Effect of Partial Experience Rating on Layoffs

It is clear from the previous discussion that firms should have more layoffs when a state's experience-rating system is more partial (i.e., the more that the government, and not the firm, pays for benefits when the worker is laid off). In fact, there are several careful investigations of the impact of the experience-rating structure on layoff decisions. These studies investigated state systems with different degrees of experience rating and found that partial experience rating increases the rate of temporary layoffs, as predicted by the theory. The studies suggest that partial experience rating alone can account for 21 to 33% of all temporary layoffs in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

## The “Benefits” of Partial Experience Rating

If partial experience-rating systems increase the number of layoffs in the U.S. labor market, why are they so common in state UI programs? Once again, the benefit that offsets this moral hazard cost is consumption smoothing. Having a fully experience-rated system would “hit firms while they are down”: just when firms have laid off the most workers (presumably because the firm is not doing well), their taxes would increase the most.

At the same time, by having partial experience rating, UI programs systematically subsidize high-layoff firms. These firms may be particularly inefficient firms that, in a capitalist economy, should go out of business, leaving the field to their more efficient rivals.

In particular, the system of partial experience rating subsidizes seasonal firms, which can afford to hire workers for just part of the year because the workers can receive UI for the remainder of the year, at no marginal cost to the firm. [Anderson and Meyer \(2000\)](#) computed that, in Washington State, the one-eighth of firms that are subsidized by the UI system for four continuous years account for one-third of all UI benefits payments.



## APPLICATION

### The “Cash Cow” of Partial Experience Rating

The United States is actually relatively unique among industrialized nations in having *any* experience rating of its UI system, however partial. Most nations finance their UI systems through a flat payroll tax that is unrelated to the firm’s actual layoff experience. Such a system can turn the UI system into a “cash cow” that subsidizes the existence of highly inefficient firms.

Consider the case of Canada’s UI system, where workers traditionally had to work only 10 weeks to qualify for 42 weeks of UI with a replacement rate of 60%, at no extra cost to their firms. One can assess the implications of such a generous system by posing a hypothetical example. You and four friends want to figure out a way to work only 10 weeks a year and take vacation the rest of the year. The five of you are considering buying a fishing boat, with each of you working 10 weeks out of the year, for a total of 50 weeks. You know that with this fishing boat, you can catch \$40,000 worth of fish during the entire year. That is only \$8,000 of fish for each 10-week period, a sum that is not large enough to support each one of you for an entire year. In the absence of UI, then, you would not purchase this fishing boat, which is the socially efficient outcome: it would be inefficient for your combined group of workers to produce only \$40,000 worth of goods per year.

Given the structure of the Canadian UI system, however, this purchase will be more attractive. In this system, you and your friends each work 10 weeks, for a total of 50 workweeks. Each of you would report earning \$800 per week for the 10 weeks worked and then report being laid off. Because you report being laid off, you would each receive \$20,160 of UI during the rest of the year (60% of the \$800 per week reported earnings, for 42 weeks). So the total UI benefits income across all five recipients is  $\$20,160 \times 5 = \$100,800$ . Adding the \$40,000 of fish produced, that is a total income to the five of you of \$140,800, or \$28,160 per worker per year for only 10 weeks of work each! This makes the purchase of the fishing boat much more attractive.

This example illustrates the fundamental problem with partial experience rating: it subsidizes the existence of inefficient firms. Your firm is not an economically viable employer of five employees. It could pay each employee \$8,000 per year if there were no UI system. But by exploiting partial experience rating, the firm can remain viable, with each employee earning \$28,160 for the year. Thus, UI is not simply a system of insurance against true unemployment risk in Canada, but also a large government transfer to inefficient firms and their laid-off workers. ■

## Workers’ Compensation and Firms

A similar set of issues arises in the context of workers’ compensation. With UI, partial experience rating means that firms and workers have an incentive to increase layoffs to exploit this government payment for leisure. With WC, firms and workers can get together to

increase “injuries” if the insurance is less than fully experience-rated. There is an additional problem as well: firms have less incentive to invest in safety when there is no-fault insurance for injuries. In the past, when injuries could lead to lawsuits against a firm, firms had to trade off the cost of making workplaces safer against the costs of getting sued if someone was injured. Now, for the partially experience-rated firm, there are relatively little savings to making the workplace safer because the firm pays relatively little of the cost of the WC benefit if the worker is injured. Thus, an additional moral hazard for firms is that no-fault WC can lead to less-safe workplaces.

The potentially important role played by experience rating in WC is illustrated in [Krueger's \(1991\)](#) study. The study compares the injury durations of employees of firms that *self-insure* their WC costs to the durations of employees of firms that buy their WC in a partially experience-rated insurance market. Self-insured firms pay their own injury claims, so by definition they are fully experience-rated (more injuries lead to higher costs for the firm). Krueger found that workers in self-insured firms came back to work more quickly from a given type of injury than did workers in comparable non-self-insured (partially experience-rated) firms. Moreover, in self-insured firms, worker injury durations were much less responsive to benefits increases than durations in non-self-insured firms. These findings suggest that firms that are more fully experience-rated are much more aggressive in monitoring worker injury durations.

## 14.5 Implications for Program Reform

This chapter has presented a large body of evidence on the costs and benefits of three of the most important social insurance programs in the United States. We can use this evidence, along with the theory presented in [Chapter 12](#), to draw lessons for program reform.

### Benefits Generosity

The optimal level of benefits generosity reflects the trade-off between moral hazard and consumption-smoothing benefits. It is clear that for all three programs studied here, the replacement rate should be less than 100% because there is significant moral hazard associated with each type of insurance. The literature also indicates that the negative behavioral responses to these programs (such as longer unemployment or injury durations) are very large for WC, fairly large for UI, and smaller for DI. At the same time, the consumption-smoothing benefits are likely largest for DI and have been shown to be only partial for UI (and likely for WC as well). Taken together, these facts suggest that benefits should be highest for DI and lowest for WC, with UI in the middle.

As [Table 14-2](#) shows, however, this is not the case. In fact, WC has the most generous benefits of all of these programs, which is clearly inconsistent with the evidence presented here.

### Targeting

Another issue that is raised by the discussions of [Chapter 12](#) and the evidence in this chapter is the need to better target program benefits toward those who benefit the most from consumption smoothing and/or for whom the moral hazard problems of social insurance are smallest. Consider those who regularly have temporary unemployment spells and receive implicit promises from their employers that they can return to their old jobs. For this group, there is little consumption-smoothing benefit of UI because the predictability and regularity of such layoffs should allow them to use self-insurance to smooth consumption. Moreover, empirical analyses have shown that this is the group that is the most responsive to UI benefit levels in terms of extending unemployment durations. For this group, the costs of high UI benefits appear to outweigh their benefits. Thus, efficiency could be improved if UI benefits could be targeted away from this group and toward those who have been permanently laid off.

Targeting is also possible within the DI and WC programs, based on the type of injury or disability. Some injuries or disabilities are easier to diagnose, minimizing problems of moral hazard. Becoming blind or paralyzed, or having a laceration or losing a limb, is unlikely to represent a negative behavioral response to social insurance program generosity. In principle, it would be possible to arrange these programs so that higher benefits were paid to people with less ambiguous (easier to verify) disabilities or injuries, people for whom the consumption-smoothing benefits are more likely to outweigh the moral hazard costs. Indeed, as noted earlier, such a system is in place in the Netherlands and other nations. And both French and Song (2014) and [Borghans et al. \(2014\)](#) find that the moral hazard effects of DI are smaller for younger (French and Song) or less disabled (Borghans et al.) workers. Moreover, [Meyer and Mok \(2018\)](#) find much larger consumption drops for those with more severe disabilities. In practice, however, this approach raises difficult issues of how to classify injuries into these different categories.<sup>26</sup>

Another form of targeting is to target by economic conditions. [Kroft and Notodowigdo \(2011\)](#) found that in times of high unemployment, the moral hazard effects of UI are smaller

(because individuals who aren't searching wouldn't be finding jobs even if searching). And [East and Kuka \(2014\)](#) found that the consumption-smoothing benefits of UI are much stronger in recessions than at other times. This suggests a rationale for more generous UI in recessionary times. On the other hand, the evidence of a rapid rise in DI applications in recessions suggests that screening may need to be tightened at such times.

## Experience Rating

Partial experience rating at the firm level has been shown to increase both the number of layoffs and the duration of workers' compensation claims. It also allows inefficient firms to continue to exist at the expense of more productive firms that pay payroll taxes despite few layoffs; this is especially true in nations with no experience rating for their UI systems. Thus, we once again confront the trade-off between insurance and incentives: we want to insure firms against downturns, but by doing so we subsidize inefficient firms to stay in business.

In this case, however, the argument for insurance seems somewhat weak. Businesses that are fundamentally sound but going through a rough spell should be able to access capital markets (say, by taking out a bank loan) much more easily than unemployed workers. That is, there are more formal structures for self-insurance by firms than there are for individuals. So, in this context, it is somewhat harder to appeal to consumption smoothing to justify insurance for firms. It seems likely that fuller experience rating would do more to put inefficient firms out of business than to hurt firms that are fundamentally sound but having a downturn.

## Worker Self-Insurance?

A more radical reform of the three social insurance systems would be to move toward *worker self-insurance* against these adverse events. For example, the government could replace payroll taxes and mandated WC insurance with individual "social insurance savings accounts," to which workers would contribute some fixed amount. If they qualified for social insurance because they experienced one of these adverse events, they could then draw on this savings account, with provisions for borrowing (and repaying) if they exceed the account. If there are positive balances in these accounts at retirement, they could be used to finance retirement consumption. The pros and cons of such an approach are discussed in the following policy application.



### APPLICATION Reforming UI

A system of worker self-insurance for UI would be similar to a privatized Social Security system, and it has many of the same advantages and disadvantages. One major advantage in this context is that there is much clearer evidence for moral hazard effects of programs such as UI and WC than for Social Security and likely much less consumption smoothing provided by government insurance. By making unemployed or injured workers pay for their income support out of their own savings accounts, the program would minimize moral hazard. [Feldstein and Altman \(2007\)](#) concluded that a UI payroll tax of 4% invested in such accounts could cover the costs of unemployment spells for virtually all workers. But a disadvantage of such a self-insured system is that we would lose the redistribution of income from those who have not lost their jobs to those who have.

[Kling \(2006\)](#) suggested an alternative approach that combines partial UI self-insurance with a new mechanism: *reemployment earnings insurance*. On average, full-time workers

displaced from a job due to economic reasons (such as a plant closing) who then find another full-time job see their earnings decline by 17% relative to comparable workers who do not lose their job ([Farber, 2005](#)). This is a much bigger reduction in lifetime resources than a 26-week temporary loss of earnings, yet there is no social insurance to protect against this loss in earnings. Moreover, many of the workers who suffer lower earnings after job loss are the same workers who would suffer the loss of redistribution from moving to a self-insured UI system.

Kling therefore suggested that UI be replaced by a two-part program. The first part would be self-insurance for unemployment: workers who lose their jobs could either draw funds from a voluntary savings account to which they had contributed while working or take loans from the government that are to be paid back out of future labor earnings. Low-wage workers or those who are unable to find a new job would receive forgiveness on the part of their loan that financed the unemployment spell (essentially converting the loan back to UI benefits). The second part of Kling's program would be wage insurance: workers would receive a transfer from the government equal to 25% of the difference between their old hourly wage and their new hourly wage. The duration of payments (up to a maximum of six years) would be determined by the number of hours worked in the two years prior to the job loss. Partial replacement, only 25% of the wage difference, ensures that workers will still try to find a high-wage new job. Indeed, a social experiment of a similar type of program in Canada found that it provided significant insurance for wage losses without adverse effects on job search or work behavior. The net result of this two-part unemployment and wage insurance program would be a system that has lower moral hazard yet redistributes to both low-wage workers and workers suffering a large wage loss. ■

## 14.6 Conclusion

The three social insurance programs studied in this chapter (unemployment insurance, disability insurance, and workers' compensation) provide excellent applications of the general principles of social insurance covered in [Chapter 12](#). In each case, individuals clearly value the consumption smoothing provided by the program, and in each case, there are significant moral hazard costs associated with the provision of the insurance. These moral hazard costs dictate that insurance be less than full. The many empirical analyses of all three programs can be used to inform policy makers' decisions as program reforms move forward.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Unemployment insurance (UI) provides 26 weeks of benefits to workers who are laid off and searching for work.
- Disability insurance (DI) provides income replacement at Social Security levels for workers who are disabled and can no longer work.
- Workers' compensation (WC) provides generous cash benefits and medical insurance to workers injured on the job.
- The consumption smoothing provided by UI is only partial because the program seems to a large extent to be crowding out other forms of self-insurance. The effects of DI and WC on consumption smoothing have not been studied enough to reach any conclusion about their consumption-smoothing effects.
- Existing evidence suggests that the moral hazard costs of UI are large, with an elasticity of unemployment durations with respect to benefits of 0.8. (Each 10% rise in benefits raises unemployment durations by 8%).
- There are also significant moral hazard effects associated with DI, although they are smaller, with each 10% rise in benefits leading to only a 3–5% rise in the odds of leaving the labor force.
- The largest moral hazard effects appear to be associated with WC, with each 10% rise in benefits leading to a 7% rise in the odds of claiming a workplace injury, and leading to a 17% rise in injury durations.
- Partial experience rating of both the UI and WC programs appears to raise the rate of layoffs and the duration of injury-related job leave.
- The evidence in this chapter implies that the WC program is likely too generous, and the DI program perhaps not generous enough; that benefits should be targeted toward groups such as the long-term unemployed and seriously disabled; and that firms should be more fully experience-rated for social insurance payments to their workers.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. The UI payroll tax is said to be partially experience-rated because the tax rate on earnings is higher for firms with a history of laying off workers. What is the rationale for making the payroll tax rate a function of a firm's layoff history?
2. Describe the effects of raising the maximum benefit level for UI on the savings rate of high-income workers. How big are the consumption-smoothing benefits of this policy change likely to be? Are there other potential benefits of raising this maximum benefit level?
3.  Workers' compensation benefits vary across states and types of injuries. How can you employ this information to estimate the elasticity of injury with respect to workers' compensation benefits generosity?
4. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) creates tax-benefit models to estimate how tax and benefit rules in OECD countries affect the net income of workers when they move between unemployment and employment. Navigate to the Benefits and Wages: Statistics page in the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, currently found at <http://www.oecd.org/els/benefits-and-wages-statistics.htm>. Download the Excel file entitled "Gross replacement rates (without accounting for taxes), uneven years from 1961 to 2011."
  1. Read the explanation in the Notes tab to understand the difference between two similar statistics: the gross replacement rate (GRR), and the net replacement rate (NRR). Which of the two does a better job of capturing the most relevant factors that unemployed individuals usually consider as they decide whether to reenter the work force?
  2. Compare years 2001 and 2011 in the tabs for GRR (Average Worker) and NRR including social assistance and housing benefit (SA HB AW). What two countries experienced the largest drops in GRR? The largest increases in GRR? Are they the same countries with the largest drops and increases in NRR?
  5. What does the empirical evidence on the consumption-smoothing benefits of UI indicate about the degree to which individuals are, on average, insured against the income losses associated with unemployment?
6.  Consider [Meyer's 1989](#) study of the effects of unemployment benefits on unemployment spell durations. How does this study deal with the likelihood that unemployment spells and unemployment benefits may both increase during economic recessions?
7. [Gruber \(2000\)](#) found evidence that the elasticity of labor supply with respect to DI benefits is considerably smaller than the estimates of the elasticity of unemployment durations with respect to UI benefits. Why might moral hazard be less of an issue in the DI program than in the UI program?
8. Governments typically provide DI and UI to workers. In contrast, governments typically *mandate* that firms provide workers' compensation insurance to their workers but do not provide the coverage. Why the difference? Why don't governments provide workers' compensation instead of mandating it?
9. In May 2004, the state of Vermont significantly reformed its workers' compensation system. One key provision of this reform was to reduce the window of time during which a claimant could file an initial workers' compensation claim. Might this reform have helped to reduce the degree of fraudulent use of the workers' compensation system? Explain.
10. Senator Doppelganger has proposed rules that will make it easier for workers to apply for and receive disability benefits. What is this likely to do to rates of application for disability benefits? To the reported unemployment rate?
11. Unemployment benefits are subject to income taxes. They are not (by default) subject to withholding, or to payroll taxes. Suppose that a particular worker is subject to a payroll tax of 7.65% of her wages; that she pays an average income tax rate of 10%; and that after losing her job, she is eligible to receive 60% of her previous weekly income.
  1. What fraction of her take-home paycheck will she receive from unemployment insurance?

2. What effect does the tax treatment of unemployment insurance benefits have on the ability it provides its recipients for smoothing?

■

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

12. Are individuals more likely to maintain their pre-injury consumption levels after an easily preventable on-the-job injury than after a difficult-to-prevent on-the-job injury? Explain.
13.  The empirical evidence on unemployment spell durations suggests that workers who leave unemployment earlier (that is, find or take a job sooner) have no higher post-unemployment wages than workers who leave unemployment later. This result could be interpreted as evidence that the quality of the job match does not improve as the unemployment spell grows longer.
1. What does this interpretation of the evidence imply about the moral hazard costs of UI?
  2. An alternative explanation for this evidence is that workers with longer unemployment spells are less qualified than are workers with shorter unemployment spells. How could you empirically distinguish between this explanation and the explanation put forth in (a)?
14. Every year the U.S. Department of Labor publishes “Significant Measures of State UI Tax Systems,” using state-reported data contained in the Unemployment Insurance Data Base (UIDB). Navigate to [https://oui.dol.gov/unemploy/sig\\_measure.asp](https://oui.dol.gov/unemploy/sig_measure.asp) and choose the most current report with data on of the major differences in UI programs across states. For example, at the time of this writing, the state of Tennessee had a much wider range in the statutory payroll tax rates paid by different experience-rated firms than did Mississippi. Which state’s system subsidizes firms with high layoff rates to a greater degree? Explain.
15. You are hired by the presidential administration to review the UI program, which currently replaces approximately 45% of a worker’s wages for 26 weeks after she loses her job. Consider two alternative reforms of the current UI system. The first is to experience-rate firms fully, so that the taxes firms pay are set exactly equal to the benefits their workers receive (benefits remain at 45% of wages). The second is a system of *individual* full experience rating—the government lends individuals 45% of their wages while unemployed, but the individuals have to pay this back when they get new jobs.
1. Contrast the effects of these alternative policies on unemployment durations and the likelihood of worker layoffs.
  2. What are the consumption-smoothing properties of each alternative policy?

- The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 14 Advanced Quasi-Experimental Analysis



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As discussed in this chapter, Meyer's study of the effect of UI benefits on unemployment durations considers two possible control groups: high-earning workers in other states and lower-earning workers in the same state. The chapter describes how these two different control groups can be used to compute two difference-in-difference estimators. This appendix describes how these estimates can be combined to form an even more convincing quasi-experimental estimate (known as a "difference-in-difference-in-difference" estimate) of the impact of UI benefits on unemployment durations.

# Carrying Out the Two Difference-in-Difference Estimates

To define these estimates, we must use eight measures of unemployment durations, which we will call  $\text{DUR}(e, s, p)$ , where:

$e$  stands for earnings level for each group:  $H$  is the high-earning treatment group with the benefits change (those earning more than \$800 per week),  $L$  is the low-earning control group with no benefits change;

$s$  indicates the state of residence of each group:  $T$  is the treatment state with the benefits change (New Jersey),  $C$  is the control state with no benefits change (Pennsylvania);

$p$  identifies the time period:  $B$  is before the benefits change and  $A$  is after the benefits change. Thus,  $\text{DUR}(H, T, B)$  is the unemployment durations of high-earning workers in the treatment state (New Jersey) before the benefits change.

As described in the chapter, we can compute two different difference-in-difference estimators. The first estimator contrasts the change in unemployment durations (from before to after the policy change) of high-earning workers in the treatment and control states:

$$\text{DD1} = [\text{DUR}(H, T, A) - \text{DUR}(H, T, B)] - [\text{DUR}(H, C, A) - \text{DUR}(H, C, B)]$$

This is a causal estimate of the effect of higher UI benefits on unemployment durations, under the assumption that other changes over time, such as a recession, affect both states in the same fashion. In that case, the first term picks up the effect of benefits increases plus the recession, the second term picks up the effect of the recession, and the difference between the two is the effect of the benefits increase.

The second difference-in-difference estimate contrasts the change in unemployment durations (from before to after the policy change) of high- versus low-earning workers in the treatment state:

$$\text{DD2} = [\text{DUR}(H, T, A) - \text{DUR}(H, T, B)] - [\text{DUR}(L, T, A) - \text{DUR}(L, T, B)]$$

This is a causal estimate of the impact of higher UI benefits on unemployment durations under the assumption that the recession in the treatment state has the same effect on workers in groups  $H$  and  $L$ . In this case, the first term picks up the effect of the benefits increase plus the recession, the second term picks up the effect of the recession, and the difference is the effect of the benefits increase.

It is possible that neither of these assumptions is true. If the recession has a stronger effect in the treatment state than in the control state, then DD1 will not measure just the impact of higher UI benefits on unemployment durations but also will measure a partial impact of the recession. Suppose, moreover, that recessions have a stronger effect on low-earning than on high-earning workers. In this case, DD2 would suffer from the same problem: it would measure the effect of higher benefits *and* a partial effect of the recession.

## Difference-in-Difference-in-Difference Estimates

Even if both of these difference-in-difference estimators have limitations individually, they can be *combined* to form a more convincing estimator. That is, one can take the difference of these difference-in-difference estimators to account for *both* the fact that the recession may be stronger in New Jersey than in Pennsylvania, *and* the fact that recessions may affect higher-earning workers differently than lower-earning workers. This is accomplished by using a difference-in-difference-in-difference estimator: compare the unemployment durations of high-earning workers to the duration of low-earning workers in treatment states, then do the same comparison in the control states, and finally take the difference of these two DD estimates. That is, one can compute:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{DDD} = & \\ & \{[\text{DUR}(H, T, A) - \text{DUR}(H, T, B)] - [\text{DUR}(L, T, A) - \text{DUR}(L, T, B)]\} \\ & - \{[\text{DUR}(H, C, A) - \text{DUR}(H, C, B)] - [\text{DUR}(L, C, A) - \text{DUR}(L, C, B)]\} \end{aligned}$$

This is a causal estimate of the impact of higher UI benefits on unemployment durations under the following assumption: the impact of recessions on high-earning workers relative to low-income workers is the same in both the treatment and control states. Under this assumption, even if the impact of the recession is different in the two states, and even if the impact is different on the two groups of workers, we can rid the estimate of bias with this difference-in-difference-in-difference estimator.

Even the assumption laid out in the previous paragraph may not be met. As highlighted in [Chapter 3](#), quasi-experimental approaches are imperfect mechanisms for replicating the “gold standard” of the randomized trial. Yet this appendix shows how the use of data from different groups in different states can help to address some of the concerns about bias that arise with quasi-experimental estimates.

# CHAPTER 15 Health Insurance I: Health Economics and Private Health Insurance



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- [15.1 An Overview of Health Care in the United States](#)
- [15.2 How Generous Should Insurance Be to Patients?](#)
- [15.3 How Generous Should Insurance Be to Medical Providers?](#)
- [15.4 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- What are the different sources of insurance for Americans?
- How generously should insurance cover illness?
- How generously should insurance reimburse medical providers?

On March 30, 1981, only two months after entering office, President Ronald Reagan was shot by John Hinckley, a deranged fan of Jodie Foster who thought the actress would pay more attention to him if he killed the president. Reagan was rushed to George Washington Hospital, where he underwent three hours of surgery to remove a bullet that had entered his lung. Though the injury was potentially fatal, Reagan made a full recovery and went on to serve a full eight years in office.

One hundred years earlier, President James Garfield was not so lucky. He, too, was shot two months after entering office, on July 2, 1881, by Charles Guiteau, who thought God had ordered him to kill the president. Garfield was brought back to the White House, where for 80 days, a dozen doctors attempted to find one bullet that, unbeknownst to them, had lodged itself near Garfield's spine. The doctors probed the president's wound with their unsterilized fingers and metal rods, succeeding only in widening the wound, infecting it, and puncturing his liver. Alexander Graham Bell ran a metal detector over Garfield's body and soon announced that he'd found the bullet. Surgeons went to work but still failed to locate it, not realizing that Bell had mistakenly detected one of the bedsprings underneath the president. The infection resulting from his poor medical care soon caused Garfield to have a heart attack, and when he eventually died, his coroner declared that Garfield would have survived if only his doctors had left him alone.<sup>1</sup>

Between President Garfield's death and President Reagan's election, the field of health care clearly made great strides, so that doctors are now helping rather than harming people. This improvement in the quality of health care in the United States has been accompanied by an enormous increase in the share of the U.S. economy devoted to health care. In 1950, only 5% of U.S. GDP was accounted for by the health care sector. At that time, Americans spent less on health care than on cars, fuel, or clothing. By 2017, health care accounted for 17.9% of GDP, surpassing spending on housing and food.<sup>2</sup> This growth is not expected to stop: health care is forecast to consume 49% of U.S. GDP by 2082, which would represent a greater share than the United States currently spends on cars, fuel, furniture, food, clothing, housing, utilities, and recreational activities combined.<sup>3</sup>

Is such high and rapidly growing health care spending a problem? After all, what is more important than our health? And, by some measures, we are buying wonderful things with our health care dollars. Consider the treatment of knee injuries in the 1950s and today. Fifty years ago, if you tore the meniscus (the cartilage under the kneecap), the only option was to have open surgery, during which the surgeon cut open your knee and removed the entire meniscus. You would spend days in the hospital, months recovering, and 15 years down the road, you would have an increased chance of developing arthritis in that knee. If you tear your meniscus today, you can often have only a small piece of it removed by arthroscopic surgery, which allows the surgeon to make tiny incisions in your knee to repair the damage in an average of 30 minutes. You go home that same day, can do light work within a few days, and be up and running (or whatever other sport you enjoy) within three to six weeks.

Similarly, in 1950, 6 out of every 1,000 Americans died from a heart attack. Since then, that number has fallen to 1.7 out of 1,000.<sup>4</sup> In 1950, 29 out of every 1,000 infants born died in their first year of life; today, that figure is 6 out of 1,000.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the huge benefits reaped from the U.S. health care system, all is not completely well: there are enormous disparities in medical outcomes. For example, in 2015, the white *infant mortality* rate in the United States, the share of infants who die in their first year, was 4.9, which was in line with other developed nations like Canada and Greece. The 2015 black infant mortality rate, however, was 11.3, which was somewhat higher than the infant mortality rate in Libya (10.8) and twice as high as the rate in Serbia (5.8).<sup>6</sup> In the 15 poorest neighborhoods in Baltimore, Maryland, the life expectancy is below that of the impoverished nation of North Korea.<sup>7</sup>

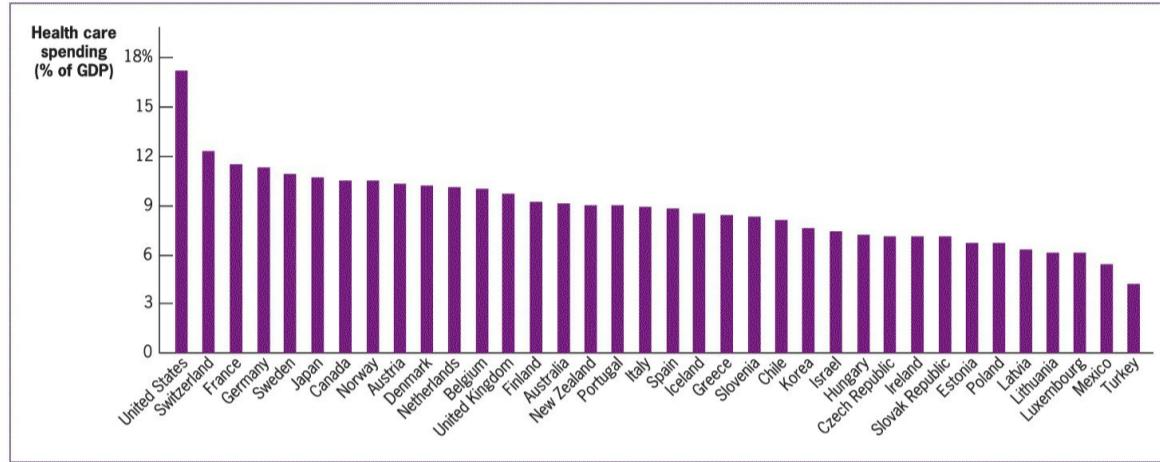
These disparities can be traced historically to the fact that the United States is the only major industrialized nation that did not endeavor to provide universal access to health care for its citizens. As a result, almost 50 million persons—more than one-sixth of the U.S. population—were without health insurance in 2010. As we've seen, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has attempted to address this issue, and as of this writing, more than 19 million Americans have gained coverage, but large gaps in coverage remain.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the perceived “private” nature of the U.S. health care system, governments account for almost half of all health spending in the United States. Health care spending is now a quarter of the federal government budget and more than a fifth of state and local government budgets.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, growth in health spending is projected to account for most of the long-run fiscal problems faced by the U.S. government because of the aging of the U.S. population and the rapid rise in medical care costs. Thus, there are clear public finance issues raised by this large and growing health economy. In this chapter and the next, we discuss many issues relative to health care and its importance to the economy and to government policy. In this chapter, we discuss the nature of health care and the set of general health insurance issues relevant to government involvement in the delivery of health insurance. This chapter provides the basis for understanding the health economy and allows us to contemplate reforms in the government role in the delivery of health care. In the next chapter, we examine the two largest public-sector interventions in health insurance markets—the Medicaid and Medicare programs—and the implications of past evidence for future directions in health care reform.

# 15.1 An Overview of Health Care in the United States

In 2010, the United States spent \$3.3 trillion on health care, or 17.9% of GDP.<sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, this represents a dramatic increase from 50 years ago. This amount is also much higher than the amount spent in other industrialized nations. As [Figure 15-1](#) shows, in 2017, the United States devoted nearly twice as large a share of our economy to health care as did Finland or the United Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Health spending in the United States amounts to \$10,348 on average for each man, woman, and child.<sup>12</sup>



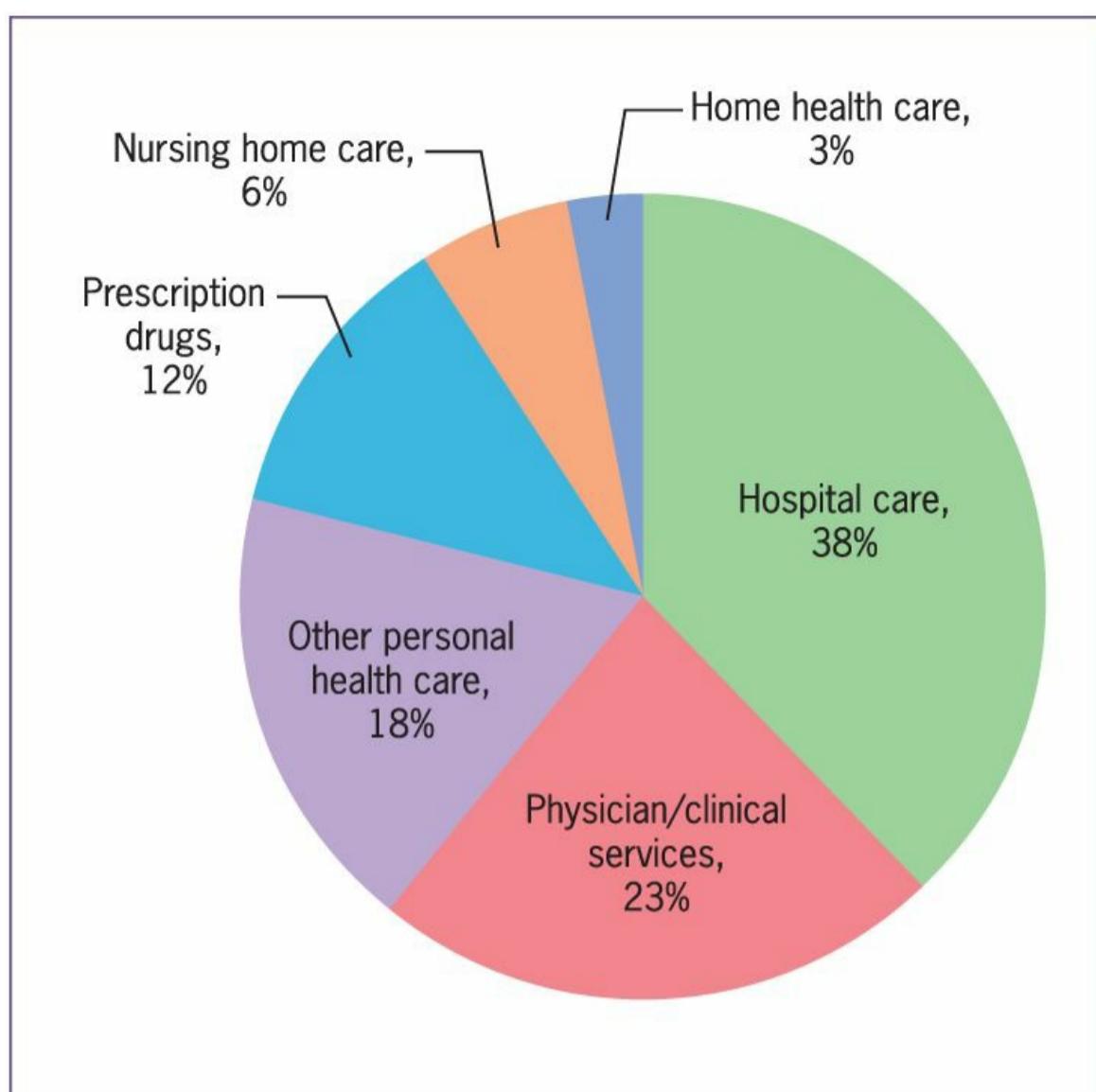
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## FIGURE 15-1

Health Care Spending in OECD Nations in 2017 • Health care spending is much higher in the United States than in the typical industrialized nation.

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018a\)](#).

Where do our health dollars go? [Figure 15-2](#) shows the distribution of health spending across the major categories of expenditures. Almost 40% of the typical health dollar is spent on hospital care, and nearly a quarter is spent on physician care. Prescription drug spending accounts for more than a tenth of health spending, while the sum of spending on nursing home care and care for the elderly in their own homes accounts for almost another tenth.



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#### FIGURE 15-2

Distribution of National Health Expenditures, 2015 • The largest single category of health care spending in the United States in 2015 was hospital care. Together hospital and physician spending accounted for almost two-thirds of all health care spending.

Data from: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2018c\)](#).

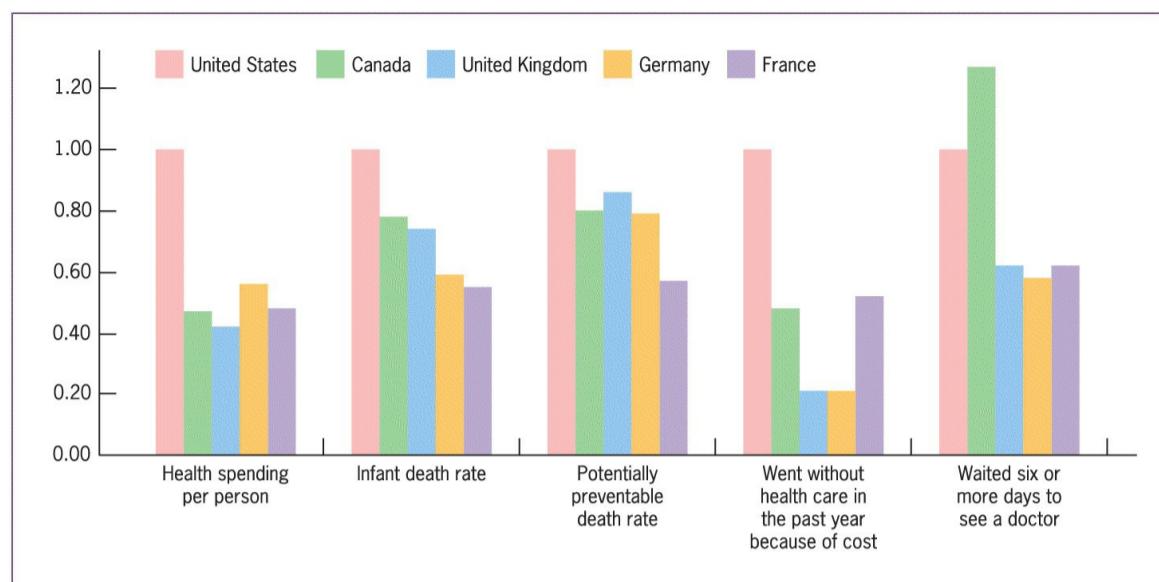


#### APPLICATION

### Finding the Inefficiency in U.S. Health Care

As we see in [Figure 15-1](#), the United States is a major outlier in international terms when it comes to health care spending. This is illustrated from a different point of view in [Figure 15-3](#), compiled using data from the Commonwealth Fund.<sup>13</sup> This figure shows the ranking of the United States relative to other developed nations along a number of indicators of health system outcomes. There are five outcomes considered, and in each case, the U.S. value is normalized to be 1 so that other countries can be shown relative to that level. For example, the first set of bars shows that the United States has the highest per-person health care costs of this set of countries and that countries such as the United Kingdom spend less than 40% as much per capita than the United States does. The United States also has the highest rate of infant mortality, the highest rate of preventable death, and the highest rate of going without

care over the past year because of cost—only Canada has a higher wait time for physician care.



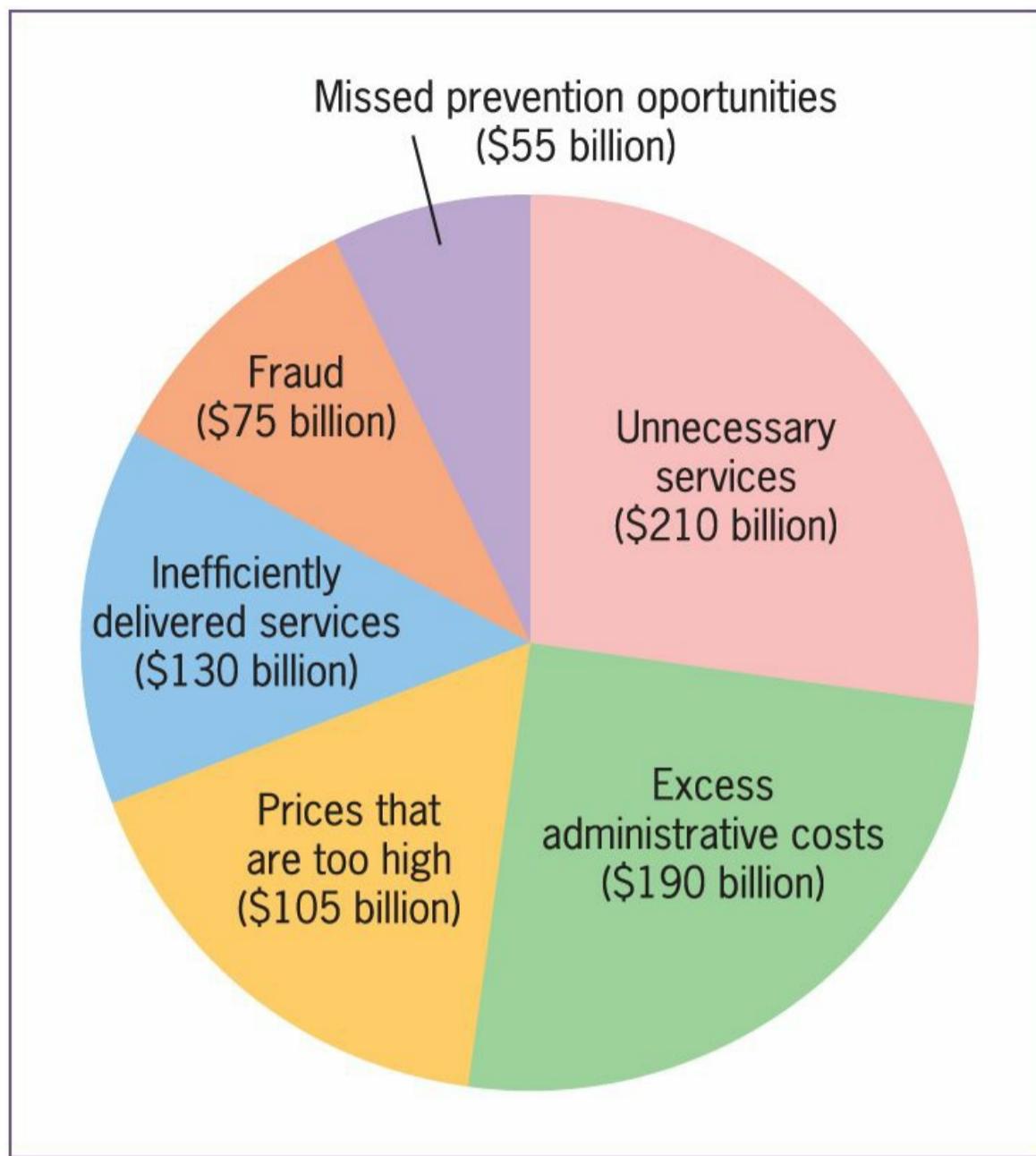
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### FIGURE 15-3

**U.S. Rankings in Health System Outcomes** • This figure shows the ranking of the United States relative to other developed nations along a number of indicators of health system outcomes. The United States spends twice as much as most other developed countries on health care, yet it is outperformed in almost every other indicator.

Data from: The Commonwealth Fund at [www.commonwealthfund.org](http://www.commonwealthfund.org).

Why is health care so expensive in the United States? What is the source of the inefficiency in how the nation delivers care? A 2012 study from the Institute of Medicine argued that one-third of U.S. health care spending, or \$750 billion, was doing nothing to make anyone healthier. The study broke the health care overspending into the categories shown in [Figure 15-4](#). The three largest sources of wasteful spending are high prices, excess administrative costs, and unnecessary or inefficiently delivered services. While experts may disagree on the relative importance of these factors, there is general consensus that these are the most important sources of waste in the U.S. health care system.<sup>14</sup>



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■ FIGURE 15-4

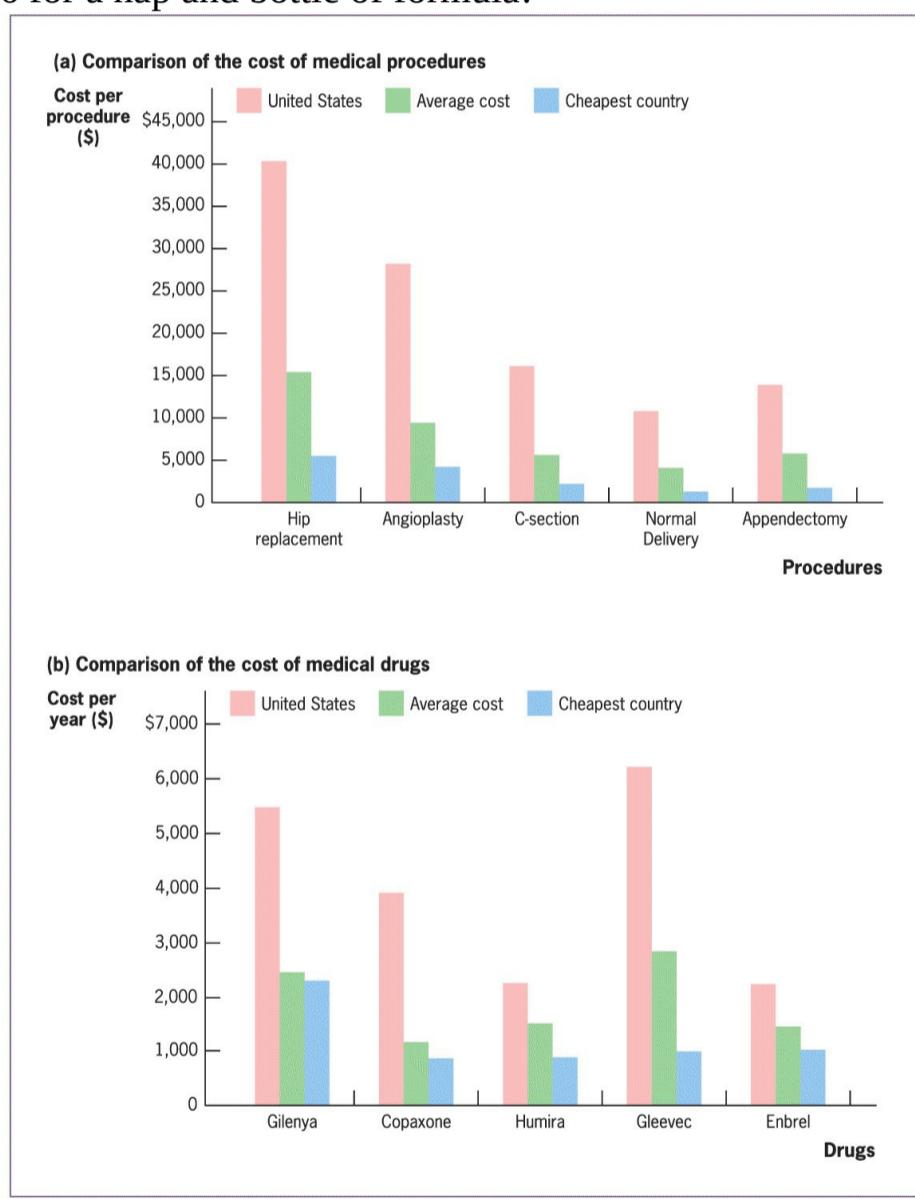
**Breakdown of Health Care Overspending** • The United States spent \$750 billion in health-related spending that did not contribute to patient care in 2010. This chart shows where it went. The three largest sources of wasteful spending are high prices, excess administrative costs, and unnecessary or inefficiently delivered services.

Data from: [Kliff \(2012b\)](#).

The easiest problem to identify is the wasted administrative spending in the United States, which arises primarily from the fragmented nature of our health care insurance and delivery system. As noted earlier, the administrative costs of private insurance in the United States average about 15%, more than twice the average for other developed nations.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, health care providers that have different private and public owners—and that have to deal with multiple private and public health care payers—spend a huge amount to bill and collect payments. A study by [Himmelstein et al. \(2014\)](#) found that hospitals spend 1.43% of GDP on administrative costs. There are many arguments for and against a more centralized system of health care delivery (as discussed in the next chapter), but one clear cost of our fragmented system is higher administrative spending.

The next major factor is the prices that the United States pays for its health care services, which are far higher than in other nations. The evidence on this proposition is nicely

summarized in a comparative cross-national study carried out by the International Federation of Health Plans (available at [www.ifhp.com](http://www.ifhp.com)). This organization gathers data on prices paid for medical goods and services from a variety of health insurers around the world. The results of this comparison are shown in [Figure 15-5](#). Panel (a) represents the cost of five medical services, ranging from hip replacement to appendectomy. Panel (b) shows the price of medical drugs used for treatment of diseases and conditions such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, and leukemia. The blue bar shows the price in the lowest-priced country, the green bar shows the average cost around the world, and the pink bar shows the cost in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The United States pays higher prices on average for every single one of these services and drugs than those paid in other nations, and many multiples of the prices charged in the lowest-cost countries. A striking investigation by Vox found dozens of examples of incredibly high prices for standard care delivery in the United States, such as \$937 for toe ointment, \$3,500 for intravenous hydration and three over the counter medications, or, most strikingly, \$18,836 for a nap and bottle of formula!<sup>17</sup>



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

### FIGURE 15-5

Comparison of the Cost of Medical Procedures and Drugs Relative to Other Nations • The United States pays higher prices on average for every single one of these services [panel (a)] and drugs [panel (b)] than those paid in other nations, and many multiples of the lowest cost comparison.

Data from: International Federation of Health Plans at [www.ifhp.com](http://www.ifhp.com).

Why are prices so much higher in the United States? The primary reason is that other nations impose much stronger regulatory controls on the prices of medical services and drugs.

In the United States, medical goods and services reflect a hybrid mix of public price setting and private competition, which has been unable (or unwilling) to bring prices to the level observed elsewhere.

Moreover, neither patients nor providers have very strong incentives to price shop. For patients, most of the costs of their medical care is covered by insurance. As for providers, they are potentially paid *more* if they choose more expensive treatments. A striking comparison here is between three drugs that are all approved to treat age-related macular degeneration of the eye, which can rob patients of their vision. One of these drugs costs \$50/month for treatment, with others can cost \$2,000 or more. And there is no clinical evidence of superiority of one drug over another. Yet more than one-third of physicians prescribe the more expensive drug.<sup>18</sup> Another study finds that for lower-limb MRI scans, which are provided at fairly equal quality by a wide variety of medical providers, the typical patient bypassed six lower-priced providers between their home and the location where they received their care—even when they had computer tool available to help them price shop (which fewer than 1% of patients used).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there is the higher intensity with which U.S. patients are treated, leading to both unnecessary and inefficiently delivered care. The most commonly cited evidence for this fact is the enormous variation that is observed even within the United States in health care utilization—variation that appears unrelated to health care outcomes.

In June 2009, physician and health care expert Atul Gawande published an article in *The New Yorker* exploring the experience of McAllen County, Texas, the second most expensive health care market in the United States (after Miami, Florida). In 2006, the Medicare program (which provides insurance to the elderly) spent \$15,000 per enrollee in McAllen, twice the national average and \$3,000 more than the entire per capita income of its residents. Furthermore, this high level of spending occurred even though the rates of cardiovascular disease are lower in McAllen County than elsewhere in the country. Indeed, the demographics of residents in this county are virtually identical to those in nearby El Paso County, yet Medicare costs per enrollee were only half as high in El Paso.

Because Medicare pays providers in both locations on a comparable fee schedule, the difference in costs is not the cost per unit of medical care across these locations. Rather, the difference appears to arise from a much more intensive pattern of patient treatment in McAllen than in other comparable locations, such as El Paso. As [Gawande \(2015b\)](#) writes, “Between 2001 and 2005, critically ill Medicare patients received almost 50% more specialist visits in McAllen than El Paso and were two-thirds more likely to see 10 or more specialists in a six-month period. In 2005 and 2006, patients in McAllen received 20% more abdominal ultrasounds, 30% more bone-density studies, 60% more stress tests with echocardiography, 200% more nerve-conduction studies to diagnose carpal-tunnel syndrome, and 550% more urine-flow studies to diagnose prostate troubles. They received one-fifth to two-thirds more gallbladder operations, knee replacements, breast biopsies, and bladder scopes. They also received two to three times as many pacemakers, implantable defibrillators, cardiac-bypass operations, carotid endarterectomies, and coronary-artery stents. And Medicare paid for five times as many home nurse visits.”

Surprisingly, this higher utilization of health services was not associated with better outcomes than in El Paso. In Medicare’s ranking of hospitals on metrics of care, the five largest hospitals in McAllen County performed worse than hospitals in El Paso. [Gawande \(2015b\)](#) concludes, “The primary cause of McAllen’s extreme costs was, very simply, the

across-the-board overuse of medicine.”

Gawande’s findings echo decades of influential research by experts at Dartmouth University. The “Dartmouth Atlas,” which charts spending across areas on medical care, has shown that there are wide variations in spending that do not seem to be associated with better outcomes. For example, [Baicker and Chandra \(2004\)](#) ranked states along quality measures, including the proper use of beta blockers and aspirin for heart attack patients, flu shots for the elderly, and mammography exams for cancer screening, and they found a *negative* association with Medicare spending. In other words, areas with higher spending deliver lower quality care along these dimensions. [Fisher et al. \(2003\)](#) examined the outcomes of patients hospitalized for various reasons, such as hip fracture or heart attacks, and found that those in the areas with the highest spending received 60% more care, yet they were no more likely to survive than were patients in the lowest spending areas. Moreover, patients in the higher-spending areas were no more satisfied with the quality of their medical care.

More generally, there is a large and growing body of evidence that the U.S. health care system does not incorporate evidence where appropriate to reduce health care spending. As many as half of all medical procedures performed in the United States may be ineffective; as Gawande states, “Millions of people are receiving drugs that aren’t helping them, operations that aren’t going to make them better, and scans and tests that do nothing beneficial for them, and often cause harm.”<sup>20</sup>

For example, by the early 2000s there were four different clinical trials showing that spinal fusion surgery was no better than (much less expensive) nonsurgical treatments for relieving back pain. Despite this evidence, back surgery rates continued to grow and remains high in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, compared to other countries, lower quality (less effective) drugs diffuse much more quickly in the United States than in other nations.<sup>22</sup> And despite the fact that intravenous (IV) acetaminophen works no better as a pain treatment than does oral ingestion of Tylenol, and costs hundreds as times as much, use of IV acetaminophen is growing rapidly and now accounts for hundreds of millions of dollars in health care spending.<sup>23</sup> ■

## How Health Insurance Works: The Basics

Individuals typically fund these expenditures by purchasing insurance. As discussed in [Chapter 12](#), risk-averse individuals generally prefer insurance as a means of financing uncertain expenditures, at least if that insurance is available on an actuarially fair basis. There are several major sources of health insurance in the United States; the distribution of the population across these sources in 2016 is illustrated in [Table 15-1](#).

TABLE 15-1 Type of Health Insurance, 2016

	People (millions)
• Total population	320.4
◦ Private	216.2
■ Employment-based	178.5
■ Direct purchase	52.0
◦ Public	119.4
■ Medicaid	53.4
■ Medicare	62.3

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Tricare/CHAMPVA</li> <li>● <i>The uninsured</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 14.6</li> <li>● 28.1</li> </ul>
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Data from: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2018b\), Table 1](#).

More than two-thirds of insured Americans have private health insurance, largely through employers, while the remaining have public health insurance. Roughly 9% of Americans are uninsured. Note that estimates by type of coverage are not mutually exclusive; people can be covered by more than one type of health insurance during the year.

Health insurance parallels the general structure of insurance discussed in [Chapter 12](#). Individuals, or firms on their behalf, pay monthly premiums to insurance companies. In return, the insurance companies pay the providers of medical goods and services for most of the cost of goods and services used by the individual (the individual's medical claims). Under most health insurance plans, however, the patient also pays the provider for part of the costs of medical goods and services, and the insurance company pays the remainder. There are three types of patient payments:

- *Deductibles*: Individuals face the full cost of their care but only up to some limit; for example, a \$100 deductible means that you pay the first \$100 of your medical costs for the year, and the insurance company pays some or all of the costs thereafter.
- *Copayment*: Individuals make some fixed payment when they get a medical good or service; for example, a \$10 copayment for a doctor's office visit or a new prescription.
- *Coinsurance*: The patient pays a percentage of each medical bill (the coinsurance rate, e.g., 20%), rather than a flat dollar amount (as with a copayment).

## Private Insurance

The most important source of health insurance in the United States is private insurance; in 2016, 67.5% of the population (or 216.2 million people) had private health insurance. Within that group, the predominant source of private insurance is employer-provided health insurance. Only 16.2% of those with private insurance purchase insurance on their own, through the [nongroup insurance market](#).

### nongroup insurance market

The market through which individuals or families buy insurance directly rather than through a group, such as the workplace.



*“Kids, your mother and I have spent so much money on health insurance this year that instead of vacation we’re all going to go in for elective surgery.”*

Jack Ziegler/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

Employers offer insurance to qualified employees in the firm, typically those who work full time and have completed some minimal service requirement (such as six months of employment at the firm); employers also typically charge employees some share of the employers' premium payments for insurance. As a result of these employee premiums, some employees choose not to take up the insurance even if it is offered. In 2013, the typical employer-sponsored insurance plan cost \$6,690 for singles and \$18,864 for families; employees typically paid 18% of the costs of single coverage and 29% of the costs of family coverage.<sup>24</sup>

There are two reasons employers are the predominant source of insurance: risk pooling and tax subsidies.

## Why Employers Provide Private Insurance, Part I: Risk Pooling

The first reason that employers provide most private insurance is the nature of insurance risk pools. An insurance **risk pool** is the group of individuals who enroll in an insurance plan. When insurers sell an insurance plan to a group, they don't care about the medical experiences of any one member of the group. What matters to the insurer is the total premium collected from, and medical claims paid out on behalf of, that insurance pool as a whole. Recall our example from [Chapter 12](#): actuarially fair pricing simply requires that the insurance company collect enough in premiums from the entire group to cover its costs for that group.

### risk pool

The group of individuals who enroll in an insurance plan.

As a result, the goal of all insurers is to create *large insurance pools with a predictable distribution of medical risk*. So long as the insurer can accurately predict the claims that it will pay out for that insurance pool, it can charge a premium to cover its claims costs (along

with administrative costs and profits). If it can't make that prediction accurately, there is a risk that the premiums will not cover the pool's medical costs.

Two features increase the predictability of medical risk distributions for insurance risk pools. The first is the absence of adverse selection. Insurers predict medical risk based on the observable characteristics (such as age and sex) of the individuals in the risk pool, and such predictions will only be valid if those individuals have the average medical risk of their age and sex group. If individuals are forming a pool based on their (unobserved to the insurer) health status as well, then the insurer can't predict the expected costs of that pool very well. The second factor that increases predictability is group size. The statistical *law of large numbers* (introduced in [Chapter 3](#)) states that as the size of the pool grows, the odds that the insurer will be unable to predict the average health outcome of the pool falls.

Employees of firms, particularly large firms, constitute a risk pool that has a good chance of meeting these two conditions. Workers generally do not take their health status into account when choosing which firm to work for, so there is no reason to believe that there will be adverse selection in this risk pool. In other words, there is no reason to suspect that particularly sick or healthy individuals band together to work in a firm (particularly a large firm) so that, on average within a firm, workers of a given age and sex will have the expected medical expenditures for that age and sex. In addition, most employees work in firms that are sufficiently large that the law of large numbers can be employed in predicting medical risks.

For these reasons, firms provide an attractive risk-pooling mechanism for insurers. Individuals, on the other hand, do not. Large groups of individuals could be formed to deal with the second concern, group size, but the first concern, adverse selection, always remains: the individuals who band together to come to the insurer looking for coverage might be doing so simply because they are sick. Because of adverse selection, insurers would much rather sell insurance to large employer groups than to small groups or individuals.

The preference for large groups by insurers is reinforced by another aspect of insurance provision, administrative costs. Many of the costs of administering insurance are *fixed* at a certain level no matter the size of the pool (e.g., the costs of selling the insurance product). As a result, the larger the pool, the more widely per capita administrative costs can be spread. For individuals or small groups, these fixed administrative costs can amount to a large share of the premium, but the costs are a very small share of the premium for large firms.

These issues are reflected in the pattern of private insurance coverage in the United States. Large employers in the United States almost universally offer health insurance to their employees: 97% of firms with more than 50 employees offer health insurance. Among smaller firms, however, health insurance offering rates are much lower; only 29% of firms with fewer than 50 employees provide insurance.<sup>25</sup> This difference is partly because the insurer cannot appeal to the law of large numbers for these smaller pools: one cancer or AIDS patient in a small firm could cause medical claims costs to exceed the insurance company's projection and thus exceed premiums collected. As a result, insurers are more reluctant to insure small firms because they can't predict with certainty the insurance costs that their premiums must cover. The difference is also due to the higher (fixed) administrative costs per worker at small firms. As discussed in [Chapter 12](#), the demand for insurance will fall if administrative costs cause insurance premiums to rise above their actuarially fair level.

## Why Employers Provide Private Insurance, Part II: The Tax Subsidy

The second reason why employers are the predominant providers of health insurance is the **tax subsidy to employer-provided health insurance**. Under current U.S. tax law, employee compensation in the form of wages is subject to taxation, but employee compensation in the form of health insurance expenditures is not. If your employer pays you \$1 in wages, you keep only  $\$1 \times (1 - t)$  of those wages, where  $t$  is your tax rate; if you have a 33% tax rate, you only keep \$0.67 of each \$1 you earn. If your employer pays you in health insurance, on the other hand, you keep the full \$1 of health insurance. This tax subsidy is *only available* for employer-provided health insurance. Thus, there is a large subsidy to purchasing health insurance through your employer rather than on your own.

#### **tax subsidy to employer-provided health insurance**

Workers are taxed on their wage compensation but not on compensation in the form of health insurance, leading to a subsidy to health insurance provided through employers.

For example, suppose that Nancy and Kate are both working for the same employer (see [Table 15-2](#)). The labor market is perfectly competitive, so their wage is equal to their marginal product, which is \$30,000 per year for each employee. Assume that both employees face a flat tax rate of 33% so that, without insurance, their after-tax income is  $\$30,000 \times (1 - 0.33) = \$20,000$ . The employer now offers both employees the opportunity to have health insurance at a cost of \$5,000, but the employer will reduce their wages by \$5,000 if they take this insurance so that their total compensation is still equal to their marginal product.

**TABLE 15-2 Illustrating the Tax Subsidy to Employer-Provided Insurance**

	Marginal Product, Wage	Employer Health Insurance Spending	Pre-Tax Wage	After-Tax Wage	Personal Health Insurance Spending	After-Tax, After-Health Insurance Income
Nancy	\$30,000	0	\$30,000	\$20,000	\$4,000	\$16,000
Kate	30,000	\$5,000	25,000	16,666	0	16,666

Nancy and Kate both have the same marginal product of labor, but Kate chooses to take insurance through her employer, accepting a \$5,000 reduction in wages as a result, while Nancy purchases it on her own for \$4,000. Even though Nancy's insurance is cheaper, Kate ends up with \$666 more income after taxes than Nancy due to the subsidy to employer-provided insurance.

Nancy can purchase insurance on her own for \$4,000, so she turns down the employer. She has an after-tax income of \$20,000, out of which she pays \$4,000 for insurance, so that she ends up with \$16,000 in after-tax, after-insurance income. Kate takes the health insurance. Her earnings fall to \$25,000, which is  $\$25,000 \times (1 - 0.33) = \$16,666$  after tax. But Kate now has a higher after-tax, after-insurance income than Nancy, even though her insurance is much more expensive (\$5,000 rather than \$4,000). This is because Kate has benefited from the tax advantage to employer-provided health insurance—lowering the taxes she has to pay by \$1,666 (33% of \$5,000)—which more than offsets the \$1,000 higher cost of the employer-provided insurance.



**Quick Hint** The subsidy to employer-provided health insurance is generally not well understood. This is not a subsidy to employers but rather a subsidy to employees for insurance purchased in the employment setting. Whether the employer pays the worker in wages or health insurance is irrelevant from the employer's perspective; either way, a dollar of employer spending has the same effect on the firm's bottom line (because any type of employee compensation is deductible from corporate taxation). From the worker's perspective, however, there is a large difference: by being paid in health insurance rather than wages, the worker reduces his or her tax payments. If the government wanted to end the tax subsidy, it would not do so by increasing the corporate tax paid by the firm; it would instead include employer spending on health

insurance as part of an employee's taxable income.

## The Other Alternative: Nongroup Insurance

Historically (i.e., before the ACA), this was a very small market. This was due to the type of problems we highlighted with the small group market (potential for adverse selection and high administrative costs per enrollee), which are even greater when the insured is a single individual or family. Insurers reacted to this market failure by setting up large barriers to access in this market for those in poor health. Often, nongroup policies had "pre-existing conditions exclusions," which stated that the health insurance would refuse to pay for the expenditures associated with any illness that the purchaser had when he bought the insurance (e.g., recurrences of cancer would not be covered for those with past episodes of cancer). Insurers in most states could also charge the sick many multiples of the healthy and would often raise rates dramatically over time to avoid individuals staying on policies until they are sick. In other words, individuals in this market did not have real insurance in a meaningful sense because they were not fully protected against either past or future illness.<sup>26</sup>

A central feature of the ACA (discussed in detail in [Chapter 16](#)) was an effort to reduce these barriers to the nongroup insurance market. The law banned pre-existing conditions exclusions and disallowed higher charges for less healthy enrollees. Along with the individual mandate and tax credits that subsidize the cost of insurance, this has prompted the growth of the nongroup insurance market, which has almost doubled since 2010.

## Medicare

The second major source of health insurance is the [Medicare](#) program, which provides health insurance for all people over age 65 and disabled people under age 65. Medicare is financed by a payroll tax of 1.45% each on employees and employers. For individuals with earnings above \$200,000, or for families with earnings above \$250,000, the payroll tax is 0.9% higher on wages above that level, and the entire 3.8% resulting tax is applied to investment income as well.<sup>27</sup>

### Medicare

A federal program that provides health insurance to all people over age 65 and disabled persons under age 65.

Every citizen who has worked for 10 years in Medicare-covered employment (and their spouse) is eligible for Medicare at age 65. (Unlike Social Security, individuals cannot access Medicare coverage before the age of 65.) In 2015, about 45.7 million elderly persons were enrolled in Medicare. After a two-year waiting period, Medicare insurance is also available to those receiving disability insurance. Disabled persons under age 65 add another 8.7 million people to the Medicare program.<sup>28</sup>

## Medicaid

The other major public health insurance program in the United States is the [Medicaid](#) program, which provides health care for the poor. The federal and state governments share the financing of this program, which is paid for out of general tax revenues.

### Medicaid

A federal and state program that provides health for poor families, the elderly, and the disabled.

Medicaid benefits are targeted at several groups:

- Those who qualify for cash welfare programs, mostly single mothers and their children
- Most low-income children (typically below 200% of the federal poverty level) and most

low-income pregnant women (typically below 200% of the poverty level, for the expenses associated with their pregnancies only)

- All persons in very-low-income families (those with incomes below 138% of the federal poverty level), but only in states that chose to expand the program to this group under the ACA
- The low-income elderly and disabled (for non-Medicare health costs and long-term care costs for facilities such as nursing homes)

Medicaid is best known for its coverage of the young poor population, particularly mothers and children, who make up more than 70% of program recipients. However, more than 60% of the costs of the program are accounted for by disabled and elderly program recipients. Expenses for this group include those for long-term care, either from providers visiting their homes or from institutions such as nursing homes, which account for 21% of total Medicaid spending.<sup>29</sup>

## TRICARE/CHAMPVA

Another large source of insurance in the United States is health insurance for those currently or formerly in the military and their dependents. TRICARE is a program administered by the Department of Defense for military retirees and the families of active-duty, retired, or deceased service members. CHAMPVA, the Civilian Health and Medical Program for the Department of Veterans Affairs, is a health care benefits program for disabled dependents of veterans and certain survivors of veterans. Together, these two programs provide health coverage for about 14.6 million Americans.

## The Uninsured

Finally, there are the 28 million people in the United States without any insurance coverage at all. Who are they?<sup>30</sup>

- The uninsured have lower-than-average incomes: one-half of the uninsured are in families with incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. Not all the uninsured are poor, however: 20% of the uninsured are in families with incomes above 400% of the FPL.
- In 2016, nearly three quarters of the nonelderly uninsured came from families where one or more members were full-time workers but were either not offered health insurance by their employers or were offered insurance by their employers but did not enroll in that insurance to cover themselves or their family members.
- About 13.3% of the uninsured are children.

## Why Are Individuals Uninsured?

Why are there so many Americans without health insurance coverage? There are several explanations. One reason is that even risk-averse individuals may be unwilling to purchase insurance if it is not available at an actuarially fair price. Private insurance in the United States has administrative costs that average roughly 15% of premiums paid.<sup>31</sup>

In the expected utility model developed in [Chapter 12](#), such a deviation from actuarial fairness can cause individuals with a low level of risk aversion to forgo insurance.

A second reason is adverse selection in the health insurance market. Adverse selection raises the cost of insurance through the standard lemons-pricing effect discussed in [Chapter 12](#): prices will be higher to reflect the (presumably sickest) subset of individuals who choose to insure. This adverse selection is offset to some extent by the individual mandate that is a part of the ACA because it brings healthier individuals into the insurance risk pool. This mandate does not entirely offset the effect of adverse selection, however, because the mandate is not fully universal.

A third reason is that individuals may be rationally forgoing insurance because the odds of them becoming ill are low, and if they become ill, they can receive care for free from medical providers. Under federal law, any hospital that accepts reimbursement from Medicare must treat individuals who arrive in an emergency condition, regardless of their ability to pay. Hospitals can try to collect the costs of such care from uninsured patients, but they often remain unpaid, becoming **uncompensated care** costs to the hospital and providing a form of “implicit insurance” for patients.

**uncompensated care**

The costs of delivering health care for which providers are not reimbursed.

A fourth reason is that individuals may be uninsured because they simply can't afford the high costs of health insurance. Individuals not offered insurance by their employers, or for whom employers pay only a small share of the costs, may simply not have the available funds to pay the remaining costs.

A fifth reason is that individuals are making mistakes and not appropriately valuing insurance coverage. This situation could arise because young and healthy individuals do not fully appreciate the health risks they face. Or it could be because individuals face the type of self-control problems discussed in [Chapter 6](#)—that is, they overvalue the short-run costs of insurance relative to long-run medical risk.

## Why Care About the Uninsured?

What does it matter if there are people without health insurance? There are several possible answers to this question. First, there are physical externalities associated with communicable diseases; uninsured people are less likely to receive vaccinations and care for communicable diseases. (Recall the measles example in [Chapter 1](#).) Second, there is a significant financial externality imposed by the uninsured on the insured through uncompensated care. When the uninsured get served by medical providers and don't pay their bills, those costs are passed on to other users of the medical system through high medical prices, a practice called *cost-shifting*. Estimates suggest that uncompensated care delivered to the uninsured in the United States amounted to more than \$50 billion in 2013 before the most important coverage provisions of the ACA went into effect. In 2014, after the ACA provisions began to be implemented, uncompensated care spending by hospitals fell by 21%.<sup>32</sup> This is a classic negative financial externality because the uninsured are raising medical costs for others without bearing the full costs themselves.

A third reason is that care is not delivered appropriately to the uninsured, thus jeopardizing their health and further raising the costs of uncompensated care that are paid by those who are insured. A classic example is the uninsured's use of the emergency room (which is designed for acute medical emergencies) for primary care, such as treatment of the common cold. There is enormous anecdotal evidence of such inefficient use of medical services; for example, a survey of individuals in a Los Angeles emergency room revealed that 38% would trade their current emergency room visit for a doctor's office visit within three days.<sup>33</sup> Such misuse of services is a problem because the emergency room is a very expensive place to

treat a minor illness. The efficiency of the medical system would be improved by sending these patients to physicians' offices instead.

Fourth, there are paternalism and equity motivations for caring about the uninsured. In particular, individuals may irrationally underinsure themselves because they do not appreciate the risks they face, and governments may view such irrational underinsurance as justifying intervention in insurance markets. In addition, many feel that health care is a basic right, like food or shelter, and, because the uninsured are generally poorer than average, they may be a group to whom we want to redistribute health care resources.

The final reason for caring about the uninsured is the possible economic impact that can result when people are unwilling to move to better jobs for fear of losing health insurance coverage, a situation referred to as **job lock**. Concern about *becoming uninsured* on the part of millions of individuals who currently have insurance, keeps them from searching for or switching to better jobs where they may be more productive. This reluctance to change can lead to a mismatch between workers and jobs that can lower overall U.S. productivity.

#### job lock

The unwillingness to move to a better job for fear of losing health insurance.

To illustrate this problem, suppose that Emma has utility over only two goods, health insurance and consumption, so that her utility function is of the form  $U = U(C, HI)$ , where  $C$  is consumption and  $HI$  is a variable equal to 1 if she is covered by health insurance and to 0 otherwise. Suppose that she works in a well-functioning labor market so that the wage she is paid equals her marginal product, net of the cost of providing health insurance, and that she consumes her net income.

Suppose that Emma currently works at Firm 1 (an accounting firm) but has a job offer from Firm 2 (a start-up software firm), where she has a higher marginal product ( $MP_1 < MP_2$ ). This move would be an efficiency improvement from society's perspective. Suppose, however, that Firm 1 is a large firm where health insurance is relatively cheap and is therefore provided at a cost  $P$ , while Firm 2 is a small firm where health insurance is very expensive and is therefore not provided. Emma enrolls in health insurance at Firm 1 so that she earns a wage  $MP_1 - P$ . Consumption is equal to net compensation, so Emma has utility  $U(MP_1 - P, 1)$  if she stays at Firm 1 and utility  $U(MP_2, 0)$  if she moves to Firm 2. At Firm 1, she has a lower marginal product, from which is subtracted the cost of health insurance, but she gets health insurance; at Firm 2, she has a higher marginal product and doesn't have to pay the costs of health insurance, but she doesn't get insurance.

In this case, if Emma values health insurance at above its cost (if there is a lot of weight on the second term in her utility function relative to the first), she might stay at her old job, even though  $MP_2 > MP_1$ , because of her disutility of losing insurance. Thus, health insurance availability may inhibit productivity-increasing job switches.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as we review in the Empirical Evidence box, it appears that job lock is an important phenomenon in the United States: workers with health insurance are about 25% less likely to change jobs because of that insurance.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Health Insurance and Mobility*

Is job lock an important problem in reality? A large literature has investigated this question and concluded that it is. Initially, this literature compared the mobility rate of those with and without health insurance and showed that those who have health insurance are less likely to leave their jobs than those who do not, suggesting job lock.

However, these groups do not form sensible treatments and controls because they are likely to be dissimilar in at least two ways. First, those who choose to enter jobs that offer health insurance may be quite different from those who do not. For example, they may be in worse health. If worse health is associated with less job mobility, then this may be the reason for the observed correlation of health insurance and mobility: illness rather than insurance coverage explains why these individuals are less likely to leave their jobs. Second, jobs that provide health insurance are typically “better jobs” in that they offer higher wages and other benefits such as pension plans or vacation. Individuals may be reluctant to leave these jobs not because they fear losing health insurance coverage but because these jobs are simply too good to leave! As a result of this lack of comparability between treatment groups (those with health insurance) and control groups (those without), the estimates are biased.

A more sophisticated literature in the 1990s surmounted this problem in two different ways.<sup>34</sup> First, studies used a difference-in-difference strategy that compared a treatment group of those who valued health insurance particularly highly with a control group of those who did not. These studies asked, for example: Does having health insurance lower the mobility rate among those who don’t have any other source of insurance coverage (treatments), relative to those who do have coverage from their spouses or some other source (controls)? If job lock is an important problem, it should be found most prominently among those who don’t have coverage from a spouse. Other reasons for the correlation of insurance with mobility (bias that does not represent true health insurance effects) are captured by the control group of those who do not have spousal coverage.

Second, studies examined the impact of state laws that allowed workers to continue to purchase their employer-provided health insurance for some period of time after leaving their jobs. These laws mitigated the problem of job lock to some extent because workers could be sure to have coverage for a period of time even if they left a job with health insurance for one without health insurance.

These laws were passed in some U.S. states in the 1970s and 1980s so that a quasi-experimental analysis was possible: individuals in states passing laws were the treatment group (because job lock should be loosened), those in states without laws were the control group, and any difference in mobility was due to a loosening of job lock through these laws. Federal legislation in 1986, part of the Consolidated Omnibus Reconciliation Act, or COBRA, then made continuation coverage available nationally (which is why it is often known as COBRA coverage). The passage of COBRA provided another opportunity for quasi-experimental analysis in which those workers in states that did not already have laws were the treatment group and those in states that already had laws (and were thus unaffected by the federal law) were the control group.

The results from these studies support the notion that job lock is quantitatively important. [Madrian’s \(1994\)](#) estimates, for example, suggested that it reduces mobility across jobs among those with health insurance by as much as 25%. Subsequent studies in this same vein have found that a lack of health insurance coverage for retirees reduces the odds that someone will retire before age 65 from his job because older persons do not want to risk being uninsured before they become entitled to Medicare at age 65. One major goal of the Affordable Care Act was to reduce job lock by providing nondiscriminatory coverage for those without employer insurance through the insurance exchanges described in [Chapter 16](#).

## 15.2 How Generous Should Insurance Be to Patients?

In considering government intervention in health insurance markets, the first question is the following: How generous should health insurance be? As with other insurance discussed in [Chapters 12, 13, and 14](#), the optimal generosity of health insurance will be determined by trading off the consumption-smoothing benefits and moral hazard costs of insurance. Yet generosity is measured in a very different way with health insurance than with the other programs we have studied. For Social Security or unemployment insurance, generosity reflects the share of pre-event wages replaced, or perhaps the duration of benefits. In the context of health insurance, generosity reflects the share of medical spending that will be reimbursed by the health insurer.

The generosity of health insurance is therefore measured along two dimensions. The first is generosity to *patients*: What share of the bill for medical services should be paid by the insurer, and what share should be paid by the patient through deductibles, copayments, and coinsurance? The most generous health insurance plan is one that provides [\*\*first-dollar coverage\*\*](#), reimbursing providers fully with no cost to the patients themselves. Plans can be less generous to consumers either by refusing to reimburse some services, so that patients pay the full cost, or by raising the amount that patients need to pay when they get the service. So, in this section we discuss the following question: What share of a patient's medical spending should be reimbursed by the insurer, and what share should be paid by the patients themselves?

### **first-dollar coverage**

Insurance plans that cover all medical spending, with little or no patient payment.



*"You're responding beautifully. Let's go ahead and see what happens if we increase your deductible."*

Danny Shanahan/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

The second dimension of insurance generosity is generosity to *providers*: How should insurers reimburse providers for the services they deliver? Should insurers just pay the amount billed by the provider for medical services, or should the insurer limit in some way how much the provider will be reimbursed? In the next section, we discuss this second

dimension of generosity.

## Consumption-Smoothing Benefits of Health Insurance for Patients

Applying what we learned in [Chapter 12](#), the benefits of health insurance to individuals are clear. Risk-averse individuals will value health insurance as a means of smoothing their consumption with respect to the cost of medical events. Not all types of medical events are created equal, however. Some are minor and predictable, such as a quick physician visit for a checkup. Others are more extensive and unpredictable, such as hospitalization for a heart attack. The key insight of expected utility theory is that insurance is much more valuable for the latter types of medical events and that there is relatively little consumption-smoothing benefit from covering the former type of (minor) events. Thus, first-dollar coverage does not provide much more consumption smoothing than does health insurance that makes patients pay the minor costs of medical care and has insurance pay only the higher costs of major medical events.

The consumption-smoothing benefit from first-dollar coverage of minor and predictable medical events is small for two reasons. First, risk-averse individuals gain little utility from insuring a small risk: the disutility to the individuals from paying insurance premiums for small risks is roughly the same as the utility they gain from insuring those risks. We can illustrate this point by returning to the initial example from [Table 12-1 \(page 340\)](#). In that example, Mimi faced an actuarially fair premium for insurance against a catastrophic risk: the 1% risk of being in a car accident and having medical expenses that wiped out her income (\$30,000). We showed that Mimi could greatly increase her utility by buying full insurance against that small but catastrophic risk.

Consider the same example now, but imagine that the medical care costs of the accident were only \$100 rather than \$30,000. In that case, Mimi's utility with no insurance is:

$$\begin{aligned} & (0.99 \times \sqrt{30,000}) + (0.01 \times \sqrt{29,900}) \\ & = (0.99 \times 173.2) + (0.01 \times 172.9) = 173.2 \end{aligned}$$

Suppose instead that Mimi buys insurance that pays the \$100 if she is hit. Because the odds of an accident are 1%, the actuarially fair premium for such insurance is \$1, which Mimi pays regardless of whether she gets hit. With insurance, Mimi's expected utility becomes:

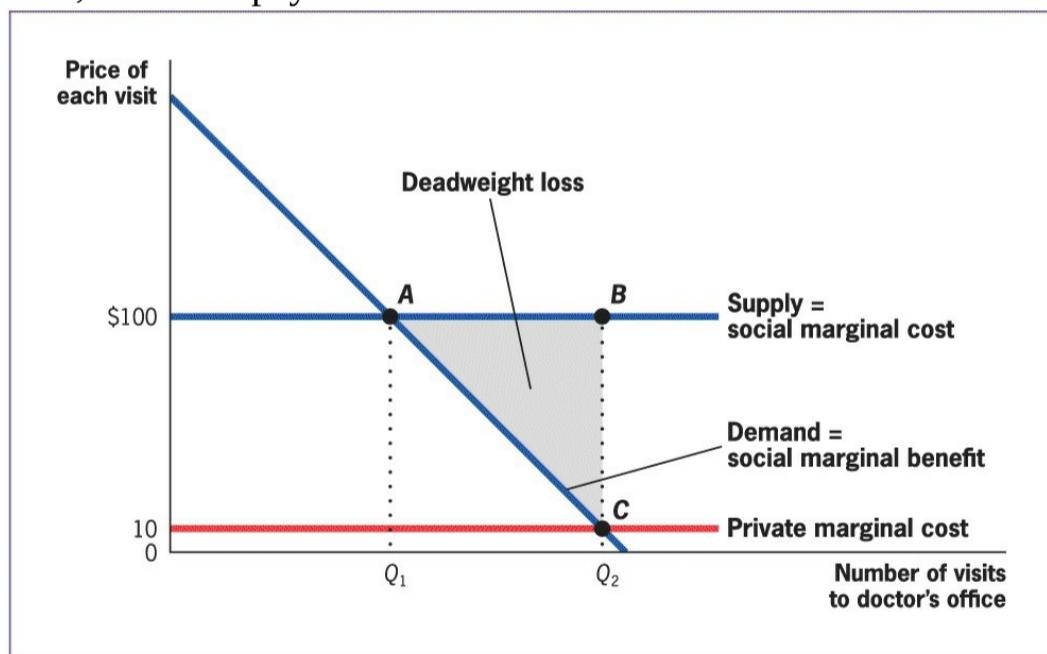
$$\begin{aligned} & (0.99 \times \sqrt{30,000 - 1}) + (0.01 \times \sqrt{30,000 - 1}) \\ & = (0.99 \times 173.2) + (0.01 \times 173.2) = 173.2 \end{aligned}$$

Thus, *Mimi's utility does not measurably increase if she buys insurance*. This outcome stands in contrast to the earlier example, when there was a large increase in utility from buying insurance, and illustrates that insurance has little value to individuals for very small risks. Technically, the consumption-smoothing gains from insuring small risks is small because there is extremely little diminishing marginal utility for small changes in consumption: the losses from reducing consumption by a dollar are roughly equal to the gains from increasing consumption by a dollar. For risks that involve very small income loss, then, individuals are no longer particularly averse to risk (they are approximately *risk neutral*).

The second reason that the consumption-smoothing benefits of first-dollar coverage are small when medical spending is small and predictable is that individuals are much more able to self-insure such spending than to self-insure large and unpredictable medical events. Individuals can save in advance for their expected physician visit, but it would be very inefficient for them to save an extra \$200,000 against the small chance that they might have a heart attack.

## Moral Hazard Costs of Health Insurance for Patients

Offsetting the consumption-smoothing benefits of health insurance to individuals is the risk of moral hazard. The classic analysis of patient-side moral hazard in health insurance is provided in [Feldstein \(1973\)](#), and illustrated in [Figure 15-6](#), in the example of a doctor's office visit (although the theory applies generally to most medical goods and services). On the horizontal axis is the number of office visits by Marty; on the vertical axis is the price that Marty must pay for each office visit. Assume that the marginal cost of producing an office visit (physician's time, supplies, etc.) is constant at \$100, so that the supply curve for medical care is the horizontal line  $S$ . Assume also that Marty has a downward-sloping demand curve for health care such as office visits: she is willing to pay less for more health care (due to diminishing marginal utility). Finally, assume that Marty is in a large group, so that her medical spending is irrelevant for the insurance premium that she pays. (There is no individual-level experience rating in insurance prices.) The only costs to her for using medical care, then, are the copayments that she makes for that care.



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■ FIGURE 15-6

Patient-Side Moral Hazard • With no insurance, and a cost of \$100 per visit, individuals would consume  $Q_1$  doctor's office visits, where marginal costs and benefits are equal. With only a \$10 copayment, however, individuals consume  $Q_2$  worth of visits, where private marginal costs equal social marginal benefit; this overconsumption of health care leads to a deadweight loss of  $ABC$ .

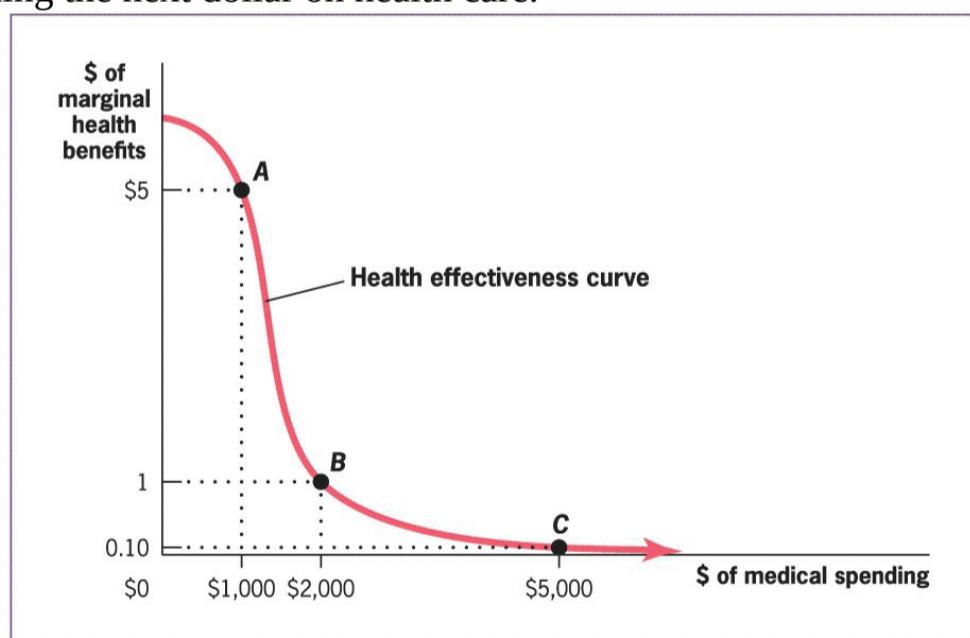
If Marty faced the full price for medical care (i.e., if she had a 100% coinsurance rate), she would consume  $Q_1$  visits per year (point A). At point A, her marginal benefit of receiving care (summarized by the demand curve) equals her full price of that care, \$100.  $Q_1$  is also the socially optimal level of medical care; at this point, social marginal benefits (demand) equal social marginal costs (supply).

Now suppose that Marty must pay a \$10 copayment when she goes to the doctor, as is typical in many health plans today. In this case, she will face a private marginal cost of only \$10 and will choose  $Q_2$  visits (point C).  $Q_2$  is an inefficiently large amount of medical care because at this quantity, private marginal costs (\$10) are far below social marginal costs (\$100). Thus, there is an inefficiency of the area ABC, which represents all of the units of medical care that are delivered with a marginal benefit (demand) below their social marginal cost. The moral hazard associated with not charging Marty for the full cost of care leads to a deadweight loss of the area ABC.

The benefit of this small copayment is consumption smoothing: individuals such as Marty value the fact that they are insured against paying the full cost when they go to the doctor. A 100% coinsurance rate may induce efficient medical care use, but it provides no insurance against large medical costs, which is valued by risk-averse consumers. Here we see the fundamental trade-off of health insurance: the gains in terms of consumption smoothing (paying \$10 instead of \$100 when you go to the doctor) versus the costs in terms of overuse of medical care (consuming  $Q_2$  instead of the socially optimal  $Q_1$ ).

### The “Flat of the Curve”

This inefficient overuse of medical care has led some to claim that we practice “flat of the curve” medicine. This notion is illustrated in [Figure 15-7](#), which graphs the relationship between medical spending and the associated improvement in health, or the “health effectiveness curve.” The horizontal axis in this figure measures the *level* of medical spending. The vertical axis measures the *marginal health benefit* from the next dollar of medical spending. Health benefits in this stylized figure are represented in dollar terms, or the monetary value of improving one’s health; an improvement of \$1 means that this improved health is worth \$1 to the individual. Each point on this curve is the marginal improvement in health for spending the next dollar on health care.



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■ FIGURE 15-7

The “Flat of the Curve” • Spending on health care is assumed to initially be very productive in terms of improved health care outcomes, but that productivity dwindles as spending rises. The curve shows the value of improved health for each dollar in medical spending. At point A, when individuals are spending \$1,000 on health care, each dollar of medical spending buys \$5 worth of improved health; at point B, when individuals are spending \$2,000 on health care, each dollar of medical spending buys \$1 worth of improved health. Beyond point B, however, there is much less than \$1 in improved health for each \$1 in medical spending.

Initially, health spending is very productive in terms of improving health status because there are a series of very cost-effective medical interventions (such as vaccination against influenza for the elderly). Point *A*, for example, measures the marginal health benefits to spending another dollar of health care once one has spent \$1,000 on health care. This next dollar of spending improves the individual's health at that point by \$5 (vertical axis), or five times the increase in health spending. As health spending rises, however, we move from clearly cost-effective interventions to less clearly cost-effective interventions. At point *B*, moving from \$2,000 to \$2,001 of health care spending improves the value of health by \$1, equal to the spending increase. At point *C*, moving from \$5,000 to \$5,001 in health care spending improves health by only \$0.10, or one-tenth the spending increase. Eventually, additional spending does no good in terms of improving health, and the effectiveness curve flattens out; some claim that overuse may actually reduce one's health, with the curve dropping below zero at very high levels of spending.

Optimally, people should stop getting medical care when the additional health benefit is smaller than the additional medical cost. When we look at [Figure 15-7](#), we see that people should not get medical care beyond point *B*, the point at which each dollar of spending buys a dollar of improved health. If individuals paid the full cost of their health care, point *B* would be the socially optimum level of health care that would be chosen in a competitive market. If individuals do not pay much for their additional health care, however, they will demand health care as long as the effectiveness curve is not perfectly flat. This demand pushes our society to the right of point *B*, into the region where each dollar of medical care buys much less than \$1 in improved health. As a result, some studies have judged that as many as one-third of all medical procedures delivered in the United States are "of questionable benefit."<sup>36</sup>

## How Elastic Is the Demand for Medical Care? The RAND Health Insurance Experiment

The extent to which moral hazard causes the actual quantity of health care consumed to exceed the socially optimal quantity depends on both the copayment amount and the elasticity of demand for medical care. Many years ago, policy makers assumed that this elasticity was close to zero; individuals went to the doctor when they were sick and didn't if they weren't sick. Several decades of empirical economics research has shown this not to be the case.

The best evidence on the elasticity of demand for medical care comes from one of the most ambitious social experiments in U.S. history: the RAND Health Insurance Experiment (HIE), which was conducted in the mid-1970s at several sites in the United States. In the HIE, individuals were randomly assigned to plans with different coinsurance rates. Some participants were placed in plans with no coinsurance (basically, a free care plan), others were assigned to plans with a coinsurance rate of 95% (these individuals paid 95% of all their health costs), and the rest were assigned plans with a range of coinsurance rates in between. Because individuals who were assigned less-generous plans had to pay more (which is unethical and might have made it hard to recruit participants), each plan had an "out-of-pocket maximum" of \$1,000. Once individuals had spent \$1,000 on their medical care, they did not have to pay any additional costs of care, regardless of their plan.

The findings of the HIE were striking.<sup>40</sup> First, medical care demand is price sensitive: individuals who were in the free care plan used about one-third more care than those paying 95% of their medical costs. The implied elasticity across the entire study was 0.2, meaning that each 10% rise in the price of medical care to individuals led them to use 2% less care.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Estimating the Elasticity of Demand for Medical Care*

Initial research on the elasticity of demand for medical care proceeded by comparing individuals in different types of health plans. Some health plans provided first-dollar coverage, where individuals had no coinsurance; others had large coinsurance, with coinsurance rates of 20% (the patient pays one-fifth of the cost of the visit) or more. These studies showed that individuals in plans with higher coinsurance used less care, which suggested that medical care demand was somewhat elastic.

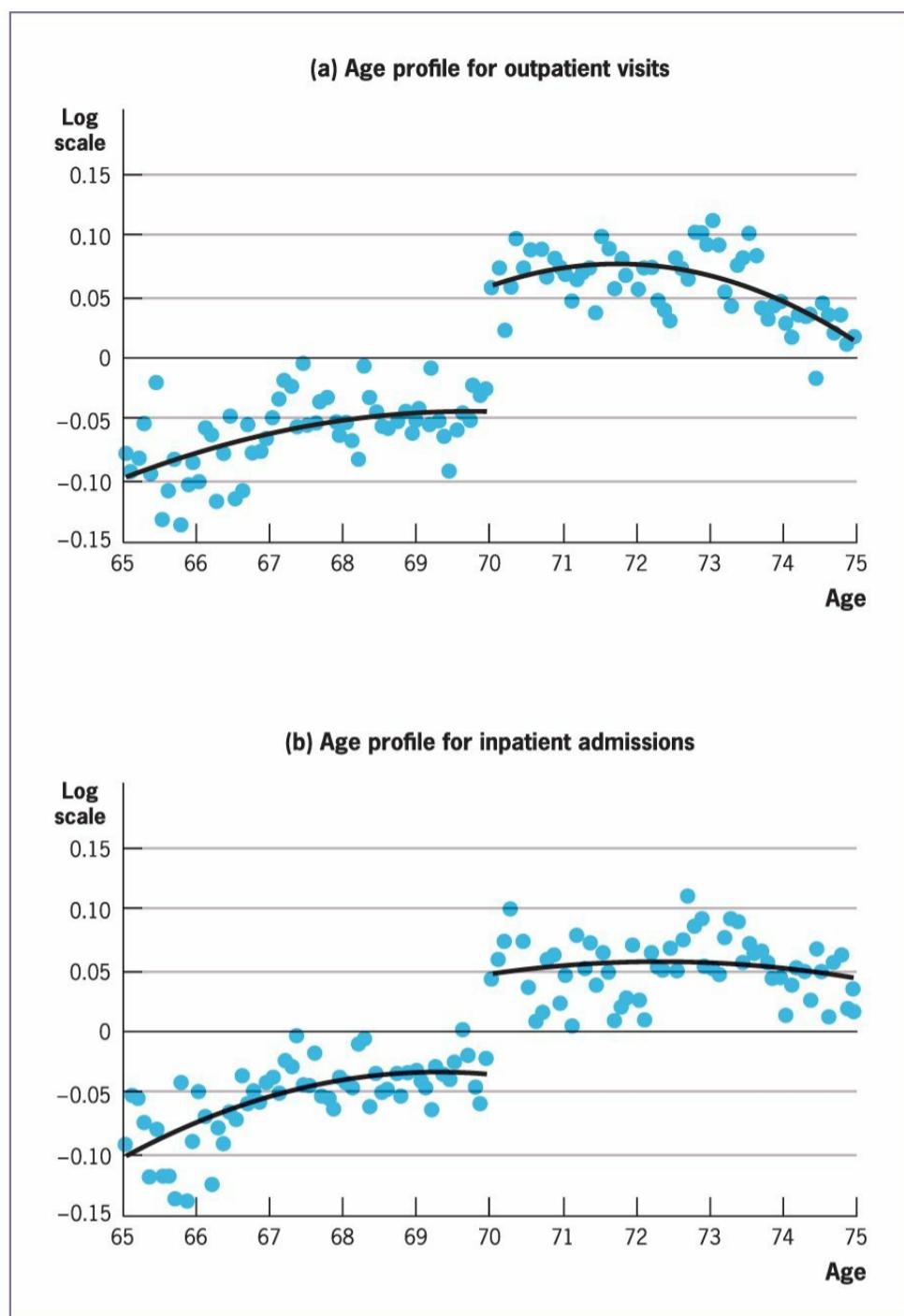
It is likely, however, that these earlier studies were seriously biased because insurance plans are not randomly assigned to individuals. Individuals who spend a lot on health care are likely to buy plans with low coinsurance, so the correlation between low coinsurance and high use of medical care is not a causal effect of coinsurance on utilization. Instead, the correlation reflects that high-utilization individuals have chosen low-coinsurance plans. This is a classic example of the bias problem that arises when trying to assign causal interpretations to correlations.<sup>37</sup>

The RAND HIE was designed to address this shortcoming. Because of random assignment, we can use the data from the HIE to assess the causal impact of coinsurance on utilization by comparing individuals in different plans. By definition, individuals with different coinsurance rates were identical other than for their coinsurance rates, so it is possible to compare the utilization of those with high-coinsurance rates and low-coinsurance rates to identify the elasticity of demand for medical services.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, we have been unable to run another randomized trial of insurance generosity in the 40 years since the RAND HIE.<sup>38</sup> But recent studies have used quasi-experimental approaches to estimate the price elasticity of medical demand. As reviewed in [Gruber \(2006\)](#), these studies compare utilization before and after a copayment change in a plan, relative to other plans that do not change copayments. These studies have the weakness that the copayment changes are not experimental; for example, firms may raise copayments for prescription drugs in the face of rising demand, leading to the appearance that higher copayments lead to more drug utilization! However, a large number of studies in many different settings have now been completed of this type, and the results are fairly uniform. These studies confirm the RAND HIE conclusion that higher copayments reduce care, particularly for prescription drugs. They also find that the reduction in care has deleterious effects on health for the chronically ill, highlighting the value of targeted copayment policies.

A quasi-experimental study in Japan confirms that these types of results hold in other nations as well. As [Shigeoka \(2014\)](#) described, the structure of cost sharing for insurance in Japan is such that cost sharing drops precipitously at age 70. Before that age, patients face a 30% coinsurance rate, with an out-of-pocket maximum exposure of more than 80,000 yen; once they reach age 70, however, the coinsurance drops to 10% with a maximum out-of-pocket exposure of only 12,000 yen. Thus, there is a sharp reduction in the burden faced by patients receiving care at age 70.

There is, in fact, a corresponding increase in health care spending at age 70 that goes much beyond typical aging patterns. This is illustrated in [Figure 15-8](#) for both outpatient visits (physicians and nonadmitted patient hospital spending), shown in panel (a), and inpatient hospital admissions, shown in panel (b). Each dot in this figure represents the actual average of the natural logarithm of the number of visits to admissions by month of age (e.g., the first dot is 65 years old exactly, the second 65 years and one month, and so on).<sup>39</sup> In both cases, the number of out- and inpatient visits increases with age, which is consistent with a growing need for medical care as we get older. But there is an enormous jump at age 70, exactly when cost sharing drops. The fitted lines in the figure show the magnitude of this “regression discontinuity,” as discussed in the Empirical Evidence box on “The Effect of Legal Drinking at Age 21” in [Chapter 6 \(p. 182\)](#). Estimates in Shigeoka’s study showed that there is a 10% jump in outpatient visits at age 70 and an 8% increase in inpatient admissions.



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### FIGURE 15-8

Age Profiles for Outpatient Visits and Inpatient Admissions Panels (Log Scale) • (a) (outpatient visits) and (b) (inpatient hospital admissions) show that both increase with age, which is consistent with a growing need for medical care as we get older. Age 70 marks a huge drop in cost sharing for the elderly and a corresponding jump in visits to the doctor and hospital admissions.

Data from: [Shigeoka \(2014\)](#), Figures 2A and 4A.

Strikingly, the implied elasticity from these changes is almost exactly what was found in the RAND HIE: an elasticity of roughly  $-0.2$ . Moreover, there is no measurable effect on patient mortality; mortality shows no discontinuity at age 70 despite the very large increase in medical care utilization. This confirms the “flat of the curve” conclusion from the HIE.

Second, those who used more health care due to the lower price did not, on average, see a significant improvement in their health. This finding suggests that the typical person is indeed on the flat of the health effectiveness curve when responding to changes in coinsurance. The finding *does not imply*, however, that insurance isn’t valuable at all because everyone in this experiment was insured; after a family’s health spending reached \$1,000, it had full insurance. The RAND results imply that after individuals are insured for large expenditures, varying the coinsurance for small expenditures does not seem to affect their health on

average.

Third, for those who are chronically ill and don't have sufficient income to easily cover copayments, there was some deterioration in health. In particular, low-income individuals who were hypertensive (had high blood pressure) saw dangerous increases in their blood pressure arising from lack of care. More recent studies have confirmed that finding, concluding that those who have treatable but chronic illnesses may be made worse off by copayments. Indeed, some studies find that for the chronically ill, raising copayments actually raises total medical costs because the reduced use of prescription drugs and physician visits results in more expensive hospitalizations due to health deterioration.<sup>41</sup>

## Optimal Health Insurance

The finding of significant deadweight loss from moral hazard in the health insurance market suggests that the *optimal health insurance policy is one in which individuals bear a large share of medical costs within some affordable range and are only fully insured when costs become unaffordable*. This structure is optimal because first-dollar coverage has little consumption-smoothing benefit but a large moral hazard cost.

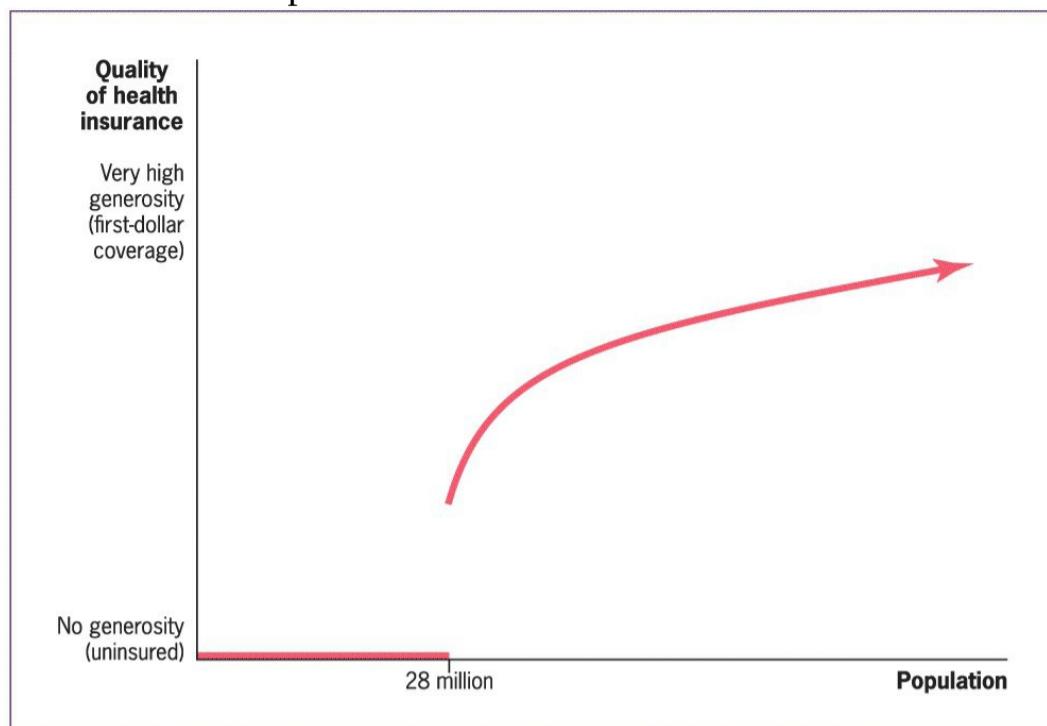
As we showed, the consumption-smoothing benefit of first-dollar coverage is small. But first-dollar coverage also has substantial moral hazard cost because it encourages individuals to overuse the medical system, demanding care for which the social costs exceed the social benefits. In other words, coverage for small amounts of medical spending has little benefit (because individuals don't much value consumption smoothing for small risks) and significant cost (because individuals are using care where marginal benefit is less than marginal cost), so the optimal insurance plan should not provide such coverage. Rather, it should insure only large medical expenses for which the consumption-smoothing gains are large (and for which the moral hazard might be smaller, such as for heart attacks). An example of an optimal insurance plan is [Feldstein's \(1973\)](#) "Major Risk Insurance" plan, in which individuals would make a 50% copayment on all services until they spent 10% of their income on medical care, beyond which there would be no more copayments.

Results from the RAND HIE and subsequent studies, however, suggest an important caveat to that general structure: there is a benefit to targeting consumer cost sharing to encourage appropriate care and discourage inappropriate care. For example, reduced cost sharing can be cost effective for prescription drugs for those with chronic illness. Indeed, it may even be optimal to subsidize preventive care for that population in order to avoid more expensive care down the road. There is a growing interest in such "value-based insurance design" as a means of incorporating consumer decision making into improving health care; a recent review of dozens of studies found that such a design can increase medication adherence without an increase in total health care spending.<sup>42</sup>

## Why Is Insurance So Generous in the United States?

Feldstein's proposal is much less generous than the typical private insurance plan in the United States, which features relatively low copayments for enrollees. As a result, the insurance coverage distribution in the United States is best described by a line such as that in [Figure 15-9](#). On the horizontal axis is the population of the United States, arrayed from least generous insurance (uninsured) to most generous, and on the vertical axis is the generosity of health insurance products. The 28 million Americans with no health insurance lie at zero on the vertical axis (no insurance = zero generosity). The line then jumps up to reasonably high generosity insurance, and there is an increasing generosity of insurance for the remainder of the population. Why the jump? Why aren't more individuals requesting lower generosity

insurance that would cover only their catastrophic risks? Why are people either uninsured or “overinsured”? There are three possible reasons.



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■ FIGURE 15-9

The Generosity of Health Insurance in the United States • The vertical axis in this diagram shows the generosity of health insurance, running from no insurance (uninsured) at the bottom to very generous insurance (first-dollar coverage) at the top. There are 28 million uninsured persons in the United States, who are at the bottom of this axis. The remaining persons in the United States almost all have insurance of high to very high generosity, leading to a jump upward in the curve. Why is there so little insurance of low to medium generosity in the United States, such as catastrophic coverage?

## The Tax Subsidy

As previously noted, health insurance expenditures by employers are tax subsidized; that is, payments to employees in the form of wages are taxed, while payments in the form of health insurance are not. This is a major reason health insurance is offered through firms. It also has the effect of increasing consumption of health insurance relative to other goods by lowering the relative price of health insurance. For the typical worker, the marginal dollar spent on better health insurance buys a dollar's worth of insurance, while the marginal dollar paid in wages buys only \$0.70 of other consumption because \$0.30 of that dollar goes to pay taxes. This situation will lead employees to devote a larger share of their compensation to health insurance than they would in the absence of the subsidy; even if individuals would not demand generous insurance at unsubsidized prices, they may choose it when there is a tax subsidy for its purchase. Estimates suggest that eliminating the tax subsidy to health insurance purchases by employers could lower employer-provided insurance spending by almost half.<sup>43</sup> Powell (2016) estimates that the distortion to health insurance plan design from the tax subsidy (which induces plans to excessively cover low medical expenditures) leads to a deadweight loss of \$34–\$44 billion per year.

This estimate does not imply that removing the tax subsidy today would necessarily be good health policy. Many individuals (more than 20 million by one estimate) would lose their employer-provided health coverage if the subsidy were eliminated and would then face the difficulties of obtaining insurance in the nongroup market, with its high prices and incomplete coverage.

One compromise policy that has been suggested is to *cap* the tax subsidy. Ending the tax

subsidy would be accomplished by taxing workers on all employer contributions to health insurance as if these were earnings to the workers. Capping the tax subsidy would mean continuing to exclude from income taxation employer health insurance spending up to some level (perhaps the median cost of a health insurance plan in the area) but taxing as worker earnings any employer spending above that level. For example, your employer would add to your reported wage income any amount spent on insurance above the ceiling level, and you would be taxed on this in the same way you are taxed on wages. This approach would retain the tax subsidy to employers for some basic insurance spending, thus encouraging them to provide some insurance coverage. The subsidization to excessively generous coverage, however, would end. There would no longer be a reason for employees to choose a very generous insurance plan over cash compensation, once employers are spending the cap amount. The “Cadillac Tax” imposed by the ACA has similar incentives to such a cap, as discussed in [Chapter 16](#).



#### APPLICATION

## Health Savings Accounts

Removing or capping the tax subsidy to employer-provided health insurance is a straightforward means of addressing overinsurance, but political opposition has made undertaking such action difficult. A more politically feasible alternative to this “stick” approach is a “carrot” approach: extend additional tax subsidies to those individuals who choose more efficiently designed health care plans. The introduction of [health savings accounts \(HSAs\)](#) as part of the Medicare prescription drug legislation of 2003 (discussed in detail in the next chapter) was one attempt at this. HSAs are plans with high deductibles (at least \$1,000 for individuals and \$2,000 for families per year) under which individuals prepay the deductible amount into a savings account, and then draw down that account as they spend the deductible. Importantly, the amount put into the HSA is not taxed so that spending on insurance and spending on deductibles are treated the same for tax purposes (as opposed to other insurance plans, where insurance spending is tax subsidized, but employee coinsurance is not).<sup>44</sup> Individuals who do not spend down their accounts in any year can roll the money over to the next year, and any money left at retirement can be withdrawn either for the retiree’s health care needs, in which case, it’s tax-free, or for any other purpose, in which case, the gains are taxed. Thus, HSAs provide a large tax subsidy to those whose plans have a high deductible, hopefully encouraging increased use of such (closer to optimal) insurance arrangements. HSAs are rapidly growing in popularity, covering more than 20.2 million Americans in 2017.<sup>45</sup>

### health savings account (HSA)

A type of insurance arrangement whereby patients face large deductibles, and they put money aside on a tax-free basis to prepay these deductibles.

HSAs have a number of disadvantages as well. First, this tax break is expensive in terms of forgone tax revenue, with a projected total revenue loss of \$4.7 billion in the 2013–2022 period.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, the tax benefits of HSAs are targeted mostly to higher income individuals who can afford large deductibles (and who have the high tax rates that allow them to benefit most from HSAs). Second, a flat deductible alone is not the right structure for encouraging the proper use of medical care. For individuals who are very poor, it may represent too much out-of-pocket risk relative to the optimal design of a copayment with an income-related out-of-pocket limit. For individuals who are well off, and who know that they will certainly use at least that much health care during the year (e.g., at least \$2,000 for the

family), the deductible is too low—because individuals know that they will surpass the deductible for sure during the year, they ignore it. Finally, if the right way to address overinsurance is to limit the employer exclusion, then HSAs represent the wrong direction for tax policy because they try to offset the distortions of the existing tax subsidy with a new tax subsidy. ■

## The Access Motive

A second reason insurance may be so generous is that the traditional analysis overstates the costs of moral hazard. In traditional models of insurance, the additional medical care used is all due to moral hazard. [Nyman \(1999\)](#) highlights a problem with this view: some of the additional medical care used because of insurance is not due to moral hazard but rather to the fact that individuals can now afford better treatments. Suppose, for example, you have an illness that costs \$1 million to treat. Suppose further that you care enough about your health that if someone handed you \$1 million today, you would immediately use the money to treat your illness. Likewise, if you had insurance that covered the treatment of illness, you would also get it treated. In this case, there is no moral hazard because all insurance has done is allow you to afford a treatment you value.

Moral hazard is technically the difference between what health care you buy with \$1 million of insurance or with \$1 million of cash. If, on the one hand, you would get treated when you have insurance, but if handed the actual cash, you would use it for other expenditures, then insurance is causing moral hazard. If, on the other hand, you would buy the expensive treatment with either the insurance or the cash, then there is no moral hazard. Insurance has allowed you to transfer sufficient resources from the situation (state) in which you are healthy to the situation that occurs when you are ill. Moral hazard is measured only by the *substitution effect* of social insurance programs, that is, the extent to which you change behavior because relative prices are changing. The *income effect* of social insurance programs, the extent to which you change behavior because you are richer, is not moral hazard.

This analysis suggests that some of the deadweight loss associated with increased expenditures due to insurance is not pure moral hazard but an income effect. As a result, we are overstating the deadweight loss associated with health insurance, which is why insurance may be more generous than our analysis would suggest is optimal.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to decompose the increase in the use of medical care into access and moral hazard effects. The access motive is a more important consideration for very expensive treatments and not for everyday treatments, such as physician's visits. Thus, the access motive may explain the strong demand for catastrophic limits on spending out of pocket, but it is unlikely to explain why individuals don't face higher copayments for minor medical procedures, such as those performed in a physician's office.

## Psychological Motivations

Finally, the third reason insurance may be so generous is that there may be motivations for holding insurance that go beyond the simple expected utility model developed in [Chapter 12](#). For example, individuals with self-control problems may use insurance as a commitment device. You may know that without insurance, you will spend all of your money today and save nothing for possible future medical expenditures. By buying insurance, you are effectively forcing yourself to save for illness. You may be buying overly generous insurance because, otherwise, your impatience would leave you with no money at all to pay large medical bills that may arise. Once again, however, this is unlikely to explain the aversion of

patients to modest coinsurance for minor medical events.

Alternatively, it may be that individuals simply don't like associating financial transactions with medical care. They would rather pay higher insurance up front to avoid dealing with the difficult decisions about whether they want to pay at the time of care. Clearly, more analysis is needed to understand the causes of overinsurance in America today.

## 15.3 How Generous Should Insurance Be to Medical Providers?

The other type of moral hazard that is relevant for health care is on the provider side. Even if insurers could perfectly assess your true level of illness, they cannot always perfectly assess how much it costs to treat that illness. For many illnesses, there is no clearly delineated course of treatment, and major illnesses can progress very differently in different individuals. As a result, insurers have traditionally reimbursed medical providers according to their reported costs of treatment; if two physicians billed different amounts to treat a heart attack, they were typically paid those different amounts, even if characteristics of the heart attack patients were similar. Such a reimbursement system is called **retrospective reimbursement** because insurers simply reimburse physicians for the costs they have already incurred.

**retrospective reimbursement**

Reimbursing physicians for the costs they have already incurred.

Retrospective reimbursement removes any incentive for providers to treat their patients cost effectively. Suppose that all a doctor wants to do is make patients as healthy as possible. In that case, if there is a medical procedure or test that has any possible medical benefit that exceeds the private costs to the patient (the coinsurance plus any discomfort or time lost due to the procedure), the doctor will provide that care. After all, why skimp when you are risking someone's health? The problem is that the *social* cost of these procedures may greatly exceed the private costs (and the private benefits) to the patient, particularly if health care is being delivered on the "flat of the curve." Thus, there is overuse of medical care and a deadweight loss from provider-side moral hazard.

Moreover, the overuse problem can be exacerbated if providers care about their incomes as well. Suppose that your doctor wants to not only maximize your health, but also maximize his or her income. In that case, if there is a procedure that does you no good (but no harm, or at least not much harm), and on which a net profit can be made, then your doctor will undertake that procedure.

## Managed Care and Prospective Reimbursement

The twin problems of patient- and provider-side moral hazard were assumed to be major drivers of the rapid rise in health care costs during the postwar period. Initially, the insurance market responded to these moral hazard concerns through increased patient cost sharing, but this approach did not slow the rise in health care costs. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, health care costs were rising sharply in real terms.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the private market (as well as public insurance programs) turned to an alternative approach to cost control: **managed care**, which implemented supply-side controls on the delivery of medical care. Managed care comes in two forms.

**managed care**

An approach to controlling medical costs using supply-side restrictions such as limited choice of medical provider.

### Preferred Provider Organizations

One fundamental failure in medical markets is that it is very difficult to shop for a medical provider. How can a consumer of medical care effectively compare hospitals or physicians? And how can consumers possibly shop for cost-efficient providers even if they wanted to when prices for specific procedures are not posted by hospitals or physicians? This dilemma is particularly true for emergency care. No one will tell the ambulance driver to "take me around to a few hospitals to see which is cheapest." This lack of price shopping means there

are few competitive pressures on providers' pricing decisions, and thus providers have no incentives to lower medical care costs.

In the 1980s, a new type of health organization called the **preferred provider organization (PPO)** gained popularity as a means of solving this problem. Essentially, PPOs serve as an intermediary that shops across providers on behalf of the insured, striking deals that can lower the cost of care. For example, a PPO might first go to an area employer and offer it 20% savings off its medical care costs *if* it is willing to restrict the set of hospitals its employees can use to the PPO's hospital "network." The PPO would then tell area hospitals that *if* they wanted the business from this firm (or other firms using that PPO), they would have to cut prices by 20%. The hospitals that agreed would lower their prices for the PPO client in return for being part of the restricted PPO network. The employer would tell its employees that they could use only those hospitals in this PPO network. In principle, this shopping strategy could lead not only to lower prices, but also to more efficient delivery of medical care, in the same way that shopping in other markets increases efficiency.

#### **preferred provider organization (PPO)**

A health care organization that lowers care costs by shopping for health care providers on behalf of the insured.

## **Health Maintenance Organizations**

The other type of managed care organization is a **health maintenance organization (HMO)**. As with PPOs, HMOs restrict enrollee choice of medical providers, but HMOs go one step further by integrating the insurance and the delivery of medical care. In the classic *staff model*, HMOs hire their own physicians and may have their own hospitals. They put the providers on a salary that is independent of the amount of care they deliver. This approach removes any income incentive for the delivery of excess care.

#### **health maintenance organization (HMO)**

A health care organization that integrates insurance and delivery of care by, for example, paying its own doctors and hospitals a salary independent of the amount of care they deliver.

The more typical HMO model is the Independent Practice Association (IPA), in which the HMO contracts with independent providers (within a restricted network) to deliver care to its enrollees. In this case, HMOs counteract moral hazard through the use of **prospective reimbursement**, the practice of paying providers based on what treating patients should cost, not what the provider spends. The HMO might, for example, pay a primary-care physician (e.g., a family doctor) \$100 per month for each person in the doctor's practice, regardless of how much medical care that person uses.<sup>47</sup>

#### **prospective reimbursement**

The practice of paying providers based on what treating patients should cost, not on what the provider spends.

Prospective reimbursement completely reverses the financial incentives of physicians. Under retrospective reimbursement, where the physician is reimbursed for all billed costs, the more care the physician delivers, the more money he or she makes. Now, the *less* care a physician delivers, the more money he or she makes. The physician gets the \$100 no matter what is done for the patient, so by delivering less care, the physician can pocket a larger share of that payment. Thus, just as retrospective reimbursement offers financial incentives for excessive care, prospective reimbursement offers financial incentives for insufficient care.

Prospective reimbursement can come in many different forms, and there is indeed an enormous variety of prospective payment schemes used by HMOs. Some HMOs augment the flat payment to primary care providers with disincentives to use specialty care or hospital visits. For example, the HMO might reduce compensation every time the primary care physician recommends a specialist or a hospital visit or raise compensation if such recommendations aren't made. In this way, HMOs try to incentivize individual providers to

not only limit the care delivered, but also to limit the care delivered by the system as a whole.

Over the late 1980s and 1990s, the vast majority of insured persons in the United States moved into some form of managed care along the spectrum from PPOs to staff-model HMOs. Currently, 98% of the privately insured are in managed care plans.<sup>48</sup>

## The Impacts of Managed Care

The key question to consider is whether managed care has improved the functioning of the insurance market. In particular, has managed care lowered the deadweight loss of excessive medical care utilization? If so, has prospective reimbursement perhaps even gone too far and begun to restrict medical care that is valued by individuals at its cost? There is now a very large amount of literature in health economics that addresses these questions.

### Spending

The consistent finding in the literature is that HMOs spend much less per enrollee than do traditional retrospective reimbursement plans. Interpreting this finding is not as straightforward as it seems, however. It is difficult to compare spending per person in these two types of plans because different types of people enroll in the plans. Many studies have found that managed care plans attract the healthiest enrollees, as measured, for example, by how much the individuals were spending before they switched to the HMO. This type of *selection* of the lowest-cost individuals into HMOs means that there is not a simple comparison between the HMOs and traditional insurance plans. Even if HMOs didn't change the delivery of medical care, their costs would be lower because they have the healthiest enrollees.

In assessing the impact of HMOs on costs, there have been a number of attempts to control for this selection problem. Perhaps the most convincing is evidence from the RAND HIE previously discussed, which had a second component that randomly assigned individuals into one of the nation's earliest HMOs, in Puget Sound, Washington. Because individuals were randomly assigned, they were otherwise comparable to individuals in traditional insurance plans, and thus any differences in costs reflect the effects of the HMO on medical utilization. This study found that the cost of medical care for the HMO enrollees was only 72% of the cost for enrollees in traditional insurance plans, in large part because the HMO admitted patients to hospitals at a much lower rate (7.1% of patients were admitted to hospitals by HMOs, compared to 11.2% in the traditional plans).<sup>49</sup> Thus, the cost savings to HMOs do not purely reflect selection (the fact that healthier people enroll in HMOs).

### Quality

As we saw earlier, retrospective reimbursement of providers may lead to excessive provision of care. We also saw that prospective reimbursement under HMOs might lead to *underprovision* of care. Do HMOs underprovide or do they simply serve to correct some of the natural excesses of retrospective reimbursement? The literature on the impact of HMOs on patient treatment, and the answer is a definite maybe. Roughly equal numbers of studies find that HMOs deliver care that is better, worse, or the same as traditional health insurance. At this point, there is no real consensus on the impact of HMOs on care quality. While it is clear that HMOs are paying lower prices for medical services, it is not clear that they are actually providing significantly fewer of those services or having any measurable adverse effects on health outcomes.

## How Should Providers Be Reimbursed?

The managed care "revolution" does not appear to have had the negative effect on patient

health that some feared. The advent of managed care has clearly lowered reimbursement to providers, but it has not measurably lowered the quality of care those providers deliver. Thus, the move from retrospective to prospective reimbursement appears to have improved efficiency in the health care sector. The key question for the future is whether additional “tightening” of the prospective reimbursement system is needed. We discuss this issue at length when we discuss the Medicare program in the next chapter.

## 15.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the health care economy in the United States. We began with a discussion of the nature of health insurance in the United States and learned that most individuals have private health insurance and that for those employed by large firms, this is a well-functioning insurance market. For small firms and individuals, there are more failures in the insurance market, which is one possible reason that approximately 28 million Americans are uninsured.

The benefits of health insurance are clear from the theory presented in [Chapter 12](#): risk-averse individuals greatly value the consumption-smoothing benefits of having their medical bills paid. There are clear moral hazard costs as well, both on the patient side and on the provider side. Some cost sharing has been used to address moral hazard on the patient side, and managed care has arisen as a means of addressing moral hazard on the provider side. The success or failure of these approaches is not yet fully apparent. In the next chapter, we discuss how the government has approached the trade-off between providing insurance for those who need it and inducing excess medical care through moral hazard.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Health care has improved dramatically in the United States over the past 50 years, but substantial inequalities remain.
- Most individuals have private insurance, which is largely provided through firms because of risk pooling and the tax subsidy to employees for employer-provided health insurance.
- The 28 million uninsured persons concern policy makers for these reasons: externalities, labor market inefficiencies (job lock), and paternalism.
- There is a clear potential for moral hazard on the patient side of the medical care system because medical demand has been shown to be somewhat elastic, with few health improvements attributable to more generous health insurance plans.
- Despite this, individuals still demand very generous health insurance coverage in the United States, which could be due to the tax subsidy to insurance, access to the most expensive treatments that insurance provides, or psychological motivations.
- The potential for moral hazard on the provider side of the medical care system has given rise to managed care, which uses shopping and prospective reimbursement to control medical costs.
- Existing research suggests that managed care has controlled costs, with no clear evidence that the quality of medical care has suffered as a result.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Every year the U.S. Census Bureau publishes a report called “Health Insurance Coverage in the United States,” with graphics and statistics on insurance coverage for Americans, using data from the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey. Navigate to the PDF report for the most recent year available. This can be found in the Census’ “Publications,” at <https://www.census.gov/topics/health/health-insurance/library/publications.html>, or by searching the web for “Health Insurance Coverage in the United States.” As of this writing, the most recent report, published in 2018, was found at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-264.pdf>.
  1. Find a graphic depicting the U.S. uninsured rate over time. In what year did the largest change in the uninsured rate occur? What explains this change? Prior to that year, what was the trend in the uninsured rate? What was the trend after that year?
  2. What states have the highest and lowest uninsured rates? What states have seen the greatest drop in the uninsured rate over the past several years? What states have seen the greatest increase?
2. Suppose the U.S. government eliminates the tax exemption for employer-provided health insurance. Instead, the government provides a 20% subsidy on employer-provided health insurance, so that the employer only has to pay 80% of the cost of such policies. How might this new policy affect the type of workers to whom firms will offer health insurance? What types of firm is this policy most likely to affect?
3. Prior to the Affordable Care Act, many privately purchased non-group health insurance plans had stringent “preexisting condition” exclusions, which denied coverage to insured persons for any health conditions that already existed at the time of enrollment.
  1. How did these preexisting condition exclusions arise from a market failure in the insurance market?
  2. How did the ACA change the treatment of pre-existing conditions in the private-purchase non-group health insurance market?
4. What negative externalities arise when an individual does not have health insurance?
5. An individual’s demand for physician office visits per year is  $Q = 10 - (1/20)P$ , where  $P$  is the price of an office visit. The marginal cost of producing an office visit is \$120.
  1. If individuals pay full price for obtaining medical services, how many office visits will they make per year?
  2. If individuals must pay only a \$20 copayment for each office visit, how many office visits will they make per year?
  3. What is the deadweight loss to society associated with not charging individuals for the full cost of their health care?
6. Aditya has three types of medical expenditures: prescription eyeglasses, adalimumab, brand-name anti-rheumatic drug that he takes twice monthly for rheumatoid arthritis, and accidents and future illnesses (such as broken bones, pneumonia, or cancer). He has been paying for all of his medical expenditures out of pocket and he is now considering purchasing health insurance. Different plans he is considering offer coverage for different types of expenditures, including vision, prescription drug, and hospital benefits. Describe the consumption-smoothing benefits and moral hazard costs of coverage for prescription eyeglasses, anti-rheumatic drugs, and accidents and future illnesses.
7. [Figure 15-1](#) shows that the United States spends the most on health care of all OECD countries, with health expenditures as a percentage of GDP approximately double the OECD average. Despite this higher level of expenditure, [Figure 15-3](#) shows that other countries outperform the United States on most health care outcomes. Discuss several factors that might contribute to this disconnect between spending and outcomes.
8.  Senator Lee, making the case for universal, free health care, argues that we don’t need to worry that health care

costs might go up under such a universal and free system, because people are not price sensitive when it comes to their health. She argues that when people need to go to the doctor, they go, regardless of the cost. Evaluate her argument in light of the empirical evidence on the price sensitivity of health care demand. According to research discussed in the chapter, to what degree do you think health care spending might change under a universal, free health care system?

9. A recent study on high-deductible health plans and health savings accounts found that individuals who are switched from generous coverage to high-deductible insurance plans reduce their adherence to medication regimens, including those recommended by their doctors to manage chronic diseases like hypertension. Does this result suggest that high-deductible plans are optimal?
10. Catastrophic injuries and illnesses account for two-thirds of total health care costs in the country of Gnuti. The Gnuti government is deciding between two different universal health insurance programs: program *X* would pay for two-thirds of any health care expense that a Gnuti citizen incurred, while program *Y* would pay only for catastrophic illnesses and injuries, but would cover 100% of those costs. Which program is likely to better allow Gnuti citizens to smooth consumption? Which program is likely to cost the Gnuti government less? Explain your answers.
11.  You observe that states with higher income tax rates also tend to have higher rates of employer-provided health insurance. Is this a good test of the effects of tax policy on the demand for employer-provided health insurance? Explain.
12. Pat, Jamie, and Taylor are three individuals who are identical in every relevant way except one: they differ in their health insurance coverage. All three have just been diagnosed with a fully treatable and non-life-threatening illness. Treatment costs \$20,000. Pat's health insurance will cover 100% of these costs, if Pat elects to be treated. Jamie has no health insurance coverage: Jamie will have to pay \$20,000 out of pocket to get treated. Taylor's insurer paid \$20,000 to Taylor as soon as the diagnosis was made; Taylor can now freely choose whether to spend the \$20,000 on treatment or whether, instead, to pocket the money. You will observe who chooses to get treated and who chooses not to get treated. What observations would lead you to conclude that health insurance leads to increased health care usage? What observations would lead you to conclude that health insurance causes moral hazard?
13. Your employer-provided health insurance coverage allows you to choose either a health maintenance organization (HMO)—in which your doctor is paid the same amount by the insurance company when you select her as your physician, regardless of how many visits you make—or a preferred provider organization (PPO)—in which your doctor is reimbursed by the insurance company based on the quantity of care provided—for your health benefits. In which organization would you expect to have an easier time getting an appointment to see your doctor? Explain.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

14. Suppose the government of Orwellia decides to test all individuals for the risk of major illness, and reports the results of these tests to potential insurers when people apply for individual health insurance coverage. Will healthy people find working for large firms more, less, or equally attractive than before this testing program began? How about unhealthy people? Explain.
15. The following question considers the possibility that employer-provided health insurance reduces job mobility—a phenomenon that has been termed “job lock.” Job lock prevents workers from transitioning to jobs in which their marginal productivity would be higher than at their current jobs.

Consider three workers with the following preferences:

$$\begin{aligned}U_{ij} &= W_{ij} + (50 \times H_{ij}) \\U_{kj} &= W_{kj} + (110 \times H_{kj}) \\U_{lj} &= W_{lj} + (150 \times H_{lj})\end{aligned}$$

where  $W_{ij}$  is the wage at job  $j$  for worker  $i$ ,  $H_{ij}$  is an indicator variable (i.e., it takes on a value of one or zero) for whether or not employer-provided health insurance (EPhi) is offered to worker  $i$  at job  $j$ . Assume that there are no employee copayments for the insurance and that the labor market is perfectly competitive. Workers  $i$ ,  $k$ , and  $l$  all have a marginal product of \$200. There is an arbitrarily large number of firms in the economy, and they cannot offer worker-specific compensation packages. If they provide EPhi to one worker, they must provide it for all their workers. EPhi costs firms \$100 per worker. Assume that there is full employment—all three workers will be employed.

1. What wage does each of these workers earn? Do they have EPhi? What is the compensating wage differential for EPhi (the labor-market-wide decrease in wages at a job that provides EPhi)?
2. Now assume that there are two types of firms: type 1 and 2. Type 1’s cost of providing EPhi is \$200 per worker and type 2’s cost of providing EPhi is \$100. At which type of firm is each of the three workers employed? Why? Which workers have EPhi?
3. Now assume that firms of type 1 develop a new technology that increases the marginal productivity of their workers to \$230. At what firms do the workers work now? Are any of them suffering job lock?

-  16. The Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (COBRA) mandated that employers with over 20 employees allow workers who are separated from their job to purchase insurance through their health insurance plan (if they offer one). How might you use this law to test for insurance-related job lock?
17. The country of Cheapland currently has a national health insurance system that reimburses citizens for 90% of all health care costs incurred. Cheapland’s government is considering a policy change that would provide medical care providers with a fixed reimbursement level for each diagnosed illness so that citizens would no longer bear any out-of-pocket expenses for medical care. In what ways will this policy change reduce moral hazard? In what ways will it increase it?

 The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# CHAPTER 16 Health Insurance II: Medicare, Medicaid, and Health Care Reform



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [16.1 The Medicaid Program for Low-Income Families](#)
- [16.2 What Are the Benefits of the Medicaid Program?](#)
- [16.3 The Medicare Program](#)
- [16.4 What Are the Effects of the Medicare Program?](#)
- [16.5 Long-Term Care](#)
- [16.6 Health Care Reform and the ACA](#)
- [16.7 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How does the Medicaid program impact patient health?
- How have cost control efforts fared in the Medicare program?
- How does the Affordable Care Act work?

Fundamental reform of the U.S. health care system has been a constant source of political debate for much of the past century. In the postwar period, there were major attempts to transform health care by President Harry S. Truman in 1950, President Richard Nixon in 1974, and President Bill Clinton in 1994. All failed, in some cases dramatically. The losing streak for health care reform ended in 2010, however, when President Barack Obama signed into law the most sweeping overhaul of the U.S. health care system since the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) makes four fundamental changes to the U.S. health care system.

- It bans insurers from denying coverage because of preexisting conditions, and from charging different prices to different people based on their health.
- It mandates that all residents of the United States be covered by health insurance, with exemptions for illegal immigrants, very-low-income families, and those for whom insurance is unaffordable.
- It requires the federal government to extensively subsidize health insurance coverage for the poor by expanding the Medicaid program and by implementing sizeable new tax credits that offset insurance costs.
- It takes a variety of actions to lower health care costs, including the introduction of private insurance exchanges through which insurers face competitive pressure to lower their prices, a cap on the tax exclusion for employer-provided insurance, and alternative provider reimbursement arrangements designed to move toward the optimal provider reimbursement strategies discussed in [Chapter 15](#).

This legislation was highly controversial and passed through Congress with a very slim margin in a strictly partisan vote (no Republicans voted for it). As noted in [Chapter 1](#), critics on the right worried that the law would lead to restricted patient choice and a bloated government bureaucracy. As Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain said in August 2011, “If ObamaCare had been fully implemented when I caught cancer, I’d be dead.”<sup>1</sup>

But those on the left were not particularly pleased either: they believed that this proposal represented a retreat from the government-run [\*\*single-payer system\*\*](#) that might more efficiently expand coverage and control costs. As former Vermont governor Howard Dean said, “This is essentially the collapse of health care reform in the U.S. Senate.” This debate between the right and the left highlights the critical argument about the proper role of the government in the U.S. health care system.

**single-payer system**

A health care system in which all health insurance is provided and paid for by the government.

Perhaps due to the dissatisfaction from both sides of the aisle, the Affordable Care Act struggled to gain popularity in the United States, and opposition to the ACA was a rallying cry for Republican candidates in the 2016 elections. President Trump and the Republican Congress made ACA repeal a priority in 2017, but were unable to pass a comprehensive repeal bill. Nevertheless, a set of legislative and regulatory actions have significantly weakened the law's impact.

Despite the general perception of the United States as having a private health care system, the government plays an enormous role in the provision of health care; almost half of all health care spending today is done by the government.<sup>2</sup> Public health spending is targeted to three specific groups: the Medicare program targets the elderly and the disabled, and the Medicaid program targets low-income families, including low-income elderly and disabled who do not qualify for Medicare. Medicaid and Medicare represent the most rapidly growing expenditure item for federal and state governments; the programs did not exist until 1965 but today account for almost 20.9% of government spending.<sup>3</sup> Because of their large and growing role, these programs are a constant source of policy debate.

To help you become familiar with the functions of these programs, this chapter provides a description of how and for whom they operate. We also review the major policy issues concerning these two programs. We begin by assessing Medicaid's impact on the insurance coverage and health of low-income families participating in the program: Has expanding public insurance to low-income groups proved a cost-effective means of improving their health? We then turn to a major source of policy debate: how to control the rapidly rising costs of the Medicare program. We discuss the two major government efforts to control costs: moving to prospective reimbursement of providers and enabling consumer choice of managed care plans. Next, we discuss the set of issues surrounding long-term care of the elderly, which involves both Medicaid and Medicare programs.

Finally, the last section of the chapter pulls together the lessons from [Chapter 15](#) and this chapter to discuss the broad question of health care reform in the United States and to discuss the design of the ACA and early evidence on its effects.

# 16.1 The Medicaid Program for Low-Income Families

The major public health intervention for low-income populations in the United States is the Medicaid program. This program serves two types of groups: low-income families and low-income disabled and elderly. Because the majority of program enrollees are in the first group, our discussion focuses on low-income families; there will be a brief discussion of the disabled and the elderly later in the chapter.

## How Medicaid Works

Medicaid, like unemployment insurance (UI), is a program that is federally mandated but administered by the states.<sup>4</sup> The program is financed by matching grants from the federal government, paid out of general revenues. The rate at which the federal government shares in Medicaid spending is an inverse function of state income, with the federal government paying half the costs of the program in high-income states, such as Massachusetts, and more than three-quarters in low-income states, such as Mississippi. The federal government mandates some minimal levels of eligibility and service coverage, and states are free to increase generosity beyond these mandates.

Individuals qualify for Medicaid on the basis of their income and family structure, as described next. If eligible, individuals may then enroll in the Medicaid program. Medicaid insurance coverage is similar to private insurance: it reimburses providers for the services they provide to enrollees, although there is little or no patient coinsurance.

## Who Is Eligible for Medicaid?

Medicaid was introduced in the late 1960s as a health insurance component of state cash welfare programs that targeted low-income, single-parent families. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Medicaid program was slowly separated from cash welfare programs, first by extending benefits to low-income children in two-parent families and then by raising the income eligibility thresholds for two groups—children and pregnant women (who were covered only for the costs associated with pregnancy, not for other health costs).

In 1997, the Medicaid program for children was augmented by the [\*\*Children's Health Insurance Program \(CHIP\)\*\*](#). The goal of CHIP was to expand the eligibility of children for public health insurance beyond the existing limits of the Medicaid program, using either expansions of the Medicaid program or a new program that more closely mimics private health insurance. To provide incentives for states to expand their low-income health care coverage using CHIP funds, the federal government pays a higher share of each state's CHIP costs than it pays of the state's Medicaid costs. In the remainder of this chapter, we will typically refer to both Medicaid and CHIP coverage as *Medicaid*.

### Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)

A program introduced in 1997 to expand eligibility of children for public health insurance beyond the existing limits of the Medicaid program, generally up to 200% of the poverty line.

Currently, all individuals age 18 or younger are eligible for Medicaid or CHIP up to 100% of the poverty line (\$25,100 for a family of four), and children under age 6 and pregnant women are covered up to 138% of the poverty line (\$33,383). In most states, eligibility extends further for both children and pregnant women: a typical state covers both groups up to 200% of the poverty line (\$50,200). Eligibility extends even further in some states: pregnant women in Iowa, for example, are eligible up to 380% of the poverty line (\$95,380).<sup>5</sup>

More recently, there was a massive expansion of the Medicaid program put in place by the ACA, which extended eligibility to all families, regardless of family structure, below 138% of the federal poverty line.<sup>6</sup> This expansion was designed to cover the entire United States, but due to a Supreme Court decision in 2012, states were able to opt out of the expansion. Even though the federal government is paying at least 90% of the costs of the expansion, as of 2018, 17 states have opted out and therefore not expanded Medicaid to this new group.

## What Health Services Does Medicaid Cover?

Besides setting the rules for Medicaid eligibility, states also control two other aspects of the Medicaid program. The first is service coverage. While federal Medicaid rules require states to cover major services, such as physician and hospital care, they do not require states to pay for optional services, such as prescription drugs or dental care. Even so, all states have chosen to cover the most expensive optional benefits; all states cover prescription drugs and optometrist services, for example, and all but one cover dental services. For the traditional Medicaid population, these services are provided with little or no copayment required. (In states that have CHIP, copayments are allowed to be somewhat higher for those above 150% of the poverty line.) This package of services is much more generous than that of virtually any private insurance plan. Thus, Medicaid is really the best insurance money can't buy!

## How Do Providers Get Paid?

States can also regulate the rate at which health service providers are reimbursed. Unlike the situation for services covered (in which all states cover basically the same health care services), there is more variability across the states in provider reimbursements. In most states, Medicaid reimburses physicians at a much lower level than does the private sector, which often leads physicians to be unwilling to serve Medicaid patients. For childbirth, for example, the reimbursement rate to physicians under Medicaid averages about half of the private-sector reimbursement rate for the same services. Perhaps as a result, nearly one-third of physicians reported in a 2011 survey that they would not accept new Medicaid patients.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while the coverage provided by Medicaid is very generous in all states, individuals may have trouble availing themselves of that coverage in a number of states because physicians do not want to accept them as patients.

## 16.2 What Are the Benefits of the Medicaid Program?

The Medicaid program is not only enormous, with spending of \$565.5 billion in 2018, but it is growing rapidly—at an average of 7.7% per year since its inception.<sup>8</sup> The goal of this large and rapidly growing program is to provide health insurance coverage to low-income populations who cannot afford private coverage, thus providing them with financial protection and ultimately improving their health. Whether Medicaid has had the intended effects is an empirical question, and in this section, we review the evidence on this question.

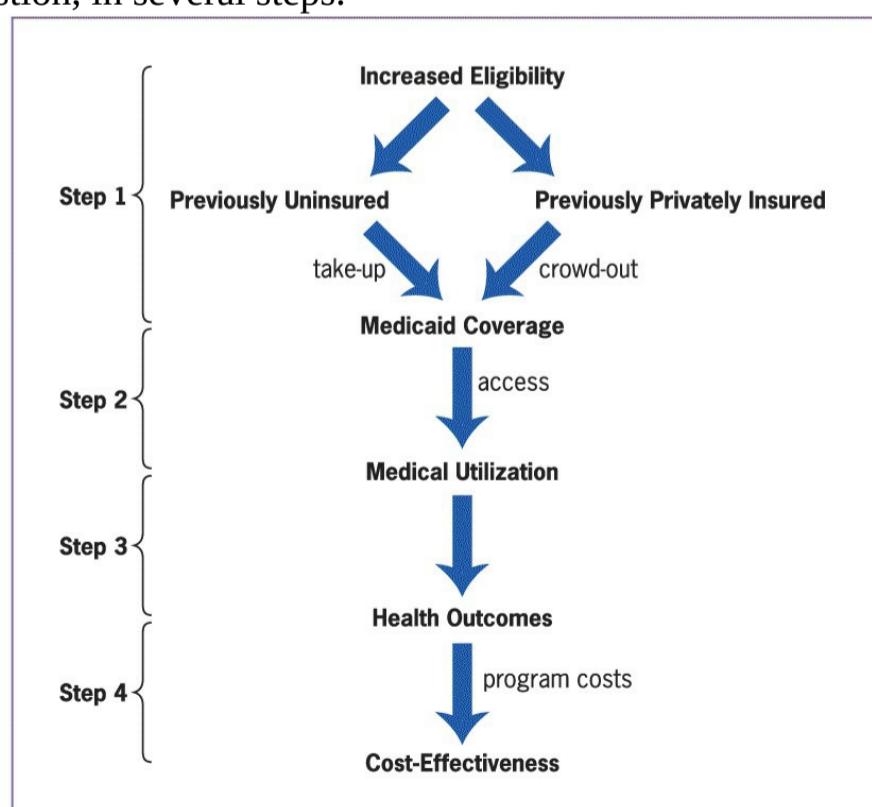
### Does Medicaid Provide Financial Protection?

The primary goal of insurance programs such as Medicaid is to provide financial protection against the risks imposed by medical spending. This is particularly important for the very-low-income families who qualify for this program, for whom even a modest health care bill can exceed their financial resources.

There are a number of studies that have documented the improved financial protection provided by Medicaid. [Gruber and Yelowitz \(1999\)](#) show that expansions of the Medicaid program are associated with higher levels of consumption on nonmedical goods. [Gross and Notowidigdo \(2011\)](#) show that expanding the Medicaid program lowers the rate of consumer bankruptcy. And [Finkelstein et al. \(2012\)](#) show that individuals made eligible for Medicaid in the state of Oregon see dramatic reductions in their levels of out-of-pocket medical spending, medical debt, and bills sent to collection agencies. Clearly, Medicaid is providing important consumption smoothing for low-income families.

### Does Medicaid Improve Health?

While the impact of public insurance on financial protection is fairly straightforward, the impact on health is more indirect. [Figure 16-1](#) provides an organizing framework for answering this question, in several steps.



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FIGURE 16-1

**How Does Medicaid Affect Health?** • This diagram shows the channels through which expanding eligibility for Medicaid can affect health. Expansions increase eligibility and lead to greater take-up by the uninsured and some crowd-out of private insurance (Step 1). This increase in insurance coverage leads to increased medical utilization (Step 2), depending on access restrictions for Medicaid enrollees. Higher medical utilization then potentially leads to better health (Step 3). This better health is associated with increased program costs, leading to the ultimate question of the cost-effectiveness of this route to improving health (Step 4).

**Step 1:** Translate the eligibility change into a change in actual coverage by the Medicaid program. There are two channels through which eligibility increases can increase coverage. The first is the “take-up” channel: eligibility changes make previously uninsured people eligible for coverage, but only some of these newly eligible people will enroll in the program. The second is the “crowd-out” channel: eligibility causes some people with private insurance to discontinue their private insurance and enroll in public insurance. This outcome is another form of the substitution of social insurance for self-insurance (crowd-out) that we discussed in [Chapters 12, 13, and 14](#).

**Step 2:** Translate the increases in Medicaid coverage into actual increases in utilization of care. As noted earlier, many providers will not see Medicaid patients because of low reimbursement rates. As a result, it is not clear that covering more people with Medicaid will greatly increase utilization; if the supply of providers willing to see Medicaid enrollees is fixed, increasing demand for care will not increase the total amount of care provided.

**Step 3:** Translate the increase in utilization of care into improved health. It is not clear how important increased medical care will be for health improvements. The RAND Health Insurance Experiment (HIE) results reviewed in the previous chapter, for example, suggest that varying the generosity of health insurance does not improve health outcomes very much.

**Step 4:** Determine the cost-effectiveness of the Medicaid expansion. The value of any Medicaid-induced improvements in health must be weighed against their costs. Even if Medicaid improves health, if we could improve health more cost-effectively through other policies, then we may want to pursue those other policies instead.

## How Does Medicaid Affect Health? Evidence

What is the evidence concerning the various steps shown in [Figure 16-1](#)? In this section, we provide a quick overview of the relevant economics literature.

### Take-Up

The Medicaid expansions of the 1980s and 1990s led to an explosion in eligibility for the program. In 1982, 12% of individuals nationwide aged 18 or under were eligible for public insurance under Medicaid. By 2000, 46% of individuals in that age group were eligible, an increase of almost 400%. There was a parallel rise for pregnant women, with some small increase for parents of eligible children in selected states that chose to expand to that population.<sup>9</sup>

Relatively few of the newly eligible people enrolled, however. By most estimates, only about one-quarter of those made eligible for Medicaid in the late 1980s and early 1990s enrolled in the program, and only about 10% of those made eligible through the CHIP expansions of the late 1990s enrolled. Just as we saw with UI in [Chapter 14](#), some of this low enrollment may be caused by a lack of information about eligibility for the program, and some may be caused by stigma about taking a public handout. Another reason that is particular to the Medicaid expansions, however, is that most of those made eligible *already had private health insurance coverage*. For those individuals, switching from private to

public coverage might not be very attractive; for example, individuals may be wary of leaving their private insurance for a public program from which they could be disqualified if their incomes rise.

## Crowd-Out

Unlike people who prefer to hold on to their private health insurance, some individuals might find it attractive to leave private insurance for public insurance because the Medicaid insurance package is much more generous than that provided by the typical private insurance plan and it doesn't cost anything. In terms of benefits, many employer-provided insurance plans don't include the "optional" benefits covered by virtually all state Medicaid programs, such as dental or vision care. In terms of costs, the typical employer that offers health insurance charges families more than \$268 per month, or \$4,421 per year, to enroll in an insurance plan, while Medicaid is free.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, while copayments are low in employer-provided insurance relative to the optimal level recommended by economic theory, they are much higher than those in Medicaid, which has close to zero copayments mandated by law. As a result of all these cost and coverage differences between private and public insurance, some privately insured individuals may find it advantageous to switch to public insurance when they become eligible. This is another example of the ways in which government intervention can crowd out private provision, as we have seen with fireworks, education, and social insurance.

There are a number of empirical studies that estimate the extent of crowd-out. These studies have found that there is some crowd-out, but it is far from complete, with private insurance declines amounting to 20 to 50% of the public insurance increases.<sup>11</sup>

## Health Care Utilization and Health

Even at the largest estimates of crowd-out, expanding Medicaid still substantially reduces the number of uninsured, so expansions may affect the utilization of health care services (such as doctor's office visits) and ultimately the health of those newly covered. In fact, the existing evidence suggests that both utilization of health care services and health care outcomes improved when Medicaid expanded (Steps 2–3 in [Figure 16-1](#)). Preventive care, particularly early prenatal care and preventive medical visits by children, rose by more than 50% when individuals were made eligible for Medicaid. At the same time, there were large corresponding reductions in both infant and child mortality: infant mortality, for example, declined by 8.5% as a result of the expansion of Medicaid coverage to pregnant women.<sup>12</sup>

The finding that providing health insurance to the uninsured can improve their health is echoed in other studies as well. [Hanratty \(1996\)](#) studied the introduction of national health insurance in Canada and found that it was associated with a 4% decline in the infant mortality rate and an 8.9% decrease in the incidence of low birth weight among infants of single mothers. [Lurie et al. \(1984\)](#) studied a large group of individuals in California who lost their eligibility to receive public insurance due to a fiscal crisis in the early 1980s that forced the state to cut back its insurance coverage. This study found that health deteriorated significantly among this group afterward. For example, blood pressure rose among hypertensive patients, leading to a 40% increased risk of dying: overall, 5 of the 186 patients who had lost insurance subsequently died, compared to 0 of the 109 patients in a comparable group of individuals that did not lose insurance coverage. A study of free universal primary care provision in Turkey found that it reduced mortality rates by more than 25% among infants, 23% among those age 1–4, and 7% among the elderly.<sup>13</sup>

[Finkelstein et al. \(2012\)](#) studied a novel randomized trial of health insurance coverage that

operated similarly to the school choice lotteries discussed in [Chapter 11](#). The state of Oregon had funding for 10,000 new spots in its public insurance program, but when it offered individuals the chance to enroll, almost 100,000 signed up. The state therefore allocated the spots randomly by lottery. This study found that lottery winners were not in much better health physically, but saw large improvements in mental health: there was a huge reduction in reported depression, at least partly due to the reduced stress of self-financing one's health care.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Using State Medicaid Expansions to Estimate Program Effects*

A natural way to measure the effect of Medicaid on health status would be to compare those who choose to enroll in the program with those who are not enrolled. Such an approach suffers from two types of bias, however. First, eligibility for Medicaid is determined by factors, such as income, that might also determine outcomes such as health status (e.g., the poor individuals eligible for Medicaid may also be the least healthy individuals in a state). Second, only some individuals who are eligible for Medicaid will take up the program, and these individuals may be different from those who do not take up the program (e.g., those enrolled may be in worse health). As a result, the treatment group (those on Medicaid) will be different along many dimensions from the control group (those not on Medicaid), biasing estimates of Medicaid's effect on health outcomes.

Fortunately, the expansions in Medicaid eligibility over the 1980s and 1990s provide a natural means of overcoming this limitation. An important feature of the Medicaid expansions is that they occurred at a very different pace across the states and at a different pace for different age groups of children within states, as illustrated in [Table 16-1](#). In Missouri, for example, which had fairly restrictive eligibility for Medicaid before these expansions, Medicaid eligibility for children rose from 12% of children in 1982 to 76% of children in 2000. In Michigan, in contrast, 20% of children were already eligible in 1982, and that figure rose to only 34% by 2000.

**TABLE 16-1 Medicaid Eligibility Changes Across and within States**

Eligibility for all children, by state			
Year	Missouri eligibility	Michigan eligibility	
1982	12%	20%	
2000	76%	34%	
<b>Eligibility for children by age, in Washington, D.C.</b>			
Year	Age 13 eligibility	Age 0 eligibility	
1982	18%	48%	
2000	59%	56%	

Data from: Calculations from the authors research with Kosali Simon at Cornell University.

Over the 1982–2000 period, Medicaid eligibility rose much more in Missouri than in Michigan (top panel). There were also dramatic differences in eligibility growth within states: eligibility rose much more for 13-year-olds in Washington, D.C., than for 0-year-olds (bottom panel).

This differential pace of expansion across the states provides an excellent setting for quasi-experimental analysis of the effects of these programs. Studies can compare outcomes (such as degree of illness) in the treatment states (those that expanded eligibility more) to outcomes in the controls (those that expanded it less). As long as nothing else is changing in these states that is correlated with both the eligibility expansions and the outcome variables, such as health, then this approach controls for the bias inherent in comparing individuals on and off Medicaid.

It is possible, however, that other things were changing along with state insurance expansions. For example, states may have been more willing to expand Medicaid when there was a state recession, which would independently affect health (if parents have less money, they are less able to afford food and health services for their children). As in the case of UI, however, there are “within-state” control groups that can further limit bias because eligibility expands for some age groups of children and not for others. For example, researchers could compare what happened to outcomes of 13-year-olds in Washington, D.C., the treatment group, for whom eligibility rose by more than 40% of the population from 1982 to 2000 (from 18 to 59%), with what happened to newborns there, the control group, for whom eligibility rose by less than 10% of the population (from 48 to 56% because a large percentage of newborns were already eligible in 1982). Both groups were subject to the same outside factors, such as a recession, but they faced very different Medicaid policies. As shown in the appendix to [Chapter 14](#), we can combine the across-state comparisons with the within-state comparisons to develop a more convincing quasi-experimental estimate.

The more recent Medicaid expansions under the ACA provide a new quasi-experiment for measuring the effects of health insurance, comparing states that did and did not expand Medicaid to individuals below 133% of the poverty line. A large literature has emerged that uses these recent expansions to confirm the findings from the earlier literature: expanding Medicaid leads to large increases in access to care, utilization of care, and improvements in health. <sup>14</sup>

Do these findings contradict the conclusions of the RAND HIE, which found that varying the extent of insurance (through the coinsurance rate) had no impact on health? They don't,

because the HIE made no one uninsured; all individuals were fully insured for expenditures above \$1,000. So putting these two pieces of evidence together, we can trace the type of medical effectiveness curve that we showed in [Figure 15-7](#). Moving individuals from being uninsured to having some insurance, as is achieved by the Medicaid expansions, has an important positive effect on health. But once someone is insured, varying the amount of insurance coverage, as is done in the RAND HIE, doesn't seem to cause significant changes in health.

## Cost-Effectiveness

Finally, we come to cost-effectiveness, the last arrow in [Figure 16-1](#); evidence indicates that expanding public insurance does improve health, but at what cost? [Currie and Gruber \(1996a\)](#) estimated that it cost Medicaid roughly \$1 million per infant life saved through its expansions. This is much lower than the typical estimate of the value of a life from compensating differential studies discussed in [Chapter 8](#) (\$3 million to \$7 million). That \$1 million is also much lower than the cost of many alternative government interventions designed to save lives, such as food regulation or seat-belt safety. This finding suggests that investing in low-income health care may be a cost-effective means of improving health in the United States.

## 16.3 The Medicare Program

The largest public health insurance program in the United States is Medicare, which, as previously discussed, was started in 1965 as a universal health insurance system for the elderly and non-elderly disabled (those receiving disability insurance from the federal government). To help you organize your thoughts about Medicaid and Medicare, [Table 16-2](#) compares the key features of the two programs.

TABLE 16-2 Medicaid and Medicare as of 2018

	Medicaid	Medicare
Eligibles	Families on welfare	Low-income children, pregnant women
	Low-income elderly, disabled	Retirees and spouses 65 and older
	Certain disabled individuals under 65	People with kidney failure (requiring dialysis or transplant)
Premiums	None	Hospital coverage: none Physician coverage: \$134 per month Prescription drug coverage: Variable
Deductibles/copayments	None (or very small)	Hospital coverage: \$1,340 deductible for benefit period Physician coverage: \$183 deductible, 20% coinsurance Prescription drug coverage: Variable
Services excluded	None (or very minor)	Prescription drugs (until 2006), routine checkups (until 2010), dental care, nursing home care, eyeglasses, hearing aids, immunization shots
Provider reimbursement	Very low	Moderate (but falling)

Medicaid provides health insurance for low-income individuals, covering a wide range of health services at little cost to those individuals. Medicare provides health insurance for those age 65 and over, covering many, though not all, health services at some cost to those individuals.

## How Medicare Works

The Medicare program is administered at the federal level. All U.S. citizens who have worked and paid payroll taxes for ten years, and their spouses, are eligible for coverage; other citizens who do not have the requisite work experience can purchase Medicare coverage at its full cost. Medicare operates similarly to a private insurance plan, with the government reimbursing providers for their costs and with patients responsible for coinsurance. There are two key features of Medicare to keep in mind as we learn about this program and think about reforms to it.

### Medicare Is Really Three Different Programs

Medicare consists of three different programs. [Medicare Part A](#) covers inpatient hospital costs and some costs of *long-term care* (care for the elderly, either in institutions such as nursing homes or in their own homes). This part of the program is financed from the Medicare Hospital Insurance trust fund, which is funded by the payroll tax on both employers and employees discussed in [Chapter 15](#). [Medicare Part B](#) covers physician expenditures, outpatient hospital expenditures, and other services. About 25% of the cost of this part of the program is financed by enrollee premiums, which are deducted directly from Social Security payments; the remaining 75% of the cost is paid from the general government revenues. Premiums for Part B depend on income; for most elders, they are \$134 per month, but they rise to \$428.6 per month for elders with combined incomes above \$320,000.<sup>15</sup> [Medicare Part D](#) provides coverage for prescription drug expenditures. As described later, individuals can choose from a large variety of private insurance plans for their prescription drug

coverage. Part D coverage is financed by a mix of enrollee premiums (which vary widely across available plans) and general revenues.

**Medicare Part A**

Part of the Medicare program that covers inpatient hospital costs and some costs of long-term care; financed from a payroll tax.

**Medicare Part B**

Part of the Medicare program that covers physician expenditures, outpatient hospital expenditures, and other services; financed from enrollee premiums and general revenues.

**Medicare Part D**

Part of the Medicare program that covers prescription drug expenditures.

## Medicare Has High Patient Costs

Relative to private health insurance, and certainly relative to Medicaid, the Medicare program has fairly high copayments and deductibles and a relatively lean benefits package. Part A of the program has a \$1,340 deductible for the first 60 days of a hospital stay (with costs to the patient rising to \$335 per day for days 61–90, \$670 per day for days 91–150, and full payment required after that), and Part B has a \$134 deductible and a 20% coinsurance rate.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that the Part B coinsurance is not capped at some level of out-of-pocket expenditures; if an individual has \$10,000 in physician bills in a year, she must pay \$2,000 in coinsurance. This greatly lowers the consumption-smoothing value of Medicare because there is still some risk of very high medical expenditures if you are ill. Part D coverage also features high patient costs (see the Application that follows), although there is wide variation across Part D insurance plans, with some plans charging higher premiums and in return covering a much larger share of prescription expenditures. Moreover, Medicare does not cover many benefits provided by private-sector insurance plans, including dental and vision care.



### APPLICATION

## The Medicare Prescription Drug Debate

One of the liveliest health policy debates of the early twenty-first century was over the addition of a prescription drug benefit to the Medicare program. When Medicare was established in 1965, it covered most medical needs for the elderly and disabled, including hospital and doctor costs, but it excluded coverage for prescription drugs. This omission was not perceived as a major one in the early years of the Medicare program, but in the 1990s, the advancement of prescription drug treatments for common illnesses among the elderly drew attention to this gap in Medicare coverage.

In the 1960s, there were few outpatient drugs for hypertension (high blood pressure), depression, peptic ulcers, diabetes, and many other common afflictions of Medicare recipients. By the late 1990s, however, all were treatable with prescription drugs. Medicare recipients, for example, spent an average of \$2,500 each on prescription drugs in 2003, more than twice what the average American spent on all health care in 1965!<sup>17</sup> As a result, there was strong demand for adding a prescription drug benefit to the Medicare program. This was a major issue in the 1998 and 2002 congressional campaigns and the 2000 presidential elections.

Democrats and Republicans proposed two different approaches to deal with this problem. Democrats suggested adding a drug benefit to the Medicare program, with the government negotiating directly with drug companies to ensure the lowest drug prices. Republicans suggested that the government subsidize private insurers to offer prescription drug coverage

to the elderly, either through HMOs or as a stand-alone prescription drug-only plan.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both these approaches. On the one hand, the federal government would represent an enormous buying pool for prescription drugs, which would allow it to both minimize administrative costs and strongly negotiate for low prices. On the other hand, the federal government could become too heavy-handed and lower prices too much, thus making new drug development unprofitable and reducing pharmaceutical innovation.<sup>[18](#)</sup>

Private insurance approaches would not suffer from this problem because they would negotiate prices with manufacturers, but the private model would introduce the new problem of adverse selection, whereby plans might suffer from getting only those enrollees who need the most prescription drugs.

In December 2003, President George W. Bush signed into law a bill that followed the Republican approach but provided government reinsurance to deal with potential problems of adverse selection. Under this reinsurance arrangement, the federal government reimburses insurers for a share of very large drug bills to ensure that insurers do not suffer unduly from enrolling sick individuals.

Enrollment in the new program, called Part D, was initially fraught with problems. Starting shortly before the official opening of the enrollment period on November 15, 2005, Medicare and state officials were bombarded by hundreds of calls per day from frustrated Medicare recipients who felt hopelessly lost among the plans they were expected to choose among, some of which continued to be adjusted by fiercely competing private insurers even as consumers were trying to make a decision. Despite this rocky start, in the following months, the federal government was able to iron out many of the problems that had arisen during the initial transition, and by the end of 2006, more than 23 million elders were enrolled in the program.<sup>[19](#)</sup>

How successful has the private-based approach been? The evidence is unclear. On the one hand, the costs of this program have been much lower than projected in the early years. The average monthly premium that enrollees paid under Part D for 2015 was \$33.13, which was 25% lower than the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projection when the law was passed in 2003.<sup>[20](#)</sup> Part of the reason for these lower costs was aggressive competition between insurers and the ability of insurers to steer Part D recipients to lower-cost “generic” drugs ([Duggan and Scott Morton, 2010](#)). On the other hand, there is clear evidence that elders have not been making the choices that are best for them among available insurance options. [Abaluck and Gruber \(2011\)](#) studied a large sample of elders using prescription drugs and found that the typical elder in their sample could have saved 30% by choosing a less expensive plan.

What is clear, however, is that the basic structure of this drug benefit was illogical. For basic Part D plans in 2006, individuals received coverage for:

- None of the first \$250 in drug costs each year
- 75% of costs for the next \$2,250 of drug spending (up to \$2,500 total)
- 0% of costs for the next \$3,600 of drug spending (up to \$5,100 total)
- 95% of costs above \$5,100 of drug spending

This is a very odd structure, featuring generous coverage for low-spending amounts (between \$250 and \$2,500 of drug spending), followed by a “donut hole” where there is no coverage (up to \$5,100), and then almost full coverage above a catastrophic level (above \$5,100). There is no coherent economic rationale for such a structure. The optimal insurance arrangement discussed in [Chapter 15](#) would feature little coverage of initial spending to avoid moral hazard, with insurance coverage rising as spending rises to ensure consumption smoothing. The first and last brackets of this plan, with an initial deductible and catastrophic coverage above \$5,100, follow that arrangement. Yet there is no economic rationale for the two middle brackets, which provide fairly generous coverage of drug spending, between \$250 and \$2,500, and then no coverage at all for the next \$3,600 of spending. This is an upside-down benefit structure that is exactly the reverse of an optimal insurance design.

The rationale for this structure was clearly political. The majority of seniors have modest drug costs; 54% of Medicare recipients, for example, have drug costs of less than \$2,000 per year.<sup>21</sup> The goal of the bill was, for a given federal budgetary cost, to deliver benefits to the largest number of elderly, regardless of their ultimate need for insurance coverage. This was accomplished by this upside-down drug benefit. Efforts to maximize votes by politicians, therefore, led to the use of low coinsurance for low expenditures and higher coinsurance for higher expenditures.

The donut hole was immediately criticized and was the source of much policy debate after the introduction of Part D. A major feature of the ACA was that the donut hole would slowly be filled over the decade after 2009, so that by 2019, the structure features 75% coverage until the “catastrophic limit,” then 95% coverage beyond that point. ■

## 16.4 What Are the Effects of the Medicare Program?

Unlike Medicaid, the focus of public policy debate on Medicare has not been about who should be eligible; there appears to be broad support for a program that universally covers the elderly and disabled. Despite this broad support, however, there is surprisingly little evidence that the Medicare program actually improves the health of the elderly.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean that Medicare is not valuable. Recall that the role of insurance discussed in [Chapter 12](#) was not to improve outcomes; rather, it was to ensure consumption smoothing over adverse events. And Medicare is clearly successful in this goal. As [Finkelstein and McKnight \(2008\)](#) documented, the introduction of Medicare was associated with a large reduction in out-of-pocket spending on medical care, particularly for those who had the highest medical spending. Using the type of insurance model described in [Chapter 12](#), these authors computed that the consumption-smoothing gains from Medicare have been at least half as large as the expenditures on the program, so that even without positive effects on health, there have been sizeable benefits to universal coverage of the elderly. [Barcellos and Jacobson \(2015\)](#) extend this analysis to look at what happens to medical expenditure risk at age 65, and find that out of pocket spending falls substantially, particularly for the highest cost individuals.

Given the broad consensus for universal coverage of the elderly, the focus of debate has been on controlling the rapidly rising costs of this program. In its first 15 years of existence, the Medicare program grew exponentially, from \$64 million in federal expenditures in 1966 to \$32.1 billion in 1980. This rapid rise led policy makers to focus on controlling costs, through two different channels: the Prospective Payment System and Medicare Managed Care.

### The Prospective Payment System

Like those in the private sector, the administrators of Medicare realized that its retrospective reimbursement of medical providers on the basis of their billed costs was a recipe for rapidly rising costs. This program was therefore a pioneer in moving toward prospective reimbursement, in which reimbursement is based on expected costs, not actual services delivered, in an effort to control overuse of medical care. In 1983, Medicare moved to a [Prospective Payment System \(PPS\)](#) for reimbursing hospitals. This system had several features:

1. All diagnoses for hospital admissions were grouped into 467 “Diagnosis Related Groups,” or DRGs.
2. The government reimbursed hospitals a fixed amount based on the DRG of patient admission, regardless of the actual treatment costs of those patients. The reimbursement amounts were higher for more “severe” (higher-cost) DRGs.
3. The fixed amount of reimbursement was determined by a national standard for the cost of treating that DRG and a hospital-specific adjustment that more highly reimbursed teaching hospitals and those hospitals that treat many poor patients.

#### Prospective Payment System (PPS)

Medicare’s system for reimbursing hospitals based on nationally standardized payments for specific diagnoses.

## Empirical Evidence on the Move to the PPS

In theory, PPS represented a classic prospective payment system, with incentives to treat patients as cost-efficiently as possible as hospitals are paid a fixed amount regardless of treatment intensity. Indeed, the effects of the PPS were striking. There was an enormous reduction in the treatment intensity of the elderly within hospitals, a result consistent with the move from retrospective to prospective reimbursement incentives. The average length of a hospital stay for elderly patients fell from 9.7 days to 8.4 days in just one year, which was four times the rate of decrease over the previous two decades. In one Indiana hospital, the length of stay for hip fractures fell from almost 22 days to only 13 days. There was a 15% drop in admissions to intensive care units and a 16% drop in admissions to coronary (heart) care units.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, despite this enormous reduction in treatment intensity, there was no evidence of an adverse impact on patient outcomes. Mortality rates within one year of treatment were the same before and after this major policy change. This result is further evidence for the “flat of the curve” model shown in [Figure 15-7](#): as long as individuals are insured, treating them less intensively leads to little decline in their health.

The move to a PPS led to a sharp reduction in the rate of growth of hospital costs: after growing at 9.6% per year from 1967 to 1982, hospital costs under Medicare grew at only 3.0% per year from 1983 to 1988. Unfortunately, the PPS appears to lose its effect over time: from 1988 to 1997, hospital costs rose at a rate of 5.4% per year.

## Problems with PPS

Why didn’t the PPS solve the long-run cost growth problems of the Medicare program? Perhaps because it was not prospective enough. Almost immediately, the system ran into the problem of “DRG creep.” Medicare was paying a fixed price per diagnosis, but the choice of a diagnosis is something the hospital has some control over when patients are admitted (particularly for elderly patients, who often have many problematic conditions on admission). Thus, by labeling an admitted patient as having a more severe diagnosis, hospitals could change their DRG categorization to one for which the hospital would be reimbursed more highly. Indeed, there was a large increase in reported severity of admission diagnoses for the elderly around the time PPS took effect!

Some examples were so egregious that they led to criminal persecution of the largest hospital chain at the time in the United States, the Columbia/HCA corporation. For example, in 1995 Columbia’s Cedars Medical Center in Miami coded 93% of their Medicare cases with respiratory illness in the DRG for complex respiratory infection (with a reimbursement rate of \$5,700), and only 7% in the DRG for pneumonia with complications (with a rate of only \$1,700). Meanwhile, at Jackson Memorial, a non-Columbia-operated hospital located just across the street, only 28% of billings were in the complex respiratory infection category. Moreover, a pronounced shift in Cedars’ billing pattern was shown to coincide exactly with its acquisition by the Columbia Corporation. In 1992, the hospital’s last year of independent operation, only 31% of respiratory cases were billed at the highest rate; only one year later, after Columbia Corporation had bought the hospital, that number had risen to 76%. Ultimately, in 2000, HCA (as the company later renamed itself) pleaded guilty to 14 felonies and agreed to pay \$1.7 billion in civil and criminal penalties, the largest amount ever secured by federal prosecutors in a health care fraud case.<sup>24</sup>

This short-run problem has a longer-run manifestation, which is a problem with the design

of the DRGs themselves. Almost half of the DRG designations are based not purely on diagnosis, but also on the actual treatment used for the patient. For example, someone entering the hospital with severe heart trouble might be given a diagnosis of “cardiac arrest, unexplained” (DRG 129), for which the hospital might be reimbursed \$5,000. Or she might receive one of many surgeries, including coronary bypass (DRG 106, with a reimbursement of \$33,000), pacemaker implantation (DRG 551, reimbursement of \$15,000), or in the most extreme case, a heart transplant (DRG 103, with a reimbursement of \$88,000).<sup>25</sup> With this categorization, there is effectively retrospective reimbursement: by performing a certain procedure, a provider can move the patient’s case to a higher DRG and raise the reimbursement level.

Another problem with PPS is that it reimburses hospitals per admission, providing an incentive to raise hospital admissions. In particular, this has raised concerns about hospital re-admissions for the same diagnosis, whereby hospitals can make money by discharging patients before they are well and then re-admitting them for the same illness, but with new reimbursement. Indeed, a key feature of the ACA is penalties for hospitals that have high levels of re-admissions, and the introduction of these penalties was associated with a large drop in hospital re-admission rates.<sup>26</sup> But internal financial incentives from hospitals can have a pernicious effect: lawsuits filed against the for-profit hospital chain Health Management Associates contended that the chain was paying doctors for admitting more Medicare patients to the hospital; for example, doctors were pressured to categorize any elderly patient with a temperature above the normal 98.7 degrees as having a “fever.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, another problem with the PPS has been that it applies only to one part of the medical system for treating the elderly, but there is enormous substitutability across different parts of the medical system. One excellent example of this is provided by [Newhouse and Byrne \(1988\)](#), who studied rehabilitation hospitals, which are designed for longer-term hospital stays that require little acute medical care (little constant monitoring and more long-term rehabilitation, such as for recovery from hip replacement surgery). Rehabilitation hospitals were originally exempt from the restrictions of the PPS. As a result, around the time of the PPS, there was an enormous shift of patients from acute-care hospitals to these exempt rehabilitation institutions, undoing a large part of the savings from the PPS change.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

##### *Short Stays in Long-Term Care Hospitals*

As we’ve seen, an unintended effect of moving to PPS for hospitals was a shift toward more use of other types of facilities that were exempt from this system. Starting in 1997, Medicare tried to remedy these shifts by introducing PPS systems in these other facilities. But these alternatives can cause problems of their own.

An excellent example is provided by the study of [Kim et al. \(2015\)](#). They focused on long-term care hospitals, which they note “first emerged in the 1980s as a cost-effective alternative for patients who would otherwise require extended care in short-term acute care hospitals. Over time, long-term care hospitals have become the fastest growing and highest-paid providers of post-acute care [care delivered after hospitalization] in the Medicare program. From 1993 to 2011 the number of long-term care hospitals increased from 192 to 424, and Medicare expenditures on them soared from \$389 million to \$5.6 billion annually.”

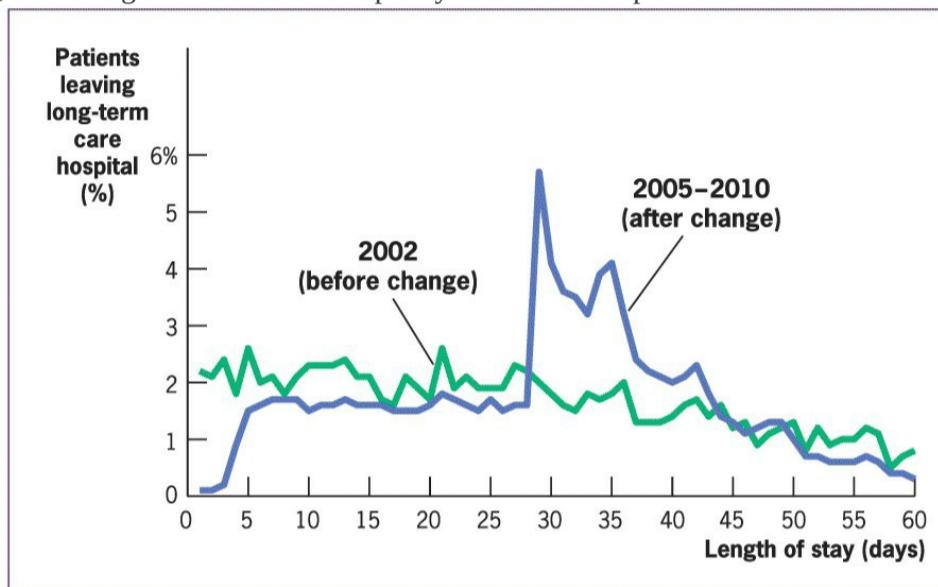
Part of this growth was fueled by the implementation of PPS, which exempted these types of providers, creating incentives for acute-care hospitals to discharge patients quickly to these fee-for-service hospitals. To remedy this situation, in October 2002 the government introduced a PPS system for long-term care hospitals that was to be phased in over several years. To discourage the transfer of short-stay patients to these facilities, the system included a reduction in payments for patients discharged before a threshold length of stay (that varied by condition). This reduction was sizeable. For the case that the authors focus on, respiratory system diagnosis needing prolonged mechanical ventilation, the DRG reimbursement for 2015 was \$79,128. But if the patient left before their 29th day at the facility, that payment could be reduced to as low as \$31,376—a reduction of more than 50%.

The question addressed by this study is whether long-term care facilities responded to this incentive by keeping patients

beyond the 29-day threshold. In particular, if hospitals were responding to this financial incentive, we should expect to see increased discharges right after the threshold when patients qualified for the higher payments.

Of course, the problem with such an analysis is that there may be a natural reason patients with this diagnosis were discharged at 29 days—for example, maybe that is the typically recommended length of stay. To address this point, the authors used a comparison group of patients who were discharged in 2002 before the new system was introduced. For those patients, there was no particular financial incentive for discharge at the 29th day. Therefore, if there was no particular jump in discharge rates at the 29th day before 2002, but one emerged after 2002, it suggests that financial incentives were playing an important role.

[Figure 16-2](#) suggests that, in fact, this was the case. This is a “hazard graph” of the type we used to analyze retirement in [Chapter 13](#): the x axis shows patient length of stay, while the y axis shows the percentage of patients leaving the long-term care hospital at that length of stay. The green line shows the distribution of lengths of stay in 2002, before the policy change, while the blue line shows the distribution from 2005–2010, after the policy was implemented. Before the policy change, there was a fairly constant discharge rate of 2% of patients at each length of stay until about 29 days, at which point it began to fall off. But after the policy change, there was a somewhat lower discharge rate at lengths of stay below 29 days (particularly at lengths of stay of 1 to 4 days), before spiking up sizeably exactly at the 29-day threshold for receiving higher payments. Whereas 2% of patients were discharged at 29 days prior to the new policy, the share almost tripled after the policy change. Clearly, this change in reimbursement policy influenced hospital behavior.



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■ FIGURE 16-2

Timing of Hospital Discharges Before and After the Policy Change • The figure shows the percentage of patients discharged from long-term care hospitals at different lengths of stay. Before the policy change, 2% of patients were discharged at 29 days. After the change, the discharge rate almost tripled, hitting 5.7%.

Data from: [Kim et al. \(2015\)](#).

What can be done about such incentives? As discussed in the next section, the only way to truly incorporate such incentives is with a broad reimbursement system that features incentives for providers to coordinate care and internalize any inefficiency in how care is delivered—however, such a system is easier to describe than to implement. In the near term, unfortunately, the government is moving in the other direction and Medicare introduced yet another reduction in reimbursement for very short stays at such facilities!

## Lesson: The Difficulty of Partial Reform

These findings highlight a key problem with partial reform of provider reimbursement. If policy makers don't address systemwide incentives for overtreatment due to retrospective reimbursement, then partial solutions are like squeezing one corner of a pillow: the costs just move to the other corners. Pay hospitals based on diagnosis and patients suddenly appear sicker; reimburse one type of hospital more strictly and patients are moved elsewhere.

In 1997, recognition of this fact motivated the federal government to mandate that the prospective reimbursement system eventually be applied to other sectors that were currently receiving retrospective reimbursement. The implementation of these changes has been slow, but initial evidence suggests that they are working. Studies show that prospective

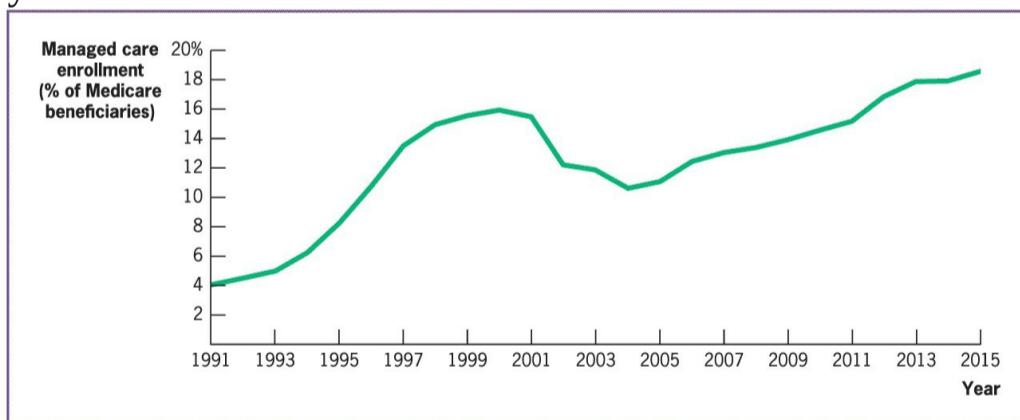
reimbursement of home health care agencies and inpatient rehabilitation facilities lowered utilization significantly, with no adverse health outcomes.<sup>28</sup>

Just as with designing optimal insurance systems for workers, designing optimal reimbursement systems for providers reflects a trade-off. On the one hand, retrospective reimbursement systems do not provide sufficient incentives to control medical costs. On the other hand, a purely prospective system, which we have not yet achieved, might lead providers to cut care too much in order to make money. Thus, the optimal system would probably include some combination of both approaches. The existing evidence for the Medicare program suggests that it may err too much toward retaining key features of retrospective reimbursement.

## Medicare Managed Care

The other avenue pursued by policy makers to control the costs of Medicare is to increase use of managed care in the Medicare program. Because managed care plans cost less per enrollee without obviously reducing the quality of care, the government could in theory save money by shifting enrollees to managed care.

Traditionally, all enrollees in Medicare received the same type of retrospectively reimbursed health insurance. Then, starting in 1985, the federal government allowed Medicare enrollees a choice of Medicare HMOs as well. These plans typically covered many of the out-of-pocket costs of Medicare so that enrollees were less exposed to the program's copayments and deductibles. The plans also often provided other benefits not available through Medicare, most notably prescription drug coverage. A disadvantage for patients was that HMOs restricted their choice of provider and potentially engaged in other rationing devices to keep down costs that were not present in the traditional system. Despite this disadvantage, as [Figure 16-3](#) shows, enrollment in Medicare HMOs rose steadily to 16% of all enrollees in 1999, dipped somewhat, and then rose again after 2003 due to an increase in reimbursement rates to the managed care providers; enrollment growth has been particularly rapid in recent years.



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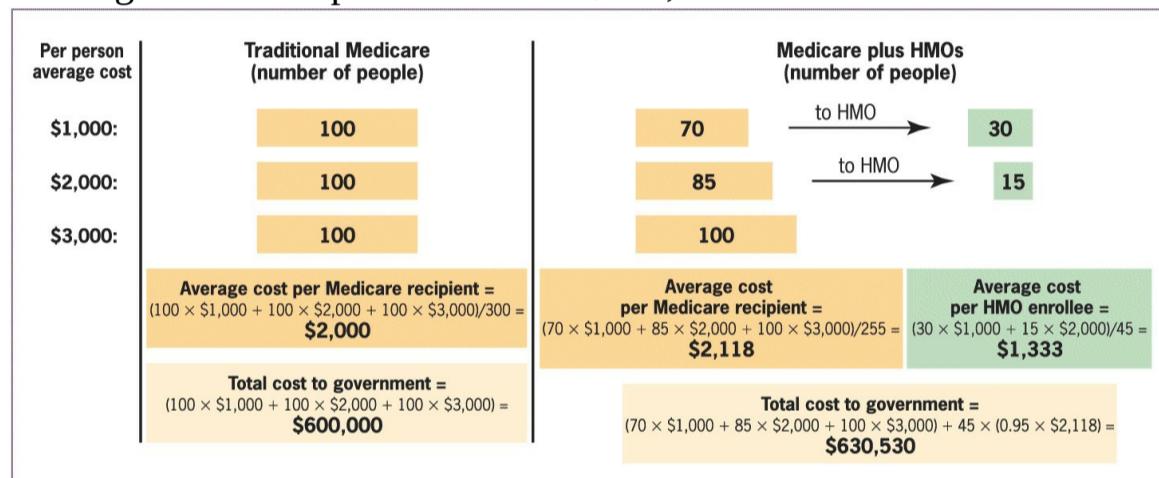
■ FIGURE 16-3

Managed Care Enrollment of Medicare Beneficiaries • When the managed care option was first introduced to Medicare, enrollment rose steadily, to a peak of 16% of Medicare beneficiaries by 1999. Enrollment then declined in the early 2000s because of the government's decision to lower reimbursement rates to managed care providers. An increase in these reimbursement rates in 2003 led to a subsequent further rise in managed care enrollment, which has continued since to surpass the 1999 peak.

The Medicare program endeavored to lower its costs by reimbursing HMOs only 95% of the average annual medical costs of enrollees who stayed in traditional Medicare (the “adjusted average per capita costs,” or AAPCC). In this way, the thinking went, everyone

won: the patients who chose Medicare HMOs got a package that they preferred, and the government saved money.

But was the government actually saving money? Recall from the previous chapter that there is strong evidence for positive selection into HMOs—only the healthiest patients choose this option. Such selection also operated strongly for the elderly in Medicare. As a result, many Medicare HMOs had annual medical costs *for their enrollees* that were well below 95% of the AAPCC because they were enrolling only the healthiest people. Thus, most estimates suggest that the government was actually losing money on the HMO option. How could the government lose money when it was paying only 95% of the average cost of the sickest enrollees remaining on Medicare, while the HMO's true cost for its healthy enrollees was much lower. [Figure 16-4](#) illustrates the process of selection with a mythical Medicare program. Before HMOs are available, there are 300 individuals in this program. One-third of enrollees have average costs of \$1,000 per year, one-third have average costs of \$2,000 per year, and one-third have average costs of \$3,000 per year. So the average cost to the Medicare program is \$2,000 per enrollee, and the government spends a total of \$600,000.



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FIGURE 16-4

**Incorporating HMOs into Medicare** • Before HMOs are introduced (first column), there are 100 persons at each of three cost levels, with average Medicare costs of \$2,000 per recipient. When HMOs are introduced (second column), they are chosen primarily by the lowest-cost individuals, resulting in a higher average Medicare cost (\$2,118) and a low average HMO cost (\$1,333). Yet the government reimburses HMOs at 95% of the average Medicare cost (\$2,012), so the government spends \$30,530 more when the HMO option is allowed.

When HMOs are introduced, they are chosen by 30 of the individuals who cost \$1,000 per year, by 15 of the individuals who cost \$2,000 per year, and by none of the individuals who cost \$3,000 per year (because HMOs are preferred by the healthy). So the set of individuals in the HMOs cost on average \$1,333, while the set of individuals remaining in Medicare cost on average \$2,118. The government reimburses the HMOs 95% of the average cost of those on Medicare, or \$2,012 ( $\$2,118 \times 0.95 = \$2,012$ ) per year. So the government is losing \$679 annually (the \$2,012 reimbursement minus the \$1,333 those individuals actually cost) on the average HMO enrollee. In other words, the government now has to pay for its remaining enrollees ( $70 \times \$1,000 + (85 \times \$2,000) + (100 \times \$3,000) = \$540,000$ , plus it pays the HMO \$2,012 for each of its 45 enrollees, or \$90,530, for a total of \$630,530. So the government has lost more than \$30,000 by introducing this HMO option!

Recognizing this problem, in 1997 the government lowered further payments to HMOs. This led many HMOs, presumably the ones unable to attract the most healthy enrollees, to drop their Medicare lines of business. As a result, Medicare HMO enrollment, which peaked

at 16% of enrollees in 1999, fell to 12.6% by 2003. Disturbed by this trend, Congress reversed itself as part of the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 (better known for its introduction of prescription drug benefits for Medicare) and raised HMO reimbursement to at least 100% of the level of reimbursement for traditional Medicare (in 2004, it was 107%). This change had the effect of increasing managed care enrollment in Medicare, which rose above its previous peak to 22% of enrollees by 2009. It is unclear, however, why managed care enrollment per se should be a government goal; what is clear is that the government is once again losing money on reimbursing HMOs, relative to traditional Medicare!<sup>29</sup> For this reason, reduced “overpayment” to Medicare managed care plans was a major source of financing for the new spending under the ACA; despite reduced Medicare Advantage reimbursement rates, as [Figure 16-3](#) shows, growth in use of Medicare Advantage has continued.

## Should Medicare Move to a Full-Choice Plan? Premium Support<sup>30</sup>

The problem with the current approach to choice in Medicare is that the government must make some estimate of how much to reimburse managed care plans, and that estimate may be too high (costing the government money) or too low (leading the HMOs to exit the program). Another alternative is to move to a system of full choice among health plans, leaving the elderly with the type of decision faced by employees at firms that offer multiple health insurance plans. In this type of system, commonly known as **premium support**, the elderly would receive a voucher for a certain amount. They could then choose from a range of options, including the traditional Medicare program. If they choose an option that costs less than their voucher amount, they keep the difference; if they choose an option that costs more, they pay the difference. As we discuss in the application, such a system would introduce competition into Medicare and allow the government to more easily set a reimbursement level, but at the cost of redistributing from the sickest enrollees to the most healthy.

### **premium support**

A system of full choice among health care plans for Medicare enrollees, whereby they receive a voucher for a certain amount that they can apply to a range of health insurance options (either paying or receiving the difference between plan premiums and the voucher amount).



### APPLICATION

#### A Premium Support System for Medicare

A typical premium support plan is illustrated in the top panel of [Table 16-3](#). An elderly person would have a choice in her area of, for example, three plans, A, B, and C. The costs of those plans per year are \$1,800, \$2,000, and \$2,500, respectively. The government could set its voucher at any level, but suppose the government chooses to reimburse the cost of the median-cost plan in the area (\$2,000 in this case). Then individuals who choose plan A would get a rebate of \$200. Individuals who choose plan B would get nothing; and individuals who choose plan C would have to pay \$500.

The advantages of a premium support system mirror the advantages of voucher systems for education (discussed in [Chapter 11](#)). First, such a system respects consumer sovereignty by allowing individuals to choose the health plan that best matches their taste rather than forcing them into one government-provided option. Second, such a system promotes efficiency in medical care delivery by allowing individuals to shop across plans. Both HMOs and

Medicare will have to produce care as efficiently as possible so that they can offer the lowest possible premiums to attract enrollees. There is less incentive to do so under today's Medicare program because enrollees pay the same premium amount regardless of which option they choose.

Finally, such a system solves the problem of "appropriate" reimbursement levels for managed care plans by simply letting the market work. For example, the government would simply announce that it would reimburse the amount of the median-cost plan in the area. Plans would then compete to have low costs in order to attract enrollees, and after this competition, the government could simply find the median price and set that as its reimbursement level. There would be no more guessing at the right reimbursement level that fits all HMOs.

Offsetting these positive attributes of health care choice are two clear concerns. The first is adverse selection. If the government simply reimburses a flat amount and makes individuals pay on the margin for more expensive plans (or allows them to pocket savings on less expensive plans), then we run into the same problem that we first discussed in the context of Harvard University in [Chapter 12 \(pp. 346–347\)](#): healthy individuals choose the less expensive plans, raising costs even further for sicker individuals, who prefer the more generous plans.

The bottom panel of [Table 16-3](#) illustrates what the premium support system might look like after adverse selection has taken its toll. The healthiest individuals have moved into plan A, lowering its costs further to \$1,600 per year. Some of these individuals came from plan B, so plan B now has sicker enrollees on average, and its costs have risen to \$2,100. A few individuals from plan C might have moved to plan A, and more from plan C have moved to plan B, so plan C now has just the sickest enrollees, and its costs have risen to \$3,000. Now, with the voucher amount tied to the median-cost plan, those in plan A get a rebate of \$500 per year, while those in plan C must pay \$900 per year.

**TABLE 16-3 Premium Support Systems with and without Adverse Selection**

**Full-choice Medicare (before adverse selection)**

Plan	Plan cost (per person)	Voucher (median plan cost)	Individual payment
A	\$1,800	\$2,000	-\$200
B	\$2,000	\$2,000	0
C	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$500

**Full-choice Medicare (after adverse selection)**

Plan	Plan cost (per person)	Voucher (median plan cost)	Individual payment
A	\$1,600	\$2,100	-\$500
B	\$2,100	\$2,100	0
C	\$3,000	\$2,100	\$900

Under a typical premium support system, individuals pay the difference between the cost of their plan and the median-cost plan, as shown in the top panel. Adverse selection, however, will cause sicker patients to choose the most expensive plans, making these plans even more expensive, while the least costly plans fall in price as they are chosen by healthier individuals. In the long term, a voucher system thus ends up rewarding the healthy and costing the sick more (bottom panel).

In a system that reimburses the cost of the median health plan offered, the adverse selection problem could lead to very large rebates for the healthy (who generally choose plan A) and very large costs for the sick (who generally choose plan C). At its heart, therefore, this adverse selection problem is primarily an income distribution issue: Are we willing to permit the healthier elderly to save money and the sicker elderly to pay more in order to introduce

competition into the Medicare system? The appropriate level of plan choice in Medicare reflects the trade-off between the benefits of competition and the costs of redistribution from the sick to the healthy.<sup>31</sup>

The second major concern is poor decision making by seniors. In the typical economics model, more choice can only make individuals better off, but there is a growing body of literature in behavioral economics that says additional choices can worsen the outcome of the decision process. Studies in a wide variety of contexts show that more choices lead to less participation in a market and in less satisfaction with the choices that are made. The literature on Medicare Part D reviewed in [Abaluck and Gruber \(2016\)](#) shows that seniors facing the large choice sets of prescription drug plans (typically about 50 options) are doing a poor job in making their choices and are not learning how to choose better over time. And follow-up studies in the broader health insurance context confirm these “choice inconsistencies”: most striking is evidence that shows that individuals frequently choose “dominated” plans in their health insurance choice sets, that is, plans that are worse along every possible dimension than other available alternatives.<sup>32</sup>

In principle, both of these problems can be solved with technical fixes. Redistribution due to adverse selection could be offset by appropriate risk adjustment, whereby insurers who enroll the sickest patients receive transfers from insurers who enroll the healthiest ones. There have been enormous advances in risk adjustment in recent years, and very sophisticated approaches to adjustment are now used by the government and private insurers. Even these sophisticated adjustors are very imperfect, however, so that it is impossible to offset fully the health risk differences across plans.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, poor decision making by seniors could be addressed with proper “decision support” tools that carefully guide customers through the complicated aspects of their insurance plan decision. Such tools are still in their infancy, however, with little evidence to date that they have dramatically improved insurance decision making. ■

## Gaps in Medicare Coverage

While most of the policy debate around Medicare has focused on cost control, another important source of debate has been whether and how to enrich the Medicare benefits package. Medicare insurance is significantly less generous than most private insurance because of its high copayments and deductibles and because it leaves some medical goods and services uncovered. Individuals fill these coverage gaps in Medicare in one of three ways:

1. Low-income elderly individuals are entitled to more generous coverage under the Medicaid program or through subsidies to private prescription drug plans.
2. About 16% of Medicare-eligible retirees over 65 are covered by retiree health insurance from their former employers, which fills in many of these gaps.
3. Many retirees not covered by Medicaid or their own retiree health insurance buy individual “Medi-gap” policies from insurance companies that fill these gaps.

An important problem with these three ways of filling the gaps in Medicare coverage is that they exert a *negative financial externality* on the Medicare program. As discussed earlier, patient coinsurance for medical care costs reduces the total amount of medical care used by Medicare enrollees. Thus, when other forms of insurance cover Medicare’s deductibles and

coinsurance, the amount of medical care used increases. Because the costs of most of this medical care (what is spent beyond copayments) is covered by Medicare, there is a negative externality imposed on Medicare by these other forms of insurance: those holding this supplementary insurance raise Medicare costs without bearing the costs of doing so. If I have to pay \$20 for my \$100 doctor's visit under the traditional Medicare plan, I may not go to the doctor, so Medicare incurs no costs; but if my Medi-gap policy covers that \$20, then I will go, and the Medicare program will see its costs increase by \$80 through no action of its own. The availability of Medi-gap has caused me to spend \$80 more of Medicare's money, but my Medi-gap insurer and I bear none of this \$80 in increased public sector costs. [Cabral et al. \(2018\)](#) show that having Medi-gap increases an individual's Medicaid spending by 22%.

## 16.5 Long-Term Care

The discussion of health care thus far in this chapter has focused on acute medical care, such as for flu or a heart attack. A growing share of medical spending, however, is devoted to chronic long-term care needs, such as nursing home stays for the elderly and disabled. In 1960, only 3.4% of health care dollars were spent on [long-term care](#). In 2016, 8% of health care spending, or \$255.1 billion per year, was on long-term care.<sup>34</sup>

### long-term care

Health care delivered to the disabled and elderly for their long-term rather than acute needs, either in an institutional setting (a nursing home) or in their homes.

This care is delivered primarily in two forms:

1. *Institutional care* provided in nursing homes. Reimbursement of the cost of such institutions (where infirm individuals live full-time) accounts for 66% of long-term care costs. Medicaid is the primary insurer of nursing home costs, covering 48% of such costs nationally; Medicare pays only for the small share of costs associated with the first 100 days in a nursing home.<sup>35</sup>
2. *Home health care*, where nurses and other aides provide care in the patient's home, accounts for the remaining 34% of long-term care costs. Medicare is the primary insurance payer for home health care, covering 43% of such costs nationally through its Part A home health care benefit.<sup>36</sup> Since 1980, there has been an enormous shift from institutional to home health care.

## Financing Long-Term Care

The major debate over long-term care is about financing. Currently, nursing home costs are financed mostly by private payers (individual self-insurance and, to a small but growing extent, private long-term care insurance) and by Medicaid. Individuals who enter nursing homes begin by paying costs out of their own savings; usually those savings are rapidly drawn down by nursing home stays, which cost on average more than \$89,297 per year.<sup>37</sup> When savings are drawn below a threshold level, individuals qualify for state programs that pick up the cost of nursing homes under Medicaid. Individuals are therefore insured against nursing home costs, but only if they use up all their personal savings first. In this sense, Medicaid imposes an implicit tax on assets: Medicaid will provide financing only once assets are low, so having a lot of assets implies forgoing the right to a government-financed nursing home stay.

This financing system has several problems. First, those who wish to leave money behind when they die have no protection against losing their entire estate to nursing home costs. Second, individuals have an incentive to cheat by hiding their wealth in forms that cannot be found or accessed by Medicaid authorities, thereby more quickly qualifying for public insurance while preserving their wealth. Finally, this system *crowds out* savings for old age because people can qualify for Medicaid only once they have spent their wealth. This situation parallels our discussion of education in [Chapter 11](#): it leads those who would like to save for a somewhat higher-quality nursing home when they are old to not save at all instead so they can take advantage of the free Medicaid entitlement. There is a private long-term care insurance market that, in principle, could solve these difficulties. Despite rapid growth in the past decade, however, this market remains small, paying only about 8.1% of nursing home

costs.<sup>38</sup> There are many potential causes of failure in this market, most notably adverse selection based on private information about the likely risk of nursing home stays. Thus, there may be an argument for replacing the government's current patchwork of long-term care financing with a social insurance system. As always, the cost of such a move would be increased by moral hazard, in the form of increased and longer-term use of nursing homes by the elderly if the costs of such care are insured.<sup>39</sup> There was an attempt to provide such a program as part of the ACA, labeled the "CLASS Act," but it was not implemented based on concerns about its financial sustainability.

## 16.6 Health Care Reform and the ACA

The United States has struggled with fundamental health care reform for almost a century, since early reform efforts in 1915. As reviewed in [Starr \(2011\)](#), the ACA was viewed as a culmination of that struggle, but continued controversy over the program leaves its ongoing status uncertain.

### The Historical Impasse

Health care reformers in the United States have always struggled to find a compromise between two extremes. On the one side were advocates for a public single-payer health care system such as the one that exists in Canada. Under such a system, the government insures all citizens by putting them into a publicly run health insurance plan. Costs are controlled through an explicit nationwide health care budget that imposes true prospective reimbursement on the health care system as a whole. For example, the government establishes a network of providers (physicians, hospitals, and so on) in each region and pays that network a fixed amount to cover all the medical costs for every person in that region. This amount could then be increased slowly to limit medical care spending growth.

Such a plan has major advantages. First, it fully solves the problem of the uninsured. Second, it reduces the administrative costs inherent in the U.S. medical care system: the administrative costs of Canada's national health insurance system are only 1.3%, compared to the 15% costs on average for private health insurance in the United States.<sup>40</sup> Third, national government-provided insurance has the potential to control costs successfully because cost controls are comprehensive, not piecemeal. Finally, it would solve the many inequities and inefficiencies arising from the patchwork of health insurance coverage available in the United States; for example, it would resolve the problem of job lock, incurred by individuals who stay in jobs that they would otherwise leave because they are afraid to abandon their employer-based insurance.

Public national health insurance also has major disadvantages, however. First, it would require massive new government expenditures because the government would now be paying the insurance costs of every citizen. A large part of this cost would be offset by reduced spending on existing public insurance for the non-elderly, but most would require new public-sector revenues.



Quick Hint One confusing aspect of discussions of public health insurance is that while public expenditures would rise dramatically, there would be an almost equally large (or even larger) reduction in private insurance expenditures. Thus, the rise in total social costs of health care would be small (or even negative) compared with the actual costs to the government. In theory, it is these social costs that matter, not the budgetary expenditures of the government. In practice, however, the expenditures by the government matter for two reasons. First, as discussed at more length in the tax chapters, there may be a deadweight loss arising from the need to increase government revenues to pay for these expenditures that does not arise from private spending (whether that deadweight loss is larger than the administrative gains from public insurance is unclear). Second, and more important in practice, moving from private financing of health insurance through employer expenditures to public financing is like moving from a hidden tax to an explicit tax. While economists can talk until they are blue in the face about how this is just shifting from one payer to another, the typical voter sees it as a massive tax increase and will be reluctant to support it.

Second, nationwide budgeting as a means of controlling health care costs is a very blunt instrument that may not allow doctors to use a technology that is worth its high cost. For example, suppose that the U.S. government had imposed a global budget on health care spending of 5% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1950. While the health care sector would likely be much more efficient today, it is also likely that many beneficial medical advances would not be available. Once again, it seems unlikely that many of us would return to the world of 1950 medical care, even at 1950s prices, if we had the choice. It is possible that we could be saying the same thing in 2066 about not wanting to return to 2018 care at 2018 prices!

Finally, national health insurance faces political hurdles that are likely insurmountable in the near term. The health insurance industry in the United States has revenues of nearly \$900 billion per year, making it a very concentrated interest that would provide a powerful roadblock to this approach. Moreover, the majority of Americans, particularly those working for large firms with a choice of plans, are quite content with their private health insurance. Telling them that they have to give up that insurance so that a minority of Americans can get covered will be a very difficult political sell (as witnessed by the attacks on health care reforms both under President Clinton and President Obama that were based on fear of restricting insurance choice).

At the other extreme have been efforts to focus on purely private-sector solutions to the health care problem (e.g., by providing tax credits to the uninsured that they could use to purchase health insurance). The problem with this approach is that it does not recognize the fundamental market failures that make the private market unable to resolve the problems with our health care system. As noted earlier, for those without employer-sponsored health insurance, there is only a dysfunctional nongroup insurance market in which individuals cannot even obtain coverage if they have been sick. This is the result of adverse selection in the private insurance market and cannot be solved without government intervention. Moreover, there is no evidence that consumer sovereignty alone can control the rapid rise in health care costs because medical spending decisions are fundamentally driven by providers who have a financial stake in the care that individuals receive. A striking recent illustration is provided by a study which showed that use of much more expensive but generally not better radiation therapy for breast cancer was much higher when physicians shared in the financial benefits of undertaking the test.<sup>41</sup>

## The Massachusetts Experiment with Incremental Universalism<sup>42</sup>

The resolution to this conflict was proposed in the commonwealth of Massachusetts in 2006 through a plan that might be called “incremental universalism.” The plan left those who were satisfied with their insurance largely alone but filled in the holes in Massachusetts’s existing system of private and public coverage to move toward universal coverage. Massachusetts had three advantages that made universal coverage more than just a wishful thought. First, the state had a relatively low uninsurance rate of about 9% of the non-elderly, compared to 15% nationally. This low rate implied that fewer subsidies would be required to move to universal coverage. Second, there was a large federal transfer to the state at stake. For years, the federal government had been transferring extra funds to Massachusetts for its safety-net hospitals that cared for the poor, and the Bush administration was threatening to end these extra payments. Federal officials agreed to allow the state to keep these funds if they were used to move toward universal coverage, but only if such a plan was in place by early 2006. Finally,

Massachusetts already had a ready-made funding source in place: the uncompensated care pool. As part of an earlier attempt at health care reform in the late 1980s, the commonwealth had set up a mechanism through which hospitals were able to bill Massachusetts for the costs of treating low-income patients, rather than absorb those costs and pass them on to other payers. This pool had risen to more than \$500 million by 2005. Because universal coverage would lower the ranks of the uninsured, it would eliminate the need for a pool of this size, and some of these funds could be freed up to pay for insurance coverage.

The approach pursued in Massachusetts can be thought of as a “three-legged stool.” The first leg was insurance market regulations, which outlawed preexisting condition exclusions and differential insurance prices based on health status. Indeed, this leg of the stool was already in place in Massachusetts, which was one of five states that mandated “community rating” in insurance markets. The result was predictable: in all five states, insurers had to raise prices dramatically because of adverse selection—if insurers were forced to charge everyone the same price, but individuals could wait until they were sick to buy insurance, then insurers would have to set prices for all participants as if they were sick. As a result, these states became among the most expensive in the nation to purchase nongroup insurance; of these, Massachusetts was by far the most expensive.

The second leg of the stool was therefore an *individual mandate*, or a requirement that all residents purchase health insurance. By mandating purchase, Massachusetts could ensure broad participation in insurance pools, thereby allowing insurers to price fairly to all. In particular, residents for whom insurance is “affordable” have to buy coverage or face a tax penalty of more than \$1,000/year; affordability is defined as a limited percentage of income that individuals have to pay for their lowest-cost insurance option.

Such a **mandate**, while possible in theory, is not feasible in practice without the third leg of the stool: subsidies to make insurance affordable. At the time that the Massachusetts plan was implemented, a family health insurance plan in Massachusetts cost more than 50% of the income level for individuals at the poverty line, and it was impossible for these individuals to spend such a high share of their income on insurance. Therefore, the state introduced a new program (called Commonwealth Care) to provide free insurance coverage for all residents below 150% of the poverty line and provide heavily subsidized coverage for those up to 300% of the poverty line. The insurance package for these low-income populations is a generous one, and individuals are free to choose from one of five “Medicaid Managed Care Organizations” (HMOs targeted to the low-income population). Thus, while the public sector financed much of the cost of insurance for the low-income population, the insurance itself was provided by private insurers. While no subsidies were available to those above 300% of the poverty line, the state introduced a new “Connector,” a health insurance exchange through which individuals could shop more effectively for their nongroup insurance.

**mandate**

A legal requirement for employers to offer insurance or for individuals to obtain some type of insurance coverage.

The results of this reform were striking. About two-thirds of uninsured Massachusetts residents obtained health insurance, and the uninsurance rate fell to about 3% (compared to 18% nationally at the time). Roughly half of the increase in insurance coverage was publicly provided coverage (Medicaid) or government-subsidized private coverage. The other half came through private sources, including an increase in employer-sponsored insurance. Premiums in the nongroup insurance market fell by half relative to national trends. The costs of reform, roughly \$800 million at full implementation, were at the projected level. Taxpayer compliance with the mandate is high (98%) and 60 to 70% of Massachusetts residents support

the law.

Has the law improved the health of the Massachusetts population? A number of studies have found that the Massachusetts reform has improved population health; most recently, [Sommers et al. \(2014\)](#) found significant declines in mortality in Massachusetts relative to neighboring states.

## The Affordable Care Act<sup>43</sup>

The success of the Massachusetts experiment motivated Congress in 2009 to consider a similar approach for the nation. But Congress faced a much larger challenge than did Massachusetts. A much larger percentage of the national population did not have insurance, so the potential costs of reform were much higher. Moreover, because the national population is poorer on average than the Massachusetts population, more sizeable subsidies would have to be provided, raising costs further, and the federal government did not have existing funding that could be readily rededicated to finance this large expansion in coverage. Finally, politicians at the national level were determined to deal not only with insurance coverage but the underlying rise in health care costs as well.

President Obama and congressional Democrats supported a reform effort based on the Massachusetts model. This proposal was the dominant domestic political issue for much of 2009 and into early 2010, and several times appeared to be following the failed path of past reform efforts. But after a bruising political battle, President Obama signed the ACA into law on March 23, 2010.<sup>44</sup>

The ACA makes a number of fundamental reforms to the U.S. health care system. First, it follows the three-legged-stool structure in Massachusetts. It imposes the community rating regulations on the rest of the nation that were already in place in several states, ending the ability of insurers nationwide to exclude pre-existing conditions or to price according to health status. The ACA also includes other insurance market regulations, such as a mandate that family insurance cover child dependents to the age of 26, and a limit on the out-of-pocket costs to which insurance can expose enrollees (currently \$6,600 for individuals and \$13,200 for families).

Second, the ACA imposes an individual mandate on all legal residents to purchase insurance (excluding those for whom the lowest-cost insurance option costs more than 8% of income), and a tax penalty of the larger of \$695 or 2.5% of income for not buying insurance.

Third, the ACA expands the Medicaid system to all legal residents with incomes below 138% of the poverty line (moving the program for the first time to a purely means-tested, rather than categorical, transfer). As noted earlier, however, subsequent to the passage of the ACA, the Supreme Court ruled that such Medicaid expansions were optional for states, and as of 2018, 34 states have undertaken these expansions to date. The law also introduces generous tax credits that help offset the cost of insurance for those with incomes at 133 to 400% of the poverty line. In particular, individuals are required to pay 3% of their income for health insurance at 133% of poverty, and the government will pay the rest; this percentage rises to 9.5% of income by 400% of poverty, with no subsidies above that level.

The ACA is more ambitious than the Massachusetts reform in two critical respects. The first is financing: the legislation includes a variety of mechanisms to finance the \$1 trillion in projected new spending on public insurance and tax credits over the next decade. About half of the financing comes from spending cuts: reductions to the overpayments to Medicare

Advantage insurers discussed earlier in this chapter and a 0.5% reduction in the rate at which Medicare inflates hospital reimbursement over time. The other half comes from revenue increases on four sources: a “free-rider charge” on employers with more than 50 workers, whose employees use tax credits to buy insurance rather than obtain insurance from their employer; excise taxes on the sectors that benefit most from 32 million newly insured customers (medical devices, pharmaceuticals, and private health insurance); an increase in the Medicare payroll tax for the wealthiest Americans (those with family incomes of \$250,000 or more); and a new “Cadillac tax,” an excise tax of 40% levied on the highest-cost health insurance plans.

The second critical difference between the ACA and the Massachusetts plan is the effort to control costs. The following Application highlights the problems that the federal government faces in controlling health care costs and the initial efforts made by the ACA to do so.



## APPLICATION

### Rising Health Care Costs and Cost Control Efforts in the ACA

Since 1950, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for medical care has risen by 2 percentage points more per year than the CPI for all items in the U.S. economy.<sup>45</sup> While managed care did lead to lower costs in the 1990s, medical cost growth in the early twenty-first century greatly outstripped the growth of the U.S. economy, before slowing again since 2007. So what drives ever-increasing health care costs?

There is no simple answer to this question—which is why fundamental cost control in the United States is so difficult. On the one hand, the evidence reviewed in [Chapter 15](#) clearly shows that there is an enormous amount of waste in our medical system and that we could produce similar health outcomes with much less spending. On the other hand, much of what has driven the rapid rise in health care spending in the United States has been *quality-improving technological changes* in the delivery of health care.

An excellent example of this technology effect is shown in the study of the treatment of heart attacks over time by [Cutler et al. \(1998\)](#). The authors note that there is a wide variety of treatments for heart attacks, ranging from the least-intensive (and lowest-cost) treatments, such as drugs and monitoring of heart activity, to the most-intensive (and highest-cost) treatment, bypass surgery. They found that from 1984 to 1991, the average cost of treating heart attacks rose by 4% per year in real terms. But over this same period, the prices paid for each type of heart attack treatment by Medicare (the primary payer, because heart attacks are concentrated in the elderly) actually fell.

The fact that costs rose even though prices for any given treatment were falling shows that there was a shift from cheaper, less-intensive treatments to more expensive, intensive treatments, which raised costs per heart attack treated. For example, the share of patients receiving only low-cost medical management (costing an average of \$9,829 per case) fell from 89 to 59%, and the share receiving high-cost bypass surgery (costing \$28,135 per case) rose from 5 to 13%. At the same time, this shift was associated with a dramatic improvement in the health outcomes of heart attack patients; over this period, the life expectancy of heart attack patients rose by 8 months, or 13% of the baseline life expectancy. Thus, there was a lot of health improvement purchased with the extra dollars spent on heart attack victims. More generally, [Cutler \(2004\)](#) makes a compelling argument that the increase in health spending in

the United States has led to improvements in health that are of even higher value to our citizens, and he asks: Would you rather buy 1950s health care with 1950s prices, or today's health care at today's prices? For almost everyone, the answer is the latter.

How is this evidence consistent with the McAllen versus El Paso, Texas, comparison described in [Chapter 15](#), or the fact that we seem to be on the “flat of the curve” in [Figure 15-7 \(p. 454\)](#), where reduced health care use (because of higher copayments or prospective reimbursement) doesn't seem to cause worse health? The key is to distinguish the *average* value of medical technological advance from the *marginal* value of a given additional procedure. On average, technological advances in medicine have been enormously beneficial, justifying the higher costs that patients pay. But, on the margin, there are many cases of inappropriate and ineffective use of medical care. If the government could figure out some way to target those cases, then perhaps it could reduce the size of the health sector without sacrificing health outcomes.

Such targeting is, however, easier said than done. It is easy to look back and highlight wasteful medical care; it is much harder to look ahead and know which care will be wasteful. For example, analysts who want to show how wasteful our health care system is often cite the fact that 25% of Medicare spending is spent on people in the last six months of their lives. They argue that we are “wasting” money on a population that will die soon anyway.

The problem with this argument is that doctors don't know in advance which of their patients are in the last six months of their lives and which might live for many more years. Only a small share of this spending during the last six months of life is for those we *know* are at the end of life. The rest of the spending may not be wasteful, in that it may have some chance of significantly extending life. If you had an illness that would likely end your life in six months but that might be cured (or be put in remission so that you could live several more years) by using expensive modern medical procedures, wouldn't you want your doctor to try those procedures? Indeed, a recent study by [Einav et al. \(2018\)](#) found that less than 5% of Medicare spending is accounted for by individuals with a predicted mortality rate of more than 50%!

A study that further compared McAllen and El Paso highlights the difficult issues here. [Franzini et al. \(2010\)](#) compared non-elderly patients privately insured by Blue Cross in the two cities and found that, in contrast to seniors on Medicare, spending on this privately insured sample was 7% *lower* in McAllen than in El Paso! This study could be interpreted as saying that even what seems like an easy case, the overspending in McAllen, is much more complicated than would appear from the Medicare comparison; it isn't simply that McAllen wastes money on all its patients. Or it could be interpreted, as the authors do, as being supportive of Atul Gawande's contention of a “culture of money” in patient treatment in McAllen. The traditional Medicare program does not in any way manage the care received by its patients, while private insurers carefully manage care and monitor provider behavior. Perhaps the latter played a major role in constraining costs in McAllen for the non-elderly.

In the face of such difficult issues, the ACA was unable to find a guaranteed way to control health care spending. Instead, the legislation takes four different tacks to move forward on cost control. The first is a cap on the tax exclusion to employer-provided insurance for the highest-cost health insurance plans. In principle, such a cap would operate by including in taxable income the amount of health insurance spending above any cap. In practice, this was deemed too politically difficult; instead, Congress turned to the “Cadillac tax,” which imposes a 40% excise tax on the most expensive insurance plans (roughly the 10% of plans

with the highest premiums) when the tax is implemented. Because this level roughly offsets the tax exclusion for the highest-income taxpayers, it effectively undoes the tax exclusion for that group (although the offset is more than full for lower-tax-rate payers). Moreover, the level of this cap is indexed to the overall price level, not the growth rate of health insurance premiums, so that unless health care cost growth is dramatically slowed, the tax will apply to more and more plans over time.

The second strategy to control spending is the introduction of competitive health insurance exchanges for the purchase of nongroup and small-group insurance coverage. The ACA empowers states with the ability to set up exchanges that mimic the successful Massachusetts Connector, in an effort to reduce insurance prices by introducing a more competitive playing field into the nongroup insurance market.

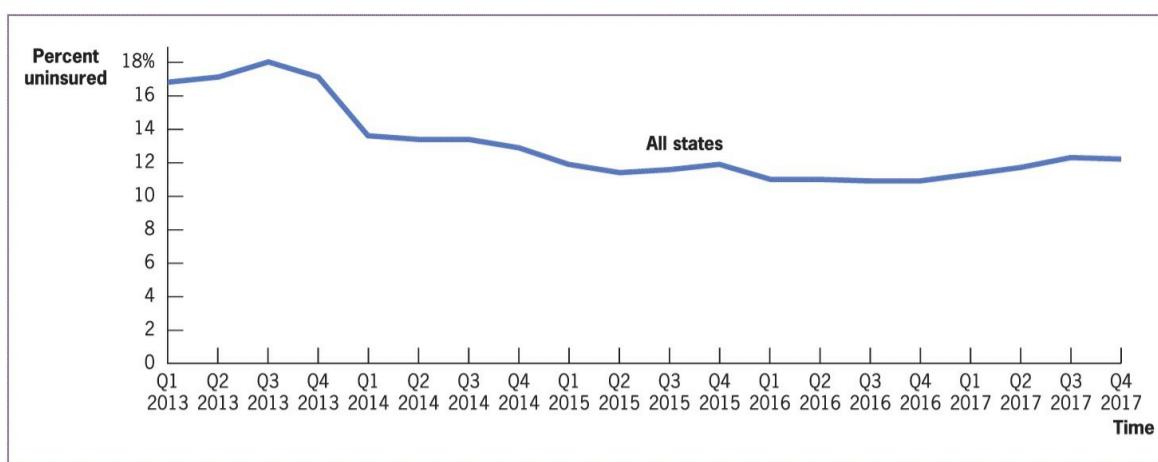
The third is the introduction of the Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAB). This institution is designed to “depoliticize” the setting of payment rates for providers under the Medicare program and to try to control the overall growth rate of the program. It can make recommendations for provider reimbursement that are subject to an up-or-down vote in Congress. The fourth is a massive new investment in “comparative effectiveness” research. The ACA set up the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) and is investing \$3 billion in research designed to understand how health care can be delivered more cost-effectively.

Fourth and finally, the ACA promotes a number of pilot programs of alternative structures for organizing and reimbursing providers that deliver care. Ultimately, the goal is to consider an updated and revised version of the original HMO model discussed in [Chapter 15](#). Physicians and hospitals would be encouraged to combine to form “Accountable Care Organizations,” which would be reimbursed not on the basis of *how much* care they deliver, but on the basis of the *value* of the care that they deliver. These organizations would be reimbursed a fixed dollar amount for each patient in their care, and they would be charged with effectively managing that care. The major perceived innovation over the earlier HMO movement is to tie reimbursement to quality metrics based on both appropriate care (e.g., regular immunizations for children) and outcome metrics (e.g., the mortality rate among enrolled patients). ■

## Early Evidence on the Effects of the ACA

Projecting the impacts of a reform as large as the ACA is difficult, but at the time of enactment of the law in 2014, the CBO projected that the law would lead to 26 million newly insured residents by 2019 (in CBO, 2014). This represented less than 50% of the uninsured in that year, however, because the law does not apply to undocumented aliens, many people are exempt from the mandate, and others will simply pay the penalty rather than obtain insurance.<sup>46</sup> The CBO also projected that the spending cuts and revenue increases in the ACA would more than offset the new spending under the ACA so that the law would reduce the deficit by more than \$100 billion over the first decade and more than \$1 trillion over the next.

Early evidence on the effects of the ACA appeared to support the contentions of the CBO analysis. The number of uninsured in the United States in 2016 fell by about 20 million, with the uninsurance rate declining by more than one-third. [Figure 16-5](#) shows the rate of uninsured since 2013.



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FIGURE 16-5

Trends in Uninsurance for Adults Ages 18–64 • Uninsurance rates among the states declined precipitously from 2014 through 2016, before rising again in 2017.

Data from: [Gallup \(2018\)](#).

Other studies have found large increases in insurance coverage for groups specifically targeted by the ACA, such as young adults covered under their parents' plans or low-income individuals in the set of states that expanded their Medicaid programs. These studies suggest that this coverage has also improved access to care and self-reported health, decreased emergency room use, and increased use of preventive care.<sup>47</sup>

Most interesting are the potential impacts of the ACA on health care cost growth. Cost growth since the passage of the ACA has been historically low: health care spending from 2011–2013 was the lowest on record, with an increase in real per capita health care spending of only 1.4% in 2013.<sup>48</sup> While it is unclear how much credit the ACA gets for this improvement (since the slowdown predicated the law's enactment), some aspects of the law are clearly working to lower costs. One example is the re-admissions penalty under Medicare noted earlier, which is estimated to have saved Medicare \$428 million since 2010.<sup>49</sup> Another example is the rapid growth of the Accountable Care Organizations promoted by the ACA. Two studies suggested that the early ACOs lowered spending by 1.2 to 3.6 percentage points.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the best way to see the potential returns to the reorganization of health care promoted by the ACA is to return one more time to McAllen, Texas, as Atul Gawande did in a recent article.<sup>51</sup> Gawande reported that in the years since his original analysis, there has been a massive slowdown in Medicare spending in McAllen County, with spending falling by \$3,000 per Medicare beneficiary. Gawande attributed at least part of the slowdown to the ACO provisions of the ACA, which provided incentives for physicians to coordinate the care of their most expensive patients.

## The ACA Runs into Trouble

While the ACA went a long way toward achieving its policy goals, it fell far short of its political goal of building support for the “three legged” structure. Public support for the ACA was below 50% both before and after passage, and remained below 50% even as the law was enacted and the coverage gains took place. The unpopularity of the law was a major feature of Republican campaigns at all levels of government in 2016, and was a significant factor in major Republican gains in that election. After the 2016 presidential election, a CNN exit poll found that 82% of people who voted for Trump thought that the ACA “went too far.”<sup>52</sup>

Part of the problem faced by the ACA was that its partial reform structure appears to have created more opponents than supporters. While many gained insurance coverage, much of that coverage was gained through expanded Medicaid or other mechanisms not directly linked in the voter's mind to "Obamacare." On the other hand, some healthy individuals had to pay higher prices in the state exchanges because they were benefitting from the discriminatory structure of the previous market, or because they were buying incomplete insurance products that were outlawed by the ACA. Moreover, there were highly publicized premium increases on the state exchanges in 2016, with average premiums rising by 22%. In fact, these premium increases followed initial premiums in the exchange that were 15% below projected levels, so that the increase was simply a market correction. But such arguments were not compelling in the face of widespread anger with what was perceived as a failure of the ACA.

Once elected, President Trump and the Republican party made ACA repeal a top priority. A variety of bills were introduced that repealed some or all of the core pieces of the three-legged stool. In addition, most proposed legislation went further, moving to a block grant structure for Medicaid that was projected by the CBO to lead to large reductions in enrollment in the existing Medicaid program. As a result, these alternative bills were projected to increase uninsurance in the United States by at least 20 million and perhaps upward of 30 million Americans.

But these bills ran into strong public opposition. Ironically, once the ACA was attacked, it became more popular than ever before, and the large headline numbers for increases in the uninsured led to extreme unpopularity for the repeal bills. As a result, comprehensive repeal of the ACA was unable to pass Congress.

At the same time, the Trump administration and Congress have taken a number of actions that have significantly weakened the ACA. Foremost among these was the repeal of the individual mandate passed as part of tax legislation at the end of 2017. In addition, a series of cuts to various ACA funding streams have led to uncertainty among insurers about reimbursement, reducing their willingness to participate in the exchanges and further raising premiums. The result has been an increase in the rate of uninsurance in 2017. Cost-control elements of the ACA have also been significantly delayed (such as the Cadillac Tax) or repealed (such as the IPAB).

The future of the ACA is highly uncertain. Republicans continue in their staunch opposition to the law, but it is unclear if they can (or even want to) construct a repeal bill that will pass. Democrats continue to defend the law but many of the leading presidential and congressional candidates are turning their attention instead to more comprehensive single-payer insurance plans.

## 16.7 Conclusion

The past few years have seen the most fundamental transformation of the U.S. health care system in many decades. The ACA held the potential to address many shortcomings in our health insurance system, and it greatly reduced the ranks of the uninsured. Evidence from past insurance expansions suggests that the ACA would provide a cost-effective means of improving population health. But the law failed to achieve widespread popularity, and it was significantly scaled back by President Trump and Congress.

But this is just the beginning of a series of reforms that will be needed to address the larger, long-run problem of controlling health care costs. Attempts at cost control have to recognize that the U.S. government already contributes about half of the health care spending in the United States through its Medicare and Medicaid programs. Therefore, important changes in those programs will be required to slow health care cost growth.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The Medicaid program serves low-income families, the low-income disabled, and the low-income elderly.
- Low-income families are eligible for Medicaid if they are on cash welfare; in most states, low-income children and pregnant women are eligible if they have incomes below 200% of the poverty line.
- The Medicaid program has been shown to reduce the number of uninsured people (although there is also significant crowd-out of private health insurance coverage), increase health care utilization, and improve health in a cost-effective manner.
- The Medicare program serves the elderly and disabled, providing universal coverage with significant enrollee copayments.
- The Medicare program has tried to limit its cost growth through restrictions on provider reimbursement, most notably with a move to prospective reimbursement of hospitals (PPS), which has lowered costs without significantly reducing quality of care.
- The Medicare program has also tried to introduce choice across insurance options with limited success. A premium support plan, which would more aggressively induce choice in Medicare, could control costs but would have adverse effects on the living standards of the sickest beneficiaries.
- A large and rising share of medical spending is on long-term care, and there is a major debate over appropriate division of the financing of these costs between individuals and the government.
- The century-long debate over fundamental health care reform in the United States was addressed in many important ways by the ACA. This law builds on a successful reform in Massachusetts to attempt to cover most of the uninsured and repair the market failures in the nongroup insurance market. The law was initially successful in increasing insurance coverage, but recent legislative and regulatory actions have weakened it.
- The longer-run problem still facing the United States, however, is the rapid rise in health care costs. This is a difficult problem to resolve because much of past health care spending growth has resulted in improved health outcomes for the American population. Future reforms will face the challenge of slowing cost growth without sacrificing the health gains made possible by improved health care.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1.  Navigate to the Excel sheet for Table 6 of the Census Bureau report “Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2017,” found at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/p60-264.html>.
  1. Using this spreadsheet, calculate the mean uninsured rate for Medicaid Expansion states, and states that have not expanded, for both 2013 and 2017.
  2. What does the result in part (a) indicate about take-up versus crowd-out during the recent Medicaid expansions enabled by the Affordable Care Act?
2.  In 1997, the Children’s Health Insurance Program was introduced, and through expansions over the next 15 years this program substantially increased children’s access to public health insurance beyond the traditional limits of the Medicaid program. How do you think this affected the job mobility of low- to middle-income parents? How could you empirically investigate this question?
3.  How did the Oregon Medicaid Experiment, described in [Finkelstein et al \(2012\)](#), show that some of the primary welfare gains from Medicaid are due to its role as traditional social insurance that provides consumption smoothing?
4. Explain why take-up rates—the fraction of eligible individuals who enroll in the program—are so much higher for Medicare than for Medicaid.
5. Describe the main components of Massachusetts’ health care reform. In what ways did Massachusetts provide a model for the Affordable Care Act? How was Massachusetts’ experience with reform similar and different to national experience with reform under the Affordable Care Act?
6. Congressman Brown supports pre-existing conditions protections introduced by the Affordable Care Act. These protections force insurers to cover health problems arising from pre-existing conditions, and forbid them from charging people with such health conditions higher prices for insurance. However, he opposes the individual mandate and subsidies introduced by the ACA, arguing that the individual mandate inhibits individual freedom, and subsidies are too costly for the government. He supports repealing the ACA, and re-introducing pre-existing condition protections using new legislation. What do you think might happen if he was successful?
7. What are the similarities between Medicare vouchers and education vouchers (described in [Chapter 11](#))? What are the differences?
8. Since the 1960s, the percentage of U.S. GDP spent on National Health Expenditure has risen from around 5% to around 18% (as of 2016). Is this rapidly expanding share of total GDP of the health sector necessarily evidence of wasteful health care spending? Why or why not?
9. One important goal of the Affordable Care Act was to address rising health care spending. Consult the free-access article “National Health Care Spending In 2016: Spending and Enrollment Growth Slow after Initial Coverage Expansions,” published in *Health Affairs*, at <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.1299>. This article reports aggregate statistics on national health expenditure using data from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.
  1. Consult Exhibit 1. What was the annual growth in national health expenditure in the years prior to and after the Affordable Care Act? In 2014–2015, immediately after the ACA’s main provisions came into effect, what were the areas with greatest growth in expenditure?
  2. Consult Exhibit 2. For each category of insurance coverage in the exhibit (private insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid), what has happened in the years after the ACA to enrollment growth and per-enrollee expenditure growth?
  3. Discuss how these tables shed light on the impact the ACA has had on overall growth in national health

expenditure. How do your findings relate to the various cost-control measures introduced by the ACA that were discussed in the chapter?

10. What explains the change in long-term care hospital discharge patterns depicted in [Figure 16-2](#)? What are the implications for policy?
11. The fact that such a large percentage of U.S. health care costs is spent on people in their last six months of life has led some to claim that the American health care system is “wasteful.” Why might this be an overgeneralization?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

12. Describe the empirical evidence for a relationship between expanding Medicaid eligibility and improving health outcomes. As depicted in [Figure 16-1](#), how strong is the empirical evidence for each of Steps 1–3 in this relationship?

13. Suppose all individuals have a utility function of  $U = \sqrt{C}$ , where  $C$  is the amount of consumption a person has in any given period. There are two types of people: those at high risk, with a 4% chance of accident, and those at low risk, with a 2% chance of accident. Half of individuals are high risk, and half are low risk. The income of all individuals is \$40,000 per year, and a catastrophic accident costs \$30,000 in the year of the accident.

1. Calculate the actuarially fair insurance premium for each type of person, assuming the insurance company can identify who is high risk and who is low risk.
2. How much will a high-risk individual be willing to pay for insurance? A low-risk individual?
3. Suppose a law passes requiring community rating, and all insurance contracts must be priced the same. Insurers are forward-looking, and know about the composition and preferences of people in the insurance market, but are forbidden from using that information to set prices. What would be the price for insurance, and who would purchase insurance?
4. The legislature is considering two possible additional regulations on top of community rating: a mandate, and subsidies. The mandate would charge anyone failing to purchase insurance \$100. The subsidies would give anyone purchasing insurance \$100 to offset the price of the insurance. Under this scheme, what would the price be for insurance and who would purchase it?
5. How do the results above relate to Massachusetts' and the ACA health care reform strategies?

14.  In response to the State Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997, 37 states (including the District of Columbia) expanded Medicaid coverage to children in families below 200% of the poverty line, and even higher thresholds in some states.

1. In some of these states, the eligibility expansions have covered all children. How would you design a quasi-experimental analysis to evaluate the impact of these expansions?
  2. In other states, the eligibility expansions only covered certain age groups of children. How could you design a quasi-experimental analysis to evaluate the impact of these expansions? How could you make this more convincing than the evaluation in part (a)? Explain.
15. After the Medicare program adopted the Prospective Payment System (PPS), researchers observed that people tended to receive less care for any given diagnosed condition.
1. One explanation for this finding is that the PPS provides incentives to provide lower levels of treatment for any given diagnosis. Why would PPS provide these incentives?
  2. Another explanation for this finding is that PPS offers incentives for physicians to diagnose marginal health conditions as more serious than they are. Why would PPS provide these incentives?
  3. Since this reduction in quantity of care was not accompanied by a reduction in observable health outcomes, what, if anything, can you infer about the efficiency of the Medicare program *before* the policy change? Explain your answer.
16. One feature of Medicare coverage is that individuals are responsible for 20% of their Part B (primary physician) costs, without limit. Individuals have traditionally purchased Medi-gap policies that cover this gap by paying for the out-of-pocket costs not covered by Medicare. But some Medi-gap policies did not cover this 20% copayment.

Finkelstein (2002) studied the effects of a federal mandate that Medi-gap plans cover this 20% copayment. She found that this mandate would lead fewer individuals to buy Medi-gap coverage.

1. Why would the mandate lower the demand for Medi-gap coverage?

2. What do you think would be the net effect of this policy on the costs of the Medicare program itself?
17. In 1981, the federal government passed a law that gave states permission to change the structure of their Medicaid program. States could now, if they wished, require Medicaid beneficiaries to enroll in a Medicaid “managed care organization” (MCO), as long as Medicaid recipients were offered a choice of several plans. Medicaid recipients would be required to receive their medical care only through their MCOs. The MCOs would receive fixed, regular payments from the state and, in return, would cover the medical expenses of their Medicaid enrollees.
1. Using what you know about Medicaid and managed care, explain several reasons why policy makers might support the requirement that Medicaid beneficiaries enroll in MCOs.
  2. Again, applying what you know about Medicaid and managed care, how do you think this requirement would affect the decision of people who are eligible to enroll in Medicaid? Be specific about which individuals eligible for Medicaid are likely to change or not change their decision to enroll.
  3. How might this requirement affect overall access to care for Medicaid-eligible patients?
18. The current government-provided system in the country of Puceland provides free health insurance for all children but to no adults. There are two types of adults in Puceland: high earners and low earners. All the 100,000 high earners receive insurance coverage through their employer, but only half of the 100,000 low earners do. The remaining adults are uninsured.
- You are hired to analyze the effectiveness of a proposed plan to offer coverage to all low earners. You have read the economics literature in Puceland and your best estimates are as follows: (1) only 80% of uninsured workers who are offered government health insurance will choose to enroll; (2) 60% of currently insured low earners work at firms that will drop insurance coverage for them after the policy change; the other 40% will remain in their current employer-provided plan; (3) 10% of high earners will choose to become low earners (at firms who do not offer health insurance) and take up the government insurance once they can get it.
1. Estimate the increase in the number of insured adults.
  2. Estimate the dollar cost per additionally insured adult. Why is it so much higher than \$5,000?
  3. Suppose that, without access to any insurance, each adult has a 5% chance of dying in a given year. Access to government-provided health insurance reduces the chance to 3%, while access to employer-provided health insurance reduces it to 2%. If it costs the government \$5,000 to provide health insurance per year to an adult, estimate the dollar cost of the program per life saved.



The icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# CHAPTER 17 Income Distribution and Welfare Programs



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

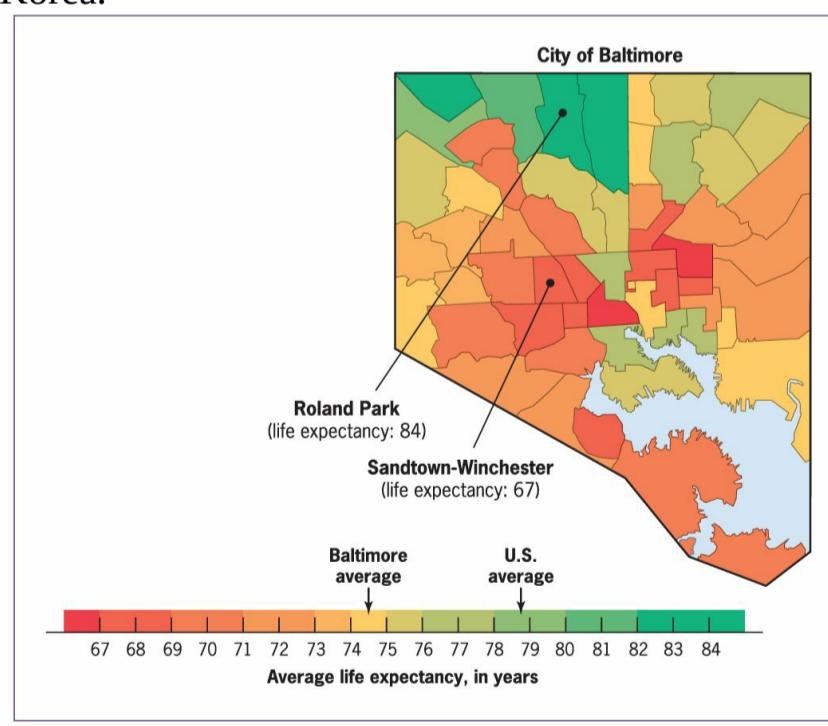
- [17.1 Facts on Income Distribution in the United States](#)
- [17.2 Welfare Policy in the United States](#)
- [17.3 The Moral Hazard Costs of Welfare Policy](#)
- [17.4 Reducing the Moral Hazard of Welfare](#)
- [17.5 Universal Basic Income?](#)
- [17.6 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do we measure the income distribution in the United States?
- What factors determine the moral hazard cost of welfare?
- How can welfare programs be designed to mitigate the moral hazard cost?

The last week of April 2015 was marked by several weeks of violence in Baltimore, Maryland. Sparked by the death of minority prisoner Freddie Gray while in custody of the police, the protests resulted in about 113 police injuries, 486 arrests, and an estimated \$9 million in damage to businesses. But while the death of Freddie Gray may have incited this violence, the larger cause may have been the astounding level of inequality in the city of Baltimore. Even in neighborhoods only several miles apart, life circumstances in Baltimore are dramatically different.

This point is illustrated vividly by [Figure 17-1](#), which shows the life expectancy by neighborhood for the city of Baltimore. Areas in green represent above-average life expectancy, while areas in red and orange represent below-average life expectancy. The vast differences across very nearby neighborhoods are immediately apparent. For example, in Freddie Gray's neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester, the average life expectancy is 67 years; only three miles away in the wealthy Baltimore neighborhood of Roland Park, life expectancy averages 84 years. In other words, just three miles marks the difference between a life expectancy that is above the U.S. average and one that is well below that in North Korea, one of the poorest countries in the world—and at about the same level as the U.S. average in 1948. This is not an isolated example: 15 Baltimore neighborhoods have a life expectancy below that of North Korea.<sup>1</sup>



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■ FIGURE 17-1

Life Expectancies in Baltimore, 2015 • Life expectancy varies hugely by neighborhood in the city of Baltimore. Areas in green represent above average life expectancy, while areas in red and orange represent below average. Roland Park's average life expectancy is closest to that of Japan, while Sandtown-Winchester is below that of both North Korea and Bhutan.

Data from: [Justice Policy Institute and Prison Policy Initiative \(2015\)](#) and [Marton and Harris \(2015\)](#).

This enormous discrepancy represents huge underlying differences in economic resources in these different neighborhoods. In 2015, the median household income in Freddie Gray's neighborhood of Sandtown-Winchester was \$24,000 per year, compared with more than \$107,000 in the more affluent Roland Park neighborhood. More than half of residents in Sandtown-Winchester live below \$25,000 per year, while fewer than 10% of those in Roland Park do. And while only 2.5% of children in Roland Park live below the poverty line (a measure of absolute deprivation described later), 54.8% of children in Sandtown-Winchester do. Writing about the recent violence, reporter Michael Fletcher said, "In the more than three decades I have called this city home, Baltimore has been a combustible mix of poverty, crime, and hopelessness, uncomfortably juxtaposed against rich history, friendly people, venerable institutions and pockets of old-money affluence."<sup>2</sup>

This dramatic discrepancy in resources raises a central issue for public finance. In [Chapter 2](#), we discussed why the socially efficient outcome of a nation's economy was not necessarily the outcome that maximizes social welfare (which here means well-being). If society cares equally about the utility of all its members, then social welfare may be maximized by redistributing from high-income individuals (for whom the marginal utility cost of losing a dollar is low) to low-income individuals (for whom the marginal utility gain of getting a dollar is high). Arguments for redistribution are even stronger if society cares in particular about low-income persons, a philosophy embodied in the Rawlsian social welfare function discussed in [Chapter 2](#).

The private sector, however, is unlikely to provide such income redistribution because redistribution faces the same free-rider problems encountered in private provision of other public goods. The consumption of the poor can be viewed as a public good: I would like the poor to consume more, but I would prefer others to provide them with the means to do so because I would then get the benefits of seeing the poor consume more but not bear the costs of their increased consumption. If everyone feels this way, then there will be too little private redistribution because everyone will be relying on others to contribute. As with the public goods discussed in [Chapter 7](#), there may be a role for the government in solving this free-rider problem by taxing its citizens to provide public redistribution.

The most well-known source of redistributing income to low-income citizens is through *cash welfare*. (Note that the use of the term *welfare* in this context does *not* refer to a measure of economic well-being, but rather to government programs that make cash payments to low-income populations.) At its peak, cash welfare spending by the federal government amounted to only 1.7% of the federal budget. Yet virtually no other public policy intervention has generated as much controversy as cash welfare programs.

To some conservatives, the negative effects of cash payments to low-income single mothers are responsible for many of the social ills in the United States. Newt Gingrich, then the newly elected Speaker of the House, said in a televised address on the steps of the Capitol on April 7, 1995, "The welfare system's greatest cost is the human cost to the poor. In the name of 'compassion,' we have funded a system that is cruel and destroys families. Its failure is reflected by the violence, brutality, child abuse, and drug addiction in every local TV news broadcast."<sup>3</sup>

To some liberals, it is wrong to force low-income families off welfare and into the labor market. In a debate on work requirements for welfare recipients, Massachusetts senator Edward Kennedy said, "We cannot throw workers into low-wage, dead-end jobs and expect them to support their families. We cannot force workers into jobs for which they have no

skills and expect them to succeed.”<sup>4</sup> Who is right? Has cash welfare played a constructive or destructive role in the lives of lower-income groups?

This chapter begins with facts on the distribution of income in the United States and around the world to motivate our concern with income redistribution. We then discuss the effects, both in theory and in reality, of alternative means of income redistribution. We focus initially on cash welfare programs, but also discuss alternatives, such as food stamps (SNAP), free child care, and work training. Finally, we review the evidence on the effects of the radical reform of our nation’s welfare system in 1996.

# 17.1 Facts on Income Distribution in the United States

To understand appropriate government involvement in income redistribution, it is useful to start with the facts on distribution of income in the United States.

## Relative Income Inequality

There are two ways of thinking about the distribution of income: relative income inequality and absolute deprivation. **Relative income inequality** measures the share of a nation's total income that accrues to the poor relative to the rich. The facts on relative income inequality for the United States over time are given in [Table 17-1](#), which shows the share of aggregate income accruing to each income quintile (each fifth of the income distribution) in the United States. For instance, in 1967, the bottom fifth of the U.S. income distribution accrued only 4% of aggregate income in that year. The top 20%, by contrast, accrued almost 44% of aggregate income. In a society with no relative income inequality, each quintile would accrue an equal share of income (20%). Relative income inequality is measured by the difference between the share of income accruing to the higher-income groups and the share accruing to lower-income groups.

**relative income inequality**

The amount of income that the poor have relative to the rich.

TABLE 17-1 Share of Aggregate Income Received by Quintile, 1967–2016

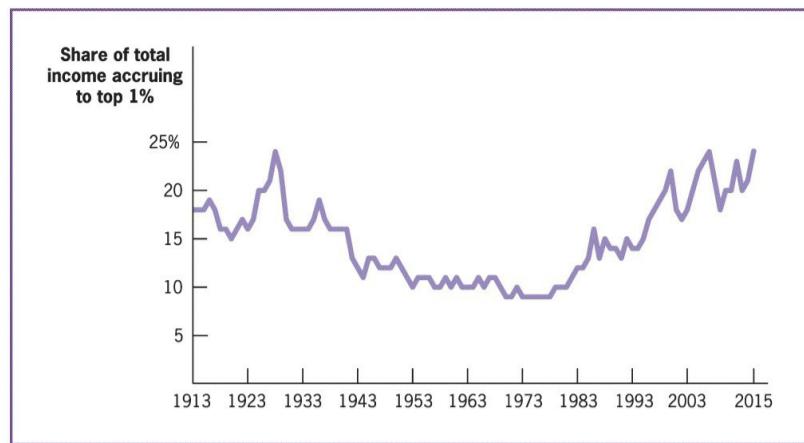
Income	1967	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2016
Lowest 20%	4.0	4.4	4.3	4.0	3.9	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.3	3.1
Second 20%	10.8	10.5	10.3	9.7	9.6	9.1	8.9	8.6	8.5	8.3
Third 20%	17.3	17.1	16.9	16.3	15.9	15.2	14.8	14.6	14.6	14.2
Fourth 20%	24.2	24.8	24.9	24.6	24.0	23.3	23.0	23.0	23.4	22.9
Highest 20%	43.8	43.2	43.7	45.3	46.6	48.7	49.8	50.4	50.2	51.5

Data from: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2018c\)](#), Table H-2.

In 1967, the poorest 20% of households received 4% of the national income, and the richest 20% received almost 44%. In 2016, the poorest 20% received 3.1% of the national income, and the richest 20% received 51.5%.

There has been an interesting evolution of relative income inequality over time in the United States. From the late 1960s through the late 1970s, income inequality was falling as the share of income accruing to the bottom income quintile grew and the share accruing to the top income quintile fell. Since 1980, however, income inequality has been rising sharply: the share of income accruing to the bottom income quintile has fallen by more than 25 to 3.1% of income in 2016, while the share of income accruing to the top income quintile has risen by about 17 to 51.5% of income in 2016.

Much of this inequality has been driven by enormous increases in income at the very top of the income distribution. [Figure 17-2](#) shows data from [Alvaredo et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Wolff \(2017\)](#) on the share of income accruing to the top 1% of earners in the United States over time.<sup>5</sup> The top 1% earned almost one-quarter of all of the income in the United States in the mid-1920s. This share then fell dramatically during the Great Depression and World War II and stayed low throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It then began to rise again in the 1980s and has continued to rise ever since to the point where it is similar to the levels from the 1920s.<sup>6</sup>



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FIGURE 17-2

Share of Aggregate Income Accruing to the Top 1% • The top 1% earned almost one-quarter of all of the income in the United States in the mid-1920s. This share fell dramatically during the Great Depression and World War II, stayed low for decades, then began to rise in the 1980s. It has continued to rise ever since, more than doubling since 1975.

Data from: [Alvaredo et al. \(2013\)](#), Figure 1 and [Wolff \(2017\)](#), Table 2.

Relative income inequality in the United States is much higher than it is in other developed nations, as [Table 17-2](#) shows. Looking at the unweighted average row in [Table 17-2](#), we see that, in 2016, the poorest 10% of households in the United States received little more than half the share of income of the poorest 10% of households in the typical industrialized nation (1.6% versus 2.9%).<sup>7</sup> In fact, the bottom share of households in the United States all received a smaller share of the nation's income than they did in all the OECD nations except Mexico. The difference was shifted to the top 10% of households in the United States, which accrued 4.4% more of the nation's income than their OECD counterparts (28.9% versus 24.5%).

TABLE 17-2 Income Share in Total Income for OECD Nations

Country (2016)	Income Share in Total Income					
	Bottom 10%	Bottom 20%	Bottom 40%	Top 40%	Top 20%	Top 10%
Austria	3.2	8.7	22.7	59.2	36.1	21.9
Belgium	3.7	8.9	22.6	59	35.3	20.9
Canada	2.6	7.2	20	62.3	39	23.9
Czech Republic	4	9.8	24.1	58.1	35.6	21.5
Denmark	3.9	9.6	23.7	58.2	35.7	22
Finland	4	9.7	24	58	35.6	21.7
France	3.5	8.7	22.2	60.5	38.6	24.4
Germany	3.3	8.3	21.8	60.5	37.8	23.2
Greece	2	6.4	18.9	63.9	40.5	25.1
Hungary	3.1	8.3	22	60.2	37	22.5
Italy	1.8	6.3	19.1	63.2	39.6	24.4
Korea	2.4	7.2	21	60.5	36.8	22
Luxembourg	3	8	21.1	61.5	38.7	23.7
Mexico	1.7	5	14.3	72	51.7	36.4
New Zealand	2.9	7.3	19.2	64.5	42.2	27.5
Norway	3.3	8.8	23.3	58.5	36.2	22.5
Poland	3	8	21.5	60.6	37.2	22.3
Portugal	2.7	7.1	19.6	63.7	41.1	25.7
Slovak Republic	3.3	9.2	23.9	57.4	34.2	20
Sweden	3.6	8.8	22.6	59.5	36.9	23.1
Turkey	2.3	6.1	16.6	68.5	47	31.6
United Kingdom	2.5	7	19.1	64.4	42.2	27.7

United States	1.6	5.3	16.3	67.5	44.8	28.9
OECD	2.9	7.7	20.6	62.1	39.3	24.5

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018a\)](#).

According to these data, the share of income received by the bottom percentages in the United States in 2016 was smaller than in any other nation. The share of income received by the top 10% in the United States was higher than in any nation except Mexico and Turkey and was 18% higher than the OECD average.

## Absolute Deprivation and Poverty Rates

The second way to think about income distribution is to think about **absolute deprivation**: how much the poor have relative to some measure of a reasonable “minimally acceptable” income level. In the United States, the standard for measuring absolute deprivation is the **poverty line**. This measure was developed in 1964 by Mollie Orshansky, a research analyst at the Social Security Administration, who wanted to compute a minimal living standard for the United States. She started with nutritional standards for a minimally acceptable diet and applied average national food costs to price out the cost of buying this bundle of goods for families of different sizes. She then determined that the average (not just poor) family of three or more persons spent one-third of their after-tax income on food, so she multiplied the food bundle cost by 3. This became the poverty line. These same amounts have simply been updated for inflation ever since, resulting in the poverty lines we see in [Table 17-3](#). In the United States in 2015, a family of four with an annual income below \$25,100 was considered to be living in poverty.

**absolute deprivation**

The amount of income that the poor have relative to some measure of “minimally acceptable” income.

**poverty line**

The federal government’s standard for measuring absolute deprivation.

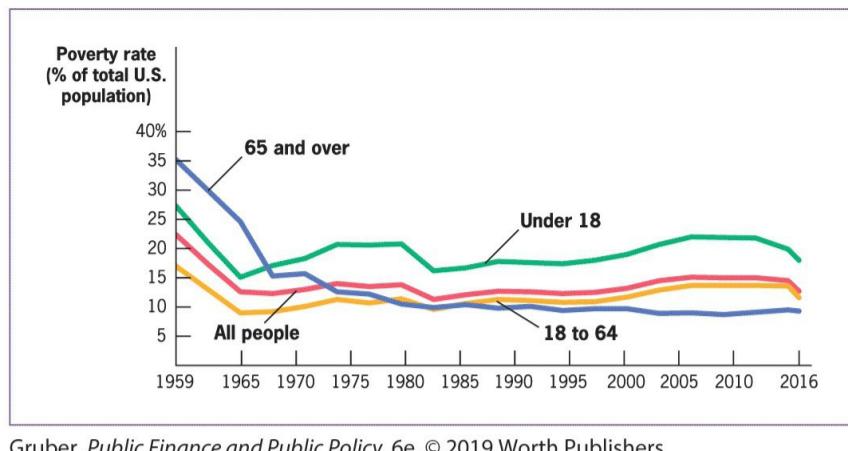
**TABLE 17-3 Poverty Lines by Family Size (2018)**

Size of Family Unit	Poverty Line
1	\$12,140
2	16,460
3	20,780
4	25,100
5	29,420
6	33,740
7	38,060
8	42,380
For each additional person, add	4,320

A family of four with an income of less than \$25,100 per year is considered to be living below a minimum acceptable standard in the United States.

Data from: [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2018a\)](#).

[Figure 17-3](#) shows the evolution of the poverty rate in the United States for all persons, as well as for two particular age groups: those under 18 and those 65 and older. The poverty rates fell both for all persons and for both age groups in the 1960s and early 1970s. From 1973 to 1995, however, all individuals (and especially children under 18) lived in increasingly poor circumstances. For children, the poverty rate rose from 14.4% in 1973 to greater than 20.8% in 1995. For the elderly, on the other hand, poverty rates continued to decline throughout this period. The late 1990s saw improvements for all groups, but these improvements were then reversed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Poverty rates began to decline again after 2010.



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■ FIGURE 17-3

Poverty Rates over Time in the United States • The poverty rate for all, and especially for children, fell substantially during the 1960s, then rose steadily until the mid-1990s, fell in the last half of the 1990s, and then rose again early in the twenty-first century. In contrast, the poverty rate for the elderly fell steadily during this entire period. All poverty rates began to decline again after 2010.

Data from: [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2018a\)](#), Table 3.



## APPLICATION

### Problems in Poverty Line Measurement

Despite its humble origins, the *poverty line* has remained a mainstay of U.S. public policy, with its exact placement influencing billions of dollars of government spending each year. There have, however, been a wide variety of criticisms of the poverty line, which suggests that it would be valuable to revisit its calculation.<sup>8</sup> These criticisms are of three types:

- *The bundle has changed:* The share of food in family consumption has fallen over time relative to clothing, shelter, medical care, and other goods: by 2016, the typical family spent only 13% of its budget on food, down from 33% in 1964, when the poverty line was calculated.<sup>9</sup> As a result, using three times the cost of food is no longer an appropriate way to compute a minimum standard of living. A better solution might be to use the cost of a “typical” bundle of consumption for families in each year and then to take a certain percentage of that to be the poverty line.
- *Differences in cost of living across areas are ignored:* In 2015, the median single-family home in the Boston-Cambridge-Newton area of Massachusetts cost \$495,900. In that same year, the median single-family home in St. Louis, Missouri, cost only \$185,700.<sup>10</sup> Yet the same poverty line applies to both locations. These differences in the cost of living across areas should be included in a true measure of the cost of achieving a minimal standard of living.
- Income definition is incomplete: The computation of the poverty rate compares an individual’s cash income to the poverty standard. Cash income is not a true representation of the individual’s available resources, however, for several reasons. First, such a representation must also include other noncash transfers provided to the individual, such as through the Medicaid program. If two individuals have the same cash income but only one of them has Medicaid coverage, then the individual with Medicaid is effectively richer because she doesn’t have to pay for medical costs, and this transfer

should be reflected in computing poverty. Second, the income that is compared to the poverty line should also include the cost of earning a living. If two individuals have the same job and earn the same wage but one of them has to pay more for child care in order to hold that job, then she has fewer resources available to spend, so the measure of her income should be adjusted to reflect that fact. Third, what determines a family's ability to consume is their after-tax income, not their before-tax cash income. Because poverty rates are designed to measure the ability of a family to achieve a given standard of consumption, they should be computed based on after-tax income.

In the early 1990s, these types of problems with the poverty line motivated a blue-ribbon panel appointed by the National Academy of Sciences to recommend radical changes to the way the U.S. poverty line is calculated, in accord with the suggestions just given. These recommendations have run into two major problems, however. First, these changes are difficult to carry out in practice. How, for example, can we include the true value of Medicaid in someone's income? It is clear from our analysis of the economic theory of social insurance in [Chapter 12](#) that the true value of Medicaid is not just the cost of medical bills reimbursed, but rather the utility benefit of having consumption smoothed across healthy and ill states, the value of which is very difficult to compute.

The second major problem is the political ramifications of making these changes. For example, accounting for area variation in the cost of living would mean that the poverty rate would go up sharply on the East and West coasts and fall in most of the South and Midwest. Such a shift would lead to an enormous relative redistribution in government income transfers across regions of the country, with more transfers to the newly poor East and West Coasts and fewer transfers to the newly rich South and Midwest. Such changes would be politically unpopular with those in the South and Midwest. Thus, such radical changes in the distribution of government resources may not be politically feasible, even if it makes for good economic science.<sup>11</sup> ■

## What Matters—Relative or Absolute Deprivation?

An important question for government redistribution policy is whether relative or absolute deprivation is the more appropriate measure for driving redistribution: Should the government care about how much the poor have relative to the rich or relative to some absolute standard? It seems intuitive that it is the latter that matters for government policy. After all, once the poor can reach an acceptable level of consumption, why does it matter how much money the rich have? If the income of the rich doesn't matter, given an acceptable level of consumption by the poor, then it is not relative income inequality that a nation cares about, but rather some measure of absolute deprivation.

There are two reasons relative income inequality measures may matter. First, the “minimal” standard of living for a society may be best defined relative to the standard of living of others. In 1950, a poor family could be living a minimally acceptable life without a television or a car, but that is clearly not true today. This concern could be addressed, as noted in the previous application, by defining the poverty line as a fraction of the “typical” consumption bundle in the United States, which would move us toward a relative income measure.

Second, fairness itself may matter, independent of absolute living standards. Consider an experiment run on a set of monkeys, who were taught to hand over pebbles in exchange for cucumber slices—which they were happy to do. Then one monkey was offered an even better

deal, a pebble in exchange for an even tastier grape—and he happily took it. But when the second money was then offered the standard deal of a pebble for a cucumber slice, he refused, sometimes even throwing the cucumber back in disgust. Given this response, it is perhaps not surprising that air rage incidents on airplanes are three times as likely when coach passengers pass by a first class cabin on the way to their seats.<sup>12</sup> For both humans and monkeys, what matters is not what they get, but how that compares to what others have.

A set of really interesting studies document that, as a result, the level of inequality in society is itself negatively related to measures of well-being. There are a number of studies, for example, that found that mortality rates across nations or states were highly correlated with the degree of income inequality.<sup>13</sup> A study by Luttmer (2004) also found that individuals' self-reported well-being rose as their own income rose, but fell as their neighbors' incomes rose, suggesting that it is relative income, and not absolute income, that determines well-being.<sup>14</sup> Another study of medical residents suggested that they were less likely to choose to relocate to cities where their income placed them lower in the income distribution.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, a study of cash transfers to households in Kenya and Uganda found that families receiving the transfers were happier—but their neighbors, who didn't receive the transfers, were sadder. The net result was that even though overall village income rose, average village life satisfaction fell!<sup>16</sup>

These types of findings have profound implications for public policy because they indicate that widening income distribution by itself lowers social welfare. Recent studies suggest one possible explanation for why this happens, which economists Marianne Bertrand and Adair Morse call “trickle down consumption”: households spend more when they are exposed to others with higher incomes, ultimately lowering their disposable income in an effort to “keep up with the Joneses.”<sup>17</sup> A particularly striking example comes from a study finding that neighbors of lottery winners in Canada had a higher probability of going bankrupt, and that the larger the winnings, the higher the likelihood that neighbors spent themselves into bankruptcy!<sup>18</sup>

## 17.2 Welfare Policy in the United States

Governments around the world play an important role in redistributing income. Indeed, if you ignore taxes and transfers, the distribution of income in the United States looks similar to that of more egalitarian European nations.<sup>19</sup> But when we include taxes and transfers, the distribution in the United States becomes very different from those nations. Post-tax and transfer distribution is so much more equal in those European countries for two reasons: a more generous distribution of resources to the disadvantaged and, to a lesser extent, higher taxes on the wealthy. This difference highlights the important role that government programs that redistribute resources to lower-income groups play around the world. In this section, we briefly discuss the nature of programs that redistribute income to low-income groups in the United States; the other side of the equation, taxing higher-income groups to finance these programs, is discussed in the next set of chapters on taxation.

In discussing welfare policy, it is important to understand two characteristics of each policy:

1. *Categorical and means-tested programs:* **Categorical welfare** programs are programs that are restricted by some demographic characteristic, such as single motherhood, disability, and so on. **Means-tested welfare** programs are programs that are tied to income and asset levels. A means-tested program might specify, for example, that benefits are available only to those with incomes below the poverty line. Most redistributive programs in the United States, such as cash welfare for low-income single mothers, are both categorical (single mothers) and means tested (low-income).
2. *Cash and in-kind programs:* **Cash welfare** programs provide cash benefits to recipients. **In-kind welfare** programs deliver goods, such as medical care or public housing, rather than money.

### categorical welfare

Welfare programs restricted by some demographic characteristic, such as single motherhood or disability.

### means-tested welfare

Welfare programs restricted only by income and asset levels.

### cash welfare

Welfare programs that provide cash benefits to recipients.

### in-kind welfare

Welfare programs that deliver goods, such as medical care or housing, to recipients.

## Cash Welfare Programs<sup>20</sup>

There are two major cash welfare programs in the United States: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). A third redistributive program, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which subsidizes labor supply for low-income families, is discussed as part of tax policy in [Chapter 21](#).

### Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

The TANF program, which is jointly funded by the federal and state governments, provides support to low-income families with children in which one biological parent is absent.<sup>21</sup> As part of a major overhaul of welfare in 1996 (discussed in detail later in this chapter), TANF replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which was begun in 1935 to support widows and orphans. In the decades that followed, however, the AFDC program had become focused primarily on women who were either divorced or never married. As part of the 1996 welfare reform, states are allowed to use their TANF funds for

either single mothers or two-parent families, although the vast majority of recipients remain single-parent families (only 4.7% of recipient families have two parents present). TANF is a relatively small program compared with the other government programs we have been discussing in this section of the book, with expenditures of \$16.5 billion in 2015.<sup>22</sup>

Families become eligible for TANF by having sufficiently low income, in which case they qualify for a cash payment from the state, called a **benefit guarantee**. For a family with one parent and two children, for example, the benefit guarantee in 2016 varied from \$204 per month in Arkansas to \$1,590 per month in Alaska; in no state were the payments from this program high enough to lift a family over the poverty line.<sup>23</sup> This payment is means-tested: it is reduced as the family's income from other sources grows. The **benefit reduction rate** (the rate at which benefits are reduced as other income grows) varies widely across the states, with states typically exempting some level of income from reduction, then reducing benefits by 50 to 100% as income grows.

**benefit guarantee**

The cash welfare benefit for individuals with no other income, which may be reduced as income increases.

**benefit reduction rate**

The rate at which welfare benefits are reduced per dollar of other income earned.

The major role of the federal government is financial: it supports TANF through the provision of large block grants to finance the state programs. In addition, the federal government imposes time limits and work requirements on TANF recipients. The federal government mandates that individuals cannot receive TANF benefits more than 60 months (five years) over the course of their lives. The federal government also requires welfare recipients to work after receiving at most 24 months of TANF benefits, although states can choose shorter deadlines, and more than 12 states require some immediate work activity. Overall, the federal government requires that half of a state's TANF recipients be working at a point in time. There are some loopholes in these requirements, however: states may exempt up to 20% of their welfare recipients from these time limits for "hardship" reasons, and the definition of "work" is somewhat flexible because up to 30% of recipients can count education or job-skills training as work.

## Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

SSI is a program that provides cash welfare to the aged, blind, and disabled. Essentially, the job of SSI is to fill holes that are left by the incomplete nature of two of our major social insurance programs, Social Security and disability insurance (DI). Some individuals who have not worked enough in the past may not qualify for benefits under either of these social insurance programs, so they qualify for SSI: for example, a young person who has never worked and is disabled in a car accident would not qualify for DI but can receive SSI. Indeed, a large share of the SSI caseload is youths, as the result of a 1990 court decision that qualified youths with learning disabilities and multiple conditions as disabled for SSI purposes. This decision led to a rise in the number of youths on the program from fewer than 300,000 in 1990 to more than 800,000 in just four years.<sup>24</sup> This rapid rise in enrollment highlights the problems in truly defining disability, particularly in a population such as children. SSI is not very widely known, nor is it debated with the ferocity of TANF, but it is, in fact, a bigger program, with expenditures of more than \$64 billion in 2017.<sup>25</sup>

## In-Kind Programs

Along with these two cash programs, there are four major types of in-kind benefits provided to the poor in the United States.

### Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP traditionally provided individuals with vouchers that they could use to pay for food at participating retailers. These vouchers have been replaced by debit-card-like systems whereby individuals are issued a card for a certain value of food, which is drawn down as they use the card to make purchases.

SNAP is a national program, with spending of \$68 billion in 2017.<sup>26</sup> Households composed entirely of TANF, SSI, or other state cash welfare recipients are automatically eligible for SNAP; otherwise, monthly cash income is the primary eligibility determinant. Households without elderly or disabled members must have net monthly income below 100% of the poverty line to receive SNAP benefits, and the amount of the benefit falls as income rises. In addition, able-bodied adults are required to register for work and be willing to take any job offered. If they violate these conditions, the state's welfare agency may discontinue benefits for one to six months. Finally, many noncitizens are ineligible: permanent residents must have been in the United States for at least five years to qualify for SNAP or disability assistance.

## Medicaid

We discussed the Medicaid program extensively in the previous chapter, but it is worth remembering that this is by far the largest categorical welfare program in the United States, with expenditures of \$565.5 billion in 2018.<sup>27</sup>

## Public Housing

The public housing system in the United States consists of two separate programs. The first is the provision of housing in public housing projects, typically large apartment buildings. The second is the provision of “section 8 vouchers,” which individuals can use to subsidize private rentals from participating landlords. Both benefits are restricted to low-income families, typically those with incomes below 50% of the median income in a metropolitan area (in 2018, median income ranged from a low of \$27,500 in Holmes County, Mississippi, to a high of \$134,900 in Stamford–Norwalk, Connecticut), and the level of benefits is reduced as incomes rise.<sup>28</sup> In 2017, \$55.5 billion was allocated for housing and urban development, with about 40% spent on private-sector vouchers.<sup>29</sup>

## Other Nutritional Programs

The other major type of in-kind welfare in the United States is additional nutritional programs. One such program is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides funds for nutritious food purchases specifically intended to improve fetal development and infant health. Pregnant women or new mothers, as well as children under five years old, are eligible if they are on cash welfare, are on Medicaid, or have incomes below 185% of the poverty line. In 2016, the program served about 8.8 million people at a cost of \$6.6 billion.<sup>30</sup>

Other programs in this category are the School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, which offer free or reduced-price meals to schoolchildren to help them meet federal nutrition standards. Children in families below 130% of the federal poverty line receive free meals in school, and those between 130% and 185% receive meals for no more than 40¢. In fiscal year 2016, 22 million free or reduced-price lunches and 11.6 million free or reduced-price breakfasts were served daily, at a cost of \$16.3 billion.<sup>31</sup>

## 17.3 The Moral Hazard Costs of Welfare Policy

As with social insurance programs, the benefits of redistributing to the poor (in terms of raising social welfare) come with potentially large moral hazard costs. It's one thing to say that we are going to take \$1 from a rich person and give that \$1 to a poor person; it is another thing to actually accomplish this. The prominent economist Arthur Okun once compared the process of income redistribution to a "leaky bucket": we are carrying money from the rich to the poor, but some money leaks out along the way. Okun's question was: At what level of leakage are we no longer willing to undertake this income transfer?<sup>32</sup> The answer depends on the nature of the country's social welfare function (SWF), which quantifies this *efficiency-equity trade-off* between less redistribution with more social efficiency and more redistribution with less social efficiency. By providing an overall measure of social well-being, the SWF allows public finance economists to ask whether the nation is better off with a larger social pie, distributed unequally, or a smaller social pie, distributed more equally.

There are three sources of leakage from Okun's bucket as society transfers money from high- to low-income groups. The first source is the administrative costs of enabling this transfer, which are fairly modest (roughly 10% of total TANF spending). The second leakage occurs because higher-income individuals are taxed to pay for income transfers. This taxation lowers returns to work and savings and might cause higher-income people to work less hard or save less (this leakage is the deadweight loss from taxation that we discuss in detail in the coming taxation chapters).

The third source of leakage is the major focus of this section, the moral hazard effects on the poor individuals who are potential recipients of these transfers. As the government insures individuals against being poor, it raises the incentive for individuals to be poor in order to qualify for these transfers, raising the cost of these means-tested transfers. This effect also matters for social efficiency because of the deadweight loss caused by reduced incomes. When individuals reduce their labor supply to become poor and qualify for cash welfare, social surplus falls because fewer goods are produced (see [Figure 2-17, p. 54](#)). A key component of the efficiency-equity trade-off is the social surplus (efficiency) lost due to reduced labor supply by welfare recipients.

### Moral Hazard Effects of a Means-Tested Transfer System

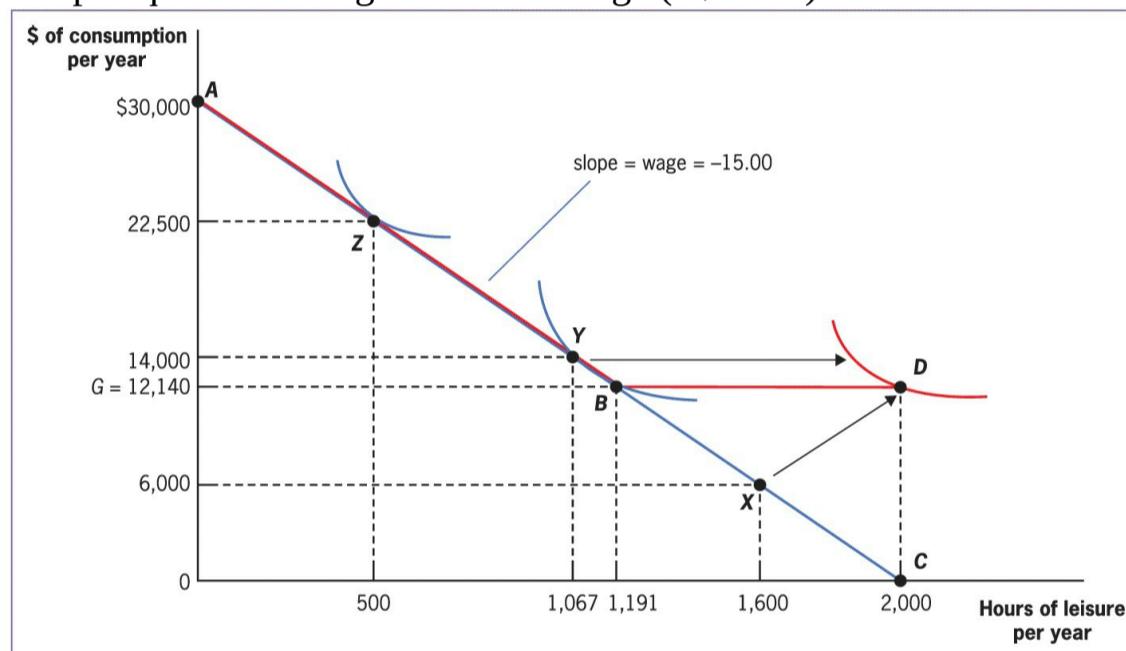
We can illustrate this moral hazard problem using a pure means-tested transfer system, as discussed in [Chapter 2](#). This system is a simplified version of TANF or other redistributive program that allows us to clearly show the effects of moral hazard that come with redistribution. Under this system, the government would guarantee every individual an income transfer (the benefit guarantee), but as labor earnings increase, this transfer would be reduced at the benefit reduction rate (the implicit tax rate). The benefit  $B$  to any individual would equal

$$B = G - (\tau \times w \times h)$$

where  $G$  is a benefit guarantee level,  $\tau$  is the benefit reduction (implicit tax) rate,  $w$  is the wage rate, and  $h$  is hours of work. For example, with a guarantee level of \$10,000 and a benefit reduction rate of 1, individuals would get a benefit equal to \$10,000 minus their labor income (until their labor income reaches \$10,000, at which point they get nothing).

In fact, it would be possible to actually end poverty in the United States today using such a system. Suppose that the government established a system with a guaranteed benefit level ( $G$ ) equal to the poverty line and a benefit reduction rate ( $\tau$ ) of 1 (a 100% implicit tax, so that the benefit falls by \$1 for each \$1 in earnings). Under this system, the government would pay any family below the poverty line the difference between the poverty line and their income. Giving families below the poverty line the difference between the poverty line and their income would cost only \$131 billion, which is only about one-sixth of the cost of the Social Security program.<sup>33</sup>

But this \$131 billion estimate is misleading because it doesn't consider individual reactions to such a system. [Figure 17-4](#) considers the individual's choice of leisure and consumption in a world with a welfare program that has a benefit guarantee of the poverty line (\$12,140 for a single-person family) and a 100% benefit reduction rate. Assume that each family just has one member, and assume that member works. This worker has a maximum of 2,000 hours per year of leisure (so hours of labor = 2,000 – hours of leisure) and a market wage of \$15.00 per hour. Before this means-tested welfare program is in place, the budget constraint is the line  $ABC$ , with a slope equal to the negative of the wage ( $-\$15.00$ ).



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■ FIGURE 17-4

Labor Supply Decisions with a 100% Benefit Reduction Rate (BRR) • If workers are subject to a welfare system with a 100% BRR, then their budget constraint changes from  $ABC$  to  $ABD$ . Persons such as Mr. X (earning below \$12,140 without welfare) will no longer work (he takes 2,000 hours of leisure). Some persons earning just above \$12,140 without welfare, such as Ms. Y, may also be induced to drop out of the labor force and join welfare. Here, Ms. Y moves from point Y to point D. Persons such as Mr. Z will be unaffected.

Suppose that a program is introduced that provides each (single person in our example) family a guaranteed benefit level ( $G$ ) of \$12,140 with a benefit reduction rate ( $\tau$ ) of 1 so that for every \$1 that the family earns above \$12,140, it loses \$1 in its guaranteed benefit. This changes the individual's budget constraint to  $ABD$ . For those working more than 809 hours (taking less than 1,191 hours of leisure), the budget constraint segment  $AB$  is unchanged: with a benefit guarantee of \$12,140 and a benefit reduction rate of 1, an individual who earns more than \$12,140 is no longer eligible for this program. Individuals working fewer than 809 hours (1,191 hours or more of leisure), however, now qualify for this program. Their benefit is \$12,140 regardless of how hard they work because any earnings are offset one for one against the benefit guarantee, so the budget constraint is flat from point  $B$  to point  $D$ .

What effects does this have on the individual's labor supply decision? Consider three individuals, characterized by their choice of leisure in the absence of this welfare program. In the pre-welfare world, Mr. X chooses to be at point *X* on the graph: he enjoys 1,600 hours of leisure and \$6,000 of consumption. After the welfare program is introduced, Mr. X's optimal decision is to move to point *D* and enjoy 2,000 hours of leisure, with \$12,140 of consumption from the government benefit guarantee. The introduction of the welfare program has raised both Mr. X's leisure and his consumption, so he is unambiguously better off.

The effects of the welfare program on the behavior of individuals located above point *B* on the budget constraint depend on their preferences, as indicated by the shape and location of their indifference curves. Consider Ms. Y, who currently takes 1,067 hours of leisure, working 933 hours and earning \$14,000 per year. If she decides to join the welfare program, she will move to point *D*: given the 100% tax rate, once people are in this program, there is no reason to work because they get more leisure and the same amount of consumption by not working. If Ms. Y moves to point *D*, her consumption will fall by \$1,860 per year (to \$12,140), but her leisure will rise by 933 hours per year. So Ms. Y may well choose to take that trade-off and move to point *D*. She will do so if she can achieve a higher indifference curve at point *D* than at point *Y*; this is the case in [Figure 17-4](#) (because her old indifference curve passes under the new budget constraint), so she moves into the new welfare program.

Now consider Mr. Z, whose pre-welfare consumption/leisure combination is shown at point *Z* in [Figure 17-4](#). He currently works 1,500 hours, taking 500 hours of leisure and earning \$22,500 per year. He is better off if he stays off the welfare program; point *D* would place him on a lower indifference curve than point *Z*.

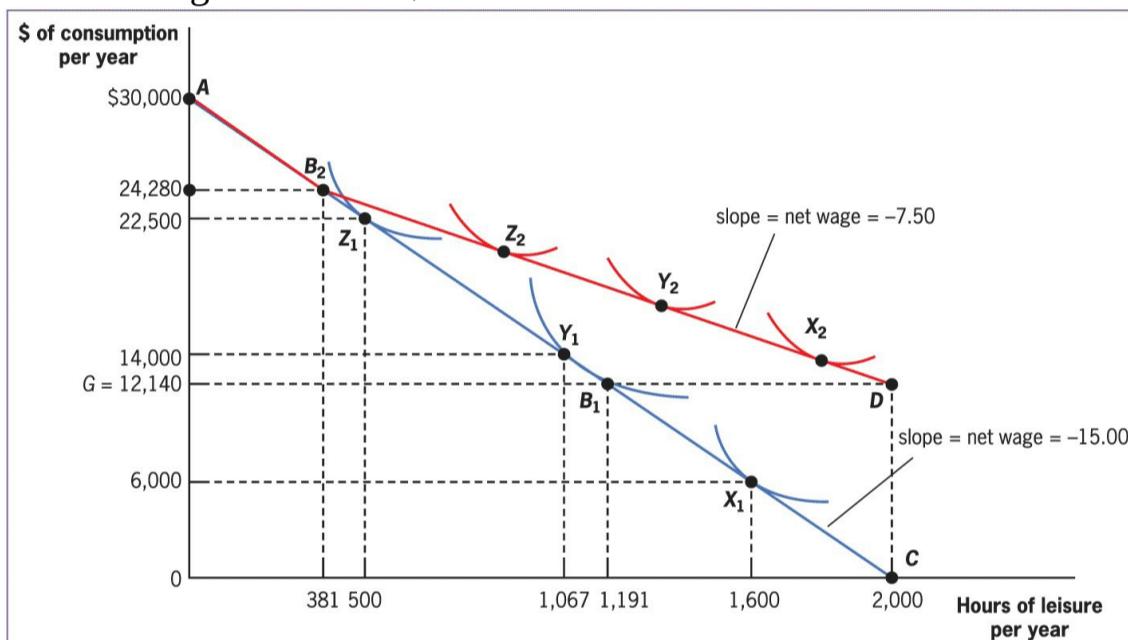
What do these behavioral reactions imply for the costs of the poverty eradication program just described? First, they imply that all families with income below the poverty line (like Mr. X) would immediately stop earning income so that they could get both more leisure and more consumption for their family. This means that now the transfer amount to every family below the poverty line becomes the poverty line itself (in our example, \$12,140 for a family of one) because the family has no earnings against which this transfer is reduced. The cost of the program becomes the poverty line for each family size times the number of families of each size below the poverty line, or \$292 billion. Our \$131 billion estimate was off because we made the *static* (no behavior change) assumption that individuals maintain their pretransfer income; if all pretransfer income falls to zero (as it does for Mr. X), the cost of the program increases substantially.

Second, many individuals above the poverty line (like Ms. Y) will stop earning money so that they can gain a huge amount of leisure with little reduction in consumption. If all individuals with incomes up to 25% above the poverty line behave this way, \$92 billion will be added to the costs of the program. Thus, the poverty eradication program would cost a total of \$384 billion, about three times the \$131 billion first estimated.

More generally, [Figure 17-4](#) illustrates the type of efficiency loss caused by the moral hazard effects of cash welfare systems such as TANF. By providing income transfers to low-income groups, the program makes being low-income more attractive, encouraging individuals to work less hard. This moral hazard effect reduces the labor supply of low-income groups, and the resulting inward shift in their labor supply curve lowers social surplus (as in [Figure 2-17](#)). In other words, the moral hazard response to this program adds a leak to the redistributive bucket.

# Solving Moral Hazard by Lowering the Benefit Reduction Rate

One answer to this moral hazard problem would be to lower the benefit reduction rate. With a 100% tax rate on work, it is no surprise that individuals quit working; with a lower tax rate, there might be a less dramatic reduction in work effort. Consider instead a system with a benefit reduction rate  $\tau = 0.5$ . Such a system is illustrated in [Figure 17-5](#), with a new budget constraint  **$AB_2D$** . (The budget constraint from [Figure 17-4](#) is also represented here, as  **$AB_1D$** ). Compared to the pre-welfare budget constraint, the segment  **$AB_2$**  is unchanged; with a benefit guarantee of \$12,140 and a benefit reduction rate of 50%, once income reaches \$24,280, individuals are no longer eligible for benefits. The second segment of the budget constraint,  **$B_2D$** , has a slope of  $-\$7.50$ : for every hour worked by a welfare recipient, each one gains \$15.00 in wages but loses \$7.50 in benefit reduction.



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■ FIGURE 17-5

Labor Supply Decisions with a 50% Benefit Reduction Rate • Reducing the BRR to 50% changes the budget constraint with welfare to  **$AB_2D$** . This leads persons such as Mr. X and Ms. Y to reduce their leisure (increase their labor supply) relative to a 100% BRR, moving from **D** to points  **$X_2$**  and  **$Y_2$** . But persons such as Mr. Z are now brought into the welfare program and reduce their labor supply as a result, at point  **$Z_2$** .

Does this type of system reduce the disincentives to work relative to a system with a 100% benefit reduction rate? In fact, it is not clear. Consider the same three persons we've been discussing. For Mr. X, the disincentive is definitely reduced because the tax rate on work is lower. Under the old system, there was no incentive for Mr. X to work because each \$1 of earnings simply reduced benefits one for one, so he chose point **D**. Now, because Mr. X gets to keep 50¢ of each \$1 he earns, he will move to a new point such as  **$X_2$** , which features less leisure (more labor supply) but more consumption than at point **D**.

For Ms. Y, the disincentive is also reduced. She also faced a 100% tax rate on earnings before, so when she joined the welfare program she automatically chose not to work at all (point **D**). Now, with a lower tax on earnings, she chooses a point such as  **$Y_2$** , with much

less leisure than at point  $D$  but more consumption as well.

For Mr. Z, however, there is a new disincentive to supply labor that was not present before. Under the old program, the welfare segment of the budget constraint left him on a much lower indifference curve, so he ignored the welfare option. Now, welfare becomes a relevant choice: his indifference curve falls below the new welfare segment  $B_2D$  of the budget constraint, so he chooses to receive welfare and operate at point  $Z_2$ , with much higher leisure (less work) and only slightly lower consumption. While labor supply has increased (leisure has fallen) for Mr. X and Ms. Y, labor supply has fallen (leisure has increased) for Mr. Z. Thus, the net impact of the new welfare program on labor supply is ambiguous and depends on the relative sizes and preferences of these different groups. For example, if there were 100 persons each like Mr. X and Ms. Y, but 1,000 persons like Mr. Z, then total labor supply could fall from this cut in the benefit reduction rate.

## The “Iron Triangle” of Redistributive Programs

This example illustrates the [\*\*iron triangle\*\*](#) of cash welfare programs—there is no way to reform a simple cash welfare program (like that used here) to simultaneously achieve three goals: (1) encourage work, (2) redistribute income, and (3) lower costs. In such a system, the government has two tools at its disposal: the level of the benefit guarantee ( $G$ ) and the benefit reduction rate ( $\tau$ ). There is no change in these two parameters that can achieve all three of these goals. As we showed, if the government lowers the benefit reduction rate for a given guarantee level, it doesn't necessarily encourage work or lower costs. If the government reduces the guarantee for a given benefit reduction rate, it will definitely encourage work and lower costs, but it will lower the amount of income redistribution (because the poor will receive less in a system with a lower guarantee). If the government raises the guarantee, it will definitely increase income redistribution, but it will discourage work and increase costs.

### iron triangle

There is no way to change either the benefit reduction rate or the benefit guarantee to simultaneously encourage work, redistribute more income, and lower costs.

## 17.4 Reducing the Moral Hazard of Welfare

The main lesson from [Section 17.3](#) is that the disincentive effects of welfare systems cannot necessarily be overcome by lowering the benefit reduction rate. Is it possible to design a welfare program that gets around this iron triangle? There are three approaches that might work.

### Moving to Categorical Welfare Payments

The moral hazard effects of cash welfare arise because the government cannot observe an individual's earning capacity. If the government knew for sure what each individual was capable of earning, it could set up a cash welfare system with no moral hazard. For example, suppose that we were all born with our earning capacity stamped on our heads, that we could not change it, and that the government could observe it perfectly. The government would then set up a system that gave larger cash welfare checks to those who had the least earning capacity. This system would have no moral hazard effects because there would be no way that we could change our behavior to affect our welfare payment.<sup>34</sup>

The problem is that the government does not know what each person is capable of earning; the government can only observe what each person actually does earn. This figure is related to earning capacity, but it is also determined by an individual's labor supply decisions. So a poor person might either be low-ability and working his or her hardest, or high-ability and not hard working. By targeting welfare payments to observed earnings, the government introduces incentives for individuals to work less hard in order to qualify for larger welfare payments.

This problem could be eliminated if the welfare program could target those who are truly less capable of earning to ensure that benefits go to those who really need them, not just to those who are working less hard in order to qualify for benefits. In the absence of being born with an earning-capacity tattoo, the government can attempt to target benefits by classifying individuals according to other characteristics that they cannot easily change.

For example, consider a program that redistributed money to Americans who are blind. Blindness is an excellent measure of earning capacity because being blind makes it difficult to earn a high wage; not impossible of course, as there are many successful blind persons in the labor force, but certainly much harder than otherwise. Using blindness as a target for cash welfare removes moral hazard as well because individuals are unlikely to change their behavior (i.e., deliberately blind themselves) to qualify for the welfare benefit. By directing resources toward blind individuals, the government can redistribute income to those with low potential earnings without distorting an individual's incentive to supply labor to the market. This type of targeting can overcome the iron triangle: the less able (e.g., blind individuals) can be made better off without discouraging work.

### What Makes a Good Targeting Mechanism?

The best targeting mechanisms have two features. First, they are unchangeable. Moral hazard in welfare programs and the resulting leaks from the bucket come from substitution: individuals change their behavior in order to receive welfare benefits. If an unchangeable characteristic is used to determine benefits, individuals have no way to change behavior in order to qualify.

Second, the best mechanisms target those with low earning capacity. For example, the government could announce a program today that gave a one-time bonus to the 500 persons

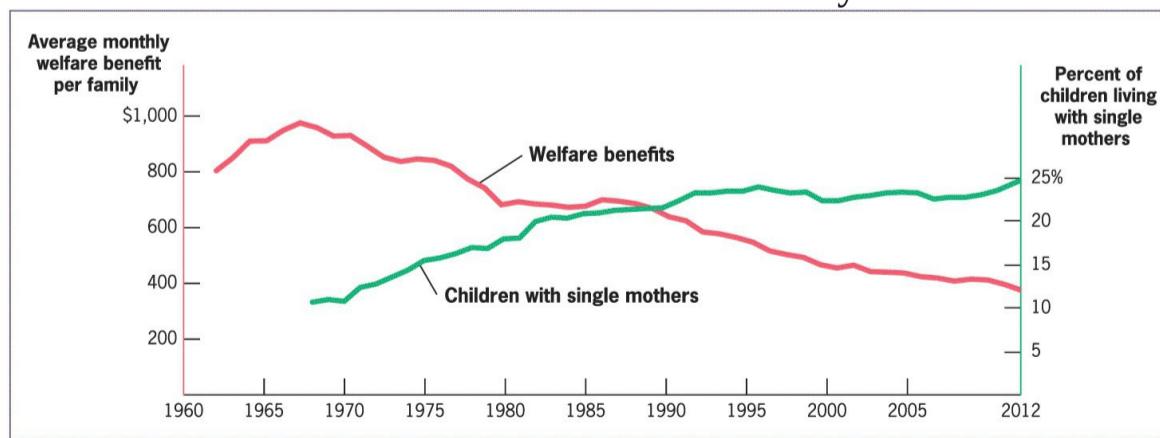
who *last year* were the CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies. This program would meet the first test for a good targeting mechanism; there is nothing that an individual could do today to qualify for the program, so there would be no substitution effect on behavior. This program would not meet the second criteria, however, because this is clearly not a group with low earning capacity.

## Targeting by Single Motherhood

The means of targeting that the United States traditionally used for cash welfare was single motherhood. Does this targeting device meet the two criteria? It seems clear that this group meets the second criterion, low earning capacity: the poverty rate for single-female-headed families with children is almost 31%.<sup>35</sup> It is less clear that this group meets the first criterion, that of being unchangeable. Women can choose to become single mothers, either by having a child out of wedlock or by divorcing, in order to qualify for welfare. Just as there are efficiency costs from reduced work effort with means-tested welfare programs, there are efficiency costs associated with women becoming single mothers in order to qualify for welfare benefits (such as the negative implications for their children from growing up with only one parent).

Indeed, perhaps the most controversial aspect of welfare has been its incentives for the dissolution of the nuclear family. After the 1992 Los Angeles riots, then Vice President Dan Quayle declared that “the lawless social anarchy which we saw is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility, and social order in too many areas of our society. For the poor, the situation is compounded by a welfare ethos. . . . A welfare check is not a husband.”<sup>36</sup>

Theoretically, it is possible that there are women might become single mothers to qualify for welfare. But two types of evidence suggest that this theoretical possibility is not very common in practice. First, time series evidence ([Figure 17-6](#)) shows that in the 1960s, single motherhood and welfare benefits rose in lockstep, which is consistent with the notion that higher welfare benefits were causing more single motherhood. In subsequent years, however, single motherhood continued to rise despite dramatic declines in welfare benefits in real terms. As always, however, these slow-moving time series trends may be driven by other factors that make it difficult to draw a causal interpretation from this graph. Second, a large number of studies have assessed whether rates of single motherhood grow in states that raise their benefits relative to other states where benefits are constant or falling. The consensus from this research is that this effect is either nonexistent or very small.<sup>37</sup>



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■ FIGURE 17-6

Welfare Benefits and Single Motherhood, 1960–2012 • The average monthly welfare benefit per family rose along with single motherhood in the 1960s, but single motherhood has continued to rise even as welfare benefits have fallen over the past three decades.

Data from: Welfare benefit data from the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2015a\)](#), Table TANF 6. Data on children with single mothers from the [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2017\)](#), Table CH-1.

Thus, single motherhood does appear to meet the first criterion of targeting mechanisms: it is unlikely that a woman will become a single mother just to receive welfare benefits. Single motherhood, then, appears to be a reasonable targeting mechanism: it targets a low-income group using a characteristic that is not very responsive to program incentives (small moral hazard effects). As a result, targeting to single motherhood allows us to overcome the iron triangle.

Despite the general consensus on this point in the empirical literature on cash welfare programs, the supposed negative effects of cash welfare on the formation of stable families remain a major source of opposition to cash welfare among policy makers. This opposition led to the removal (at least in theory) of the distinction between single-female-headed families and other types of families when TANF was introduced in 1996 (although most recipients remain single mothers). What policy makers should recognize, however, is that the benefits of reducing such distinctions (removing disincentives to marriage) are offset by two costs. First, by removing targeting, we subject ourselves once again to the iron triangle: a program designed to make married families better off will reduce their labor supply (because married families are like Mr. Z in [Figures 17-4](#) and [17-5](#): welfare used to be irrelevant but could now induce them to work less hard). Second, we are now paying out benefits to a much larger group, at higher costs. Thus, if the target is not responsive to welfare benefits, as appears to be true with single motherhood, then the benefits of removing the target are likely outweighed by the budgetary costs of doing so.

## Using “Ordeal Mechanisms”

The first approach just discussed was to use observable characteristics of individuals to target programs at the least able. That approach faces the problem that it might be difficult to assess ability based on a limited set of observable characteristics. An alternative approach is to try to get individuals to *reveal themselves as less able* by setting up a welfare program that is unattractive to the more able persons in society but continues to redistribute to those who are truly less able. The government can accomplish this through the use of **ordeal mechanisms**, features of welfare programs that make them unattractive: if welfare programs are sufficiently unattractive, only the least able will want to sign up for them.<sup>38</sup>

### ordeal mechanisms

Features of welfare programs that make them unattractive, leading to the self-selection of only the most needy recipients.

Suppose that there are two types of individuals who want to be on welfare: hardworking but low-ability individuals and low-performing but high-ability individuals. The government would like to set up a welfare system to redistribute income to the low-ability individuals but not to high-ability individuals who have low income just because they are low performers. One way to do this is to find characteristics, such as education, that are correlated with ability, but this correlation is far from perfect. Another way is to set up a welfare system that the high-ability lazy individuals would not find attractive so that the high-ability individuals *self-select* out of welfare.

An excellent example of such an ordeal mechanism is the *work or training requirements* that are a feature of the TANF program. Such requirements impose a cost on lazy individuals who are just using welfare as a means of increasing their leisure. For those who are using welfare because they simply can't make ends meet despite working hard, however, these requirements are not costly. Indeed, such low-ability individuals might welcome the training

that is provided.

Another example of an ordeal mechanism is the provision of in-kind rather than cash benefits through welfare programs. Targeting is hard to do with cash because just about everyone values cash. If the government gives away cash, then individuals who aren't needy will pretend to be needy in order to qualify for the cash. If the government gives away apartments in a somewhat unappealing public housing project, however, those with high ability may not be interested in taking up the benefit; they would rather work harder than live in a bad apartment. Once again, however, those who are truly needy will likely prefer the bad apartment to living on the street. A recent study of home health care delivered to the elderly finds that the benefits of providing in-kind subsidies for home care exceed the inefficiency of providing in-kind benefits rather than cash.<sup>39</sup>

The use of an ordeal mechanism may not be the only reason for providing transfers in-kind instead of in the form of cash, however. It may also be that voters are more willing to support redistribution through in-kind mechanisms, perhaps because of paternalistic concerns that low-income groups will not spend their money appropriately. Evidence that this might be the case comes from an innovative study by Jacobsson et al. (2007). These authors ran a number of laboratory experiments in which participants were given the choice of providing assistance to others in the form of cash or in-kind; for example, they were offered the choice between helping smokers with diabetes by providing them with cash or with a quit-smoking product with an equivalent value. In 90% of cases, when given this choice, participants chose the in-kind transfer.<sup>40</sup>

## The Paradox of Ordeal Mechanisms

The fundamental efficiency problem in transfer programs is that the non-needy might *masquerade* as needy to qualify for benefits, and as a result, the government cannot target benefits only to the needy. If the government provides a benefit that is not attractive to the non-needy but helps out the truly needy, then the non-needy won't pursue this masquerade and targeting will be more efficient.

The paradox of ordeal mechanisms is, therefore, that *apparently making the less able worse off can actually make them better off*. This is because the government has a fixed amount of money that it will spend on welfare. If the less able have to share that budget with the (masquerading) more able, then that is less money they can receive. If an ordeal mechanism can get the more able off the welfare rolls, then the less able can receive more money, even if it involves putting them through an ordeal along the way. If the government can assess who is truly less able through an ordeal mechanism, then it can surmount the iron triangle by having a generous program targeted to that less able population.

This ordeal mechanism intuition suggests a rationale for making the process of receiving welfare less pleasant, such as by making individuals use SNAP vouchers at the supermarket, where others can see them, or making them wait in line at a public welfare office. By more effectively targeting benefits, such approaches make recipients better off: they remove the drain on the system by weeding out higher-income individuals who pretend to be poor in order to claim benefits.



### APPLICATION

## An Example of Ordeal Mechanisms

An example illustrates the power of ordeal mechanisms as a targeting device. The government wants to set up a soup kitchen for low-ability individuals who are poor, but the government cannot tell whether individuals are truly low-ability, or high-ability and low performers, or just lazy. The government can either hire a large number of workers for this soup kitchen, so no one has to wait very long for a meal, or they can hire a small number, so there is always a line outside. It seems inefficient to make needy and hungry individuals wait in line for their meal, but doing so might reveal who truly needs the free food: the long line might prevent the more able from using resources that they don't need and are not really intended for them.

More specifically, suppose that the utility that low-ability individuals gain from the soup kitchen's soup is  $U_l = 240S - W$ , where  $S = \text{soup}$  and  $W = \text{wait in minutes}$ . The utility of high-ability individuals for soup is  $U_h = 120S - 2W$ ; the high-ability person gets less utility from each serving of soup (because the high-ability are not as hungry), and more disutility from waiting (because the high-ability have more productive things that they can do with their time). Suppose further that the government endeavors to maximize a utilitarian social welfare function that weights equally the utility of each member of society,  $SWF = U_l + U_h$ . Finally, suppose that there are two bowls of soup to give away and that the government is trying to figure out how long to make individuals wait for those bowls.

The government first attempts a system with no waiting ( $W = 0$ ). Under such a system, both the high-ability and low-ability will take the free soup, so let's assume that they each get one bowl. Thus, the low-ability individual gets  $U_l = 240$ , and the high-ability individual gets  $U_h = 120$ , so that social welfare = 360.

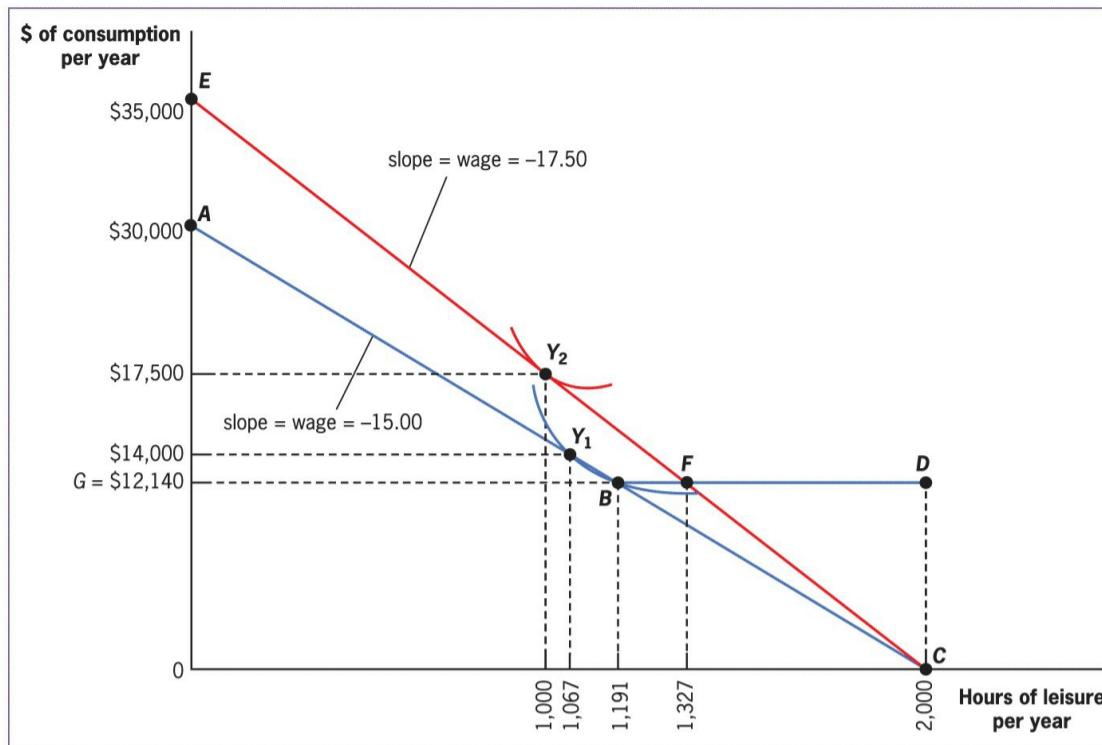
The government then moves to a system that requires individuals to wait 61 minutes to get free soup. Under such a system, the high-ability person will no longer demand the soup because the utility would be negative [ $U_h = 120 - (2 \times 61) < 0$ ], so that person won't wait in line. The low-ability person would therefore get both bowls of soup for a utility that would be  $U_l = 480 - 61 = 419$ . Social welfare has therefore risen from 360 to 419. Thus, making the low-ability person wait in line raises both that person's individual utility and that of society as a whole!

This outcome is possible because the gains from efficient targeting (not having to share benefits with the high-ability) outweigh the costs of having the low-ability person wait in line. Through the use of ordeal mechanisms, such as waiting in line, welfare programs can use the fact that the low-ability want the good more, and have a lower disutility from this ordeal, to more effectively target the redistribution of scarce resources. ■

## Increasing Outside Options

The third approach to reducing the moral hazard effects of welfare is to increase the outside options available to individuals so that it is no longer attractive to be on welfare. [Figure 17-7](#) replicates the choice set depicted in [Figure 17-4](#), focusing just on one worker from that earlier case (Ms. Y). As in that earlier graph, individuals such as Ms. Y initially face an hourly wage of \$15.00 (represented by the budget constraint ABC) and choose 1,067 hours of leisure and \$14,000 of consumption at point  $Y_1$ . If welfare is introduced as earlier, with a guarantee of

\$12,140 and a benefit reduction rate of 100%, the budget constraint becomes  $ABD$ , and she chooses to work not at all at point  $D$ . At this point, she loses only \$1,860 of consumption, but she gains 933 hours of leisure.



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■ FIGURE 17-7

**Increasing the Cash Welfare Opportunity Set** • One way to reduce use of welfare without changing the benefit reduction rate (and thus running into the iron triangle problem) is to increase the outside opportunities of single mothers so that they can literally “work their way off welfare.” By raising the single mother’s wage to \$17.50, we move her budget constraint with welfare from  $ABD$  to  $EFD$ . With this new budget constraint, she will no longer choose to be on welfare.

Suppose now that Ms. Y’s wage rises to \$17.50 per hour, so her budget constraint now becomes  $EFC$  without welfare or  $EFD$  with welfare. At this higher hourly wage, Ms. Y earns \$17,500 and chooses 1,000 hours of leisure (point  $\mathbf{Y}_2$ ) regardless of the existence of welfare; even when welfare is introduced, she is on a higher indifference curve at point  $\mathbf{Y}_2$  than at point  $D$ . Thus, raising the wage rate to \$17.50 per hour reduces the inefficiencies of welfare by making it a less attractive option relative to work, without penalizing those on welfare by actually lowering benefits. This theory underlies the “carrot” approach to welfare reform: reduce the welfare rolls by providing women with the means to work their way off welfare rather than by making welfare less generous.

There are five different approaches the government can take to increase outside opportunities for welfare recipients: training, labor market subsidies, child care and preschool, child support, and removing “welfare lock.”

## Training

The traditional approach to increasing outside opportunities is through *training* of welfare recipients. Most women on welfare lack basic job skills; they are typically high school dropouts without many of the skills necessary to earn a reasonable living in the high-tech U.S. economy. If these women can learn the skills valued in the current economy, their potential wage will increase, as shown in [Figure 17-7](#), these women will find welfare less attractive relative to outside labor market opportunities.

State welfare programs have actually run a series of randomized trials to evaluate how well this training approach (including classroom training, workplace training, and job search

assistance) works. The evidence from these randomized trials is that training does work; training programs lead to modest declines in welfare receipt and increase the earnings for welfare recipients.<sup>41</sup> Most experts agree, however, that while the effects of training programs are positive, they are minor, and that such programs cannot induce sizeable reductions in the welfare rolls.

## Labor Market Subsidies

Another approach to increasing outside options for welfare recipients is to directly subsidize their market wages to make market work more attractive to them so that they leave welfare. These types of subsidies can come in two forms. The first form is a general subsidy to the labor supply of the lowest-income workers. An example of this approach is the EITC, which provides a subsidy for each dollar of earnings for those with income less than a certain level. In 2014, to be eligible for the EITC, a two-parent family with two or more children had to earn less than \$50,597; a family with one child had to earn less than \$45,207; and a family with no children had to earn less than \$20,600. In [Chapter 21](#), we will see that this approach has been shown to be very successful in terms of increasing the labor supply of low-income earners. At the same time, it is fairly expensive, with current EITC expenses of more than \$65 billion per year.<sup>42</sup>

An alternative is to target wage subsidies to those already on welfare and thus reduce the costs of the subsidy program. [Blank et al. \(2000\)](#) reviewed evidence from a series of programs designed to increase returns to work among families on welfare. They found that subsidizing work increases employment and reduces the number of people on welfare and that this impact rises with the size of the subsidy. Moreover, such targeted programs are much less expensive than general wage subsidies such as the EITC.

Such a targeted approach has two disadvantages, however. First, there are many individuals who could benefit from wage subsidies but who do not qualify for them. For example, a single mother who loses her job, but who does not want to enroll in welfare, is penalized by her reluctance to accept the government's help if the benefits are restricted to welfare recipients. This leads to the second disadvantage: [Blank et al. \(2000\)](#) found that subsidizing those on welfare when they go to work increases the number of people enrolling to receive welfare benefits. Because individuals have to be on welfare to get these wage subsidies (in contrast to general subsidies like the EITC), individuals will join welfare programs to qualify. The mother in our example is now more likely to join welfare to qualify, offsetting some of the cost savings from the more targeted subsidy program.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *The Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project*

A particularly interesting example of a wage subsidy program is the Self-Sufficiency Project (SSP) in Canada.<sup>43</sup> This program randomly offered wage subsidies to a treatment group of Canadian welfare recipients who had been on welfare for more than one year: if these individuals found a full-time job within one year of leaving welfare, the program would on average double their earnings over the first three years that they held the job. By choosing only those who had been on welfare for a long period of time, the program minimized the concern about individuals claiming welfare in order to receive the benefit—but at the cost of excluding many individuals who could benefit from this program. This treatment group was compared to a control group of long-term welfare recipients randomly selected to not receive this wage subsidy.

The results of this randomized trial are striking: the employment rates of those offered the subsidy (the treatment group) rose by 12 percentage points (43%) relative to those who were not offered the subsidy (the control group), and the rate of welfare enrollment fell by roughly the same amount. This short-term subsidy did not have long-lasting effects, however. After five years, the treatment and control groups appeared similar in terms of work and welfare utilization. An open question is whether a longer-term version of this subsidy would have had longer-lasting impacts. Over the entire five-year period studied by researchers, each \$1 of government spending translated into \$2 in increased income for former welfare recipients who took this subsidy. Thus, this program is the opposite of a leaky bucket: government transfers raised total income by more than the amount of the transfer. This finding suggests that well-targeted, large wage supplements can be an

effective means of reducing the welfare rolls.

Thus, there is a clear trade-off between more general and more targeted (to existing welfare recipients) wage subsidy programs. More targeted subsidy programs will save costs relative to general programs—but at the risk of leaving out some of the truly needy and increasing welfare enrollment among those trying to qualify for the program.

## Child Care and Preschool

In reality, for families with children, the budget constraint shown in [Figures 17-3](#) and [17-7](#) should represent the wage that the mother can earn in the labor market *net* of the costs of the child care she must buy for her children while she is at work. The more a mother must pay others to care for her children while she is working, the less she takes home at the end of the week. As a result, another means of increasing outside opportunities for women is to subsidize the costs of their child care or preschool options or even to make these options free. This is equivalent to raising the wage and thus the slope of the non-welfare budget constraint. Subsidizing child care has been shown to raise female labor supply: recent estimates suggest that for each 10% rise in child care subsidies, female labor supply increases by about 2% (as reviewed in [Chapter 21](#)).

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Child Care, Preschool, and Child Outcomes*<sup>44</sup>

While subsidized or free child care or preschool may be a means of promoting work among mothers who might otherwise be on welfare, the most important effects of such programs may be on the children themselves. An open and crucial question is how shifting across modes of care for children—from home to child care to preschool—affects both the short- and long-run outcomes for these children. Addressing this question is difficult, however, because families who choose different modes of caring for their children may be different in many ways, thus making it more difficult to compare outcomes of children in different settings.

One approach to addressing this problem is to compare siblings who do and do not receive child care services. Comparing siblings raised in the same family environment can remove any comparability differences along that dimension. This approach was pioneered by [Currie and Thomas \(1995\)](#) to evaluate the Head Start program, a high-quality preschool program that is provided on a subsidized basis to low-income families in the United States. Their work and subsequent follow-ups have painted a generally positive picture of Head Start, with the program leading to higher test scores and better health at younger ages and higher test scores, greater graduation rates, lower likelihood of arrests, and lower likelihood of smoking at older ages. But this approach suffers from the problem that there may be other explanations for the differences among siblings. For example, those siblings who attended Head Start may have been born when the family was more disadvantaged than was the case with other siblings who did not attend because the family did not qualify as disadvantaged. In this case, any positive effects of Head Start would be understated.

Another approach is to use “discontinuities” in the rules of Head Start, which cause relatively similar children to either qualify or not due to small differences in income around the qualification point for the program. [Carneiro and Ginja \(2008\)](#) use this strategy to show that Head Start participation reduced behavior problems and obesity at ages 12 to 13 and reduced depression, obesity, and criminality for those ages 16 to 17. A limitation of this approach, however, is that family income is not perfectly verified by Head Start so that families may be able to manipulate their income to qualify for the program. If families who are very supportive of their children in other ways are the ones reducing or underreporting their incomes to qualify for the program, then this could lead to perceived positive program effects.

Due to these limitations in the literature, the federal government funded the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), which, in 2002, randomly assigned children who had applied to an oversubscribed Head Start program to two groups: a treatment group that was granted admission and a control group that was denied. This randomization solved the comparability problem that may have plagued earlier studies.

The findings thus far from the HSIS support the notion that Head Start leads to significant improvements in child outcomes in the short run. But the studies also have found that these effects fade over time so that any test score gains have largely disappeared by first grade ([Bitler et al., 2014](#)). This raises the question of whether the longer-run gains documented by other studies will appear in this experimental evaluation.

Suggestions that these gains might appear comes from perhaps the best-known work in this area: evaluation of randomized experiments from the 1960s where children were randomly assigned to very high-quality preschool interventions. These studies showed very large returns later in life, including higher earnings, better family stability, and lower crime rates—even when short-term gains in test scores faded out. Estimates suggest that each dollar spent on these interventions led to \$4 in savings to tax payers alone, with higher savings coming from reduced crime rates and other social improvements. A possible explanation for positive longer-run outcomes, despite small persistent test score gains, is that intervention may improve noncognitive skills that are necessary for success in life.

Finally, a number of studies have used quasi-experimental variation to evaluate broader expansions of child care and

preschool globally. These studies typically use a difference-in-difference approach, comparing cohorts of children for whom child care or preschool were made available to previous cohorts who did not have access in areas where access expanded relative to those in which it did not.

Numerous studies of the introduction of pre-kindergarten programs throughout the United States have found that such programs improve school performance for disadvantaged students but not advantaged students. Studies of the introduction of universal child care in the Canadian province of Quebec, which already provided child care for disadvantaged citizens, have found a worsening of child outcomes in both the short and long run. And studies of expansion in child care in Denmark, Germany, Norway, and Spain have all found that there are benefits for the most disadvantaged children but no benefits or even a worsening of outcomes for children of advantaged families.

Taken together, this large literature paints a fairly consistent picture of positive effects of child care and preschool access for the educational and social outcomes of disadvantaged youth—especially for highly intensive interventions. But the effects appear modest or even negative for youths from families with more resources. This suggests that policies that endeavor to direct resources to the most disadvantaged children, rather than universal entitlement to child care, may be more productive in the long run.

At the same time, however, increases in the use of child care also imply more nonparental care for children, and there is an open debate over whether this is beneficial or not. The empirical application reviews the body of literature on this question. There is clear evidence that high quality preschool pays dividends for disadvantaged youth, but there is also suggestive evidence that providing day care to middle class youth may actually hurt their outcomes.

## Child Support

A fourth means of increasing outside opportunities is to more fully enforce the [child support](#) obligations of the fathers of children whose mothers are welfare recipients. When individuals divorce, or children are born out of wedlock, the court system often orders the absent parent (typically the father) to provide some means of financial support to the parent who retains custody of the children (typically the mother). The problem is that only half of these court-ordered child support payments are actually made in the United States today. As a result, women are unable to leave welfare because they cannot finance consumption for themselves and their children on their wage earnings alone without these child support payments. If more child support were paid, there would be an outward shift in the non-welfare budget constraint in [Figure 17-7](#), and welfare would become less attractive.

**child support**

Court-ordered payments from an absent parent to support the upbringing of offspring.

This is a very appealing approach to reducing welfare dependence; after all, there isn't a large constituency to defend the “deadbeat dads” who aren't paying their child support. The appeal of this approach probably explains why, in nearly every year from 1981 to 1999, there was major federal legislation to continue to tighten child support enforcement in order to find the parent not complying with the law and making them pay their court-ordered obligations. A state (the entity that enforces child support laws) now has the power to order possible fathers to undergo genetic testing to establish paternity, investigate financial records to facilitate court-ordered determinations of child support payments, and enforce child support orders by withholding deadbeat parents' wages or seizing and selling their property.<sup>45</sup>

The problem with this approach to solving welfare dependence, however, is that many of these noncompliant parents are poor as well, so there is not much money that can effectively be collected from them. And evidence from Denmark suggests that rising child support obligations reduces labor supply among fathers subject to child support orders.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, under the current structure of the TANF system in most states, virtually all the money collected from deadbeat dads in child support for women on welfare goes directly to the state to offset the women's welfare costs, with the women keeping only a small nominal

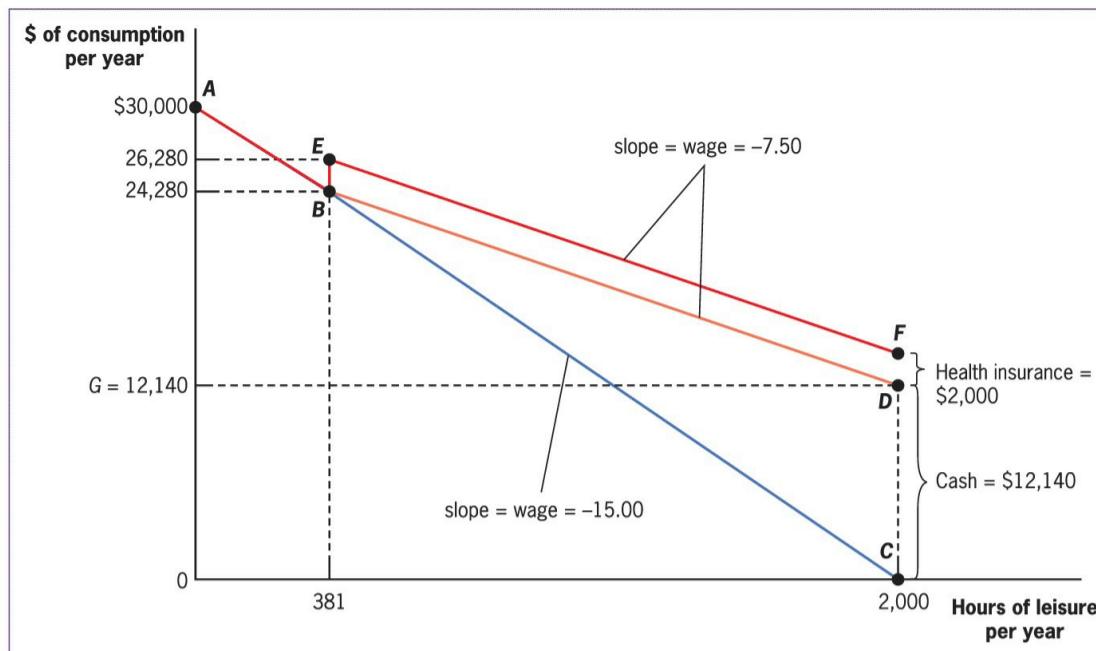
amount. So the current system is effectively taxing low-income deadbeat dads to finance welfare programs. This system provides little incentive for women on welfare to help in tracking down deadbeat fathers because the state gets the money, not the mothers. That is why some states are experimenting with “passing-through” to mothers on welfare the entirety of the child support payments collected from absent fathers.

On the other hand, the major advantage of stronger enforcement of child support is that it potentially reduces the incidence of single motherhood by making it financially costly for fathers to abandon their families. There is little convincing evidence, however, to demonstrate that stronger child support enforcement is associated with lower divorce rates or with lower rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing. Indeed, recent studies by economist Maya Rossin-Slater suggest that the opposite may be the case. She finds that when states passed laws strengthening paternity identification, the results were *lowered* marriage rates and a reduction in fathers’ involvement with their children. Likewise, increases in child support benefits in Denmark caused fathers to be less likely to live with their children. These results suggest that men who are unsure about whether or not to marry the mothers of their children may view money as an acceptable substitute.<sup>47</sup>

### Remove Welfare Lock

Finally, a fifth approach to improving outside incentives is to unlink cash welfare from other in-kind benefits. For example, until the mid-1980s, receipt of public health insurance under Medicaid for low-income, nondisabled mothers was restricted to those on welfare. If they left welfare, most of these women could not find jobs that offered health insurance. This linkage between cash welfare and insurance had the potential effect of causing women to stay on welfare solely to receive the health insurance benefit.

This point is illustrated in [Figure 17-8](#). The starting point is [Figure 17-5](#), showing a pre-welfare budget constraint with a slope of \$15.00 (the hourly wage), ABC. A welfare program is introduced that provides a benefit guarantee of \$12,140 with a 50% benefit reduction rate (recipients lose 50¢ in benefits for each \$1 earned), shifting the budget constraint to ABD, as in [Figure 17-5](#). Now suppose that the poverty reduction program offered by the government includes free health insurance only for those on welfare and that this health insurance is worth \$2,000. This causes an additional upward shift in the budget constraint when an individual is on welfare by \$2,000; as long as the individual is on the welfare program, she receives health insurance worth \$2,000. Once she leaves welfare, however, she loses her health insurance, as well as cash payments. The budget constraint on welfare (and public health insurance) thus becomes AB<sub>E</sub>F.



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■ FIGURE 17-8

**Tying Health Insurance to Cash Welfare** • The linking of health insurance coverage through Medicaid to cash welfare creates an additional large disincentive to leave welfare. The budget constraint with the welfare program moves from *ABD* to *ABEF* when insurance is tied to welfare, with an extra portion (*BEF*) that reflects the value of Medicaid, but that ends when the individual leaves welfare. Thus, when Medicaid is linked to welfare, it is never sensible to leave welfare for a job that pays only slightly more, unless that job offers health insurance.

The implication is that for the woman who is considering working her way off welfare, that last \$1 of earnings that moves her off the welfare program doesn't just cost her 50¢ of welfare benefits; it also costs her the entire value of the health insurance package! Thus, there is a huge disincentive to working one's way off welfare. Women will not leave welfare until their earnings exceed what they could get on welfare by a large amount, enough to cover the cost of the lost health insurance. Just as there is job lock (covered in [Chapter 15](#)), there is *welfare lock*: even if women can increase their income in the labor market, they may be unwilling to leave welfare because they will lose their public health insurance.

One way to increase the outside opportunities of women is to uncouple their eligibility for health insurance from their receipt of cash welfare payments. This was one major motivation for the Medicaid expansions of the 1980s and 1990s, which were not tied to cash welfare. Unfortunately, however, there is only mixed evidence on whether welfare lock is important in practice; even the largest estimates suggest that such uncoupling of health insurance from welfare results in only very modest decreases in the number of people on the welfare rolls.



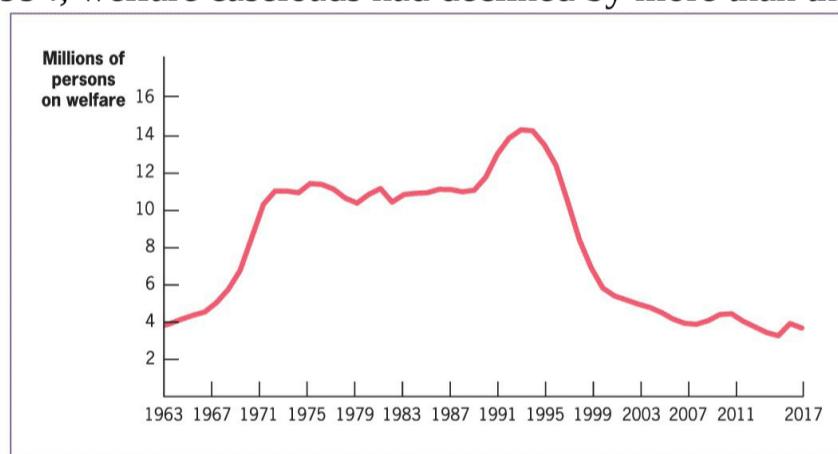
#### APPLICATION

### Evaluating the 1996 Welfare Reform

On August 22, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), more commonly known as the welfare reform law. This law fulfilled the promise that President Clinton (and many other policy makers) had made to “end welfare as we know it.” Some of the most important changes were as follows:

1. Cash welfare was changed from an *entitlement*, for which the federal government paid at least half of a state's benefits costs, to a *block grant*, where the federal government simply sent each state a check for a fixed amount to finance welfare programs. This change is equivalent to moving from retrospective to prospective federal reimbursement of states for welfare costs.
2. States were allowed, and encouraged, to experiment with alternative structures of cash welfare payments, such as reducing the benefit reduction rate or allowing women to keep more of the child support payments made by their children's fathers.
3. Time limits were imposed on welfare recipients, as described earlier in this chapter. These time limits did not exist before PRWORA.
4. Work requirements were imposed on welfare recipients. Work requirements were much weaker before PRWORA.
5. New efforts to limit unwed motherhood were introduced: teenagers who want to qualify for benefits must live with their parents and attend school; there is a 25% reduction in benefits for mothers who do not identify the paternity of their children; and states are allowed to impose a "family cap," whereby benefits don't increase as women have more children.

The association between the timing of this law and the reduction in welfare caseloads (the number of persons receiving cash welfare), documented in [Figure 17-9](#), is striking. After reaching a peak in 1994, welfare caseloads had declined by more than three-fourths by 2017.



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#### ■ FIGURE 17-9

Welfare Caseloads in the United States, 1963–2017 • The number of persons on welfare rose rapidly in the 1960s, then was fairly constant until rising again in the recession of the early 1990s. Welfare enrollments fell dramatically after 1994; some of this reduction was due to the 1996 welfare reform law and related earlier state policy initiatives.

Data from: [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2018c\)](#).

As you might expect, however, the time series evidence for the effects of welfare reform in [Figure 17-9](#) is not entirely convincing, for two reasons. First, the caseload decline began in 1994, well before welfare reform began taking effect. Second, this period also saw one of the largest economic booms in the history of the United States, and better labor markets have always been associated with reductions in welfare rolls. Similar problems plague attempts to assess the impact of welfare reform on other outcomes such as labor supply and childbearing.

It is very hard to move beyond time series analyses of welfare reform, however, because the reform was instituted on a national, not state-by-state, basis. The law did have different manifestations in different states, due to decisions each state made with its new flexibility, but

so many different aspects of the welfare laws changed that it is hard to assign a causal impact to any one of the changes.

Analysts of the 1996 welfare reform have proposed two solutions to this problem, neither entirely satisfactory, but which together can begin to paint a picture of the effects of reform. The first approach is to compare the outcomes of single mothers (the treatment group) to other control groups, such as married mothers, who were subject to similar economic shocks but were not much affected by welfare reform. The second approach is to use the fact that some states received waivers from the federal government to experiment with particular aspects of welfare reform before the national law was in place, such as changing the benefits reduction rate and other incentives for work or sanctions for nonwork. The fact that these policies were tried in some states and not others in the mid-1990s provides a quasi-experimental set-up for evaluating their effects.<sup>48</sup>

Based on these approaches, researchers have documented a number of clear findings about welfare reform. First, about one-third of the decline in the welfare rolls can be ascribed to reform, with the rest due to the improving economy. Second, despite the enormous reduction in use of welfare, single mothers as a group have *not* seen a drop in their income or their consumption due to welfare reform. This surprising finding is accounted for by the large increase in the labor supply of single mothers over this period so that rising earnings fully offset falling welfare benefits. The rise in single mother labor supply, in turn, is due partly to the strong economy of this era, partly to expansions of wage subsidies through the EITC, and partly to welfare reform itself. At the same time, some subgroups of single mothers, those with particularly low skills who were unable to increase their earnings, have suffered from the reduction in their entitlement to cash welfare.

Finally, one of the major motivations for welfare reform was to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing. Yet, consistent with the evidence described earlier in this chapter's section on targeting to single mothers, there has been no noticeable effect of welfare reform on fertility rates. For example, a study of the state-level family caps by [Kearney \(2004\)](#) found that capping benefit levels did not at all reduce the rate at which single mothers had children.

So was welfare reform a success? These reforms, and state reforms that preceded them, appear to have lowered welfare rolls without lowering the incomes of single mothers in the United States. Whether these reforms were ultimately “successful,” however, depends on four additional factors. First, while incomes did not fall on average, they did fall for some women. If society cares in particular about those at the very bottom of the income distribution, these costs for a small share of women may exceed the gains from reduced government welfare spending.<sup>49</sup>

Second, although incomes for single mothers were not down on average, they did not rise much either, and leisure clearly fell. So, in a standard utility-maximizing framework, these single mothers are worse off. The benefits of reduced government spending on welfare must be weighed against the reduction in the utility of these single mothers from reduced leisure.<sup>50</sup>

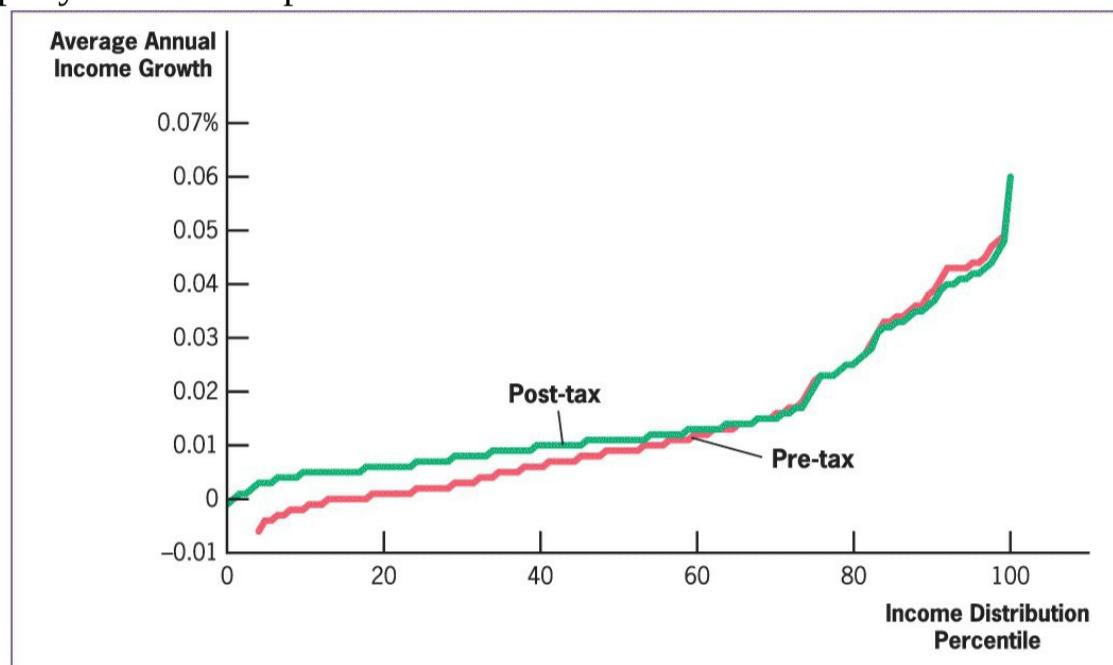
Third, this reform was passed in the midst of one of the largest economic expansions in U.S. history, and the welfare system has not responded well to the steep recession of the late 2000s. As [DeParle \(2012\)](#) documented, the recession led to an enormous growth of the food stamp program, which is an entitlement and thus responds to the state of the economy, while welfare rolls have not risen because they are financed by a block grant. DeParle presents a number of compelling examples of hardships imposed by welfare limits in the Great

Recession. Despite this, efforts continue to reduce these programs, including imposing work requirements and time limits on food stamp recipients.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the most important long-run effects of welfare reform are likely to be on the children in welfare-eligible families. Such children did not see much change in their income on average from welfare reform, but they are now increasingly cared for by others rather than by their own mothers (who are working instead of staying at home on welfare). Whether this is on net a positive or negative outcome for their own well-being remains to be seen. But initial evidence is not favorable: one study finds that children of former welfare recipients are actually more likely today to be on welfare than they were in 1996.<sup>52</sup> ■

## 17.5 Universal Basic Income?

The problems of income inequality described in [Section 17.1](#) are only getting worse. While the U.S. economy has grown steadily since the end of the Great Recession, those benefits are not being shared widely in society. This is illustrated compellingly in [Figure 17-10](#), from [Piketty et al. \(2016\)](#). This graph shows who has benefitted from U.S. economic growth from 1980 to 2014. The x axis shows the percentiles of the income distribution—the poorest are on the left and the richest on the right. The lines show the average annual growth income for each percentile of the distribution, both pre-tax (red) and post-tax (green). For the bottom 50% of the population, income growth has been less than 1%. But for those at the top of the income scale, growth has been much faster—incomes rose by 2.3% per year for the top 1%, and by 6% per year for the top 0.001%!



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■ FIGURE 17-10

Average Annual Income Growth, 1980–2014 • The figure displays the percentiles of the income distribution (the poorest are on the left and the richest on the right). The lines show the average annual growth income for each percentile of the distribution, both pre-tax (red) and post-tax (green).

Source: [Piketty et al. \(2016\)](#).

Accompanying this growing inequality has been a sense that the existing welfare system is not equipped to address the income disparities in society. For the reasons covered in this chapter, means-tested cash welfare approaches face a number of limitations—and reforms of these systems over the past several decades have not reduced these limitations, and have, in fact, made them worse.

For these reasons, there has been a resurgence of interest among progressive policy experts in a radical new approach: a Universal Basic Income (UBI). Under this approach, all citizens would receive a flat grant of income, no strings attached. Most importantly, this income would not be means-tested—and therefore would not distort labor supply. In this way all citizens are ensured a minimal standard of living, without the inefficiencies associated with the implicit taxes of cash welfare. The UBI is not merely a theoretical concept. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton included a version of this proposal in her 2016 campaign platform, and Finland and the Canadian province of Ontario are running basic income experiments.

A UBI is appealing because it would be a powerful tool to combat the growing income

inequality documented through this chapter, and would do so without taxing work by giving a flat payment. There are, however, two concerns with such an approach. First, it is possible that even though this is a flat income grant, it would significantly lower labor supply. A variety of studies in other contexts show that the income effect from redistributive programs, even absent distortionary work incentives, does lead to less work. However, evidence from the Alaska Permanent Fund in the United States, reviewed in the empirical evidence box, suggests that this may not be a major issue with a UBI program.

Second, this would be very expensive. Suppose that the goal of UBI was to ensure that no families lived in poverty. There are 126 million households in the United States today. A basic income of \$12,400 per household, enough to simply lift a household of one out of poverty, would cost \$1.5 trillion per year—or about the same as the Medicare and Medicaid programs combined.

For this reason, attention has turned instead to bold but somewhat more constrained proposals. One is to move to a large universal child benefit, to ensure at least that children in the United States are adequately provided for. This would follow the approach taken in at least 10 other major developed nations, which have per child credits ranging from \$1,200 in the Netherlands to \$4,725 in Luxembourg. Canada recently scrapped a series of child support programs to move to a universal child credit of \$4,935 per child under 6 and \$4,164 per child 6–17. A \$2,500 per child benefit in the United States would cut child poverty by one-third and cost \$203 billion per year.<sup>58</sup>

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *The Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend and Labor Supply*

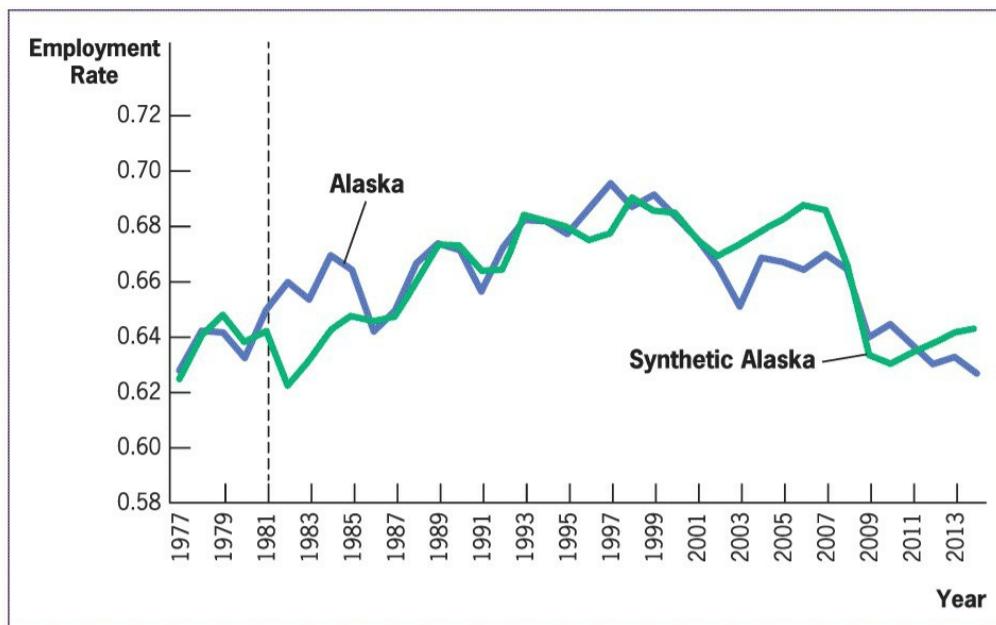
While there are appealing distributional benefits to a Universal Basic Income, there is substantial concern that it would lead to a major reduction in labor supply in the United States. As we saw in the [Chapter 13](#) discussion of Social Security, a large new entitlement to income can lead to large reductions in labor supply even if it is largely just an income effect. Such a reduction would not, in theory, be distortionary, as this would represent an income effect only (see [Chapter 20](#) for a fuller explanation).

Whether this is true in practice has been the subject of an interesting recent study of the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend. In Alaska, leases and royalties for oil exploration and the creation of the massive Trans-Alaska pipeline added up to almost \$1 billion in the early 1970s—and was just as quickly spent by the state legislature.<sup>59</sup> Alaskans voted in 1976 by a margin of 2–1 to amend the constitution to put at least 25% of oil revenues into a dedicated fund called the Permanent Fund.<sup>60</sup>

The Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation (APFC) is overseen by a board of trustees and currently manages about \$60 billion in assets. One of the key factors in its success has been an annual dividend that is paid to every man, woman, and child who is resident in Alaska (residents must reapply every year to establish their residency). The Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend (APFD) each year amounts to roughly 10% of the net income earned by the APFC during the year.<sup>61</sup> Since 1982, the fund has paid out \$40,000 per resident of the state. The dividend in 2016 was \$1,022. It peaked in 2015 at \$2,072.<sup>62</sup> This payment provides a way to ensure that all Alaskans benefit equally from oil revenues, and has the advantage of lifting state residents out of poverty: one 2016 study found that the dividend annually lifted 15,000–25,000 Alaskans out of poverty.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the dividend may be one reason that Alaska is the most equal state in the nation in terms of income distribution.

[Jones and Marinescu \(2018\)](#) have studied the impact of the APFD on labor supply. To do so, they compared labor supply in Alaska to other states around the time of the introduction of the APFD. Of course, Alaska is a fairly unique state, raising the question of what the proper “control” states are. To address this, Jones and Marinescu drew on the popular new methodology known as *synthetic controls*, in which a weighted average of control states is chosen to best match Alaska for the outcome of interest and other observable characteristics in the period before the quasi-experiment. Then, compared to this comparable weighted set of state outcomes, the authors could look at what happened in Alaska when the APFD started.

The results of the analysis is shown in [Figure 17-11](#). This figure graphs the employment rate in Alaska, relative to the synthetic control set from 1977–2014. The vertical dashed line in 1982 highlights the introduction of the APFD. In the years before 1982, the employment rate in Alaska closely tracked that of the synthetic controls, which is the goal of this methodology. After the introduction of the APFD, the employment rate in Alaska was higher than the control states, before equalizing; over this entire post-1982 period, there was essentially no difference in labor market outcomes. Compared to other comparable states, Alaska has seen no long-run labor supply reduction from this (modest) universal basic income.



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■ FIGURE 17-11

The Employment Impacts of a Basic Income • When Alaska started paying the APFD in 1982, it had no noticeable negative effect on employment in that state relative to a comparable set of control states.

Source: [Jones and Marinescu \(2018\)](#).

## 17.6 Conclusion

One of the major roles of governments in the United States and in the rest of the world is to redistribute resources to low-income groups. In the United States, this redistribution occurs through cash and in-kind benefits, which are targeted to low-income groups in general, and often to low-income single mothers in particular. These welfare programs have been a source of contentious debate for many years, and the 1996 cash welfare reforms were the most radical since the program's inception. Given the mixed evidence on welfare reform, welfare debates will no doubt continue in the future.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Redistribution may be concerned with either relative income inequality or absolute deprivation, where the latter is measured by the poverty line. Income inequality is high in the United States relative both to other nations and to historical standards.
- There are two major cash welfare programs in the United States (TANF and SSI) and four major in-kind welfare programs (food stamps, other nutritional programs, Medicaid, and public housing).
- Welfare policy may distort the incentives for low-income populations to work (to supply labor). This disincentive problem cannot be solved simply by lowering the benefit reduction rate because the increased labor supply incentives for some groups are offset by new labor supply disincentives for other groups (the iron triangle problem).
- One potential solution to the iron triangle problem is to use categorical welfare programs, which are effective if (a) individuals cannot (or will not) easily change to appear to be one of the targeted group and (b) the targeted group has low earnings capacity. Single motherhood appears to be a good targeting device using these criteria.
- Another potential solution to the iron triangle problem is to make use of ordeal mechanisms (such as in-kind benefits or welfare stigma) that reduce the value of welfare to higher-ability groups and so can be used to effectively target public spending to lower-ability groups.
- Another solution to the iron triangle problem is to increase the outside opportunities for welfare recipients, through training, wage subsidies, child care, or child support, or by uncoupling in-kind from cash benefits.
- Welfare reform in 1996 reduced welfare rolls without significantly reducing the incomes of welfare recipients, but the long-run results have shown some problems with this approach.
- One more radical solution would be a Universal Basic Income, which would directly address growing inequality by simply giving large flat cash grants to all Americans. This idea is gaining popularity but so far has just been implemented on a very limited level, for example for children only.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. As [Table 17-2](#) shows, members of the poorest fifth of U.S. households have a much smaller share of total U.S. income than is typical in other developed countries. Does this mean that the poorest fifth of U.S. households are worse off in the United States than are the poorest fifth of households elsewhere? Why or why not?
2. The U.S. federal government definition of *poverty* is the same in all communities around the country. Is this appropriate? Why or why not?
3. Suppose there are two types of people in the country of Diplandia: people who value only food, and people who value both food and movie tickets. The government of Diplandia is considering moving from a cash-welfare system to a food stamps system. The new system will provide the same benefit levels, but recipients will get stamps allowing them to buy food instead of cash. Explain how this change will affect the work efforts and utility levels of the two types of people in Diplandia. How do you think the change would affect the overall Diplandia economy?
4. Suppose that the government currently provides everyone with a guaranteed income of \$12,000 per year, but this benefit level is reduced by \$1 for each \$1 of work income. The government is considering changing this policy such that the benefit level is reduced by \$1 for every \$2 of work income. What effect would this policy have on work effort? Explain your answer.
5. Senator Ostrich suggests that “in order to end poverty, all we need to do is pay everyone making less than the poverty line the difference between what they are earning and the poverty line.” Ostrich argues that, based on the set of people currently below the poverty line, this would cost \$98 billion per year. Why is Ostrich understating the costs of this program?
6. An individual can earn \$12 per hour if he or she works. Draw the budget constraints that show the monthly consumption-leisure trade-off under the following three welfare programs.
  1. The government guarantees \$600 per month in income and reduces the benefit by \$1 for each \$1 of labor income.
  2. The government guarantees \$300 per month in income and reduces that benefit by \$1 for every \$3 of labor income.
  3. The government guarantees \$900 per month in income and reduces that benefit by \$1 for every \$2 in labor income, until the benefit reaches \$300 per month. After that point, the government does not reduce the benefit at all.
7.  Suppose that you want to test the hypothesis that welfare-benefit generosity induces people to become single mothers.
  1. Which population would you choose to study in answering this question?
  2. How would you use variation in welfare benefits to estimate the impact of welfare on single motherhood?
  3. How would you know whether welfare-benefit generosity influences single motherhood?
8. Several studies have documented a “race to the bottom” in welfare-benefit levels, whereby states respond to their neighbors’ benefit reductions with reductions in their own welfare generosity. Why might a state respond to its neighbors’ change in generosity?
9. The EITC provides a cash subsidy for every \$1 earned by those with incomes below \$52,247 per year. How might the EITC raise an individual’s overall work effort? How might the EITC lower an individual’s work effort?
10. An issue that arises when designing a welfare system is whether to make the benefits available to all low-income families with children or only to families headed by a single mother. Explain the trade-offs involved in this decision.
11. Consider the major changes in the welfare system that occurred in the 1996 welfare reform, described in [section 17.4](#). Which of these changes are likely to reduce the number of people on welfare? Which of these changes are likely to increase the number of people on welfare?

12. Congresswoman Snow, having read [Chapter 11](#) of this text, informs her colleagues that people who have higher levels of education have higher earnings capacities. She argues, based on [Chapter 17](#), that one way to reduce the moral hazard of welfare is to pay larger benefits to those with limited earnings capacities. Therefore, according to Congresswoman Snow, one way to accomplish this would be to provide large welfare payments to poorly educated Americans. Would this eliminate moral hazard?

- The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

13. The WIC food assistance program provides needy families with easily identifiable coupons good for very specific types of food, while in most states the food stamps program provides recipients with an Electronic Benefit Transfer card that looks and works very much like a standard debit card. Explain which program is more likely to surmount the problem of the iron triangle?
14. The PRWORA imposed limits on the amount of time that a family could receive cash-welfare payments during its members' childhoods. [Grogger and Michalopoulos \(2003\)](#) found that these time limits led to immediate reductions in the number of people receiving welfare benefits, even though nobody in the family had reached his or her time limit. Which group of families should be particularly sensitive to the introduction of these time limits: those with younger children or those with older children? Explain your answer.
15.  A wealthy tech mogul, concerned about how increasing automation might one day reduce the availability of employment in some sectors of the economy, has decided to fund a randomized controlled trial of Universal Basic Income. The trial will last three years, and study 1,000 people randomly assigned to a treatment or control arm. Five hundred people will be randomly assigned to receive \$5,000 per year with no strings attached, and the other five hundred will receive only a small incentive to participate in the study. What are the advantages and pitfalls of such a research strategy in understanding the likely benefits and drawbacks of a Universal Basic Income implemented nationwide, for all citizens?
16. Emma spends her money on food and all other goods. Right now, she has an income of \$600 per month. Compare two alternative welfare programs in which she could participate: program A would provide her with a monthly check of \$300, and program B would provide her with \$400 a month in credits that can be spent only on food.
  1. Draw Emma's budget constraints in each of these two cases.
  2. Draw representative indifference curves that would reflect each of these three scenarios (see [Figure 17-5](#)).
    1. Emma prefers program A to program B.
    2. Emma prefers program B to program A.
    3. Emma is indifferent between the two programs.
17. Polly, Molly, and Dolly are all single mothers. They each can earn \$10 per hour working for up to 2,000 hours per year. Their government runs a welfare system that gives income benefits of \$5,000 per year for single mothers with no income. The welfare benefits are reduced by \$1 for every \$2 in earned income. Currently, the government also provides free health care for children of single mothers with less than \$25,000 in income. Each mother values this benefit at \$2,000 per year. Under this system, Polly works 200 hours per year, Molly works 1,025 hours per year, and Dolly works 1,500 hours, so only Polly receives welfare.
  1. Draw the set of hours worked and consumption combinations that these mothers face (carefully labeling the slopes of the budget constraint). Draw a representative indifference curve for each mother.
  2. In an effort to save money, the government decides to cut back on provision insurance. It dictates that to receive free health care for their children, single mothers will henceforth have to be on welfare. On a new set of axes, draw the new budget constraint for the three mothers. Describe what will happen to the number of hours each mother works.
18. Consider the following welfare program, designed to ensure that needy people get adequate income to buy food. The government offers cash assistance to any worker earning less than \$980, paying out  **$C = \$294 - 0.31$** .

There are two types of consumption goods, food ( $F$ ) and other goods ( $X$ ), and people have utility functions

$$U = 1/4 \ln(F) + 3/4 \ln(X)$$

over these goods. The prices of food and other goods are both normalized to 1; therefore, the budget constraint is

$$F + X = Y$$

1. Determine the optimal levels of food and other-good consumption for an individual with earned income of \$380.
2. Now consider replacing the cash-welfare program with a food stamps program. Instead of receiving the cash amount indicated in the question, workers would receive an equal amount of stamps that they could spend only on food. Determine the optimum level of food and other-good consumption for the individual with \$300 in earned income. Does this make the individual better or worse off than the cash-welfare system?
3. Repeat parts (a) and (b) for an earned income of \$900 and explain any differences in outcomes.

# CHAPTER 18 Taxation: How It Works and What It Means



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [18.1 Types of Taxation](#)
- [18.2 Structure of the Individual Income Tax in the United States](#)
- [18.3 Measuring the Fairness of Tax Systems](#)
- [18.4 Defining the Income Tax Base](#)
- [18.5 Externality/Public Goods Rationales for Deviating from Haig-Simons](#)
- [18.6 The Appropriate Unit of Taxation](#)
- [18.7 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do income taxes work in the United States?
- What is the proper base for income taxation?
- What is the appropriate family unit for taxation?

Upon ascending to office in January 2001, President George W. Bush was faced with a rare opportunity: a projected federal budget surplus. Bush quickly decided that the government should use this surplus to lower the federal tax burden. As he said in a radio address on February 24, 2011, “A surplus in tax revenue, after all, means that taxpayers have been overcharged. And usually when you’ve been overcharged, you expect to get something back.”

Later in his first year, Bush signed into law the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001. This law lowered tax rates across the board, with rates falling from 15 to 39.6% to 10 to 35%. The estate tax levied on the estates of the wealthiest decedents in the United States was phased out, before completely disappearing in 2010. These cuts were further extended by the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003, which accelerated the rate at which lower tax rates were phased in, lowered the maximum tax rate on stock dividend and capital gains income, and increased deductions from the corporate tax.

Unfortunately, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), by the time President Bush left office, this surplus had become a very large deficit. An ongoing debate throughout the subsequent Obama presidency was whether and how to end the Bush tax cuts. The cuts were scheduled to expire in 2010, and Obama proposed to extend the cuts for at least another year for those earning under \$250,000, which includes 98% of Americans, but raise taxes back to their original levels for those making more.<sup>1</sup>

Obama explained, “These tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans are also the tax cuts that are least likely to promote growth.”<sup>2</sup> But Republicans argued that higher taxes in the midst of a recession would hurt the economy further by punishing job-creating small businesses that pay taxes under the individual income tax code.

In the end, the two sides compromised by extending the full set of tax cuts for another two years, along with other tax breaks and spending to promote growth during the ongoing recession. President Obama vowed to not allow another such extension, saying, “I’ve said before that I felt that the middle-class tax cuts were being held hostage to the high-end tax cuts. I think it’s tempting not to negotiate with hostage-takers, unless the hostage gets harmed. Then people will question the wisdom of that strategy. In this case, the hostage was the American people, and I was not willing to see them get harmed.”<sup>3</sup> Whether the promise not to allow another extension of the Bush tax cuts was credible was uncertain, given Republican control of Congress.

When the tax cuts did expire (again) in 2012, another compromise was reached through the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012. This law made permanent all tax cuts for those households making under \$450,000; above that level, the tax cuts expired and the top tax rate increased from 35 to 39.6%. Tax deductions and various tax credits also began to be phased

out for those making more than \$250,000 or \$300,000 for individuals and couples, respectively. The estate tax also increased from 35 to 40%, but still maintained the same exemption of \$5 million (i.e., you only paid the estate tax on any amount greater than \$5 million).

But by the time President Trump ascended to office in January 2017, tax cuts were once again the focus. “We believe that ordinary Americans know better than Washington how to spend their own money and we want to help them take home as much of their money as possible and then spend it,” Trump explained during a rally in Springfield, Missouri, meant to start his push for tax reform.<sup>4</sup>

And then in December 2017 President Trump signed into law the biggest tax cuts since the 2001 Bush cuts. Trump’s tax bill lowered the corporate tax rate from 35 to 21%, introduced special tax breaks for unincorporated businesses, dramatically reduced the taxation of international corporate income, and doubled the estate tax exemption to more than \$11 million for individuals, and \$22 million for couples. On the individual tax side, the reform raised the threshold to the highest tax bracket from \$470,700 for couples to \$600,000, and cut the tax rate for that bracket to 37% from 39.6%. The bill also limited the amount of state and local tax deductions for individuals to \$10,000. Previously there was no limit. Additionally, low-income families get a more generous child tax credit. The threshold for families having to pay the alternative minimum tax (AMT) rate also increased from \$160,900 to \$1 million. Every one of the individual cuts and changes is scheduled to sunset in 2025. Overall, this represented a sizeable cut in taxes that was projected to lower tax revenues by almost \$1.5 trillion over the subsequent decade.<sup>5</sup> Democrats uniformly voted against the tax bill. The tax cuts “give \$1.5 trillion away to the richest Americans and the biggest corporations, and let everybody else pick up the crumbs,” Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren said in a 2018 interview with CNBC.<sup>6</sup>

These debates highlight the important role that taxes play in both the political arena and government policy making in the United States. In this section of the book, we move beyond our study of government expenditures to the study of government revenue raised through taxation. This chapter begins the study of taxation by setting the institutional and theoretical stage for understanding tax policy and its effects. Once we understand these basic concepts, our study of taxation proceeds in three steps. [Chapters 19](#) and [20](#) cover the basic theory of taxation. [Chapters 21](#) through [24](#) apply this basic theory to the study of how tax systems affect economic behavior by individuals and by corporations. Finally, [Chapter 25](#) discusses the implications of our analysis for fundamental tax reform in the United States.

We begin our study by providing a brief overview of the types of taxation that exist in the United States; at the federal, state, and local levels; and around the world. We then discuss in more detail the main tool of revenue raising in the United States: the federal income tax. We provide an overview of the structure of the income tax and discuss alternative means of measuring the “fairness” of the income tax system. We then turn to the question of how to measure the base on which income taxes should be levied. Should all forms of income be taxed or only some forms? Should the government use the tax code to encourage private provision of public goods by exempting contributions toward such goods from taxation? Should the government tax individuals on the basis of their own income or on the basis of the income of all those in their family? This part of the chapter discusses how governments should, and do, form the bases for taxing income.

## 18.1 Types of Taxation

The governments of the United States and other nations raise revenues through a wide variety of mechanisms. Our study of taxation will focus on the five most common types of taxes, which we review in this section. (Other, more specific types of taxes will also be discussed, when appropriate, in the remaining chapters of the book.)

### Taxes on Earnings

The first type of taxation is the **payroll tax**, a tax levied on the earnings of workers. Payroll taxes are the primary means of financing social insurance programs, such as those discussed in the preceding chapters (Social Security, unemployment insurance, Medicare, and so on).

**payroll tax**

A tax levied on income earned on one's job.

### Taxes on Individual Income

The second type of taxation is the **individual income tax**, a tax paid by individuals on income accrued during the year. Income for income tax purposes includes labor earnings, but the tax is distinguished from the payroll tax by (1) applying to a broader set of income sources (such as interest earnings from household savings as well) and (2) applying in many cases to the entire income of a family, not just to the income of one individual worker. A form of income taxation that is of particular interest is the taxation of **capital gains**, the earnings from selling capital assets, such as stocks, paintings, and houses.

**individual income tax**

A tax paid on individual income accrued during the year.

**capital gains**

Earnings from selling capital assets, such as stocks, paintings, and houses.

### Taxes on Corporate Income

In addition to taxing individual income, many countries also separately tax the earnings of corporations through the **corporate income tax**. The purpose of the separate taxation of corporations, above and beyond taxes on individuals, is to tax earnings of owners of capital that otherwise might escape taxation by the individual-based income tax system.

**corporate income tax**

Tax levied on the earnings of corporations.

### Taxes on Wealth

**Wealth taxes** are taxes paid not on income as it is accrued, but on the value of the assets held by a person or family, such as land, jewelry, artwork, real estate, and stocks. Included in this category are state and local **property taxes**, which are based on the value of land and any structures built on the land, and **estate taxes**, which are based on bequests (money, property, and so on) left behind when one dies.

**wealth taxes**

Taxes paid on the value of the assets, such as real estate or stocks, held by a person or family.

**property taxes**

A form of wealth tax based on the value of real estate, including the value of the land and any structures built on the land.

**estate taxes**

A form of wealth tax based on the value of the estate left behind when one dies.

### Taxes on Consumption

The form of taxation that is most common around the world is the **consumption tax**, which is paid on individual or household consumption of goods (and sometimes on services as well). Consumption taxes are often levied in the form of **sales taxes**, taxes that are paid by consumers to vendors at the point of sale. These taxes can be applied either to a broad variety

of consumption goods or to a particular good alone. When applied to only certain goods, for example cigarettes, cars, or gasoline, the sales tax is called an [excise tax](#).  
**consumption tax**

A tax paid on individual or household consumption of goods (and sometimes services).

**sales taxes**

Taxes paid by consumers to vendors at the point of sale.

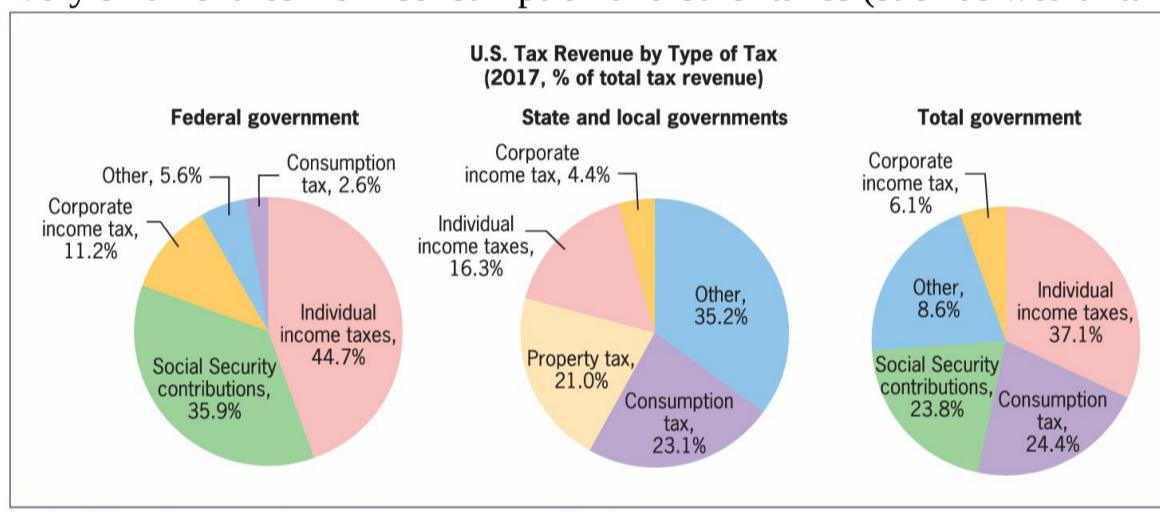
**excise tax**

A tax paid on the sales of particular goods, such as cigarettes or gasoline.

Payroll, income, and wealth taxes are called *direct taxes* because they are assessed directly on individuals. Consumption taxes are called *indirect taxes* because they tax individuals indirectly by taxing their transactions.

## Taxation Around the World

[Figure 18-1](#) and [Figure 18-2](#) show the distribution of tax revenues across these different types of taxes in the United States and in other nations. The U.S. federal government receives a large portion of its tax revenue (47.9%) from the individual income tax and another large share (35%) from payroll taxes. A more moderate share comes from the corporate income tax (9%), with very small shares from consumption and other taxes (such as wealth taxes).

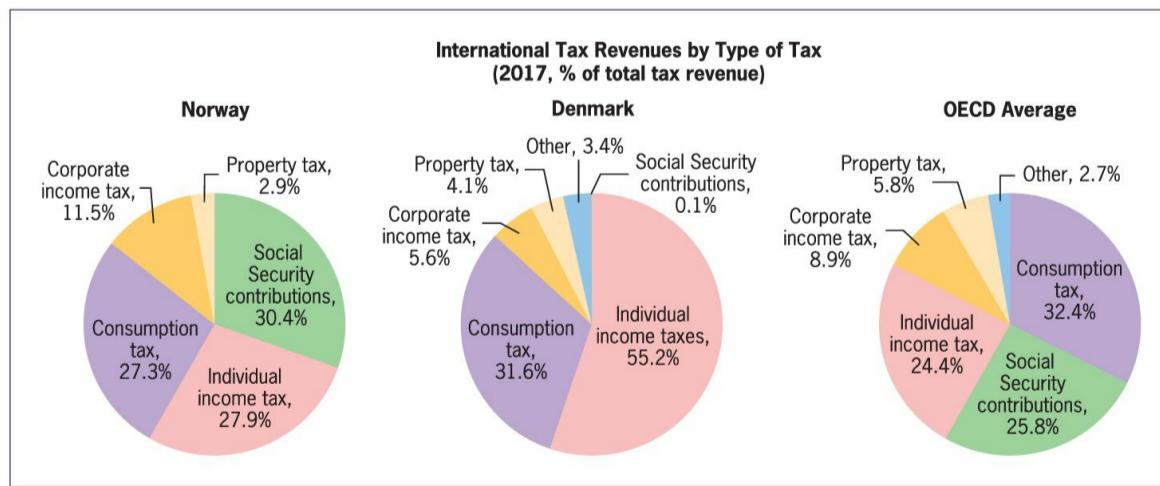


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■ FIGURE 18-1

**Tax Revenues by Type of Tax** • More than three-quarters of the federal government's tax revenue comes from individual income taxation (income and payroll taxes). For state and local governments, revenue is more evenly split among taxes on wealth (property), consumption, and individual income. In total, U.S. governments receive about two-thirds of their revenue from individual income taxes and payroll taxes.

Data from: [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2018\)](#), Tables 3.1–3.3.



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■ FIGURE 18-2

**International Tax Revenues by Type of Tax** • Consumption taxes provide a greater portion of national government revenue in

all OECD countries than in the United States.

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2017\)](#).

The distribution of tax revenue sources at the state and local levels is quite different. For states and localities, individual income tax revenues are only 16.3% of total revenues. The two major sources of revenues for subnational governments in the United States are sales taxes and local property taxes on homes and commercial property. While some states collect payroll taxes, payroll tax data are not available at the state level. For the United States as a whole, combining all levels of government, the most revenues are raised by income taxation, followed by payroll taxes and consumption taxes, while property taxes and corporate income taxes are about the same.

The distributions are quite different in other nations. [Figure 18-2](#) shows the distribution of taxes in two countries with very different tax systems, Norway and Denmark, and then for the set of developed Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations as a whole. In Norway, revenues are raised almost equally from income taxes, payroll taxes, consumption taxes, and corporate income taxes, with a very small share of revenues from property taxation. In Denmark, in contrast, half of revenues are raised from individual income taxes, with a large portion of the remainder from consumption taxes; there are small shares from corporate income taxes, property taxes, and payroll taxes. On average, the other developed OECD nations have a share of tax revenues from consumption taxes that is more than four times as large as that of the United States and shares from payroll taxes that are about the same.

## 18.2 Structure of the Individual Income Tax in the United States

As shown in the previous section, the most important source of revenue in the United States is the federal individual income tax. In this section, we review the structure of this tax, which is shown graphically in [Table 18-1](#), both in general terms and with some sample calculations for an individual we'll call Jack.

TABLE 18-1 Computing Jack's Income Tax

• Gross income	•	\$85,000
• -Deductions	•	-2,000
• =Adjusted gross income (AGI)	•	=83,000
• -Standard (or itemized) deduction	•	-24,000
• =Taxable income	•	=59,000
• ↓	• ↓	
• Use income tax schedule ( <a href="#">Figure 18-3</a> )		
• =Taxes owed	•	=6,699
• -Credits	•	-6,000
• =Total tax payment	•	=699
• -Withholding	•	-2,000
• =Final payment (refund) due	•	=(1,301)

Jack has gross income of \$85,000, from which he subtracts some deductions to get adjusted gross income (AGI). From AGI, he subtracts his family exemptions and either the standard deduction or itemized deductions (Jack chooses the former), yielding taxable income. A tax schedule is applied to determine taxes owed, and tax credits are then subtracted to arrive at the final tax payment.

### Computing the Tax Base

The income tax calculation begins by adding up one's various sources of income to compute

**gross income**, which is \$85,000 for Jack. This includes wages and salaries; capital income, such as interest, dividends, or rental income; and other business income. Once the taxpayer determines his gross income, the taxpayer is allowed to adjust it downward by subtracting the amounts spent on several items; the amount that remains after these deductions is called **adjusted gross income (AGI)**. These adjustments have varied over time, but currently they include:

- Contributions to retirement savings through Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) or self-employed pension plans
- Alimony paid to a former spouse
- Health insurance premiums paid by the self-employed
- One-half of the payroll taxes paid by the self-employed
- Educator expenses
- Contributions to Health Savings Accounts
- Expenses for job-related moves
- Interest paid on student loans

**gross income**

The total of an individual's various sources of income.

**adjusted gross income (AGI)**

An individual's gross income minus certain deductions, such as contributions to IRAs.

In our example, Jack makes a \$2,000 contribution to his IRA, so he deducts \$2,000 from his gross income, leaving him with an AGI of \$83,000.

The next step is to subtract from AGI a large deduction. There are two forms of deductions from which to choose:

1. The **standard deduction** is a fixed amount that taxpayers can deduct from taxable income. In 2018, the standard deduction was \$12,000 for single taxpayers and \$24,000 for married couples.
2. Alternatively, taxpayers can forgo the standard deduction and choose **itemized deductions**. Following this route, the taxpayer deducts from his income the sum of deductible amounts from several categories:
  - Medical and dental expenses exceeding 10% of AGI
  - Other taxes paid, such as state or local income tax (or sales tax if the state has no income tax), real estate tax, and personal property tax
  - Interest that the taxpayer pays on funds borrowed to make investments and on home mortgages
  - Gifts to charity
  - Casualty and theft losses
  - Unreimbursed employee expenses, such as union dues or expenses incurred on job travel

**standard deduction**

A fixed amount that a taxpayer can deduct from taxable income.

**itemized deductions**

Alternative to the standard deduction, whereby a taxpayer deducts the total amount of money spent on various expenses,

such as gifts to charity and interest on home mortgages.

Taxpayers are free to choose the method (standard or itemized deductions) that maximizes their deductions and minimizes their tax bill. Most homeowners have sufficiently high mortgage interest and property tax payments that it makes sense to itemize. Jack has paid \$6,000 in interest on his mortgage, paid \$2,500 in state and local taxes, and has given \$500 to charity, so his itemized deductions total \$9,000. Because this amount is less than the standard deduction for married couples (\$24,000), he chooses the standard deduction. Nationwide, 70% of taxpayers chose the standard deduction in 2010, with the remaining 30% using itemized deductions.<sup>7</sup>

The remainder after subtracting exemptions and deductions from AGI is called **taxable income**. Jack's taxable income is \$59,000.

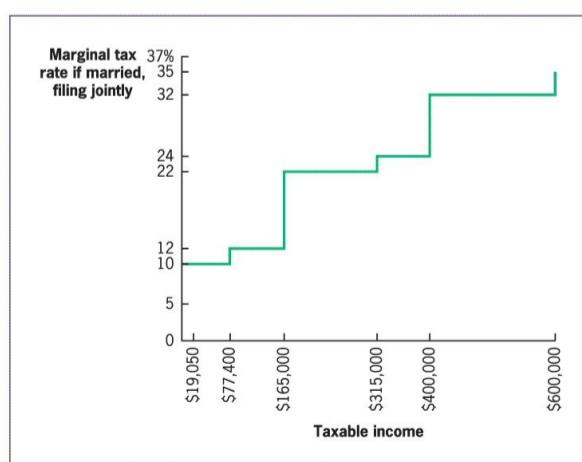
#### taxable income

The amount of income left after subtracting exemptions and deductions from adjusted gross income.

## Tax Rates and Taxes Paid

The next step for Jack is to figure out the amount of tax that he owes to the government on his taxable income of \$59,000. To find out how much he owes, Jack can look at a tax schedule, such as that shown in [Figure 18-3](#). The typical tax system in the United States and around the world is one in which the tax rate on one's next dollar of income rises as income rises. For example, the 2018 U.S. tax rate schedule (for a married couple, filing taxes jointly) is as follows:

- For any dollar of taxable income below \$19,050, there is a tax of 10¢ on each dollar of taxable income.
- For the next \$58,350 of taxable income, there is a tax of 12¢ on each dollar of taxable income.
- For the next \$87,600, there is a tax of 22¢ on each dollar of taxable income.
- For the next \$150,000, there is a tax of 24¢ on each dollar of taxable income.
- For the next \$85,000, there is a tax of 32¢ on each dollar of taxable income.
- For the next \$200,000, there is a tax of 35¢ on each dollar of taxable income.
- For all income above \$600,000, there is a tax of 37¢ on each dollar of taxable income.



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■ FIGURE 18-3

U.S. Federal Income Tax Rate Schedule, 2018 • In 2018, the tax rate on the next dollar of taxable income varied from 10%

on married couples with taxable incomes below \$19,050 to 37% on those with taxable incomes above \$600,000.

Data from: [Tax Policy Center \(2018a\)](#).

Applying this tax schedule, Jack owes \$6,699 in taxes: he owes 10% of his first \$19,050 of taxable income (\$1,905) plus 12% of the remaining \$39,950 of taxable income (\$4,794).

Taxpayers can then reduce their tax payments through certain **tax credits**, flat amounts that are subtracted from taxes owed. These include credits for having children (the Child Tax Credit); for paying for care of children and elderly dependents (the Credit for Child and Dependent Care Expenses); for being poor and either elderly or disabled (the Credit for the Elderly or Disabled); for paying for educational expenses of family members (the Hope and Lifetime Learning Credits); for hiring as employees welfare recipients, ex-felons, veterans, or other members of groups with high unemployment rates (the Work Opportunity Credit); and for earning income if family income is very low (the Earned Income Tax Credit). Jack qualifies for a child credit of \$6,000 for his three children, so that he now owes \$699 (\$6,699 – \$6,000) in taxes.

#### **tax credits**

Amounts by which taxpayers are allowed to reduce the taxes they owe to the government through spending, for example on child care.

The taxes for each year must be paid by April 15 of the following year. For most taxpayers, taxes are subtracted from their wage and salary income as it is earned, a process called **withholding**.<sup>8</sup> The amount withheld is an estimate of the taxes the worker will owe based on his or her earnings, but this estimate is rarely perfectly accurate. In Jack's case, for example, the government has withheld \$2,000 from his earnings during the year. Thus, Jack is due a tax **refund** of \$1,301—the difference between what was withheld from his earnings and the amount he owes in taxes. In other cases, withholding may fall short of taxes due, in which case the taxpayer must pay additional taxes when he files his tax return.

#### **withholding**

The subtraction of estimated taxes owed directly from a worker's earnings.

#### **refund**

The difference between the amount withheld from a worker's earnings and the taxes owed if the former is higher.

## 18.3 Measuring the Fairness of Tax Systems

In March 1990, rioters in London set fire to parked Jaguars and Porsches, smashed store windows, destroyed a Renault showroom, and ultimately caused the injury of more than 400 people and the arrest of nearly 350 people. The cause of the riot was a tax reform proposal by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's government. Thatcher had proposed to replace the system of property taxes (based on real estate value) with a poll tax, a flat charge levied equally on all individuals, regardless whether they were rich, poor, or somewhere in between. The proposal provoked enormous outrage because the tax burden was being shifted away from wealthy citizens owning valuable property and onto poorer citizens, who didn't previously pay property taxes but would now have to pay the poll tax. Because of the poll tax's unpopularity, Thatcher was eventually ousted as leader of the Conservative Party and the proposal was quickly abandoned. Thatcher may have gotten off easily: the last attempt to impose such a tax in England, in 1381, led to the beheading of several prominent citizens.<sup>9</sup>

As this example illustrates, tax *fairness* is an important concern to citizens worldwide. Yet fairness is an elusive goal: what is a fair tax system to me may seem unfair to you. To carry out the evaluation of a tax system's fairness requires a particular concept of fairness, or *equity*, and a means of measuring how a tax system redistributes income to make the distribution more equitable. This section defines the common concepts that are used to measure fairness and the statistics that are used to assess whether tax systems meet those fairness goals. But we must first define some important terms that are used to measure the distributional nature of tax systems.

### Average and Marginal Tax Rates

Two key concepts describe the set of tax rates on income. The first is the **marginal tax rate**, the percentage of the next dollar of taxable income that is paid in taxes. With a system such as that in the United States, the marginal tax rate rises with income; for those with taxable income below \$19,050, the marginal tax rate is 10%, but for those with taxable income above \$600,000 the marginal tax rate is 37%.

**marginal tax rate**

The percentage that is paid in taxes of the next dollar earned.

The second concept is the **average tax rate**, the percentage of total income that is paid in taxes, which is computed as the ratio of total tax payments to total income. The average tax rate for any individual is a weighted average of the marginal rates the individual pays as she moves along the tax schedule. For example, suppose that Ranya has gross income of \$190,000 and has taxable income (after adjustments, deductions, and exemptions) of \$170,000 (and no tax credits). Her total tax bill is

$$(\$19,050 \times 0.1) + (\$58,350 \times 0.12) + (\$87,600 \times 0.22) + (\$5,000 \times 0.24) = \$29,379.$$

**average tax rate**

The percentage of gross income that is paid in taxes.

We compute Ranya's total tax bill by walking her up the marginal rate schedule until we get to her income level. Ranya's marginal rate is 24% because this is the rate that she pays on her next dollar of income. Her average tax rate is 15.5%, which is her tax bill (\$29,379) divided by her gross income (\$190,000). This is a weighted average of all the marginal rates Ranya is paying, where the weights are the share of her income in each tax bracket (including the \$20,000 of her income that is not taxed and therefore faces a zero marginal rate).

### Vertical and Horizontal Equity

Two distributional goals are frequently considered in measuring tax fairness. The first is **vertical equity**, the principle that groups with more resources (higher income, higher wealth, higher profits, etc.) should pay higher taxes than do lower-resource groups. This idea is related to the concept of equity discussed in [Chapters 2](#) and [17](#), which referred to the distribution of resources between higher- and lower-income (or -ability) groups. Concerns over vertical equity in taxation could be motivated, for example, by a utilitarian social welfare function that calls for redistribution from lower to higher marginal utility of consumption groups in society.

#### **vertical equity**

The principle that groups with more resources should pay higher taxes than groups with fewer resources.

Another concept of equity that is often raised in tax policy discussions is **horizontal equity**, the principle that individuals who are similar but who make different economic or lifestyle choices should be treated in the same way by the tax system. Consider two state sales tax systems. One state sets a sales tax of 5% on all goods. Another state implements a system whereby whenever you make a purchase, the cashier flips a coin, and you pay no sales tax if it is heads and a 10% sales tax if it is tails. This latter system will raise the same amount of money as the former system on average, but it is much less horizontally equitable because two identical individuals could end up paying very different taxes.

#### **horizontal equity**

The principle that similar individuals who make different economic choices should be treated similarly by the tax system.

This extreme example clearly illustrates a horizontal inequity, but in reality horizontal inequities are hard to define. Imagine that my friend and I are identical in terms of intelligence, education, and motivation. I choose to spend more of my time at home with my children, while my friend chooses to spend more time on her job. Even though we are the same in many respects, my friend has higher income than I do, and will pay higher income taxes as a result.

Does this outcome violate horizontal equity? On the one hand, we have different amounts of income, so we pay different taxes, which seems horizontally equitable. On the other hand, we are two identical people in terms of abilities and underlying resources, yet because of the different choices that we have made, we pay different amounts of taxes, which seems horizontally inequitable.

Whenever the amount of taxes paid depends on choices made by individuals, such a dilemma will exist: individuals of identical underlying resources who make different choices will pay different amounts of tax. The only time that horizontal inequities are unambiguous is when taxes differ for reasons independent of choice, such as in the previous random taxation example. Thus, violations of horizontal equity are ultimately in the eye of the beholder, an unfortunate fact because horizontal equity concerns are constantly raised in tax debates and are often distorted to fit the views of the proponents or opponents of a particular tax proposal.<sup>[10](#)</sup>

## Measuring Vertical Equity

While horizontal equity is often difficult to define and measure, there are more standard measures of vertical equity that are central to debates over tax policy. Most analysts conclude that to be vertically equitable, tax systems must be **progressive**: effective average tax rates must rise with income so that the rich pay a higher share of their income in taxes than do the poor. (For example, a progressive tax system would be one in which individuals pay 10% of their income in tax at an income of \$10,000, but they pay 30% of their income in tax at an income of \$100,000.) Tax systems in which the effective average tax rate does not change

with income are **proportional** tax systems because everyone pays the same proportion of his or her income in taxes. (For example, individuals pay 15% of income in taxes regardless of whether they earn \$10,000 or \$100,000.) Tax systems in which effective average tax rates fall with income are **regressive** tax systems. (For example, individuals pay 15% of their income in tax at an income of \$10,000, but pay only 10% of their income in tax at an income of \$100,000.)

**progressive**

Tax systems in which effective average tax rates rise with income.

**proportional**

Tax systems in which effective average tax rates do not change with income, so that all taxpayers pay the same proportion of their income in taxes.

**regressive**

Tax systems in which effective average tax rates fall with income.



## APPLICATION

### The Political Process of Measuring Tax Fairness<sup>11</sup>

As we've just seen, measuring tax fairness can be challenging. There are several different ways to measure fairness, and politicians are likely to choose the one that best fits their agendas in advocating or opposing a tax change. An excellent example of this process is the debate over the income tax cuts proposed by President George W. Bush and signed into law by Congress in 2003. These tax cuts accelerated already scheduled reductions in income tax rates, expanded tax breaks for married couples, increased the credit paid to families with children, and increased tax breaks for corporations.

Democratic critics opposed these tax cuts on grounds of "fairness." They pointed out, for example, that 44% of the tax reductions from this bill would go to the top 1% of taxpayers. The Bush administration acknowledged that fact but responded by pointing out that these top taxpayers already pay 38% of all income taxes. So this reduction in their tax bill was roughly in proportion to their existing income tax payments. Thus, in the view of the bill's proponents, this was a fair reduction in taxes for those paying the most in taxation today.

Democrats responded by highlighting that while the top 1% of taxpayers pay 38% of income taxes, they pay only 30% of *all taxes*. Because the payroll tax rate is flat rather than rising, and because the base of taxation for Old Age Security and Disability Income (OASDI) taxes is capped for high earners, our payroll tax system is less progressive than our income tax system. So the top 1% was getting a tax break (44% of the tax cut) that was far out of proportion to its share of total payments (30% of total taxes paid). This, the Democrats contended, was unfair.



*"My bill isn't terribly controversial. It would provide modest tax breaks for people who don't really need them."*

J.B. Handelsman/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

The administration fired back by noting that 34 million families with children would receive an average tax cut of \$1,549 each. But critics noted that this was a misleading use of the word “average.” These average figures were inflated by the fact that the lion’s share of the tax cut accrues to households with the highest incomes. As economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman put it, “When Bill Gates enters a bar, the average net worth of the patrons soars, but that doesn’t make everyone in the bar a billionaire.”<sup>12</sup> While it is true that 34 million families with children would get a \$1,549 tax cut on average, this average consisted of both 10 million families that would receive a tax cut of less than \$100 and 200,000 families (with incomes over \$1 million per year) receiving a \$93,500 tax cut. Families in the middle of the income distribution received an average tax cut of only \$217.

As is often said in Washington, D.C., where you stand on an issue depends on where you sit. For most Republicans, this tax cut fairly rewarded those who were most burdened by the current income tax. For most Democrats, this tax cut unfairly rewarded the rich out of proportion to their current overall tax burden. Neither party to the debate really emphasized the economist’s generally preferred measure of the distributional effects of tax policies, which is how they affect the after-tax distribution of income. Progressive tax reforms will narrow the after-tax distribution of income; regressive tax reforms will widen it. According to the non-partisan Tax Policy Center’s evaluations of both the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts, the lowest quintile of the income distribution saw their after-tax incomes rise by 0.7% as a result of these tax cuts, while the top quintile saw their after-tax incomes rise by 4.4%, and the top 0.1% of taxpayers saw their after-tax incomes rise by 7.5%. Clearly, by this measure, the tax

changes were highly regressive, resulting in a widening in the after-tax distribution of incomes.<sup>[13](#)</sup>

The recent tax reform of 2017 highlighted the importance of this debate, as it was generally viewed as even more skewed to the rich than the Bush tax cuts. A comprehensive analysis found that richest 1% of Americans would get a break of \$33,000 under the tax reform, while the poorest Americans would receive just \$40.<sup>[14](#)</sup> Within a decade, as some individual tax provisions expire under the law, 83% of the benefits of the tax cut would go to the top 1% of Americans.<sup>[15](#)</sup> ■

## 18.4 Defining the Income Tax Base

As was clear from [Table 18-1](#), income taxes are not determined by simply taking all income accrued during the year and applying a tax rate schedule. In the U.S. tax system, as in most other income tax systems, there are a variety of tax exemptions, deductions, and credits that cause the tax base to be smaller than total income. What are the rationales for these “holes” in the tax base? What are their implications for the equity of the tax system? In this section, we discuss the theoretically appropriate income tax base and carefully review the sources of deviation of income taxes from that theoretical ideal and their implications.

### The Haig-Simons Comprehensive Income Definition

The benchmark that public finance economists use for defining income is the [\*\*Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition\*\*](#), which defines taxable resources as an individual’s *ability to pay taxes*. This ability to pay is equal to an individual’s *potential annual consumption*, the individual’s total consumption during the year, plus any increases in his stock of wealth.

**Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition**

Defines taxable resources as the change in an individual’s power to consume during the year.

The U.S. tax system deviates from the Haig-Simons standard in many ways. For example, the amount that employers spend on employer-provided health insurance is not currently included in taxable employee income, but it would be included under a Haig-Simons definition because it contributes to an individual’s ability to consume: because you don’t have to pay for health insurance yourself, you have that much more of your income to spend on other things or to save.

Does the Haig-Simons definition make sense as a goal of tax-base design? Recall that there are two aspects to measuring the equity of a tax system. Vertical equity is achieved when high-income taxpayers pay a larger share of their income in taxes, and horizontal equity is achieved when identical taxpayers pay the same amount in taxation regardless of their choices.

Using the Haig-Simons income definition to determine the base on which taxes are paid improves vertical equity because those who have more resources pay more tax, even though they get those resources through a nontaxed channel (such as with employer-provided health insurance). Thus, if you and I have the same cash wages, but I have more valuable health insurance, I should pay more tax.

The Haig-Simons approach also improves horizontal equity by ensuring that people who are the same in terms of their underlying resources pay the same amount of tax regardless of the form in which they choose to receive or spend their resources. Under the current U.S. system, if I choose to take my compensation in wages and you choose instead to take part of your compensation in the form of employer-provided health insurance, you pay less tax than I do. Moving to a Haig-Simons approach, which treats all forms of compensation as income, would improve horizontal equity.

Thus, adhering to a Haig-Simons definition could greatly improve the equity of a tax system along both vertical and horizontal equity dimensions. However, implementing a Haig-Simons definition in practice is challenging. In the remainder of this section, we discuss two of the major difficulties with implementing a Haig-Simons definition in the U.S. tax system: (1) the difficulty of how to define a person’s power to consume/ability to pay and (2) how to

deal with expenditures that are associated with earning a living and not personal consumption.

## Deviations Due to Ability-to-Pay Considerations

The first difficulty with implementing Haig-Simons is the question of how to define an individual's ability to pay taxes. Suppose that two individuals have the same income in any year but that one suffers a large fire in his home and has to spend 20% of his income to repair the damage. In that year, this person will have lower consumption and increases in wealth, or a lower ability to pay taxes, and this should be reflected by adjusting his tax base. The desire to take into account expenditures that are not associated with desired consumption is the rationale for one of the major deductions from taxable income allowed by the tax code, the deduction for *property and casualty losses*.

Another major deduction that may be justified on ability-to-pay considerations is the deduction for *medical expenditures*. Itemizers can deduct from their taxable income any medical expenditures that exceed 10% of their AGI. The motivation for this deduction is that large medical expenditures are not a choice but are beyond the taxpayer's control, like the fire.

As we discussed in [Chapter 15](#), however, this assumption may not be valid in the context of medical spending. When individuals have some control over their level of medical spending, a part of that spending may be consumption, and thus should be included in Haig-Simons income. By providing the medical expenditure deduction, the government may be subsidizing that optional part of medical consumption. The ideal tax system would provide a deduction only for nondiscretionary medical expenditures. The key question is whether 10% of income is "high enough" so it covers only large expenditures over which individuals have little control.

Another deduction that is often justified on ability-to-pay grounds is the deduction for *state and local tax payments*. If Lily and Rob have the same income, but Lily lives in a state or town with high taxes and Rob lives in a state or town with low taxes, then some argue that Lily has a lower ability to pay federal income taxes, so state and local taxes should be subtracted from her Haig-Simons income. The problem with this argument, however, is that Lily's higher taxes are also buying her a higher level of state and local public goods. Indeed, if Lily lived in a perfect Tiebout equilibrium, then her local taxes would simply be the user fee that she happily paid for local public goods. Because at least some of the state and local taxes collected from individuals are providing them with valuable benefits, full deductibility of state and local tax payments is hard to justify on Haig-Simons grounds.

The 2018 tax reform included the most aggressive attack on the state and local tax exemption (SALT) since its introduction. The bill limited the exemption to a maximum of \$10,000, where previously there had been no limit. SALT has two parts: the first lets a person deduct state and local property taxes from her federal tax return, and the second lets her deduct the higher of state income tax or state sales tax. This limit raises taxes mostly for the very wealthy, for whom it makes more sense to use an itemized deduction than the standard deduction. High tax states will be hit hardest by this, and there is worry from legislators that the change will decrease home value and school quality in high tax areas. While the tax plan was being finalized in Congress, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo tweeted "New York will be destroyed if the deductibility of state and local taxes is included in any final plan that passes the House." His pleas were not heard.<sup>[16](#)</sup>

# Deviations Due to Costs of Earning Income

Another rationale for deviations from Haig-Simons is that some expenditures are not for consumption but rather reflect the cost of earning a living. Because the comprehensive income definition refers only to the *net* increment to resources over the period, any legitimate costs of doing business should be deducted from a person's income.

Difficulties arise in defining "legitimate" business costs, however. Consider business meals. Suppose that you have a new business and you have two types of promotion expenditures: magazine ads and lunches with prospective clients. Advertising expenditures are fully deductible from your reported business income as a cost of doing business, but lunches are not. Why are lunches different? Because you are deriving some consumption value yourself from those lunches, and this consumption value should be included in your Haig-Simons income. In theory, you should only be able to deduct from your income the total cost of the lunch minus your own consumption value from that lunch.

This point seems to have been gradually realized by U.S. policy makers. Up until 1962, businesses were allowed to deduct expenses related to business entertainment, which included meals. After President John F. Kennedy's 1961 call for a crackdown on this business tax advantage, the Revenue Act of 1962 required that deduction claimants supply proof to demonstrate the "business purpose" of each entertainment claim. In the case of business meals and drinks, however, Congress said that no business discussion need occur before, during, or after the meal. The only requirement was that the meal be under circumstances "of a type generally considered to be conducive to a business discussion." Thus, meals remained 100% deductible.

In the 1976 presidential election, Jimmy Carter campaigned vigorously against the "\$50 three-martini lunch," but, though he won the election, he was never able to reduce the 100% deduction to the 50% he desired. The first reduction occurred under President Reagan, who reduced the deduction rate to 80% in 1987 (under the 1986 Tax Reform Act). In 1994, under President Clinton, business meals became only 50% deductible.



## APPLICATION

### What Are Appropriate Business Deductions?

In the original *Ghostbusters* movie, lovable loser Louis is an accountant throwing a big party one evening. He brags to his guests that the smoked salmon cost \$24.95 a pound, but only \$14.12 after tax. How? Because of an accounting trick, he explains: "I'm giving this whole thing as a promotional expense. That's why I invited clients instead of friends."

As Louis's explanation points out, the U.S. tax code distinguishes between expenditures for business and expenditures for pleasure: the former are wholly or partially deductible from one's taxable income, while the latter are not. Yet Louis's party shows how vague this distinction is. The difficulties in defining an appropriate or inappropriate business deduction are well illustrated by some classic examples from U.S. tax law:

- In a famous case, an exotic dancer claimed her breast enhancement surgery as a business expense. Although the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) initially rejected the claim, the

U.S. Tax Court overturned their decision. The court ruled that because the dancer received more tips as a result of the surgery and the implants were large enough to be considered burdensome in her daily life, the surgery was an appropriate business claim. The dancer was permitted a \$2,088 deduction.

- A man claimed \$30,000 worth of business expenses for the costs of goods that he was selling in 1981. The goods? Amphetamines, cocaine, and marijuana. The IRS disallowed the deductions because the man hadn't documented his business thoroughly, but a tax court overturned the decision based on his candid testimony about his business practices. Allowed to claim the deductions, he was then sentenced by a criminal court to four years in prison for possessing cocaine with intent to distribute it. The next year, Congress outlawed the deduction of expenses related to drug trafficking; the removal of this deduction has led to very high taxes on legal marijuana production relative to other activities.<sup>[17](#)</sup>
- In a book about the 1970s pop group Abba, the lead singer revealed that the group's famously outrageous outfits, featuring hot pants, sequined jumpsuits, and platform heels, were worn for tax purposes. In Sweden, the tax law states that business clothes are deductible only if they are so outrageous that they couldn't be worn on the street. Turns out the United States has a similar law, stating that work clothes are only deductible if they are "not suitable for everyday wear." Lady Gaga's famous meat dress (reportedly her favorite outfit ever), is one such tax deductible example. Perhaps we have tax law to thank for the entertaining and sometimes outrageous outfits worn by our music stars.<sup>[18](#)</sup>
- NFL athletes and coaches may deduct league fines as business expenses, so when your favorite athlete is fined for brawling, dangerous tackles, or personal conduct, he can deduct that on his taxes. If the NFL decides that his touchdown celebration went too far, he can write that off, too.<sup>[19](#)</sup>
- Traditionally, U.S. companies were at a disadvantage in international business efforts because other countries (but not the United States) allowed their companies to write off as a business expense the cost of bribing foreign officials! The United States, in 1996, convinced 26 OECD nations to revise their tax codes so that such bribes were no longer considered a deductible expense. ■

## 18.5 Externality/Public Goods Rationales for Deviating from Haig-Simons

One classic rationale for deviations from a comprehensive income definition is the possibility that reducing taxes on certain activities will yield external benefits to society. In this section, we discuss two major deviations from the Haig-Simons definition that are typically justified by the fact that the private market is likely to underprovide some good or activity: charitable giving and housing expenditures.

### Charitable Giving

An excellent example of the application of the external benefits rationale is that donations to charitable organizations can be deducted from taxable income. Because of the free rider problem discussed in [Chapter 7](#) (when costs are private but benefits are public, individuals will underprovide public goods), the private market is likely to underprovide charitable support for many public goods.

Suppose, for example, that the government is concerned that the private sector is not providing sufficient funds to build shelters for the homeless, which is a classic case of a public good. One way to address this problem would be to subsidize charitable giving to the homeless in order to increase private sector support, and one means of subsidizing charitable giving is to allow individuals to deduct from their taxable income the amount they give to charity. By doing so, the government makes charitable giving cheap relative to other types of consumption, which must be financed by after-tax dollars. The tax system in the United States allows those who itemize their deductions to subtract contributions to charitable organizations from taxable income.

Suppose that Ellie is deciding whether to buy a \$4 cup of coffee or to donate \$4 to a homeless shelter. If she spends the \$4 on coffee, she will have to pay income tax on that dollar at a tax rate  $\tau$ . So to get \$4 worth of coffee, Ellie will have to earn  $\$4/(1 - \tau)$  first. For example, if her tax rate is 50%, then she will have to earn \$8 to buy a \$4 cup of coffee. If Ellie spends the \$4 on the donation, however, she doesn't pay any tax on the \$4. So she can use \$4 of her earnings to give \$4 to the shelter. Thus, the *relative price* of charitable giving, relative to other consumption, is  $\$4/[\($4/(1 - \tau)\)]$ , or  $\$(1 - \tau)$ . At a tax rate of 50%, the relative price of charitable giving is only \$2 because Ellie has to earn \$8 to get a \$4 cup of coffee, but she only has to earn \$4 to give \$4 to charity. This tax treatment yields a benefit (it makes giving to charity much more attractive) at the cost of deviating from the Haig-Simons standard, since the part of taxable income given to charity is not taxed, so taxes are applied to a less-than-comprehensive measure of ability to pay.

There is another approach the government could take to support the provision of the public good, however; it could provide the good itself. Rather than indirectly inducing private individuals to raise their charitable contributions by giving them a tax break, the government could simply spend its own money to improve homeless shelters. So why does the government choose to deviate from the Haig-Simons standard rather than increase government spending? There are at least two possible reasons.

### Spending Crowd-Out Versus Tax Subsidy Crowd-In

First, as we discussed in [Chapter 7](#), government provision may crowd out private

contributions to the public good. If the government subsidizes homeless shelters, the amount of private charitable giving to those shelters would most likely fall.

When the government tax subsidizes charitable giving, however, it may “crowd in,” or increase, private contributions. This occurs because the government tax subsidy lowers the relative price of charitable giving. A lower relative price for charitable giving increases private giving, through both substitution effects (the “price” of charitable giving has fallen) and income effects (because Ellie is paying fewer taxes, she is richer and can give more to charity).

## Marginal Versus Inframarginal Effects of Tax Subsidies

At the same time, when the government tax subsidizes charitable giving, it is also giving a tax break to those who *would have already supported the homeless even without this tax break*. This may be viewed as horizontally equitable because the tax break applies to everyone who is giving to charity. But it adds significantly to the cost of this “hole” in the Haig-Simons base: the government subsidizes not only new giving to charity, but also old giving to charity that would have existed even without this tax break.

For example, suppose that there would be \$1 million of private giving to the homeless without any tax break. The government then allows individuals to deduct charitable giving from their taxable income, at a 50% tax rate, and this raises giving to the homeless to \$1.5 million. The government has therefore encouraged \$500,000 in new giving through this tax break, achieving its goal of expanding private giving. Yet for those who would have given the \$1 million anyway, there is also now a \$500,000 tax break that rewards what they were already doing.

When economists discuss the impact of tax breaks such as that for charitable contributions, they often distinguish the *marginal* and *inframarginal* impacts of these tax breaks. The **marginal impacts** are the changes in behavior the government hopes to encourage by offering this tax incentive. In the case of charitable giving, the government wants to encourage people to give more to charity; in our example, the marginal impact is the \$500,000 increase in giving to the homeless that was encouraged by the tax subsidy to giving. The **inframarginal impacts** are the tax breaks the government gives to those whose behavior is not changed by this policy. In the case of charitable giving, the inframarginal impact is the revenue lost in rewarding (with a tax break) those who were going to give to charity anyway; in our example, the inframarginal impact is \$500,000 in new tax deductions offered to those individuals who were going to give to the homeless even without this tax incentive.

**marginal impacts**

Changes in behavior the government hopes to encourage through a given tax incentive.

**inframarginal impacts**

Tax breaks the government gives to those whose behavior is not changed by new tax policy.

What determines the efficiency of a tax break designed to encourage behavior (such as increasing charitable giving) is the share of the tax break that goes to those who are changing their behavior versus the share going to those whose behavior is unaffected. The most cost-efficient tax breaks have large marginal impacts that come from those who change their behavior. In that case, a relatively small government expenditure can deliver large marginal impacts. The least cost-efficient tax breaks have small marginal impacts and large revenue costs because of those who were already engaging in the subsidized behavior. In that case, there can be very large government expenditures without much of a marginal impact.

## Effects of Tax Subsidies Versus Direct Spending

Thus, there is a trade-off to be considered when deciding which of these two approaches to

use, direct spending or tax subsidies. If the government spends the money directly, it raises the public resources available to the homeless but, through crowd-out, potentially lowers the private resources available. If the government provides a tax break, it induces new giving but also spends money to subsidize existing giving. This trade-off can be summarized with the following question: If the government has a dollar of revenue that it wants to spend on charitable causes such as homeless shelters, what is the best way to spend that dollar? Mathematically, the government should use a tax break instead of direct spending if:

the increase in charity per dollar of tax break >

1 – the reduction in charity per dollar of government spending.

If this inequality holds, the government can increase the total amount of charitable giving by tax-subsidizing private charity rather than directly spending its revenues on charitable goods or services.

### Evidence on Crowd-Out Versus Crowd-In

There are a large number of studies that have endeavored to estimate the effect of tax subsidies on charitable giving. The general conclusion of these studies is that the elasticity of charitable giving with respect to its subsidy is about  $-1$ : for each 1% reduction in the relative price of charitable giving, the amount of giving rises by 1%. This means that the increase in charity (the *marginal* effect of the tax subsidy) equals the tax revenues lost from tax breaks to existing giving (the *inframarginal* effect of the tax subsidy). This corresponds to the previous example. The elasticity is  $-1$  because a fall in the tax price of 50% raises charitable contributions by 50%; the \$500,000 increase in contributions is exactly equal to the \$500,000 in lost revenues from existing givers.

The extent of government crowd-out referenced in the right-hand side of the inequality is unclear and depends on a variety of factors, as discussed in [Chapter 7](#). The available evidence suggests some, but less than complete, crowd-out (between 10% and 70%). Thus, \$1 of government spending raises overall spending by 30¢ to 90¢. This gives us the right side of the equation above ( $1 - \text{the reduction in charity per dollar of government spending} = 0.3 \text{ to } 0.9$ ).

Thus, it appears that, using this criterion, subsidizing private giving is a more efficient way of providing resources to the homeless than direct spending. Subsidies to private giving deliver \$1 in new spending for each \$1 in reduced government revenues, while direct spending delivers only 30¢ to 90¢ in new spending for each \$1 in increased government spending (due to private crowd-out).

## Consumer Sovereignty Versus Imperfect Information

In addition to being a more efficient means of increasing charitable giving, tax subsidization may also be preferred to direct government spending on consumer sovereignty grounds. When the government provides spending directly, then it imposes its preferences on how the funds are spent. The types of government failures discussed in [Chapter 9](#) suggest that the preferences of legislators may not be the same as those of citizens. By offering tax subsidies to private individuals to donate as they wish, the government directly respects the preferences of its citizens.

The disadvantage of this decentralized provision of charity is that the private sector may not have the appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure efficient distribution of charitable

spending. Most individuals do very little research before making their charitable donations. A recent study found that two-thirds of all donors report doing *no research at all* on their charitable contributions each year, and just 5% do two or more hours of research. On average, Americans spend about four times as long to research television purchases (four hours) and eight times as long researching computer purchases (eight hours) than they do with more expensive investments in charities (one hour).<sup>20</sup> This approach has the potential to lead to gifts that don't provide much benefit to the intended target but, instead, only reward the organization collecting the funds. A dramatic example of this is the U.S. Navy Veterans Association, which was founded in 2002 to provide support to Navy veterans in need and which, by 2010, had chapters in 41 states and had raised \$100 million. Or not. It turns out that this was all false information provided by one individual who used direct telemarketers to swindle this money from givers and to keep it for himself. This scheme was exposed in 2010, and the culprit was caught two years later. Perhaps most disturbing is that most of what this "charity" did was perfectly legal: during the subsequent trial, one of the for-profit fundraisers for this Association reported that 90% of all donations were kept as a fund-raising charge, with no legal repercussions.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, there are also inefficiencies in direct government provision of public goods. The important question, to which there is no clear answer at this point, is whether the private or public sector is more effective at translating each dollar of charitable spending into beneficial outcomes.

## Housing

A second example of a deviation from Haig-Simons that is potentially justified on externality grounds is the *tax subsidy to homeownership*. Suppose that you are looking for a place to live and you find a home that you like with a market rental value of \$1,000 per month. The owner offers to either rent it to you for \$1,000 per month or sell it to you for \$100,000. To finance that \$100,000 purchase, you would have to take a home loan, a **mortgage**, with interest payments of \$1,000 per month (in this example). Your tax rate is 50%, and you earn \$4,000 per month.

**mortgage**

An agreement to use a certain property, usually a home, as security for a loan.

A true Haig-Simons approach to defining your income in either case would be to add to your income the net consumption value to you from living in that home and to subtract the cost to you of doing so. Whether you rent or own, you are consuming \$1,000 worth of housing services each month, which we call the *imputed rental value* of your home. And, in either case, you are paying \$1,000 for the right to live in that home.<sup>22</sup> Thus, your Haig-Simons tax burden would be unaffected by your decision to rent or buy.

The current U.S. tax system does not include the rental value of one's home in taxable income. Nevertheless, the income tax does allow individuals to deduct mortgage interest from their taxable income—but does not allow them to deduct rental payments. Under the U.S. tax system, if you decide to buy, your taxable income is reduced from \$4,000 to \$3,000, and you pay only \$1,500 in taxes. If you decide to rent, however, you pay taxes on the full \$4,000, for a tax burden of \$2,000. Because of this mortgage interest deduction, there is a financial advantage to buying rather than renting. This subsidy is a major budgetary cost to the government: the federal tax revenues forgone by allowing mortgage interest deductions are \$80 billion per year (i.e., if the mortgage interest deduction were ended, federal tax revenues would rise by \$80 billion per year).

## Why Subsidize Homeownership?

The most common justification provided for this subsidy to homeownership in the United States is that homeownership has *positive externalities* that renting does not. As [Glaeser and Shapiro \(2003\)](#) wrote: “To its supporters, the home mortgage interest deduction is the cornerstone of American society. Homeownership gives people a stake in society and induces them to care about their neighborhoods and towns. By subsidizing property ownership, the deduction induces people to invest and then to have a stake in our democracy. Ownership makes people vote for long-run investments instead of short-run transfers.”

Glaeser and Shapiro reviewed a large body of empirical evidence that supports the existence of these positive externalities: relative to renting, homeownership is positively correlated with political activism and social connection, and homeowners take better care of their properties, leading to a higher value for surrounding houses (a positive financial externality for their neighbors). Unfortunately, the empirical evidence that they reviewed does not convincingly address the types of problems that we discussed in [Chapter 3](#). The study reviewed in the following Empirical Evidence box provides a solution to those problems, and it finds little evidence for positive externalities associated with homeownership.

## Effect of Tax Subsidies for Housing

For a tax subsidy to housing to promote positive externalities, two conditions must be met: there must be positive externalities and the tax break must encourage increases in homeownership. If the latter condition is not met, then the tax break just has inframarginal effects, not the marginal effects which would deliver social benefits.

Existing evidence, however, shows that the tax subsidy to housing does not encourage homeownership. Despite wide variation in this tax subsidy, the homeownership rate has remained essentially constant since the 1950s, at about 65%. It did rise sharply in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but reversed again during the Great Recession. And Gruber et al. examine a very large change in the tax subsidy to housing in Denmark in the late 1980s, and find that it has a precisely estimated zero effect on home ownership.<sup>23</sup>

Tax subsidies do seem to increase expenditures on housing, with an elasticity of spending with respect to tax subsidies of roughly 1.<sup>24</sup> Given that the tax subsidy doesn’t appear to increase homeownership but does increase housing expenditures, it appears that the tax subsidy is inducing individuals to spend more on houses that they would have bought anyway, even without the tax subsidy.

Most arguments for positive externalities, however, focus on the benefits from homeownership, not the benefits from having larger, more expensive houses. Thus, even if there are externalities from ownership, the existing subsidy does little to address this issue. This finding suggests that the case for tax subsidizing of homeownership is weak on positive externality grounds.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *The Social Benefits of Homeownership*

As we’ve discussed, a critical question for tax policy is whether there are positive social benefits to homeownership that justify its preferred tax treatment. The dozens of studies that claim to find such benefits face the classic bias problem discussed in [Chapter 3](#): those who own homes are different in many ways from those who do not, so comparing their behavior is not an effective way to identify the impact of owning a home per se. That is, the set of people who buy homes might be the types of persons who would be more inclined to make social connections and take care of their properties even if they were renting. To surmount this problem, researchers had to find some way to assign homeownership to individuals

independent of their other characteristics.

[Mills et al. \(2008\)](#) did exactly that in an exciting study that focused on the results of the randomized “American Dream Demonstration” in Tulsa, Oklahoma, from 1998 to 2003. Families with at least one worker and family income below 150% of the poverty line (about \$16,000 in 2009 dollars) were eligible to join the demonstration. Upon joining the demonstration, individuals were randomized into a treatment group, which was allowed to open an Individual Development Account (IDA), and a control group, which was not. An IDA is a savings account that provides matching contributions when balances are withdrawn for qualified uses, including down payments on new homes. These matching contributions are 2:1 for new home purchases; that is, for every \$1 that individuals save in their IDAs and then withdraw for purchasing a home, the government contributes \$2. The matching rates for other savings purposes (such as education or starting a new business) were only 1:1. Combining deposits and matching funds, individuals could save up to \$6,750 for a new home purchase, a large amount relative to the median home price of \$89,000 in Tulsa during this period.

In previous research, the authors had found that this financial inducement caused a sizeable rise in homeownership: those randomized into the treatment group that could set up an IDA were 7 to 11% more likely to purchase a home. In their 2007 research, the authors stated that this same experiment could be used to infer the social benefits of homeownership because the treatment and control groups were otherwise identical, yet after the demonstration, they had very different rates of homeownership.

If it is true that homeownership has social benefits, then social benefits should be found for the treatment group (the home purchasers) relative to the control group in this study. In fact, however, this was not the outcome. The authors surveyed those involved in the experiment on a wide variety of social capital measures. They found that when compared to non-homeowners, homeowners had higher measures of social involvement, echoing the work described earlier. Yet, when the treatments (who randomly received incentives for homeownership and had higher ownership rates as a result) were compared to the controls (who did not), there was *no evidence* of higher rates of political, civic, and local school involvement in the treatment group. Engelhart et al. did find that the treatment group was likely to spend more on home maintenance—but only on the *inside* of the house, which generates private benefits, and not on the *outside* of the house, the part that generates social benefits! Thus, along all measured dimensions, there is no evidence of an external benefit for society from homeownership.

From the evidence that the home mortgage interest deduction does not have external benefits, there is no clear rationale for this deviation from the Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition. Yet the home mortgage deduction remains one of the most popular provisions in the tax code, and politicians rarely criticize or try to limit this provision. The likely reason is that discussed in [Chapter 9](#): the beneficiaries of this subsidy are organized and aware of its benefits, while the losers (taxpayers in general, who have to pay \$100 billion more each year in taxes) are neither organized nor aware of the cost. Nevertheless, if policy makers want to subsidize homeownership, there are much more efficient and equitable ways to do so, such as the first-time home buyer’s credit discussed in [Gale et al. \(2006\)](#), which would directly subsidize first-time home purchase through a tax credit rather than allowing a deduction for mortgage interest paid.

## Tax Deductions Versus Tax Credits

Another important question that arises when a tax system deviates from the Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition is whether to apply those deviations in the form of tax deductions or tax credits. **Tax deductions** allow taxpayers to reduce their *taxable income* by a certain amount (e.g., the amount of charitable giving or home mortgage interest deduction); deductions therefore lower the price of the behavior in question to  $\$(1 - t)$ , where  $t$  is the marginal tax rate. **Tax credits** allow taxpayers to reduce the *amount of tax they owe* to the government by a certain amount (e.g., the amount they spend on child care). If an individual’s expenditure is less than the amount of the credit, the tax credit lowers the price of the behavior in question to zero.

### **tax deductions**

Amounts by which taxpayers are allowed to reduce their taxable income through spending on items such as charitable donations or home mortgage interest.

## Efficiency Considerations

Which approach is preferable? The answer is unclear on efficiency grounds. For example, consider replacing the current deductibility of charitable giving with a 100% tax credit for charitable giving up to \$1,000. For those who are giving less than \$1,000 now, the credit

provides a much stronger incentive to increase giving up to the \$1,000 level because it is free (tax payments fall by \$1 for each dollar of giving). Once a person gives more than \$1,000, there is no more benefit from the tax credit. The deduction, however, continues to provide some incentive to give even beyond the \$1,000 limit (after the credit's incentive has run out). The trade-off that the government faces is between a system that subsidizes all giving partially (the deduction), versus one that subsidizes some giving fully and some not at all (the credit).

Which policy, deduction or credit, is more efficient is dictated by two considerations. The first is the nature of the demand for the subsidized good. Our discussions in this book have generally assumed constant elasticities of demand for goods, but in reality elasticities of demand may differ depending on the magnitude of the price change. For some goods, individual demand may be very elastic in response to large reductions in the price, but not very elastic in response to small reductions in price; in such cases, credits may cause a larger increase in charitable giving (for example) than deductions because credits lead to larger reductions in price.

Second, policy makers must decide how important it is to achieve some minimal level of the behavior. With charitable giving, for example, there is no obvious reason why \$1,000 should be the target, so it may be better to simply subsidize individuals to give as much as they like. With some behaviors, however, the government may want to subsidize some minimal level of provision but not subsidize a particularly generous provision. As we discussed in [Chapter 15](#), health insurance probably fits this case, where the government may want to subsidize individuals so they can have some basic level of coverage but does not want to subsidize expensive health insurance on the margin. Similarly, with the subsidy to housing, we may want to subsidize some basic level of housing consumption but not particularly large houses that don't have obvious external benefits.

## Equity Considerations

On vertical equity grounds, tax credits are more equitable than deductions. The value of a deduction rises with one's tax rate—and, therefore, one's income—making deductions *regressive* (deduction amounts are higher, as a share of income, for higher-income taxpayers). Credits, on the other hand, are available equally to all incomes so that they are *progressive* (credit amounts are lower, as a share of income, for higher-income taxpayers). This difference is further heightened by the nature of the itemized deductions in our tax system. The rate of itemization among high-income groups is very high: 96% of households with income greater than \$200,000 itemize deductions. Yet only 6% of those with incomes less than \$20,000 do so.<sup>25</sup> Because deductions are typically only available to those who itemize, they will be used more by the higher-income groups that do itemize, a fact that further reduces their equity.



### APPLICATION

## The Refundability Debate<sup>26</sup>

While tax credits are more progressive than tax deductions, the extent of their progressivity depends on whether they are *refundable*, or available to individuals who owe few or no taxes. Refundable credits result in a net payment to such individuals; that is, refundable credits increase the tax refund that such taxpayers receive. Refundability is important because many of the lowest-income families in the United States that can benefit from tax credits do not currently owe taxes. As a result, if credits are not fully refundable, they are not as

powerful in terms of vertical equity.

#### refundable

Describes tax credits that are available to individuals even if they pay few or no taxes.

Nevertheless, many conservatives object to the notion that those who owe little or no income taxes get a refund. “It’s not a credit, it’s someone else’s money,” said former Representative Spencer Bachus (R-AL) “If we want to turn our income tax code into a welfare system, let’s be honest with the American people that’s what we are doing.” Supporters of refundability respond to this point by noting that while low-income families pay little income tax, they do pay a large portion of their income in the form of other taxes, such as the payroll and sales tax, and that the credit could thus be seen as a refund for those payments. Moreover, most individuals who receive a refund in any year actually pay positive taxes over a ten-year period.<sup>27</sup>

An excellent example of this conundrum is the debate over the child credit, a tax credit for low- and middle-income families introduced in 1997, but on a nonrefundable basis for most families. In 2001, this credit was expanded from \$500 to \$600 per child and made partially refundable. If the credit were fully refundable, then families would receive \$600 per child, regardless of their tax payment status. Instead, for families that pay less income tax than the child credit to which they are entitled, the 2001 law allowed them to receive a refund of 10% of earnings over \$10,500 (in 2003), up to a maximum of \$600 per child.

Consider, for example, a married couple with two children and an annual income of \$20,000 who, because of the standard deduction and personal exemptions, owe no federal income tax. Under the 2001 tax cut, that family receives a \$950 credit [ $0.10 \times (20,000 - 10,500)$ ], or \$475 per child. If the credit were not refundable, the family would receive no credit because they pay no taxes; if it were fully refundable, the family would receive \$1,200, or \$600 per child. This \$950 was a compromise between forces in favor of and opposed to refundability.

This issue became much more difficult during the next round of tax cuts, in 2003, when the Child Tax Credit (CTC) was increased by \$400 to \$1,000, accelerating a raise already scheduled in the 2001 bill. The president made frequent public mention of the \$400 checks that would be mailed to families eligible for the credit, but criticism began to mount over last-minute changes that had been inserted into the bill before he signed it into law. These changes prevented low-income families from receiving the benefits of this \$400 increase by retaining the 10% cap from the 2001 bill. The married couple just mentioned, for instance, would continue to be limited to the \$475 credit per child and would thus not benefit from the newly increased child tax credit. Because of this, some proposed raising the 10% cap to 15%. This 15% cap would mean the married couple in our example would receive \$712.50 per child [ $0.15 \times (20,000 - 10,500)/2$ ] and would thus see some benefit from the increased credit.

This provision was left out of the final law, however; by one estimate, of the 12 million children who would have been helped by this accelerated refundable tax credit, 8 million would now see no benefit because of the 15% provision’s removal. This effect was viewed by many as particularly appalling given that adding the 15% provision would have cost \$3.5 billion, about 1% of the bill’s \$350 billion total cost. Indeed, in 2004 the Congress passed legislation to raise the cap to 15% to remedy this perceived shortcoming. In October 2005, however, the tax credit once again came under close scrutiny when a study released by the Tax Policy Center found that more than a quarter of American children (19.5 million in total) and half of the nation’s black children belonged to families who were too poor to qualify for

the full \$1,000 benefit.

This issue was addressed to some extent by a law in 2009 that dramatically lowered the earnings threshold above which earnings could qualify for the Child Tax Credit to \$3,000. Families earning above this threshold would qualify for at least a partial credit. The law allows for a CTC of up to \$1,000 per child under age 17, and if the credit exceeded the taxes owed, the taxpayer could receive a refund up to 15% of earnings. This change allowed about 3 million new children to qualify for the credit and increased the credit for 10 million others. The additional refundability increased costs by \$12 billion per year but lifted roughly 1 million children from poverty. The lower threshold was renewed in 2010 and again in 2015, but it expired in 2017.<sup>28</sup>

The CTC was updated again in 2017 as part of the tax reform bill. The bill doubled the tax credit per child, to \$2000. If the credit is greater than taxes owed, then the refundability is capped at the lower of two options: \$1,400, or 15% of earnings above \$2,500. The lack of complete refundability implies that the increase in the child tax credit disproportionately benefits higher income families. During debates over how to format the 2017 tax cut, Republican Senators Marco Rubio and Mike Lee fought for an amendment that would allow the \$2,000 credit to also be applied to payroll tax, a measure that would help low income families who often owe more in payroll tax than income tax. They proposed to pay for the change by decreasing the planned corporate tax cut by 0.94% (a cut of 13.06% instead of 13%). Less than half of republicans voted for the amendment, and only eight democrats supported the change, claiming that it didn't do enough for struggling families.<sup>29</sup>

A much more radical bill to reform the CTC was introduced in 2017 by senate Democrats Sherrod Brown and Michael Bennet. The bill would have made the credit fully refundable and increased its value to \$3,600 for children under 6, and \$3,000 for children 6–17. The value of the credits would be indexed for inflation, and could be paid out monthly so that needy families would have the money when necessary. The plan would have nearly halved childhood poverty, and childhood extreme poverty would have decreased by 750% (from 1.7 to 0.2%).<sup>30</sup> In effect, this policy would have moved us closer to the universal child credit discussed in [Chapter 17](#). ■

## Bottom Line: Tax Expenditures

The end result of the existing set of deviations from the Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition is a set of **tax expenditures**, defined by the government as “revenue losses attributable to provisions of the Federal tax laws which allow a special exclusion, exemption, or deduction from gross income or which provide a special credit, a preferential rate of tax, or a deferral of liability.” Since 1976, the federal government has included a separate section of the budget that shows the amount of these tax expenditures. For example, the government measures how much revenue is lost by excluding health insurance from taxable compensation, or how much revenue is lost by allowing individuals to deduct charitable contributions from their taxable income.

### **tax expenditures**

Government revenue losses attributable to tax law provisions that allow special exclusions, exemptions, or deductions from gross income, or that provide a special credit, preferential tax rate, or deferral of liability.

The major tax expenditures are shown in [Table 18-2](#). In 2018, the government was projected to lose \$1.56 trillion through all income tax expenditures (including many smaller expenditures not shown here). The largest single tax expenditure is the exclusion of employer-provided health insurance premiums from taxable income, which cost the federal

government \$235,830.8 billion in forgone income tax revenues in 2018. Other large expenditures include the exclusion of net imputed rental income (\$112.6 billion) and defined contribution employer plans (\$69.42 billion) and the deduction of mortgage interest (\$68.09 billion). The total amount of income tax expenditures was almost 50% of total tax revenues projected for 2018 and nearly double the projected federal deficit for 2018.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the debate over the tax base is not an academic one; the holes in the Haig-Simons tax base for the United States allow large sums of money to escape the U.S. Treasury every year.<sup>32</sup>

TABLE 18-2 Selected Major Tax Expenditures for 2018

● Tax Expenditure	● Amount (in millions), 2018
● Exclusion of employer contributions for medical insurance premiums and medical care	● \$235,830
● Deferral of income from controlled foreign corporations (normal tax method)	● 112,560
● Exclusion of net imputed rental income	● 112,670
● Capital gains (except agriculture, timber, iron ore, and coal)	● 108,560
● Defined contribution employer plans	● 69,420
● Deductibility of mortgage interest on owner-occupied homes	● 68,090
● Deductibility of nonbusiness state and local taxes other than on owner-occupied homes	● 63,340
● Defined benefit employer plans	● 70,980

● Deductibility of charitable contributions, other than education and health	●	51,180
● Step-up basis of capital gains at death	●	54,070
● Capital gains exclusion on home sales	●	48,470
● Deductibility of state and local property tax on owner-occupied homes	●	38,940
● Self-employed plans	●	33,780
● Social Security benefits for retired and disabled workers and spouses, dependents, and survivors	●	40,580
● Exclusion of interest on public purpose state and local bonds	●	31,910
● Subtotal	●	\$1,140,380
● Total income tax expenditures, effect on federal government receipts	●	\$1,560,850

Data from: [U.S. Department of the Treasury \(2018\)](#).

In 2014, the government lost more than \$1.2 trillion in revenue because of various exclusions and credits in the tax code. The largest such tax expenditures are shown here; the most important tax exclusions are those that favor employer contributions to health insurance and mortgage interest deductions.



## APPLICATION A Tax Break for Olympians?

In our hyperpartisan political environment, it is rare to get a bill that passes the Senate by unanimous consent and the House by 415 to 1. But the bill signed into law by President Obama on October 7, 2016, did exactly that. What did the law do? It provided a tax break that has absolutely no justification under the principles we've just described: removing taxation of the prize bonuses earned by Olympians.<sup>33</sup>

Under the current structure of the United States Olympic Committee, Olympic athletes receive prize money if they medal at the Olympics. For example, at the 2018 Winter

Olympics in South Korea, U.S. gold medalists received a bonus of \$37,500; silver medalists a bonus of \$22,500; and bronze medalists a bonus of \$15,000. Until this recent law, these bonuses were considered taxable income—as our tax principles suggest they should. They are clearly income under Haig-Simons principles, and it is hard to make an argument that this form of income earning delivers more positive externalities for society than, say, the income of social workers, physicians, Nobel prize winners, or our nation’s soldiers, all of whom are taxed on their income.

But such economic principles were no match for a celebration of American victories on the world stage. In a profile of the one representative brave enough to vote against this tax bill, Democrat Jim Himes of Connecticut (a former college rower who even tried out for the Olympics), the *New York Times* wrote that the bill was “a ‘feel-good thing,’ a celebration of bipartisan patriotism wrapped in red-white-and-blue Speedos and leotards and clad in similarly themed running spikes.” Himes was alone in asking “why should athletes receive perks at a time when the money, even if it’s only a drop in the federal budget, is needed elsewhere?”<sup>34</sup> A good question—but one that was left at the starting line in the race to pass this patriotic-sounding tax break. ■

## 18.6 The Appropriate Unit of Taxation

Another important aspect of the tax base has been absent from our discussion of the Haig-Simons principle: How should the government choose the appropriate *unit of taxation*? That is, how should the government share the tax burden among individuals who are in the same family? Should taxes be levied on total family income or just on the incomes of individuals?

### The Problem of the “Marriage Tax”

Suppose you were hired by the federal government to design a tax system that had three goals:

- *Progressivity*: Marginal tax rates rise as family incomes rise.
- *Across-Family Horizontal Equity*: Families with equal incomes would pay equal taxes.
- *Across-Marriage Horizontal Equity*: Tax burdens would be *marriage neutral*, independent of whether two individuals decide to wed.

These all seem like worthwhile goals. There is one problem, however: it is literally impossible to achieve all three goals at once.

This impossibility is easiest to see through a simple example. Consider a tax system with a 10% tax rate on income up to \$20,000, a 20% marginal rate up to \$80,000, and a 30% marginal rate on any income above \$80,000. Now consider two successful couples. The first couple, Barack and Michelle, get the bulk of their income from Michelle, who makes \$140,000 a year, while Barack makes only \$10,000. Bill and Hillary, on the other hand, each contribute equally to their partnership, earning \$75,000 a year. Both couples have the same total income of \$150,000.

We have two choices for how to tax these couples. If the government taxes the couples on an *individual basis*, it would compute the tax burden on each individual, then add burdens to find the family's tax bill. As [Table 18-3](#) shows, such an approach leads to a tax bill of \$33,000 for Barack and Michelle, but only \$26,000 for Bill and Hillary. Thus, this approach violates our second condition: families with equal incomes are not paying equal taxes.

TABLE 18-3 The Impact of Marriage on Tax Liabilities

	• Individual Income	• Total Family Income	• Individual Tax	• Family Tax with Individual Filing	
• Michelle • Barack	• \$140,000 • 10,000	• \$150,000	• \$32,000 • 1,000 } • \$33,000	• \$33,000	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bill</li> <li>• Hillary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 75,000</li> <li>• 75,000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 150,000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13,000</li> <li>• 13,000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 26,000</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 35,000</li> </ul>
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A progressive tax system that is based on the individual incomes of each person in a married couple leads Barack and Michelle to pay a much higher tax (\$33,000) than Bill and Hillary (\$26,000), despite having the same family income (\$150,000). On the other hand, a progressive tax system based on total family income imposes a “marriage tax” on both couples, as they both pay more in tax than they would as individuals (\$35,000) than they would as singles.

The alternative is to tax the couples on a *family basis*. Under this system, the government would first add the incomes of the individuals to get the family income, and then compute a family tax based on that family income. As [Table 18-3](#) shows, such an approach leads to tax bills of \$35,000 on both families so that the second condition is met. Such a system violates our third condition, however, because both couples now pay more tax as families (\$35,000) than they would as individuals living together (\$33,000 or \$26,000). That is, there is now a **marriage tax**, a rise in the total tax burdens of two individuals simply from marrying.

#### marriage tax

A rise in the joint tax burden on two individuals from becoming married.

These problems crop up because of the first condition, progressivity. If we tax on an individual basis, rising marginal rates mean that individuals with higher income pay a higher share of their income in taxes. Thus, families with a more equal distribution of income will pay lower taxes, violating our second condition. Rising marginal rates also mean that when individuals combine their income into families, a larger share of the total family income is subject to the higher marginal tax rate. Thus, families will pay more taxes when married than when single, violating our third condition.

Referring to our example, when we tax on an individual basis, Michelle pays 23% of her income in taxes, Barack pays 10%, and Bill and Hillary each pay 17%. Adding up the individual taxes owed by each family, Barack and Michelle pay a larger share of their total income (22%) than do Bill and Hillary (17%), violating the second condition. If we then move to family taxation, Barack’s \$10,000 of earnings, which used to be taxed at a low rate of 10%, are now taxed at a much higher rate of 30%. Under the individual tax, both Barack and Michelle benefited from having the first \$10,000 of income taxed at only 10%, but with a family tax, Michelle “uses up” that \$10,000 bracket with her first \$10,000 of earnings. Thus, Barack’s earnings are added on top of Michelle’s income so it is in the higher marginal tax rate bracket. A similar phenomenon occurs with Bill and Hillary: while they used to both benefit from low taxation on the first \$10,000 of earnings, now only one of them does. This causes the marriage tax, violating the third condition. The only way to satisfy both the second and third conditions would be to have a proportional tax, which would violate the first condition (progressivity).

## Marriage Taxes in Practice

Note that the third condition was couched in terms of having marriage *neutrality*, not in terms of having *no marriage taxes*. In fact, we could have a system with no marriage taxes by providing very large deductions for married couples relative to single tax filers. Suppose that we augmented our tax system with a deduction for married couples of \$20,000 per year, with no deduction for singles. In this case, each couple would now have a taxable income of \$130,000 and thus pay \$29,000 in taxes. Under this system, Barack and Michelle would have a marriage *subsidy* (a reduction in their tax bill from marrying), while Bill and Hillary would

have a marriage tax. We could even increase the deduction to \$40,000, and then both families would have a marriage subsidy.

The point is not that the government can't get rid of marriage taxes; it can. Instead, the point is that there is no set of deductions we could establish that would make the system of family-based taxation marriage *neutral*, rather than providing subsidies to some marriages and taxing others. Given the differences between these couples, and the other goals of tax policy, there is no way to design a system that yields zero marriage tax/subsidy on both couples. This is the essence of the problem facing family-based tax systems.

## Marriage Taxes in the United States

There has been much debate over the marriage tax in the United States. In 2001, Republican House Majority Leader Dick Armey said the IRS was sending the message that "if you fall in love and get married, we will punish you."<sup>35</sup> In fact, despite this rhetoric, the tax system in the United States looks very much like the previous example with a \$20,000 deduction: some families face marriage subsidies and some face marriage taxes. Indeed, according to one report on taxpaying couples in 2012, 48% of couples receive a marriage penalty, 38% receive a marriage subsidy, and 15% receive neither a penalty nor a subsidy.<sup>36</sup> The mean penalty paid by such couples is \$1,657, and the mean subsidy received is \$914.<sup>37</sup>

So when individuals say that there are marriage taxes in the United States, what they really mean is that *some* families pay marriage taxes. The only way to get rid of marriage taxes completely would be to give a joint filer deduction that is so large that no one would have a marriage tax. Under such a program, most families would receive large marriage subsidies.

Despite the rhetoric around this topic, however, there has been little attention paid to the more fundamental question: Should we care about marriage taxes? One reason to care is the horizontal equity point previously made. The other reason to care is that society might actually want to encourage marriage, not discourage it through marriage taxes. Once again, if the government were to use a tax incentive to encourage marriage, it would have to consider the marginal and inframarginal effects of this incentive: Do taxes actually matter for marriage decisions, or does such a policy simply give a large tax break to those who would have married anyway? The answer appears to largely be the latter; most research on this topic suggests that taxes exert little effect on the decision to get married. Thus, encouraging marriage is not a strong argument for the large revenue costs of ending marriage taxes imposed on some families (and increasing marriage subsidies for others).<sup>38</sup>

Finally, the reason that we might care is not marriage at all, but the high marginal tax rate on secondary earners. In our example, moving from an individual tax to a family tax has raised the marginal tax rate on Barack's earnings from 10 to 30%. Such a high tax rate could reduce the labor supply of secondary earners, causing Barack not to work at all, for example. One proposal to address this problem (which is a lot less expensive than raising the deduction for joint filers) is to reintroduce a secondary earner deduction that was in place in the early 1980s, which would allow families to deduct some amount of earnings by a secondary earner. Under such a policy, for example, couples could deduct from taxation the first \$10,000 of earnings by a secondary earner, which would remove the higher tax rates on Barack's labor under family taxation than under individual taxation. This deduction would greatly reduce both the marriage tax and the distortion to secondary earner labor supply. At the same time, however, it would reduce vertical equity because families with two earners tend to have more money than families with one earner.

## Marriage Taxes Around the World

The United States is almost alone in having a tax system based on family income. Of the industrialized nations in the OECD, 19 tax husbands and wives individually, and 5 (France, Germany, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Switzerland) offer marriage subsidies to virtually all couples through family taxation with *income splitting*.<sup>39</sup> This means that the family income is totaled and then divided equally, either between husband and wife (in Germany, as in the United States between 1948 and 1969) or among all family members including children (in the other four nations). As we saw in [Table 18-3](#), under family taxation with rising marginal tax rates, families with more equally divided income (Bill and Hillary) pay lower taxes than those with more unequal incomes (Barack and Michelle). Thus, allowing families to divide their income equally, along with other provisions generous to families, leads to marriage bonuses in most cases in these nations. Only two other nations have a “pure” family taxation system similar to that used in the United States: Ireland and Norway.

## 18.7 Conclusion

The debates over taxation in the United States highlight the key role that taxes play in formulating public policy in the United States. In this chapter, we set the stage for our study of taxation by discussing the different types of taxation used by the United States and the rest of the world, how to measure tax “fairness,” and the key issues policy makers face in designing the base of income taxation. In the remaining chapters of the book, we discuss the economic considerations that drive the determination of both the tax base and the tax rate.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- There are many different types of taxes, which can be sorted into four broad categories: taxes on individual income, taxes on corporate income, taxes on wealth, and taxes on consumption. The federal government depends heavily on individual income taxes, while state and local governments get most of their revenue from taxes on wealth and consumption. Other national governments receive a much greater share of their revenue from consumption taxes than the United States does.
- The major source of revenue raising in the United States is the individual income tax, which starts with total income accrued during the year, subtracts a variety of exemptions and deductions, and then applies a schedule of tax rates to determine tax liability.
- Measuring the “fairness” or equity of the income tax is difficult and involves considerations such as how to measure tax rates and how to define equity.
- The “gold standard” for defining the income tax base is the Haig-Simons definition, which defines the ability to pay taxes as consumption plus change in net worth. The tax base in the United States deviates in significant ways from this gold standard.
- Some deviations are based on ability to pay or the cost of earning income, both of which should be deductible under Haig-Simons in theory but raise some difficult issues in practice.
- Some deviations are based on externality arguments, which can justify tax subsidies if these subsidies have large marginal impacts (such as encouraging more charitable giving) without very large inframarginal impacts (the revenue lost on subsidizing those already giving to charity). The existing evidence suggests that tax breaks for charitable giving may be justified on these grounds, but that tax breaks for homeownership are not.
- Deviations from Haig-Simons can come in the form of tax credits or deductions from taxable income. The relative efficiency implications of these alternative approaches are unclear, but credits are clearly more vertically equitable, as long as they are refundable to taxpayers who pay little or no taxes.
- The ideal tax system would not distort the decision to become married, but that is not possible if the tax system wants to also meet the goals of progressivity and equal treatment of families with equal income. The U.S. tax code currently provides roughly as many marriage subsidies as it does marriage taxes.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. The nation of Fishkasar has a tax rate of 5% on the first 20,000 walops (the national currency) of taxable income, then 20% on the next 30,000 walops, then 50% on all taxable income above 50,000 walops. Fishkasar provides a 5,000-walop exemption per family member.
  1. Jamil's family has three members and earns 60,000 walops per year. Calculate the family's marginal and average tax rates.
  2. Boba's family has five members and earns 100,000 walops per year. Calculate the family's marginal and average tax rates.
  3. Suppose that Fishkasar changed its tax code to a flat tax of 30% with an 10,000-walop per family member exemption. Would this change in the tax system make the system more progressive, more regressive, or neither?
2. What is the rationale behind having an Alternative Minimum Tax?
3. Suppose that the U.S. personal income tax system became a flat tax system, in which all taxpayers paid a certain percentage of their incomes in tax, and in which there are no exemptions or deductions. In which way(s) could this flat tax be more *regressive* than the present U.S. system? In which ways could it be more *progressive* than the present system?
4. Why should casualty losses or large medical expenditures be fully tax deductible only in certain circumstances?
5. Many employers sponsor plans that allow employees to put some of their earnings into a health savings account, which can be used for medical expenditures. The income put in this account is not considered part of the individual's tax base. In what ways is it desirable to exclude this income from the tax base? In what ways is it undesirable?
6. Professor Jha attended the Antarctic Economic Association meetings. She is able to deduct fully from her taxes the hotel expenses that she incurred, but can deduct only half of the meals expenses that she incurred. Why does the U.S. tax code make this distinction? Does this tax policy make sense, from a Haig-Simons perspective?
7. Ed and Wendy are a married couple with no children. Each earns \$75,000 per year, and their combined household adjusted gross income is \$150,000. John and Kristen also have \$150,000 in combined household adjusted gross income and no children. However, Kristen earns all of the income; John does not work. [Note: To answer this question, you may need to look up some tax rates for individuals with different filing status. These can be found on the IRS website at <http://www.irs.gov/formspubs>.]
  1. Use the 2018 tax rates for married couples filing jointly to compute how much income tax each couple owes. Assume that both take the standard deduction.
  2. Does either couple pay a "marriage tax?" Does either couple receive a "marriage benefit?"
8. [Chapter 7](#) argues that private provision of public goods is inefficiently low, and that subsidization can help attain the optimal level of public goods. Why might offering tax breaks for public goods provision be an inefficient method of bringing about this goal?
9. The government of Utopia plans to offer a transportation tax credit in which families receive a share of their expenditures on transportation to and from work or school as a reduction in their tax bill. Utopia is considering two forms of this tax credit, one that is fully refundable and one in which the tax credit is limited to the amount of taxes the family pays. Which form of the tax credit is more progressive? Explain.
10. Suppose that the government adopts a Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition. Will this make employers more likely or less likely to offer employer-provided pension plans or health insurance coverage? Why?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. Maria is single with no dependents and has an annual salary of \$125,000. She is considering purchasing a house that costs \$400,000. While she was looking for a house, the 2017 tax reform bill passed, changing deductions and tax brackets, and limiting the state and local tax exemption to \$10,000.

In her state, income taxes are a flat 5% of all income (with no deductions or exemptions), and property taxes are 2% per year of the value of the house. Assume that if Maria decides to itemize her deductions, she has no deductions beyond her state and local taxes, and mortgage interest (if relevant). Finally, assume that if she decides to buy the house, she will pay \$15,000 in mortgage interest in the first year.

1. Prior to tax reform, under 2017 tax rules, how much would Maria have saved in taxes in the first year by purchasing the house?
  2. Under 2018 tax rules, how much would Maria save in taxes in the first year by purchasing the house?
  3. If most people in Maria's area have similar incomes and similar tax situations, do you expect house prices in her area will go up or down as a result of the 2018 tax reform bill?
12. Your employer allows you to purchase a parking permit with "pretax dollars"—that is, you don't have to pay taxes on the money that you used to purchase this permit. Does allowing some people to purchase certain goods or services using pretax dollars increase or decrease equity in the U.S. tax system? Explain.
13. Oregon has an income tax but no state sales tax, while Washington has no state income tax but does have a state sales tax. Oregon residents can deduct the state taxes they pay (the income tax payments) from their federal income taxes, while Washington residents cannot deduct the state taxes they pay (the sales tax payments). What are the equity implications of this difference?
14.  Suppose that a researcher compared charitable contribution levels across counties and found that, all else equal, counties with higher homeownership levels have higher levels of charitable contributions. Give an explanation of this finding that draws on the U.S. personal income tax code. Can you think of a reason this estimated relationship might not, in fact, be an effect of the tax code?
15.  You are interested in estimating the effects of tax breaks on the level of charitable contributions. How could observing changes over time in tax rates and associated charitable contribution levels help you to distinguish between marginal and inframarginal effects of the tax break?
16. The largest tax break for most Americans is the mortgage interest tax deduction, which allows home owners to deduct from their taxable income the amount of money they pay in interest to finance their homes. This tax break is intended to encourage home ownership. Compare this tax deduction to a uniform *tax credit* for home ownership on equity and efficiency grounds.

- The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# CHAPTER 19 The Equity Implications of Taxation: Tax Incidence



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [19.1 The Three Rules of Tax Incidence](#)
- [19.2 Tax Incidence Extensions](#)
- [19.3 General Equilibrium Tax Incidence](#)
- [19.4 The Incidence of Taxation in the United States](#)
- [19.5 Conclusion](#)
- [APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 19](#)
  - [The Mathematics of Tax Incidence](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- What factors determine who bears the burden of taxation?
- How does considering markets other than the one in which the tax is imposed affect the burden of taxation?
- What is the distribution of tax burdens in the United States?

In early 2002, with New Jersey facing a \$5.3 billion budget gap, Governor James McGreevey called for changes in the state's corporate tax system. The outdated system based corporate tax payments on the corporation's profits earned in the state of New Jersey, thus encouraging businesses to use accounting tricks to shift reported profits to their subsidiaries in other states. As a result, 30 of the state's 50 companies with the biggest payrolls each paid just \$200 annually in corporate taxes. McGreevey wanted to institute a 1% tax on corporate gross sales in New Jersey to ensure that all corporations would pay tax. Arthur Maurice, vice president of the NJ Business and Industry Association, objected: "Where are companies going to get the money to pay these taxes? They're going to cut jobs. It will be the people who work at these companies who will ultimately pay the price for this counterproductive tax."

A version of the tax reform was eventually enacted, leading one company, Federated Department Stores, to publicly announce layoffs that they attributed to the tax increase. Governor McGreevey responded angrily, claiming that these statements were just a cover for those wealthy corporate owners who would really bear the brunt of this new tax: "All that we're asking is that they pay their fair share: not a dollar more, not a dollar less. But when you have a CEO making \$1.5 million and upwards of \$14 million in stock options threatening people who are making \$25,000, that's what's wrong."<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental disagreement between the governor and the business community concerned who would ultimately pay this new tax. The business community claimed workers would bear the burden, while the governor claimed the burden would be shouldered by wealthy companies and their executives.

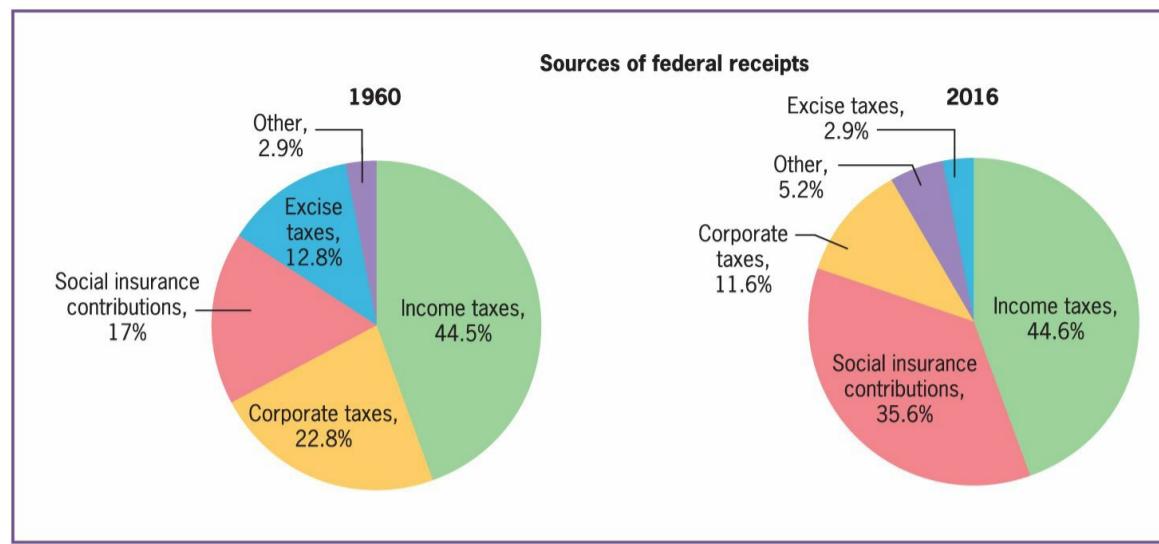
This debate focuses on the central question of **tax incidence**: Who bears the burden of a tax? A simple answer to this question would be that whoever sends the check to the government bears the tax. Yet such an answer ignores the fact that markets respond to taxes and that these responses must be taken into account to assess the ultimate burden, or *incidence*, of taxation.

**tax incidence**

Assessing which party (consumers or producers) bears the true burden of a tax.

To see the importance of this question, let's return to the facts on the distribution of federal taxation over time from [Chapter 1](#). [Figure 19-1](#) shows these facts again. In 1960, 23% of federal taxes was collected from corporations, and 61.5% was collected from individuals through income and payroll taxes. Today, 12% is collected from corporations, and 80% is collected through income and payroll taxes. Is this an equitable shift in the burden of taxation? The typical person's first reaction might be "No, it's not equitable at all! Corporations are rich, and individuals aren't, so this imbalance is not fair." Such an indignant reaction, however noble, is misplaced because corporations don't pay taxes; corporate taxes are paid by the individuals who own, work for, and buy from the corporations. When we study tax incidence, then, we are always comparing taxes collected from one set of people to taxes collected from another set. This comparison makes the issue of figuring out who bears

the burden of a tax less clear than if we view it simply as a matter of pitting rich corporations against individuals.



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■ FIGURE 19-1

The Sources of Federal Government Revenue (% of Total Receipts) • The federal government depends much less on corporate and excise taxes and much more on payroll taxes than it did in 1960. Its biggest source of revenue, then as now, is the individual income tax.

Data from: [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2018\)](#), Table 3.1.

This chapter examines the equity implications of taxation. We begin with the *three rules of tax incidence* that guide our modeling of the distributional implications of taxation. We then turn to the study of *general equilibrium tax incidence*, the effect of taxes on one sector in a multisector world. Finally, we present empirical evidence on the burden of taxation in the United States over time.

## 19.1 The Three Rules of Tax Incidence

The goal of determining a tax's incidence is to assess who ultimately bears the burden of paying a tax. Economic tax incidence can be described by *three basic rules*. We describe these rules with reference to the incidence of a tax of a fixed amount on a specific commodity, or a *specific excise tax*. An alternative form of taxation of commodities is *ad valorem* taxes, a fixed percentage of the sales price (such as with state sales taxes). All of the lessons drawn here apply equally to both types of taxes; the major difference with ad valorem incidence analysis is that taxes shift the demand or supply curve proportionally (e.g., quantity rises by 10%) rather than by fixed amounts (e.g., quantity rises by five units).

### The Statutory Burden of a Tax Does Not Describe Who Really Bears the Tax

The first and most important rule of tax incidence is that tax laws do not accurately identify who actually bears the burden of the tax. The **statutory incidence** of a tax is determined by who pays the tax to the government. For example, the statutory incidence of a tax paid by producers of gasoline is on those very producers. Statutory incidence, however, ignores the fact that markets react to taxation. This market reaction determines the **economic incidence** of a tax, the change in the resources available to any economic agent as a result of taxation. The economic incidence of any tax is the difference between the individual's available resources before and after the tax has been imposed.

**statutory incidence**

The burden of a tax borne by the party that sends the check to the government.

**economic incidence**

The burden of taxation measured by the change in the resources available to any economic agent as a result of taxation.

When a tax is imposed on producers in a competitive market, producers will raise prices to some extent to offset this tax burden, and the producers' income will not fall by the full amount of the tax. When a tax is imposed on consumers in a competitive market, the consumers will not be willing to pay as much for the taxed good, so prices will fall, offsetting to some extent the statutory tax burden on consumers. Technically, we can define the tax burden for consumers as

**consumer tax burden**

$$= (\text{post-tax price} - \text{pre-tax price}) + \text{per-unit tax payments by consumers}$$

For producers, the tax burden is

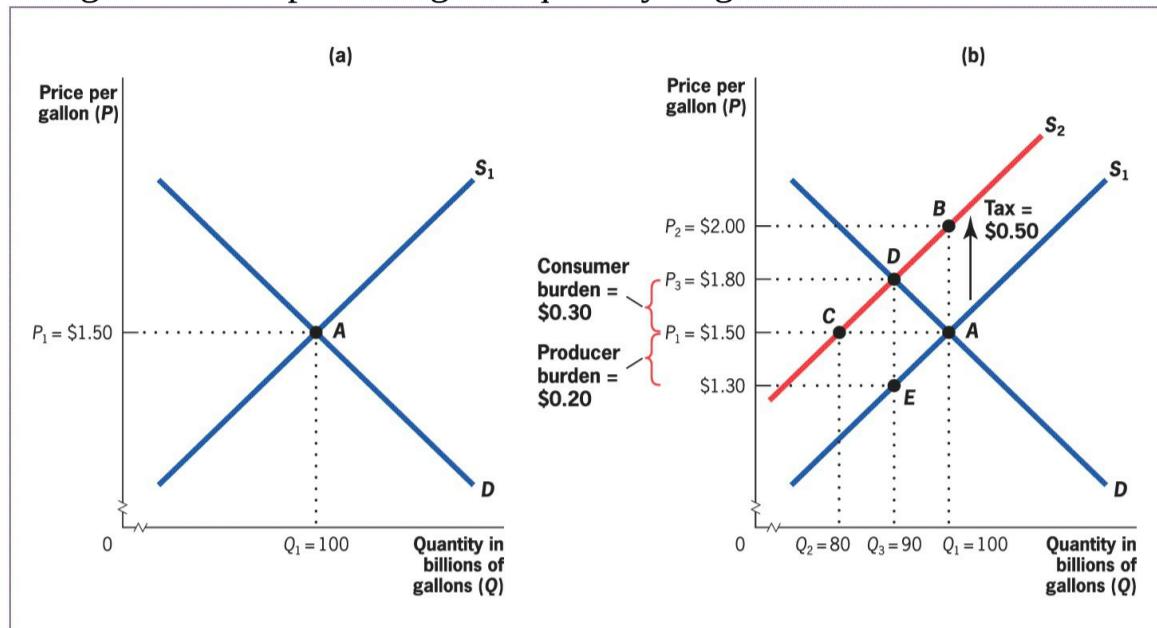
**producer tax burden**

$$= (\text{pre-tax price} - \text{post-tax price}) + \text{per-unit tax payments by producers}$$

For example, suppose that tomorrow the federal government levied a 50¢ per gallon tax on gasoline, to be paid by the producers. Will gas producers receive 50¢ less on each gallon they produce as a result of this tax?

To answer this question, we need to consider the impact of the gas tax on the market for gas, as shown in panel (a) of [Figure 19-2](#). The vertical axis in this graph shows the price per gallon of gas, and the horizontal axis shows billions of gallons of gas. Recall from [Chapter 2](#) that the supply curve shows the quantity that suppliers are willing to sell at any given price. In a competitive market, the supply curve is determined by the firm's marginal cost: the

producer will sell any units for which the market price is at or above its marginal cost of producing that unit. In [Figure 19-2](#), the market is initially in equilibrium at point A: at the market price of **\$1.50 ( $P_1$ )**, producers will supply 100 billion gallons ( $Q_1$ ) of gasoline. Producers are willing to supply 100 billion gallons at \$1.50 per gallon because \$1.50 is the producers' marginal cost of producing that quantity of gas.



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■ FIGURE 19-2

Statutory Burdens Are Not Real Burdens • Panel (a) shows the equilibrium in the gas market before taxation (point A). A 50¢ tax levied on gas producers (the statutory burden) in panel (b) leads to a decrease in supply from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  and to a 30¢ rise in the price of gas from  $P_1$  to  $P_3$  (point D). The real burden of the tax is borne primarily by consumers, who pay 30¢ of the tax through higher prices, leaving producers to bear only 20¢ of the tax.

Panel (b) of [Figure 19-2](#) shows the effects of imposing a tax of 50¢ per gallon of gas sold on the producers of gas. For these producers, this is equivalent to a 50¢ per gallon increase in marginal cost. Because firms must pay both their original marginal cost and the 50¢ tax, they now require a price that is 50¢ higher to produce each quantity. To supply the initial equilibrium quantity of 100 billion gallons after the tax is imposed, for example, firms would now require a price of  **$P_2 = \$2.00$**  (50¢ higher than the initial \$1.50 equilibrium price, at point B). Because the tax acts like an increase in marginal cost, the entire supply curve shifts upward by 50¢ from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , and the supply of gas falls.

At the initial equilibrium price of \$1.50, there is now excess demand for gasoline. Consumers want the old amount of gasoline (100 billion gallons) at \$1.50, but with the new tax in place, producers are willing to supply only 80 billion gallons (point C). At \$1.50, there is a shortage of  $Q_1$  (point A) minus  $Q_2$  (point C), or 20 billion gallons. Consumers therefore bid up the price as they compete for the smaller quantities of gas that are now available from producers. Prices continue to rise until the market arrives at a new equilibrium (point D) with a market price of **\$1.80 ( $P_3$ )** and a quantity of 90 billion gallons ( $Q_3$ ). The market price is now 30¢ higher than it was before the tax was imposed.

## Burden of the Tax on Consumers and Producers

The tax has two effects on the participants in the gas market. First, it has changed the market price that consumers pay and producers receive for a gallon of gas; this price has risen by 30¢

from \$1.50 to \$1.80. Second, producers must now send a check to the government for 50¢ for each gallon sold.

From the producers' perspective, the pain of the 50¢ tax is offset by the fact that the price the producers receive is 30¢ more than the initial equilibrium price. Thus, the producers have to pay only 20¢ of the tax, the portion that is not offset by the price increase.

From the consumers' perspective, they feel some of the pain of the tax because they pay 30¢ more per gallon. Even though consumers send no check to the government and producers send a 50¢ check to the government, consumers actually bear more of the tax (30¢ to the producers' 20¢). The price increase has transferred most of the tax burden from producers to consumers.

These burdens are illustrated in [Figure 19-2](#) by the segments labeled "Consumer burden" and "Producer burden." Using the formulas on [p. 587](#), we can compute the burdens on consumers and producers. The consumers' burden is

### consumer tax burden

$$\begin{aligned} &= (\text{post-tax price} - \text{pre-tax price}) + \text{per-unit tax payments by consumers} \\ &= P_3 - P_1 + 0 = \$1.80 - \$1.50 = \$0.30 \end{aligned}$$

The producers' burden is

### producer tax burden

$$\begin{aligned} &= (\text{pre-tax price} - \text{post-tax price}) + \text{per-unit tax payments by producers} \\ &= P_1 - P_3 + \$0.50 = \$1.50 - \$1.80 + \$0.50 = \$0.20 \end{aligned}$$

The key insight is that the burden on producers is not the 50¢ tax payment they make on each gallon but some lower number because some of the tax burden is borne by consumers in the form of a higher price. The sum of these burdens is \$0.50, the total [tax wedge](#) created by this tax, which is the difference between what consumers pay (\$1.80) and what producers receive net of tax (\$1.30, at point *E*) from a transaction.

#### **tax wedge**

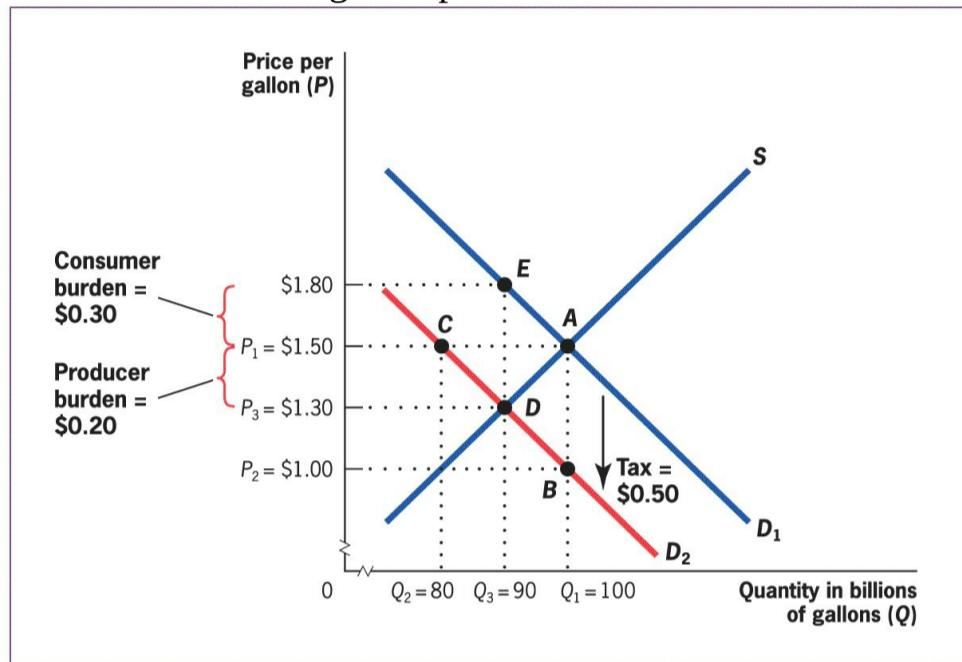
The difference between what consumers pay and what producers receive (net of tax) from a transaction.

## The Side of the Market on Which the Tax Is Imposed Is Irrelevant to the Distribution of the Tax Burdens

The second rule of tax incidence is that the side of the market on which the tax is imposed is irrelevant to the distribution of the tax burdens: tax incidence is identical whether the tax is levied on producers or consumers.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the previous rule and [Figure 19-2](#), this rule means that whether the 50¢ tax is imposed on producers or consumers, consumers will always end up bearing 30¢ of the tax, and producers will end up bearing 20¢.

[Figure 19-3](#) considers the impact of a 50¢ per gallon tax on consumers of gas. In this case, the tax is collected from consumers at the pump when they pay for their gas rather than from producers, as in [Figure 19-2](#). Recall from [Chapter 2](#) that the demand curve represents

consumers' willingness to pay for any quantity of a good. Each point on the demand curve shows the quantity demanded for any market price encountered by consumers. With consumers having to pay a 50¢ tax in addition to the market price at every quantity, they are now willing to pay 50¢ less for each quantity. Thus, because the tax causes a reduction in consumers' willingness to pay (before adding in their tax payments), the entire demand curve shifts downward by 50¢, from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$ . Before the tax, consumers were willing to pay a price of  $P_1 = \$1.50$  for the 100 billionth gallon of gas at point A. Now they are willing to pay only a price of  $P_2 = \$1.00$  for the 100 billionth gallon (point B) because they also have to pay the 50¢ tax on each gallon purchased.



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■ FIGURE 19-3

**The Side of the Market Is Irrelevant** • A 50¢ tax levied on gas consumers (the statutory burden) leads to a decrease in demand from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$  and to a 20¢ fall in the price of gas from  $P_1$  to  $P_3$  (with the market moving from the pre-tax equilibrium at point A to the post-tax equilibrium at point D). The real burden of the tax is borne primarily by consumers, who pay the 50¢ tax to the government but receive an offsetting price reduction of only 20¢. Producers bear that 20¢ of the tax.

At the old market price of \$1.50, there is now an excess supply of gasoline: producers are willing to sell the old amount of gasoline (100 billion gallons, at point A), but consumers are willing to buy only 80 billion gallons at that price, at point C. There is an excess supply of gasoline of  $Q_1 - Q_2 = 20$  billion gallons at the initial equilibrium price of \$1.50 after the demand curve shifts. Producers therefore lower their price to sell their excess supply until the price falls to  $\$1.30 (P_3)$  at point D, with an equilibrium quantity of 90 billion gallons ( $Q_3$ ). The market price is now 20¢ lower than it was before the tax was imposed.

As in the previous example, this tax has two effects on the participants in the gas market. First, it has changed the market price that consumers pay and producers receive for a gallon of gas; this price has fallen by 20¢ from \$1.50 to \$1.30. Second, the consumer must now pay the government 50¢ for each gallon purchased. At the equilibrium price of \$1.30, adding the 50¢ tax yields a cost to consumers (price plus tax) of \$1.80 at point E.

From the consumers' perspective, the pain of the 50¢ check is offset by the 20¢ per gallon decline in the market price. From the producers' perspective, they are feeling some of the

pain of this tax since they are receiving 20¢ less per gallon. Even though producers send no check to the government, and consumers send a 50¢ check to the government, both parties bear some of the ultimate burden of the tax because the price decrease has transferred some of the tax burden from consumers to producers.

These burdens are illustrated in [Figure 19-3](#) by the segments labeled “Consumer burden” and “Producer burden.” Using our formulas, we can compute the burdens on consumers and producers:

$$\text{consumer: } P_3 - P_1 + \$0.50 = \$1.30 - \$1.50 + \$0.50 = \$0.30$$

$$\text{producer: } P_1 - P_3 + 0 = \$1.50 - \$1.30 = \$0.20$$

Once again, the sum of the burdens on consumers and producers, the difference between what consumers pay (\$1.80) and what producers receive (\$1.30), is the tax wedge of 50¢.

Note that *these tax burdens are identical to the burdens in the previous example.* Consumers now have to pay the 50¢ at the pump, but they are facing a lower price (\$1.30) to which they have to add that tax. Adding the two together, the consumer pays exactly the same amount (\$1.80, price plus tax) as in the previous case. Producers now don’t have to pay a tax, but they receive a lower price for their gas (\$1.30 instead of \$1.50), so they end up receiving the same amount (\$1.30) as well.

## Gross Versus After-Tax Prices

While there is only one market price when a tax is imposed, there are two different prices that economists often track in these types of tax incidence models. The first is the **gross price**, the price paid by or received by the party not paying the tax to the government; it is the same as the price in the market. The second is the **after-tax price**, the price paid by or received by the party that is paying the tax to the government; it is either lower by the amount of the tax (if producers pay the tax) or higher by the amount of the tax (if consumers pay the tax).

**gross price**

The price in the market.

**after-tax price**

The gross price minus the amount of the tax (if producers pay the tax) or plus the amount of the tax (if consumers pay the tax).

When the gas tax is levied on producers, as shown in [Figure 19-2](#), the gross price paid by consumers is \$1.80, and the after-tax price received by producers is  **$\$1.80 - \$0.50 = \$1.30$** . When the gas tax is levied on consumers, as in [Figure 19-3](#), the gross price received by producers is \$1.30, and the after-tax price paid by consumers is  **$\$1.30 + \$0.50 = \$1.80$** . The after-tax price is equal to the gross price *plus* the tax wedge if the tax is on consumers, but is equal to the gross price *minus* the tax wedge if the tax is on producers.

## Parties with Inelastic Supply or Demand Bear Taxes; Parties with Elastic Supply or Demand Avoid Them

In the previous example, we described a particular case in which consumers bear more of the burden of a tax than do producers. This is, however, only one of many possible outcomes. The incidence of taxation on producers and consumers is ultimately determined by the

*elasticities of supply and demand* on how responsive the quantity supplied or demanded is to price changes.

## Perfectly Inelastic Demand

Consider again the case in which the 50¢ per gallon tax is levied on gasoline producers, but let's assume this time that consumers have a perfectly inelastic demand for gas, as shown in [Figure 19-4](#). At initial equilibrium, the price for 100 billion gallons is  $P_1 (\$1.50)$ . When the tax is levied on producers, they once again treat this as equivalent to a 50¢ rise in marginal cost, raising the price that they require to supply any quantity; supply falls, and the supply curve shifts from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ . The new equilibrium market price is  $\$2.00 (P_2)$ , a full 50¢ higher than the original price  $P_1$ . When demand is perfectly inelastic, the tax burdens are

**consumer burden**

$$\begin{aligned} &= (\text{post-tax price} - \text{pre-tax price}) + \text{tax payments by consumers} \\ &= P_2 - P_1 = \$2.00 - \$1.50 = \$0.50 \end{aligned}$$

**producer burden**

$$\begin{aligned} &= (\text{pre-tax price} - \text{post-tax price}) + \text{tax payments by producers} \\ &= P_1 - P_2 + \$0.50 = \$1.50 - \$2.00 + \$0.50 = \$0 \end{aligned}$$



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■ FIGURE 19-4

Inelastic Factors Bear Taxes • A tax on producers of an inelastically demanded good is fully reflected in increased prices, so consumers bear the full tax.

When demand is perfectly inelastic, producers bear *none* of the tax and consumers bear *all* of the tax. This is called the [full shifting](#) of the tax onto consumers.

**full shifting**

When one party in a transaction bears all of the tax burden.

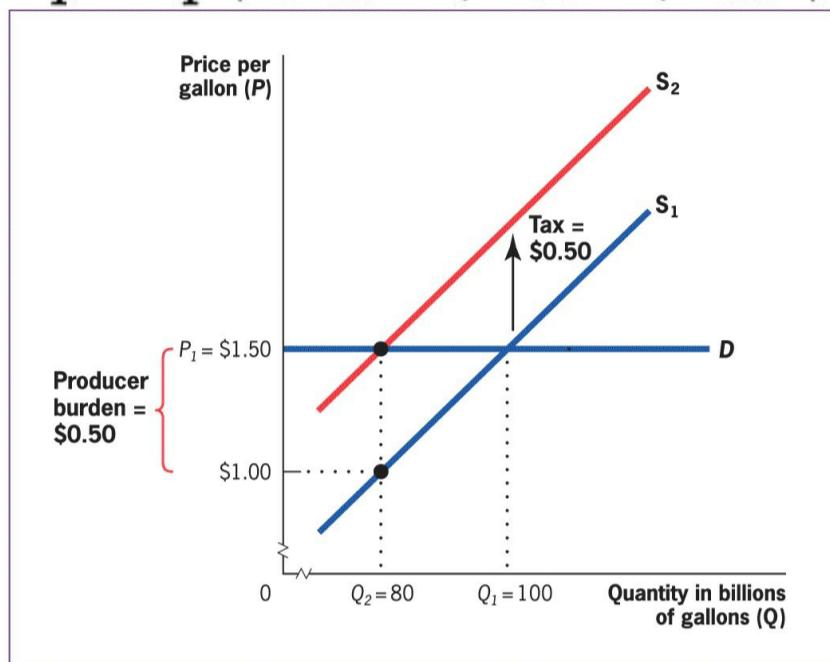
## Perfectly Elastic Demand

Contrast that outcome with the case in which consumers' demand for gas is perfectly elastic,

as shown in [Figure 19-5](#). Initially, the market is in equilibrium at  $P_1 = \$1.50$  and  $Q_1 = 100$  billion gallons. In this case, when a 50¢ tax causes the supply curve to shift from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , the equilibrium price remains at  $P_1, \$1.50$ , but the quantity falls to  $Q_2, 80$  billion gallons. When demand is perfectly elastic, the tax burdens are therefore

**consumer:**  $P_1 - P_1 = \$1.50 - \$1.50 = 0$

**producer:**  $P_1 - P_1 + 0.50 = \$1.50 - \$1.50 + \$0.50 = \$0.50$



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■ FIGURE 19-5

Elastic Factors Avoid Taxes • A tax on producers of a perfectly elastically demanded good cannot be passed along to consumers through an increase in prices, so producers bear the full burden of the tax.

In this case, producers bear *all* of the tax, and consumers bear *none* of the tax.

### General Case

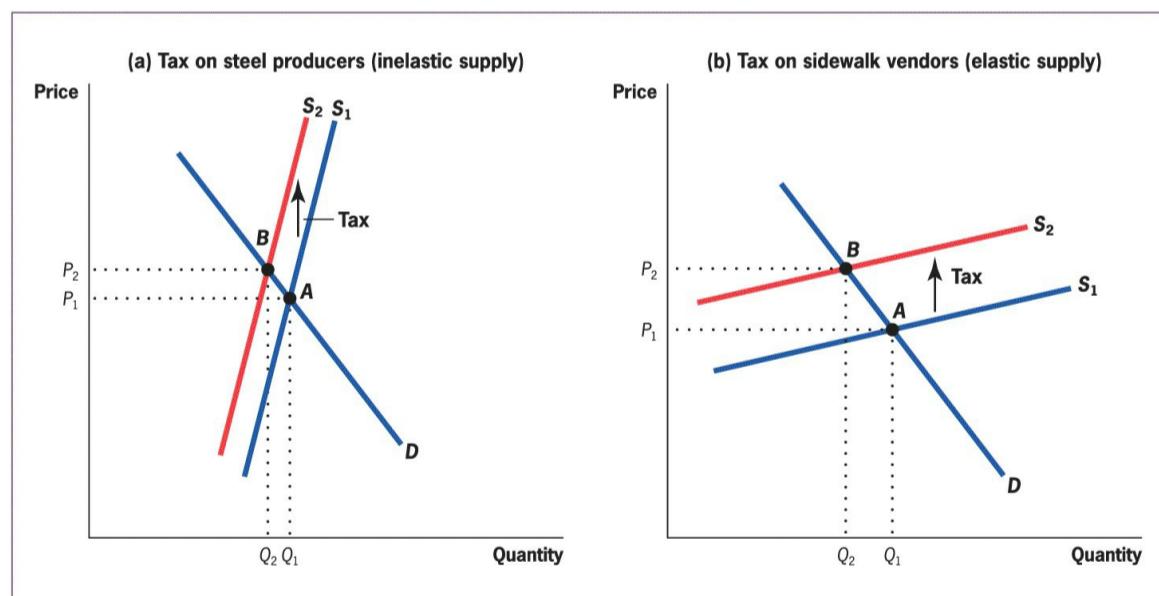
These extreme cases illustrate a general point about tax incidence: *parties with inelastic demand (or supply, as we'll soon see) bear taxes; parties with elastic demand (or supply) avoid them.* Demand for goods is more elastic (the price elasticity of demand is higher in absolute value) for goods with many substitutes. For example, the demand for fast food is fairly elastic because higher-quality restaurant meals or home cooking can be substituted for fast food fairly easily. Thus, if the government levied a tax on fast food, fast-food restaurants would find it difficult to raise prices in order to pass all of the tax onto fast-food consumers; if they did, individuals would substitute one of these alternatives for their fast food. Thus, because the demand for fast food is elastic, the producers (the restaurants) bear most of the burden of the tax.

For products with an inelastic demand, the burden of the tax is borne almost entirely by the consumer. For example, the demand for insulin is highly inelastic because it is essential to the health of diabetics. If the government taxes the producers of insulin, they can easily raise their price and completely shift most of the tax burden onto consumers because there are no substitutes available that allow consumers to leave this market due to a higher price.

### Supply Elasticities

Supply elasticity also affects how the tax burden is distributed. Supply curves are more elastic when suppliers have more alternative uses to which their resources can be put. In the short run, a steel manufacturer has fairly inelastic supply; having invested in the steel plant and expensive machinery to produce steel, there are few alternative choices for production. The plant cannot easily convert from making steel to making plastic pipes or wood furniture. So the supply curve for steel will be fairly inelastic (vertical). The supply of sales from sidewalk vendors (of items such as watches, handbags, scarves, and so on) in New York City, in contrast, is very elastic. Because the individuals selling these goods have a very low investment in that particular business, if it is taxed, they can easily move to other activities, such as working in a store selling the same items. So the supply curve for sidewalk vendor sales will be very elastic (horizontal).

Compare the incidence of a tax on steel (levied on steel producers) to the incidence of a tax on sidewalk vendors (levied on the vendors) for any given demand curve (assuming that the demand curve is neither perfectly elastic nor inelastic). Panel (a) of [Figure 19-6](#) shows the impact of a tax on steel producers. The steel market is initially in equilibrium at point A. The steel company can reduce the amount of steel it produces only slightly because it is committed to a level of production by its fixed capital investment. As a result, even when the steel company is paying 50¢ to the government for each unit of steel produced, it still wants to produce almost the same amount. Overall, the steel company's supply curve shifts upward from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ . Price rises only slightly from  $P_1$  to  $P_2$ , and quantity of steel sold falls only from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ ; the new equilibrium is at point B. Because the price rise is very small, it does not much offset the tax that the steel company must pay. The steel company therefore bears most of the tax, and consumers of steel bear very little (they don't pay a much higher price).



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FIGURE 19-6

Elasticity of Supply Also Matters • A tax on producers of an inelastically supplied good, as in panel (a), leads to a very small rise in prices, so producers bear most of the burden of the tax. An equal-sized tax on producers of an elastically supplied good, as in panel (b), leads to a large rise in prices, so producers bear little of the burden of the tax (and consumers bear most of the burden).

Panel (b) of [Figure 19-6](#) shows the impact of an equal-sized tax on sidewalk vendors. These vendors are very sensitive to the costs of production in their production decisions, leading to the very elastic supply curve. They are initially willing to provide a quantity  $Q_1$  of

goods at a price of  $P_1$ . If the government makes them pay 50¢ per good they sell, then many vendors will move out of the sidewalk-vending business into some more lucrative line of work. The supply curve therefore shifts from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , with prices rising from  $P_1$  to  $P_2$ , and the quantity of goods sold falling from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$  (at point *B*). The large increase in price in the sidewalk vendors' market greatly offsets the taxes the vendors have to pay, so they bear little of the burden of the tax. Consumers of goods sold by sidewalk vendors will see much higher prices for these goods, however, so they will bear most of the tax.

Thus, the same principles hold for supply as for demand elasticities; elastic factors avoid taxes, while inelastic factors bear them.

In the appendix to this chapter, we develop the mathematical tax incidence formulas that formalize this intuition.

## Reminder: Tax Incidence Is About Prices, Not Quantities

When the demand for gas is perfectly elastic, as in [Figure 19-5](#), we claimed that consumers bore none of the burden of taxation, and yet the quantity of gas consumed fell dramatically. Doesn't this decrease in consumption make consumers worse off? And if so, shouldn't that be taken into account when determining tax incidence?

The answer to both questions is "no" because, at both the old and new equilibria, consumers in this case are indifferent between buying the gas and spending their money elsewhere. Each point on a demand curve represents consumers' willingness to pay for a good. That willingness to pay reflects the value of the next best alternative use of their budget. If the demand curve for gas is perfectly elastic, consumers are truly indifferent, at the market price, between consuming gas and consuming some other good. So if they have to shift to buying more of another good and less gas, they are no worse off.

More generally, when we analyze tax incidence, we ignore changes in quantities and only focus on the changes in prices paid by consumers and suppliers. This assumption makes tax incidence analysis simpler.<sup>3</sup>

## 19.2 Tax Incidence Extensions

Section 19.1 presented the fundamental rules that will guide tax incidence analysis throughout the rest of this book. To recap:

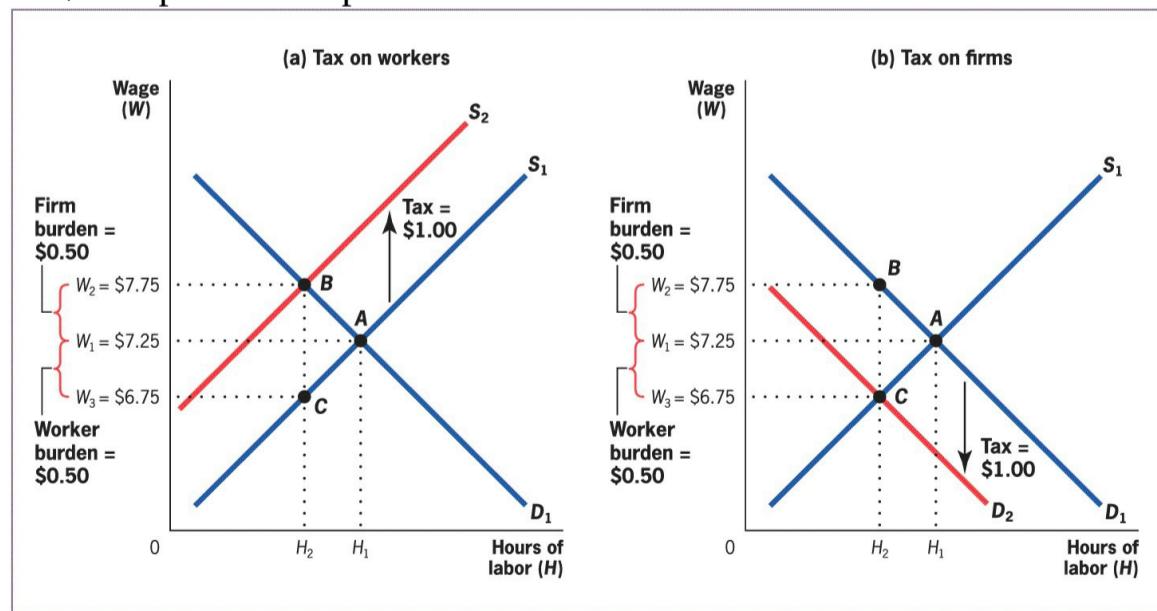
- The statutory burden of a tax does not describe who really bears the tax.
- The side of the market on which the tax is imposed is irrelevant to the distribution of tax burdens.
- Parties with inelastic supply or demand bear taxes; parties with elastic supply or demand avoid them.

In this section, we apply these rules to cases different from those previously considered, including taxes on factors of production, taxes in markets with imperfect competition, and accounting for (tax-financed) expenditures in tax incidence analysis. As we will see throughout the remainder of this book, the three basic rules of tax incidence are largely all we need to know to understand more complicated cases and issues in taxation.

### Tax Incidence in Factor Markets

Our discussion thus far has focused on taxes that are levied in the goods markets, such as the markets for gas or fast food. Many taxes, however, are levied in factor markets, such as the market for labor. The analysis of tax incidence in factor markets is identical to that in goods markets; the only difference is that consumers of the factors are the firms (they demand factors such as labor) and producers of factors are individuals (who provide factors such as labor).

Consider, for example, the market for labor shown in panel (a) of Figure 19-7. Hours of labor supplied in the market are shown on the  $x$  axis; the market wage is on the  $y$  axis. There is a downward-sloping demand for labor from firms ( $D_1$ ) and an upward-sloping supply of labor from individuals ( $S_1$ ). The market is initially in equilibrium, before taxes, with a wage  $W_1$  of \$7.25 per hour at point A.



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FIGURE 19-7

Incidence Analysis Is the Same in Factor Markets • These figures show the market for labor where firms are the consumers and workers are the producers of hours worked at a wage rate  $W$ . A \$1.00 tax per hour worked that is levied on workers,

shown in panel (a), leads the supply curve to rise from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  and the wage to rise from its initial equilibrium value of \$7.25 (point A) to a higher value of \$7.75 (point B). A tax of \$1.00 per hour worked that is levied on firms, shown in panel (b), leads the demand curve to fall from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$  and the wage to fall from \$7.25 to \$6.75 at point C. Thus, regardless who pays the tax, workers and firms each have a burden of 50¢ per hour.

Suppose that the government levies a payroll tax of \$1 per hour on all workers. This tax lowers the return to work by \$1 at every amount of labor. As a result, individuals require a \$1 rise in wages to supply any amount of labor and the supply shifts up from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  in panel (a) of [Figure 19-7](#). With demand remaining at its original level, this shift results in a higher market equilibrium wage of \$7.75 ( $W_2$ ) at point B. The incidence of the tax is shared by workers (suppliers) and firms (demanders) according to the elasticities of demand and supply. If these elasticities are equal, the burden is shared equally: the wage will rise to \$7.75 per hour, and workers will take home \$6.75 per hour after paying their \$1 per hour tax. The firms and the workers each bear 50¢ of the \$1.00 tax, split as indicated on the vertical axis. The firms pay a 50¢ higher wage (\$7.75), and the workers receive a 50¢ higher wage (\$7.75), but because they must pay \$1 an hour in tax, they receive 50¢ less in after-tax wage (\$6.75). The gross wage in the market has risen to \$7.75, but the after-tax wage of workers has fallen to \$6.75.

According to the second rule of tax incidence, what matters for the burdens on workers and employers from this tax is the total tax wedge and the elasticities of supply and demand, not who sends the check to the government. Panel (b) of [Figure 19-7](#) shows the effect on the labor market if the payroll tax in our example were instead paid only by firms and not by workers. In that case, the supply curve would remain at  $S_1$ , and, because the tax on consumers (the firms) acts like an increase in the price of labor, the demand for labor would fall, and the demand curve would shift inward to  $D_2$ . Market wages would fall by \$1.00 from \$7.75 to \$6.75, the new equilibrium (point C), and the burdens of taxation would be unchanged. Firms bear the same 50¢ burden as before; rather than paying a 50¢ higher wage, however, they now pay a wage (\$6.75) that is 50¢ lower than the initial equilibrium wage of \$7.25. In addition, firms now must send a \$1 check to the government, so in effect they are paying a wage of \$7.75.

Workers see the same 50¢ burden; rather than receiving a 50¢ higher wage and sending a \$1 check to the government, however, they now receive a 50¢ lower wage (\$6.75). The gross wage in the market has fallen to \$6.75, but the after-tax wage paid by firms is \$7.75.

The tax incidence analysis of a payroll tax shows that it makes no difference that the Social Security payroll tax is levied half on workers and half on firms rather than being levied 100% on workers or on firms. The second rule of tax incidence tells us that what matters for determining the burden of the Social Security tax is the total size of the tax (the total tax wedge), not how the tax is distributed across demanders and producers.<sup>4</sup>

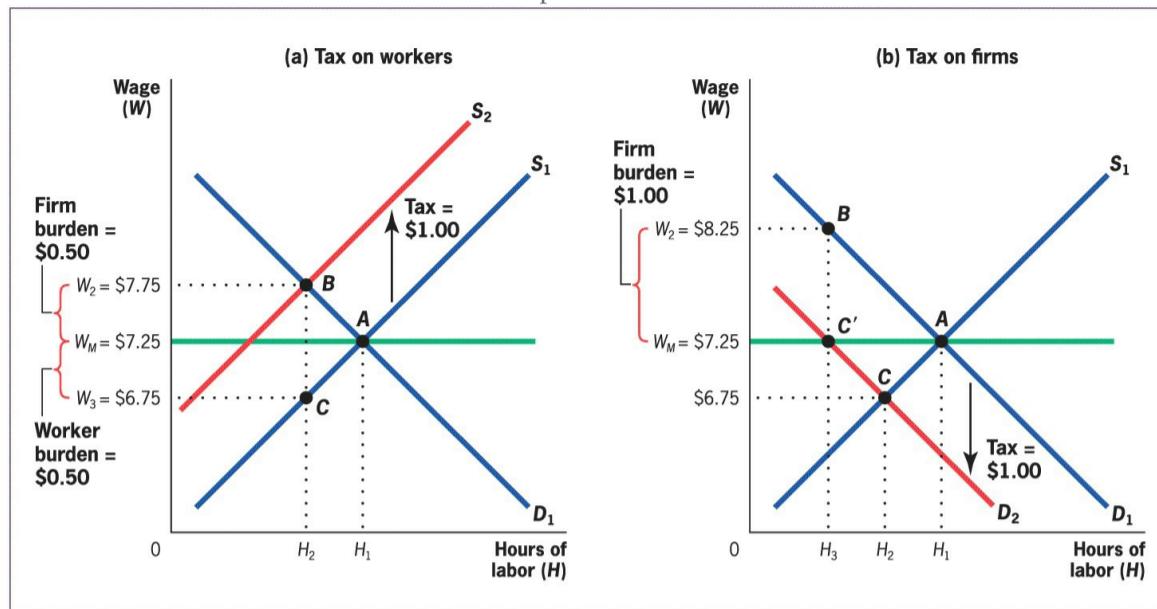
## Impediments to Wage Adjustment

These conclusions from comparing panels (a) and (b) in [Figure 19-7](#) will not be correct, however, if anything impedes the free adjustment of wages in the labor market. One such impediment is a [minimum wage](#), a mandated minimum amount that virtually all workers must be paid for each hour of work. The current U.S. minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. Panels (a) and (b) of [Figure 19-8](#) show how the analysis of [Figure 19-7](#) changes when a

minimum wage,  $W_M$ , is introduced at the initial equilibrium wage of \$7.25.

#### minimum wage

Legally mandated minimum amount that workers must be paid for each hour of work.



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■ FIGURE 19-8

Incidence Analysis in Factor Markets Differ with a Minimum Wage • The analysis here is the same as in [Figure 19-7](#), with the addition of the constraint that the wage cannot fall below \$7.25 per hour. If the payroll tax is levied on workers, as shown in panel (a), this constraint has no effect: the wage rises to \$7.75, as in [Figure 19-7](#), and workers and firms equally share the burden of the tax. If the payroll tax is levied on firms, as shown in panel (b), however, the firms cannot lower the wage to the desired \$6.75 per hour, so the firms bear the full amount of the tax.

Panel (a) shows the case where the payroll tax is levied on workers. In that case, the minimum wage has no effect on incidence analysis: when the tax is implemented, wages rise to \$7.75 at point *B* (firms pay 50¢ in higher wages), workers send \$1 to the government in taxes, and they earn an after-tax wage of \$6.75.

Panel (b) shows the case where the payroll tax is levied on firms. In that case, the supply curve remains at  $S_1$ , and the demand curve shifts to  $D_2$ . However, the firms cannot lower the wage to the desired level of \$6.75 (point *C*) because this is an illegally low wage. The wage must stay at \$7.25, and the *firm must bear all of the burden*. The workers' wage doesn't fall from \$7.25, and the firm sends the check to the government, so the firm bears the full incidence of the payroll tax and pays an after-tax wage of \$8.25. The quantity of labor in the market falls to  $H_3$ , where the new demand curve  $D_2$  intersects the minimum wage line (point  $C'$ ).

When there are barriers to reaching the competitive market equilibrium (as in this minimum wage example), the side of the market on which the tax is levied can matter. A number of potential barriers, ranging from the minimum wage to workplace norms, do not allow employers to explicitly cut workers' wages. Such rigidities are often not present in output markets. For this reason, the party on whom the tax is levied may matter more in input than in output markets.

## Tax Incidence in Imperfectly Competitive Markets

Our analysis thus far has focused on perfectly competitive markets in which there are a large number of demanders and suppliers consuming very similar goods. Very few markets are perfectly competitive in practice. Unfortunately, modeling *imperfectly competitive* markets is

an imperfect science. In this section, we discuss the one case that we can model clearly, a **monopoly market**, which is a market that has only one supplier of a good.

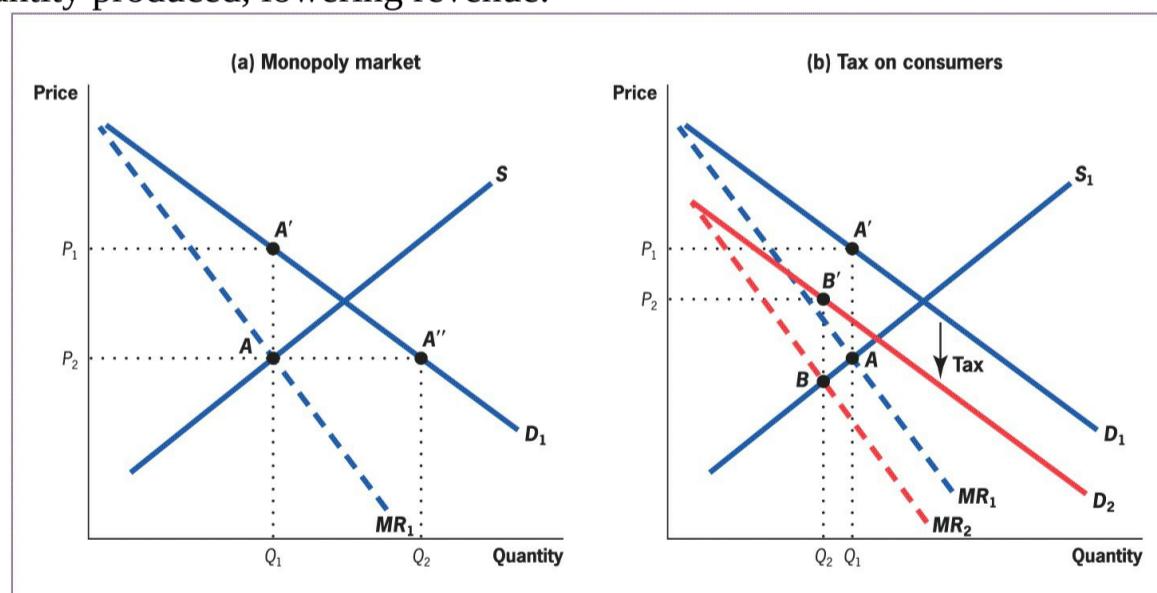
#### monopoly markets

Markets in which there is only one supplier of a good.

## Background: Equilibrium in Monopoly Markets

Monopolists maximize profits just as competitive firms do: they produce a good or service until the marginal cost of the next unit produced equals the marginal revenues earned on that unit. For competitive firms, the marginal revenue earned on the next unit is the market price, so they set marginal cost equal to price. Because monopolists are *price makers*, not *price takers*, however, marginal revenue is *not* a price determined in the market but a price chosen by the monopolist. (In our analysis of tax incidence in monopoly markets, we assume that monopolists charge one price to all consumers; we do not consider the case of *price-discriminating monopolists*.)

Panel (a) of [Figure 19-9](#) shows the determination of equilibrium in monopoly markets. The monopoly seller has an upward-sloping marginal cost curve and faces a downward-sloping demand curve. For a monopolist, there are two aspects to the decision about whether to produce and sell the next unit. The first is the price that the monopolist will earn on the next unit. The second is that in order to sell the next unit, the (non-price discriminating) monopolist must lower the price because he or she faces a downward-sloping demand curve. Consumers will buy another unit only if the market price is less than it was at the previous quantity. However, because the monopolist charges only one price to all customers, he or she must lower the price on all previous units for sale as well. Thus, monopolists face a trade-off as price makers: additional sales at a given price will increase revenue, but they will also force the monopolist to lower prices on all existing units to achieve equilibrium at the new higher quantity produced, lowering revenue.



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**FIGURE 19-9**

Tax Incidence in Monopoly Markets • Panel (a) shows the equilibrium in a monopoly market. The monopolist sets quantity  $Q_1$  produced where the marginal revenue curve intersects the supply curve (at  $P_1$ ) and then sets the price using the demand curve for that quantity (at  $P_1$ ). When a tax is imposed on consumers in this market, as in panel (b), the demand curve shifts downward from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$ , leading the marginal revenue curve to also shift downward from  $MR_1$  to  $MR_2$ . The new equilibrium quantity is  $Q_2$ , with a new price of  $P_2$ .

The result of this pricing decision is that the monopolist's *marginal revenue curve* is the

line  $MR_1$  in panel (a) of [Figure 19-9](#), which lies everywhere below the demand curve  $D_1$ . The marginal revenue that the monopolist gets from additional sales is below the consumers' willingness to pay for the given unit (the demand curve) because it incorporates the negative effect of lowering prices on all other units. In our example, the monopolist chooses to produce the quantity  $Q_1$ , the quantity at which marginal revenue equals marginal cost at point A. As measured on the demand curve  $D_1$ , consumers are willing to pay price  $P_1$  for quantity  $Q_1$ . Thus, the monopolist produces  $Q_1$  and charges price  $P_1$ . Note that even though the monopolist sets the price, the demand curve still must be respected. The monopolist cannot, for example, produce quantity  $Q_1$  and charge price  $P_2$  because at that price consumers would demand  $Q_2$  far more than  $Q_1$  (where the monopolist's marginal revenue equals marginal costs). The mathematics of the monopolist's profit maximization and its implications for tax incidence are developed in the appendix.

## Taxation in Monopoly Markets

Suppose that the government imposes a tax on consumers in a monopoly market, as shown in panel (b) of [Figure 19-9](#). This tax causes consumers to be less willing to pay a given market price for the monopolist's good, shifting the demand curve to  $D_2$ . This reduction in willingness to pay leads to an associated shift in the marginal revenue curve to  $MR_2$ . The new equilibrium (at the intersection of  $MR_2$  and the marginal cost curve) is at a lower quantity  $Q_2$ , and the new lower price is  $P_2$ . The monopolist bears some of the tax, just as the competitive firm does: even though consumers are paying the tax to the government, the monopolist receives a lower price ( $P_2$ ) in the market, so he or she shares the tax burden. The three rules of tax incidence therefore apply in monopoly markets as well. In this case, as we show in the appendix to this chapter, the side of the market on which the tax is imposed remains irrelevant: even though the monopolist has market power, a tax on either side of the market results in the same sharing of the tax burden. So monopolists cannot "exploit their market power" to avoid the rules of tax incidence.

## Tax Incidence in Oligopolies

Very few markets are perfectly competitive or monopolistic. Most markets operate somewhere in between, with some degree of imperfect competition. [Oligopoly markets](#) are markets in which firms have some market power in setting prices but not as much as a monopolist. Although there are widely accepted models of how competitive and monopolistic markets work, there is much less consensus on models for oligopolistic markets. As a result, economists tend to assume that the same rules of tax incidence apply in these markets as well, but there is more work to do to understand the burden of taxes in oligopoly markets.

**oligopoly markets**

Markets in which firms have some market power in setting prices but not as much as a monopolist.

## Balanced Budget Tax Incidence

The model we have used thus far to examine the burden of taxation in perfectly competitive markets and monopolies has focused on the incidence of the tax alone. Taxes also raise revenues, however, and these revenues will ultimately be spent. Thus, a complete picture of tax incidence would consider not only who bears the tax but also who receives the *benefit* of the spending that is financed out of the tax revenues.

Consider, for example, the federal gas excise tax, a tax levied by the federal government on the sale of gasoline. Suppose that demand for gasoline is very inelastic (or supply is very

elastic), so that the price of gas to consumers rises by the full amount of this tax. At the same, however, 84% of the revenues collected by this 18.3¢ gas tax are spent on highway improvements and repairs through the highway trust fund.<sup>5</sup>

In this case, it would be wrong to say that drivers fully bear the tax: they do pay the tax, but they also reap some of the rewards in terms of better roads on which to drive. Tax incidence that takes into account the incidence of both the tax and the benefit is called **balanced budget incidence**.

#### **balanced budget incidence**

Tax incidence analysis that accounts for both the tax and the benefits it brings.

It is often difficult, however, to trace the spending associated with a given tax increase. Thus, we typically ignore the spending side when we do tax incidence analysis. It is important to remember, however, that in reality the full burden of a tax policy will depend on the distribution of both the tax payments and the spending of the associated revenues.

## 19.3 General Equilibrium Tax Incidence

The model of tax incidence that we have used thus far is what economists call a **partial equilibrium tax incidence** model, which considers the impact of a tax on a market in isolation. In reality, however, a given market does not exist in isolation; it is integrated with a number of other markets. To study the effects on related markets of a tax imposed on one market, economists use the model of **general equilibrium tax incidence**.

**partial equilibrium tax incidence**

Analysis that considers the impact of a tax on a market in isolation.

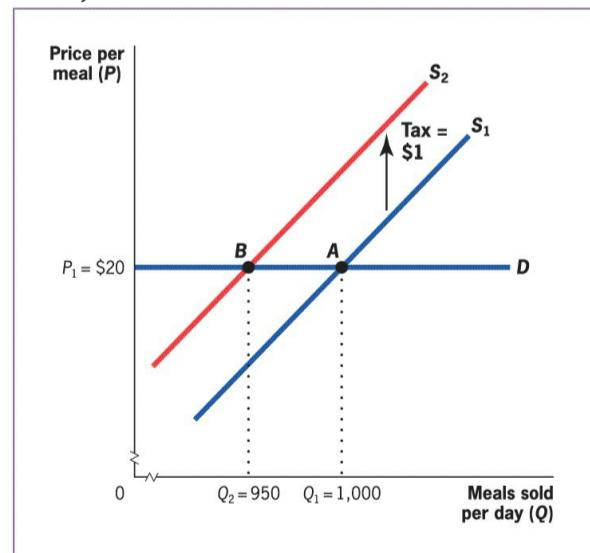
**general equilibrium tax incidence**

Analysis that considers the effects on related markets of a tax imposed on one market.

## Effects of a Restaurant Tax: A General Equilibrium Example

Many travel guides consider Bozeman, Montana, to be among the most beautiful small towns in America. Suppose that Bozeman were to announce tomorrow that it was levying a tax of \$1 on all restaurant meals in that town. The demand for restaurant meals in Bozeman is fairly elastic because there are many substitutes, such as cooking at home or going to a restaurant in a nearby town. For ease, let's suppose that the demand for Bozeman restaurant meals is perfectly elastic.

The effect of the restaurant meal tax under this assumption is illustrated in [Figure 19-10](#). The restaurant meal market in Bozeman is initially in equilibrium at point A: at a price of \$20 per restaurant meal ( $P_1$ ), 1,000 restaurant meals are sold per day in the town ( $Q_1$ ). The meal tax acts like an increase in the restaurants' marginal costs and shifts the supply curve inward from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , with quantity falling to 950 meals sold per day ( $Q_2$ ). Note that this tax has no effect on the price charged by restaurants. Because demand is perfectly elastic, any increase in price to consumers would drive all business away. Thus, the restaurant bears the entire burden of the tax, and consumers bear none of it.



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■ FIGURE 19-10

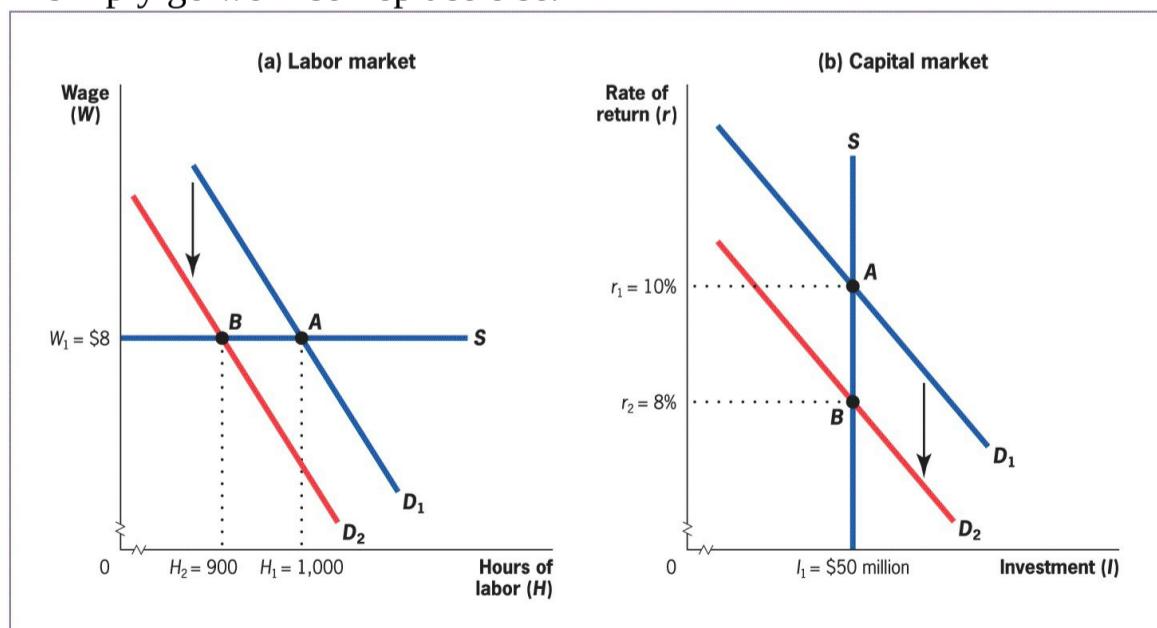
The Incidence of a Tax on Bozeman Restaurants • The demand for restaurants in Bozeman is perfectly elastic, so prices cannot increase when they are taxed; as a result of a \$1.00 tax on restaurant meals, the supply of meals falls from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , and the quantity of meals demanded and supplied falls to  $Q_2$  (950). The price of a restaurant meal remains at \$20, so the restaurant, which is paying the tax, bears its full burden.

The story can't end there, however, for the simple reason that *restaurants cannot bear taxes*. As Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman once said in discussing energy taxes, "How do you 'burden' industry or 'tax' a factory? Do you squeeze it until it screams? Send it to jail? Only people can bear a 'burden' or pay a tax. An industry, a factory, or a utility can do neither."<sup>6</sup>

In the standard microeconomics model, firms are not self-functioning entities but are a technology for combining capital and labor to produce an output. In the context of our restaurant example, capital is best thought of as *financial* capital, the money that buys physical capital inputs, such as the building, the ovens, tables, and so on. By labor, we mean the hours of labor workers supply to the restaurant. When we say that the \$1 Bozeman meals tax is borne by restaurants, we mean that it is borne by the factors (labor and capital) that restaurants have organized to produce meals. To accurately identify who bears the burden of the meals tax, we need to move the analysis back one step and ask: In what proportions do these factors of production bear the restaurant tax?

## General Equilibrium Tax Incidence

Consider first the market for labor employed by restaurants in Bozeman, shown in panel (a) of [Figure 19-11](#). In this market, supply is likely to be very elastic because workers can always choose another job in Bozeman or go to work in a restaurant in a nearby town. Once again, for ease, let's assume that the labor supply available to restaurants in Bozeman is perfectly elastic. At the initial market equilibrium (point A), the wage is \$8 per hour ( $W_1$ ), and the quantity of labor is 1,000 hours per year ( $H_1$ ). When the new tax goes into effect, and restaurants bear its full burden (since the demand for restaurant meals is perfectly elastic), they will reduce their demand for workers. Each worker is worth less because a restaurant's willingness to pay for an hour of labor falls when it is taxed on the fruits of that labor (the meals).<sup>7</sup> The demand curve in the Bozeman restaurant labor market shifts downward from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$ , but because labor supply is perfectly elastic, wages do not fall, and workers bear none of this tax. If restaurant owners try to pay their workers a wage lower than  $W_1$ , the workers will simply go work someplace else.



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FIGURE 19-11

The Incidence of a Bozeman Restaurant Tax on Labor Versus Capital • If the burden of a tax on restaurants is borne by the restaurants, it must be borne by the factors of production used by the restaurants. In panel (a), the supply of labor to

restaurants in Bozeman is perfectly elastic, so when demand for labor falls to  $D_2$ , it cannot be reflected in lower wages; the wage is unchanged and workers do not bear any of this tax. In panel (b), the supply of capital to restaurants in Bozeman is perfectly inelastic, so when demand for capital falls to  $D_2$ , the rate of return to capital falls by the full amount of this tax to  $r_2$ .

Now consider the market for capital in Bozeman restaurants, shown in panel (b) of [Figure 19-11](#). In the short run, having invested in a Bozeman restaurant, the capital owner is stuck, unable to pull out money that has already been spent on stoves, tables, and a building. In principle, the capital owner could resell goods, such as chairs, tables, and buildings, but in reality the owner would receive only a fraction of the purchase price. Thus, while the supply of capital isn't perfectly inelastic in reality, we assume for convenience in panel (b) of [Figure 19-11](#) that capital supply is perfectly inelastic.

The initial equilibrium in this capital market is at point A: the rate of return to capital is 10% ( $r_1$ ) and the investment in restaurants is \$50 million. Because the tax is borne fully by the restaurants, it reduces their demand for capital just as it reduced their demand for labor. Capital is also worth less when the restaurant is taxed on the fruits of that capital (meals), so the restaurant will demand capital only from those who are willing to charge a lower rate of return. The lower demand is reflected in the fall in the demand curve from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$ ; the new equilibrium is at point B, with a lower rate of return of 8% ( $r_2$ ). Because the supply of capital is inelastic in the short run, capital owners will bear the meals tax in the form of a lower return on their investment in the restaurant. Thus, when Bozeman levies a tax on restaurant meals, its incidence ultimately rests on the investors in Bozeman restaurants. This spillover of incidence to other markets is an example of general equilibrium tax incidence.

## Issues to Consider in General Equilibrium Incidence Analysis

General equilibrium analysis is a game of “follow the tax burden”: the analysis does not stop with the effects on the market in which a tax is levied but expands to all related markets until it identifies the persons who ultimately bear the tax burden. This process raises three interesting issues that must be considered when using general equilibrium analysis.

### Effect of Time Period on Tax Incidence: Short Run Versus Long Run

Under the assumptions we made, we have just shown the correct general equilibrium analysis of the tax burden of a restaurant meals tax in Bozeman. These assumptions are likely to be valid for a short-run (say, one-year) analysis of a restaurant tax. In the long run (e.g., more than ten years), however, these assumptions may no longer be valid. Over time, capital invested in Bozeman restaurants is no longer inelastic; investors can close or sell the restaurants, take their money, and invest it elsewhere. Indeed, in the long run, capital supply is likely to be perfectly elastic because there are many substitutes for investing in restaurants in Bozeman. In the long run, then, capital owners will not bear any of the tax.



Quick Hint What does it mean for capital supply to be elastic? Think of capital investments already made as irretrievable; that is why capital supply is inelastic in the short run. In the long run, however, restaurants need new infusions of capital to stay

afloat: equipment and furnishings need to be replaced, buildings need to be renovated, and so on. The elasticity of capital supply in the long run arises from the ability of investors to choose whether to reinvest in a firm. If there is a tax on the good produced by the firm, and this tax is passed on to capital investors in the form of a lower return, then they are less likely to reinvest in the restaurant.

The rule that the market participants with the most elastic supply or demand avoid taxes is *always* the guide to the game of “follow the tax burden.” We’ve just seen that in the long run, the supply of capital is perfectly elastic. The supply of labor was already elastic in the short run, and it should be even more elastic in the long run as workers with restaurant-specific skills can move out of Bozeman to other towns where the restaurants are not taxed and can pay higher wages as a result. This finding leaves us with a puzzle: If neither capital nor labor bears the tax in the long run, who does?

There is one more inelastic factor in the restaurant production process: the *land* that the restaurants are built on. This land is in fixed supply and is therefore inelastic by definition. When labor and capital avoid the tax, its burden falls squarely on the owners of the land in Bozeman. With workers unwilling to accept a lower wage to work at Bozeman restaurants and owners of capital unwilling to accept a lower return, the only way restaurants can stay open is if they pay lower rent on their land. Thus, factors that are always inelastically demanded or supplied in both the short and long run bear taxes in the long run.

## Effect of Tax Scope on Tax Incidence

The incidence of a tax is also affected by the share of the product market to which it applies. Compare the incidence of the tax on restaurant meals in Bozeman with a tax imposed on all restaurant meals in Montana. While demand for meals in Bozeman may be very elastic, demand for all restaurant meals in Montana is less elastic because it is more costly to find substitutes. Individuals can still eat at home instead, but there aren’t easily available substitutes for dining away from home unless you live very near a neighboring state. Because demand is less elastic, restaurant consumers will bear some of the tax burden.

In the short run, the remainder of the tax burden not borne by consumers is shared once again between labor and capital. The incidence on labor has changed, however: workers are less mobile because they cannot move into other restaurant jobs as easily as they could when the restaurant tax was imposed only in Bozeman. (In that case, they could avoid the Bozeman tax burden by working at a restaurant in a neighboring town.) With the labor supply to the entire state restaurant industry less elastic than it was to just Bozeman restaurants, labor will bear some of the meals tax: restaurants will be able to pay their workers somewhat less in response to this tax because the workers have fewer employment alternatives. As before, capital is inelastic in the short run, so it will continue to bear much of the tax burden.

As a result, the short-run burden of a tax on all restaurants in Montana will be shared among consumers, workers, and capital, rather than being fully borne by capital. The exact proportions in which the burden will be shared depend on the exact elasticities of demand and supply in each of these markets. Once again, the goal of general equilibrium tax analysis is to follow the burden until it is distributed across all payers. When demands or supplies are not perfectly elastic or perfectly inelastic, the tax burden may be spread across many parties. The scope of the tax matters to incidence analysis because it determines which elasticities are relevant to the analysis: taxes that are broader based are harder to avoid than taxes that are narrower, so the response of producers and consumers to the tax will be smaller and more inelastic.

## Spillovers Between Product Markets

While the discussion thus far has focused solely on the consumers and producers in the restaurant market, the incidence of a tax may extend beyond this market to other goods markets as well. When consumers of a good bear any of the tax on that good, this burden will affect their consumption of other goods by shifting their budget constraint. This spillover to other goods markets means that a tax in one market can have a burden or benefit on the consumers and producers in other markets, too.

Consider the tax on restaurant meals in Montana. This tax reduces demand for restaurant meals by raising the after-tax price to consumers. This higher after-tax price has three effects on other goods as well:

1. Consumers have lower incomes and may therefore purchase fewer units of all goods (the income effect).
2. Consumers may increase their consumption of goods and services (such as movies) that are substitutes for restaurant meals because they are now relatively cheaper than the taxed meals (the substitution effect).
3. Consumers may reduce their consumption of goods or services (such as valet parking services) that are complements to restaurant meals because they are consuming fewer restaurant meals (the complementary effect).

So, for example, a tax on restaurant meals could lower the demand for babysitters because incomes will be lower and individuals will go out to eat less frequently. On the other hand, the meals tax could raise the demand for concerts because individuals might attend a concert instead of eating out.

A complete general equilibrium tax analysis must account for effects in all other markets. Playing “follow the tax burden” means not only following it up and down within a market but also following it horizontally across markets and then vertically within those other markets. For example, if the tax on restaurants raises demand for movies (shifting out the demand curve), it leads to higher prices for moviegoers (so that movie consumers bear some of the tax on restaurants), higher wages for movie workers, and a higher return on capital in the movie sector. Indeed, a full general equilibrium analysis must also incorporate supply spillovers as well. As highlighted in the important article by [Bradford \(1978\)](#), a tax that shifts capital or labor out of any one jurisdiction will raise the supply of capital or labor to other jurisdictions, lowering the return to capital or labor elsewhere.

# 19.4 The Incidence of Taxation in the United States

The central role of tax fairness in debates over tax policy has motivated extensive analysis of tax incidence in the United States. The best-known study of tax incidence in the United States is the periodic analyses of the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), as updated for recent years by the Urban Institute's Tax Policy Center (TPC). In this section, we review the lessons from its analyses.

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *The Incidence of Taxation: Real-World Complications*

While the three rules of tax incidence are clear, in reality, tax incidence can be a lot more complicated. In this box, we review two studies that illustrate those complications.

In the United States, excise taxes on goods such as gasoline, alcoholic beverages, and cigarettes vary widely across the states, and there are frequent changes within states over time in these taxes. This variation in taxation allows for quasi-experimental estimation of the impact of excise taxes on prices of the taxed goods. Analysts can compare the change in goods prices in the states raising their excise tax (the treatment group) relative to states not changing their excise tax (the control group), to measure the effect of each 1¢ rise in excise taxes on goods prices.

An excellent example is excise taxes on cigarettes. The excise tax on cigarettes varies widely across the U.S. states, from a low of 17¢ per pack in Missouri to a high of \$4.35 per pack in New York.

[Harding et al. \(2012\)](#) studied the impact of cigarette excise tax increases on cigarette prices over the 2006–2007 period. They made use of an innovative source of data for measuring prices: Neilson Homescan data. The Neilson company collects information on prices paid for many consumer products from a very large sample of individuals around the country, and the authors were able to obtain that detailed price information, including the prices paid for cigarettes. The authors do not just compare prices in high-tax versus low-tax states because this would be potentially biased by the fact that states may set their taxes as a function of voters' taste for smoking—tastes that also directly affect cigarette prices. So the fact that some Southern states have very low cigarette taxes and high smoking rates could reflect the causal effect of low taxes—or they could reflect a long-standing tradition of smoking in these tobacco-producing states, which leads politicians to keep cigarette taxes low.

To address this possible bias, Harding et al. used the quasi-experiment provided by tax changes in 12 states during their study period and studied how prices change when taxes are increased. Such tax increases are unlikely to be due to a sharp rise in the taste for smoking or other factors that drive pricing decisions. Thus, any changes in cigarette prices in those states, relative to similar states that did not raise taxes, should be due to the tax increase. The authors found that the vast majority of these tax increases, 85%, were passed forward to customers in the form of higher prices, suggesting fairly inelastic demand for cigarettes (consistent with the estimates discussed in [Chapter 6](#)).

Interestingly, however, they found that these price increases were not uniform throughout states that raise taxes; in particular, price increases were much lower near state borders. This is because customers in those areas can readily cross over to nearby low-tax states to buy cigarettes. Indeed, the authors showed a rise in cross-border shopping when taxes rose. As a result of this much more elastic demand, only 49% of tax increases were shifted to prices near state borders. More generally, the shifting of taxes to prices rose by 7.6% for each 1% increase in the distance to the state border. Thus, the average incidence of tax can mask considerable differences in underlying price elasticity and, therefore, the shifting of the tax increases to increases in prices.

Another complication to the rules of tax incidence can arise when there is differential tax evasion on different sides of the market. An example of this phenomenon is presented in [Kopczuk et al. \(2016\)](#). This paper studies the incidence of state diesel fuel taxes. An important feature of these taxes is that they are paid at different points in the supply chain in different states. In some states, the taxes are paid by retail outlets that sell diesel fuel. In other states, the taxes are paid by wholesalers who distribute diesel fuel to these retailers. But as we learned earlier, unless there are barriers to shifting tax increases to consumer prices, it shouldn't matter which supplier pays the tax—the incidence is determined by elasticities of supply and demand.

As Kopczuk et al. illustrated, however, this was no longer true once they recognized that retail outlets were more able to evade the tax (i.e., cheat the government) than were wholesale suppliers. This is because retail suppliers are more able to mislabel diesel fuel used for driving (which is subject to state taxes) as diesel fuel used for heating (which is not); such mislabeling is much harder at the wholesale level when fuel is being sold in bulk to retailers who sell both types of fuel. It is also because retailers are more able to simply underreport how much fuel was sold and, therefore, pay less in taxes compared to wholesale suppliers who are much more tightly monitored by the government and more likely to get caught if they underreport. If retail outlets can cheat and pay less tax, then there is less tax to be shifted to consumers, and prices will rise by less than for equivalent taxation of wholesalers.

The point at which taxes are paid changes over time and across states, so Kopczuk et al. were able to use a standard difference-in-difference estimation strategy to evaluate how the party paying the taxes impacted their pass-through to prices. The authors found that a higher percentage of the tax was passed through to increased prices when taxes were paid at the wholesale level. Because retailers cheated more—and, as a result, paid less tax—prices didn’t rise by as much when taxes were levied at that level. Thus, in the case of diesel fuel taxes, whether the tax was levied on the wholesaler or the retailer affected how much of the tax was passed on to the consumer.

Another complication to our models in the real world is that markets are imperfectly competitive, with firms earning profits that should be competed away in perfect competition. As noted in [Section 9.2](#), we do not have strong predictions for tax incidence in oligopolistic industries.

A paper by [Ganapati et al. \(2018\)](#) explores the incidence of electricity costs (and therefore energy taxes) in oligopolistic industries. Of course, electricity costs might vary for reasons that are correlated with firm outcomes. To address this point, the authors used a “shift-share” analysis. That is, different parts of the country and different industries use electricity generated by a very different mix of energy inputs: electricity generated in some areas rely more on coal, while others rely more on natural gas, and still others more on oil. These energy prices often move independently of each other. For example, oil prices may rise while coal prices do not (due to an international oil embargo or a war in the Middle East, for example). In such cases, areas that generate electricity from oil will see prices go up, while those that rely on coal will not—providing a treatment/control comparison for analyzing pass-through. The authors also looked at industries that rely on different mixes of energy inputs in their production processes to measure the incidence of energy costs across industries. Using this variation across both areas and industries, they found that only about 70% of the costs of energy increases were passed on to consumers; the remainder came from firms in the form of lower profit rates.

A final real-world complication is that formal markets may compete with informal or illegal markets, significantly increasing consumer price sensitivity. This complication is explored in a novel study of the taxation of recreational marijuana in Washington state by [Hansen et al. \(2017\)](#). They studied the impact of shifting from a tax on suppliers that was collected at each stage of the production process to a tax that was collected solely at retail sales. They arrived at two key findings. First, taxing each stage of the production process led to an increase in “vertical integration,” with firms combining (inefficiently) to avoid taxes. Therefore, when the tax was changed, some of the benefits went to producers as they moved to a more efficient form of production. Second, consumers of marijuana are very price elastic—much more so than for goods such as cigarettes and alcohol—perhaps due to the possibility of substituting out of the legal market. As a result, the authors estimated that less than half of the incidence of marijuana taxes fell on consumers.

## CBO/TPC Incidence Assumptions

The CBO and TPC analysis considers the incidence of the full set of taxes levied by the federal government. To do so, CBO/TPC must use the type of analysis we employed to guide their assumptions about the incidence of each type of taxation in the United States. Their key assumptions follow:

1. *Income taxes* are borne fully by the households that pay them.
2. *Payroll taxes* are borne fully by workers, regardless of whether these taxes are paid by the workers or by the firm.
3. *Excise taxes* are fully shifted to prices and so are borne by individuals in proportion to their consumption of the taxed item.
4. *Corporate taxes* are borne 20% by workers and 80% by the owners of capital; the latter is in proportion to each individual’s capital income.

These assumptions are generally consistent with both theory and empirical evidence. For example, as we show in [Chapter 21](#), the low response of the labor supply of primary earners in the United States to taxation (inelastic supply) means that taxes on labor will be borne by workers. There is also substantial evidence that excise taxes on goods such as tobacco and alcohol are shifted forward to the prices charged to consumers, as discussed in the Empirical Evidence box.

The most difficult assumption to assess is the incidence of the corporate tax. As we’ll discuss in [Chapter 24](#), it seems likely that at least some of the corporate tax is borne by consumers and workers rather than its full incidence being solely on capital owners. The

CBO/TPC traditionally assumed that the corporate tax was fully borne by the owners of capital, but more recently moved to the updated assumption noted above. Nevertheless, the available evidence is consistent with more than 20% of the burden being borne by workers. This finding suggests that the corporate tax is not as progressive as the CBO/TPC analysis indicates; this is because some of that tax is borne by lower-income workers (whereas the CBO/TPC assumes that the corporate tax is fully borne by higher-income owners of capital).

## Results of CBO/TPC Incidence Analysis

The results of this CBO/TPC analysis are shown in [Tables 19-1](#) and [19-2](#); data through 2006 come from the CBO, while consistent data for 2017 are provided by TPC. [Table 19-1](#) shows the computed average tax rates (taxes paid relative to total income) by income group for the years 1979, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2006, 2011, 2014, and 2017. We show the results for all households and for the lowest and highest quintile. The top panel in [Table 19-1](#) shows the average tax rates for all taxes combined; the remaining panels show the average tax rates by type of tax.

TABLE 19-1 Effective Tax Rates

	1979	1985	1990	1995	2000	2006	2011	2014	2017
Total effective tax rate									
All households	22.2%	20.9%	21.5%	22.6%	23.0%	20.7%	18.6%	19.2%	20.2%
Bottom quintile	8.0%	9.8%	8.9%	6.3%	6.4%	4.3%	1.1%	3.1%	3.3%
Top quintile	27.5%	24.0%	25.1%	27.8%	28.0%	25.8%	23.8%	25.1%	26.0%
Effective income tax rate									
All households	11.0%	10.2%	10.1%	10.2%	11.8%	9.1%	10.1%	9.2%	10.0%
Bottom quintile	0.0%	0.5%	-1.0%	-4.4%	-4.6%	-6.6%	-6.0%	-4.5%	-4.9%
Top quintile	15.7%	14.0%	14.4%	15.5%	17.5%	14.1%	15.3%	15.1%	15.8%
Effective payroll tax rate									
All households	6.9%	7.9%	8.4%	8.5%	7.9%	7.5%	5.3%	7.0%	6.9%
Bottom quintile	5.3%	6.6%	7.3%	7.6%	8.2%	8.5%	4.8%	6.6%	7.1%
Top quintile	5.4%	6.5%	6.9%	7.2%	6.3%	5.8%	4.1%	5.9%	5.8%
Effective corporate tax rate									
All households	3.4%	1.8%	2.2%	2.8%	2.4%	3.4%	2.5%	2.9%	3.1%
Bottom quintile	1.1%	0.6%	0.6%	0.7%	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	1.0%	1.1%
Top quintile	5.7%	2.8%	3.3%	4.4%	3.7%	5.4%	4.0%	4.0%	4.2%
Effective excise tax rate									
All households	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	0.9%	0.7%	0.7%	0.8%	0.7%
Bottom quintile	1.6%	2.2%	2.0%	2.4%	2.3%	1.9%	1.9%	2.1%	1.5%
Top quintile	0.7%	0.7%	0.6%	0.7%	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%

Data from: [Congressional Budget Office \(2007b\)](#) and [Tax Policy Center \(2018b\)](#).

TABLE 19-2 Top and Bottom Quintile's Share of Income and Tax Liabilities

	1979	1985	1990	1995	2000	2006	2012	2013	2014	2017
Top quintile										
Share of income	45.5%	48.6%	49.5%	50.2%	54.8%	55.7%	56.2%	54.5%	51.4%	52.6%
Share of tax liabilities	56.4%	55.8%	57.9%	61.9%	66.6%	69.3%	70.0%	68.0%	67.3%	67.6%
Bottom quintile										
Share of income	4.8%	4.6%	4.6%	4.0%	3.9%	3.9%	3.6%	3.6%	4.5%	4.0%
Share of tax liabilities	2.1%	2.3%	1.9%	1.3%	1.1%	0.8%	0.3%	0.3%	0.7%	0.6%

Top 1%										
Share of income	9.3%	11.5%	12.1%	12.5%	17.8%	18.8%	18.5%	17.8%	17.1%	15.5%
Share of tax liabilities	15.4%	14.8%	16.2%	20.1%	25.5%	28.3%	25.2%	27.0%	29.8%	25.4%

Data from: [Congressional Budget Office \(2007c\)](#) and [Tax Policy Center \(2018c\)](#).

This table shows the share of income and tax liabilities accruing to the top and bottom income quintiles over time.

Several interesting conclusions emerge:

1. The total average tax rate, combining all taxes across all households, declined from 22.2% in 1979 to 20.9% in 1985, then climbed to 23% in 2000, before falling until 2011, where it hit 18.6%. By 2017, the total average tax rate had risen again to 20.2%.
2. The total average tax rate on the bottom quintile rose from 8 to 9.8% from 1979 to 1985 and then fell throughout the rest of the period, reaching 4.3% by 2006 and falling sharply in the recession to only 1.1%. Since then, it has increased to 3.3% by 2017.
3. The average tax rate on the top quintile fell from 27.5% in 1979 to 24% in 1985, rose to 28% by 2000, and then fell back to 23.8% by 2011 before rising again in 2017 to 26%.
4. The bottom quintile pays much more in payroll taxes than in income taxes, and this disparity has been growing over time. In 1979, the bottom quintile had an average income tax rate of zero but an average payroll tax rate of 5.3%; by 2006, the average income tax was -6.6% (on net, the income tax system paid out more to lower-income individuals through tax credits, primarily the Earned Income Tax Credit, than it collected through tax payments), but the average payroll tax rate had risen to 8.5%. The payroll tax rate fell again in 2011 due both to the recession and to the temporary payroll tax holiday, but increased in 2017 to 7.1%. Indeed, more than two-thirds of all households paid more in payroll taxes than in income taxes in 2016.<sup>8</sup>
5. Average corporate tax rates are small relative to income and payroll tax rates and have fallen at both the top and bottom of the income distribution since 1979. The recent revised assumptions that allow some of the burden of the corporate tax to fall on workers has doubled the share borne by the bottom quintile in the most recent analysis.
6. Average excise tax rates are also small and have fallen for both the top and bottom of the income distribution, though they have fallen more steeply at the top. (This is due to a much larger decline in consumption of taxed goods, such as cigarettes, by higher-income groups than by lower-income groups.)<sup>9</sup>

The general conclusion from [Table 19-1](#) is that the United States has a fairly progressive tax system overall, although some elements (the income tax) are progressive while others (the payroll tax) are not. [Table 19-2](#) presents the share of tax liabilities paid by the top and bottom quintiles over time, and it compares this to their share of the income earned in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The bottom quintile of taxpayers has always paid a very small share of taxes, and that share has fallen (from 2.1% of taxes paid to 0.7% of taxes paid) along with its share of national income (which has fallen from 4.8% of national income to 4% of national income). The top quintile of taxpayers has always paid the majority of taxes, and that share has risen (from 56.4% of taxes paid to 67.6% of taxes paid) along with its share of national income (from 45.5% of national income to 52.6% of national income). Today, the top quintile earns

more than half of all the income earned in the United States, and pays more than two-thirds of the taxes paid, under the CBO's incidence assumptions.

Of particular interest is the tax burden on the very richest members of society, which is also shown in [Table 19-2](#). The top 1% of the income distribution now controls 15.5% of pre-tax income, or almost one in every \$5 of income, a doubling since 1979. But the tax burden on this group has risen over time as well, increasing by almost two thirds since 1979.

## Current Versus Lifetime Income Incidence

A final important distinction that must be drawn in incidence analysis is between [current tax incidence](#) and [lifetime tax incidence](#). The CBO analysis just presented measures individual incomes on an annual basis. This approach can be misleading given the extensive mobility across income classes observed in the United States. Recent estimates show that between 25 and 40% of Americans change income quintiles within a one-year period, and roughly 56% change within a decade.<sup>11</sup>

**current tax incidence**

The incidence of a tax in relation to an individual's current resources.

**lifetime tax incidence**

The incidence of a tax in relation to an individual's lifetime resources.

Closer to home, suppose that we were to assess the incidence of a tax on college textbooks. College students are typically living independently and would be measured as having fairly low incomes. Thus, such a tax would be viewed as highly regressive on an annual or current basis. Yet most of the students reading this book certainly hope that their incomes will be much higher later on in life as a result of their valuable college education. Indeed, the lifetime incomes of college graduates are, on average, more than twice as high as the lifetime incomes of those who do not attend college. Thus, on a lifetime basis, taxes on college textbooks are *progressive* because they tax those who earn high incomes on a lifetime basis.

The importance of this point is illustrated by [Poterba \(1989\)](#), who examined the incidence of alcohol, gasoline, and tobacco taxes. Poterba first divided people in 1984 by quintiles of income and observed that the share of income spent on gasoline and alcohol of the lowest quintile was five times the share of the highest quintile. The share of tobacco of the bottom quintile was nine times the share of the top quintile. Thus, it seems that taxes on such goods would be highly regressive.

Poterba then divided people by quintiles of *consumption*, which may be a better measure of lifetime resources. For example, low-income college students who know they will someday be rich will reflect that in their spending by borrowing from parents; similarly, rich elderly people who currently have low income but high savings will also have high consumption. Relating taxes paid to consumption rather than to current income, Poterba found that the tax burden is still regressive but much less so. In fact, the lowest four quintiles spend roughly the same share of their total expenditures on gasoline and alcohol, which is less than twice the highest quintile's share. For tobacco, the lowest quintile's share of total expenditures is only three times the share of the highest quintile.

## 19.5 Conclusion

Debates over tax incidence have been central to tax policy for decades. The “fairness” of any tax reform is one of the primary considerations in policy makers’ positions on tax policy. Therefore, it is crucial for public finance economists to have a deep understanding of who really bears the burden of taxation so that we can best inform these distributional debates over the fairness of a proposed or existing tax. The techniques developed in this chapter can provide that deep understanding and allow you to think more carefully through the distributional implications of any tax change.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Tax incidence is the study of the distribution of tax burdens across economic agents, and it takes into account not only who pays the tax to the government but also the effects of the tax on market prices.
- Tax incidence does not depend on who pays the taxes to the government or on whether taxes are levied on suppliers or demanders. In all cases, elastic parties avoid taxes and inelastic parties bear them.
- The incidence of taxes on factor markets is analyzed in the same way as taxes in goods markets, although impediments to price adjustment such as minimum wages can complicate the analysis. Likewise, the analysis of tax incidence in imperfectly competitive markets is similar to the analysis in competitive markets.
- General equilibrium tax incidence is a game of “follow the tax burden” from goods markets to their associated input markets and from one output market to another.
- Taxes are fairly progressive overall in the United States, although the overall progressivity of taxation is subject to key assumptions about tax incidence.
- Tax incidence can be based on current or lifetime income, and the results can differ greatly for some types of taxes.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Why do most analysts assume that payroll taxes in the United States are borne by workers rather than by employers?

2. The demand for rutabagas is  $Q = 2,000 - 300P$  and the supply of rutabagas is  $Q = -100 + 100P$ . Who bears the *statutory* incidence of a \$2 per unit tax on the sale of rutabagas? Who bears the *economic* incidence of this tax?

3. The demand for rutabagas is still  $Q = 2,000 - 300P$  and the supply is still  $Q = -100 + 100P$ , as in Question 2. Governor Jackson decides that instead of imposing the \$2 sales tax described in Question 2, the government will instead force stores to pay the tax directly. What will happen to the “sticker price” on rutabagas? How will the size of the consumer tax burden change?

4. The demand for football tickets is  $Q = 360 - 10P$  and the supply of football tickets is  $Q = 20P$ . Calculate the gross price paid by consumers after a per-ticket tax of \$4. Calculate the after-tax price received by ticket sellers.

5. The government is considering imposing taxes on the sellers of certain classes of products. The first tax they are considering is a tax on 2% milk. The second is a tax on all dairy products. The third is a tax on all food products. Which of these three taxes would you expect to have the largest impact on the sticker prices of the taxed products?

6. To finance a new health insurance program, the government of Millonia imposes a new \$2-per-hour payroll tax to be paid by employers.

1. What do you expect to happen to wages and the size of the workforce?
2. How will this answer change in markets where labor is inelastically demanded?

7. You have determined that producers, rather than consumers, will bear the lion’s share of the burden associated with a new tax. How does the elasticity of labor supply influence whether this tax burden will, in turn, be borne more by workers or more by property owners?

8. Why can some taxes that appear to be regressive in terms of current income be thought of as progressive from a lifetime tax incidence perspective?

9. Consider a labor market in which workers are paid the minimum wage. When will it matter for tax incidence whether a payroll tax is imposed on workers or on employers?

10. Consider the changes over time in the U.S. effective tax rates presented in [Table 19-1](#). How did the total effective tax burden change for the lowest and highest deciles of the population between 1979 and 2011? How did the composition of this burden across different types of taxes change over this period?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. The elasticity of demand for maracas is  $-2.0$  and the elasticity of supply is  $3.0$ . How much will the price of maracas change with a per-unit tax of \$2? Who bears the larger burden of the tax, consumers or producers?
12. The government of Byngia has introduced a new tax on tickets for airline travel. Byngia has two types of travelers, business travelers and leisure travelers. Business travelers in Byngia have an elasticity of demand of  $-1.2$ , while Byngian leisure travelers have an elasticity of  $-3.0$ . Airlines can price-discriminate among these groups; that is, they can charge different prices to the different types of fliers in the market. Which type of traveler will bear a larger fraction of the burden of the new tax on their tickets? Explain.
13. Massive Products, Inc., is a monopolist whose cost of production is given by  $10Q + 2Q^2$  (so its marginal cost curve—equivalently, its inverse supply curve—is given by  $10 + 4Q$ ). Demand for Massive Products' massive products is  $Q = 200 - P$ .
  1. What price will the monopolist charge, and what profits will the monopolist earn? What will consumer surplus be?
  2. How will the monopolist's price and profits change if a tax of \$15 per unit is imposed on the buyers of the product?
  3. What is the deadweight burden of the tax?
14. Why did [Harding et al. \(2012\)](#), discussed in the text, use changes in state-level tax rates on cigarettes rather than across-state differences in tax rates on cigarettes in their study of the impact of cigarette taxes on cigarette prices? Based on their findings, would you expect consumers, on average, to bear a larger incidence of a new tax in a small state with many neighboring states—like Massachusetts—or in a large state like Texas? Explain.
15. The city of Malaise is considering a 10% tax on the revenues of all hotels/motels inside the city limits. Although not completely different from hotels and motels in the nearby suburbs, the ones in Malaise have a distinct advantage in their proximity to the interesting sights and convention centers. So individuals will pay some premium to stay in Malaise rather than to stay nearby.

Furthermore, all land is used equally well by hotels/motels and other forms of business; any Malaise land not taken by a hotel/motel is readily absorbed by other forms of business. Mayor Maladroit calls you in to advise him on the incidence of such a tax. He is particularly concerned with who will bear this tax in the short run (one month) and the long run (five years).

1. What is the incidence of the tax in the short run? Answer intuitively, and use a diagram to illustrate.
2. What is the long-run incidence? Once again, use a diagram to illustrate.
3. How would your analysis in part (b) change if hotels/motels in the suburbs were perfect substitutes for those in Malaise? What would happen to tax revenues?

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 19 The Mathematics of Tax Incidence



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In this appendix, we develop the mathematical formulas that lie behind the incidence discussion in [Chapter 19](#). We then use them to examine various aspects of tax incidence in a monopoly market.

## Tax Incidence Formulas

To analyze tax incidence, we need to measure how imposing a tax changes the price in a market. Consider first the case of a tax that is *paid by consumers* so that the total price change to consumers is

$$\text{total price change} = \Delta P + \tau$$

where  $\Delta P$  is the change in market price (presumably negative), and  $\tau$  is the tax payment. The price change to producers is just  $\Delta P$ , the reduction in price.

We can determine the effect of tax on price in three steps:

## Step 1:

Start with the definitions of elasticity of demand and supply:

$$\text{elasticity of demand} = \eta_d = \Delta Q / (\Delta P + \tau) \times (P/Q)$$

$$\text{elasticity of supply} = \eta_s = \Delta Q / \Delta P \times (P/Q)$$

## Step 2:

Rearrange terms so that the two expressions can be set equal to each other:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta Q/Q &= \eta_d \times (\Delta P + \tau)/P \\ &= \eta_s \times \Delta P/P\end{aligned}$$

## Step 3:

Set these expressions equal to each other, and solve for the change in price as a function of the tax (which is what we need to know to do incidence analysis):

$$\Delta P = [\eta_d / (\eta_s - \eta_d)] \times \tau$$

This equation formalizes our intuition on inelastic and elastic factors. For example, if demand is inelastic ( $\eta_d = 0$ ), then  $\Delta P = 0$ . The price does not change, so since the consumer is sending the check to the government, he bears the full tax. Alternatively, if demand is perfectly elastic ( $\eta_d = \infty$ ), then  $\Delta P = -\tau$ . The price falls by the full amount of the tax, offsetting the consumer tax payment so that the consumer has no remaining tax burden.

Similarly, if we redo the exercise for a tax paid by producers, we obtain

$$\Delta P = [\eta_s / (\eta_s - \eta_d)] \times \tau$$

# Tax Incidence in a Monopoly

We can put these mathematical insights to work to explore the implications of tax incidence in a monopoly. Suppose that a monopoly firm has a cost function of

$$C = 12 + q^2$$

Its marginal cost, the increment to cost from one additional unit of production, is therefore  $2q$  (the derivative of the cost function with respect to quantity).

Suppose further that the monopolist faces a demand function of

$$p = 24 - q$$

Given the cost and demand functions, we can determine the monopolist's revenue and marginal revenue:

$$\text{revenues} = p \times q = (24 - q) \times q = 24q - q^2$$

$$\text{marginal revenues} = \text{derivative of revenues with respect to } q = 24 - 2q$$

Marginal revenues are set equal to marginal costs to maximize profits:

$$24 - 2q = 2q$$

Solving for  $q$ , we find that  $q = 6$ ; marginal revenues equal marginal costs (and profits are maximized) by selling 6 units. Once the monopolist has determined the quantity at which profits are maximized, the price per unit is determined by the demand curve  $p = 24 - 6 = 18$ . Initially, then, the monopolist produces 6 units and sells them for \$18 each.

Now suppose that the government levies a tax on the monopolist of \$4 per unit sold. The cost function becomes  $12 + q^2 + 4q$ , and marginal costs are  $2q + 4$ . Re-solving for the profit-maximizing quantity, we obtain  $q = 5$ . As before, once the monopolist sets the quantity, the price is determined by the demand curve,  $p = 24 - q = 19$ . After the tax is imposed, the monopolist therefore produces 5 units at a price of \$19. The monopolist bears three-quarters of this tax; the price goes up by only \$1, but the monopolist pays \$4 in tax.

How would this outcome change if the government levies the tax on consumers of this monopoly product? After tax, the demand function becomes  $p = 24 - q - 4 = 20 - q$ . Revenues are therefore  $(20 - q) \times q = 20q - q^2$ . Differentiating with respect to  $q$ , we obtain a marginal revenue function of  $20 - 2q$ . Re-solving for the profit-maximizing quantity, we once again find that  $q = 5$ . On the new demand curve, this implies a price of \$15 to consumers and an after-tax cost to consumers of \$19 (because they pay the \$4 tax). So, once again, consumers bear only \$1 of the tax (since price has decreased from \$18 to \$15 to offset the \$4 tax payment), and the monopolist bears \$3 (as the price has decreased). This analysis

confirms our earlier finding that the side of the market on which the tax is imposed is irrelevant to the determination of which side bears the burden of the tax.

# CHAPTER 20 Tax Inefficiencies and Their Implications for Optimal Taxation



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [20.1 Taxation and Economic Efficiency](#)
- [20.2 Optimal Commodity Taxation](#)
- [20.3 Optimal Income Taxes](#)
- [20.4 Tax-Benefit Linkages and the Financing of Social Insurance Programs](#)
- [20.5 Conclusion](#)
- [APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 20](#)
  - [The Mathematics of Optimal Taxation](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- What determines the efficiency consequences of taxation?
- How should governments set taxes across goods?
- How should governments set taxes on different income groups?

Arnold Harberger, one of the pioneers of the general equilibrium tax incidence model we discussed in [Chapter 19](#), once wrote of his experience in Indonesia, where cars are taxed more heavily than motorcycles. This tax difference provided a great incentive to make motorcycles more carlike. As Harberger reports, “Three-wheel cycles were converted, by artful additions, into virtual buses, or at least taxis. Sometimes a single bench was added, with the passenger looking backward. Other times the cycle was stretched at the back, with two benches going down each side, and maybe even with an extra little running board cutting laterally across the rear (where the rear bumper of the car would be). I must say I was truly astounded when I saw my first eight-passenger motorcycle.”<sup>1</sup>

This example highlights a simple fact: markets do not take taxes lying down. If there is some action that market participants can undertake to minimize the burden of taxation, they will do so. As long as there are substitutes for the consumption of any taxed good, some consumers will shift to those substitutes to avoid the tax, and as long as there are alternatives to the production of taxed goods, some producers will shift into producing those alternatives.

In this chapter, we learn how attempts to minimize tax burdens have *efficiency costs* for society. In the absence of market failures, social efficiency is maximized at the competitive equilibrium without government intervention. When the government taxes market participants, they change their behavior to avoid the tax and move the market away from the competitive equilibrium, thereby reducing social efficiency. Put simply, it is costly for society to transport people in dangerous eight-passenger motorcycles instead of cars.

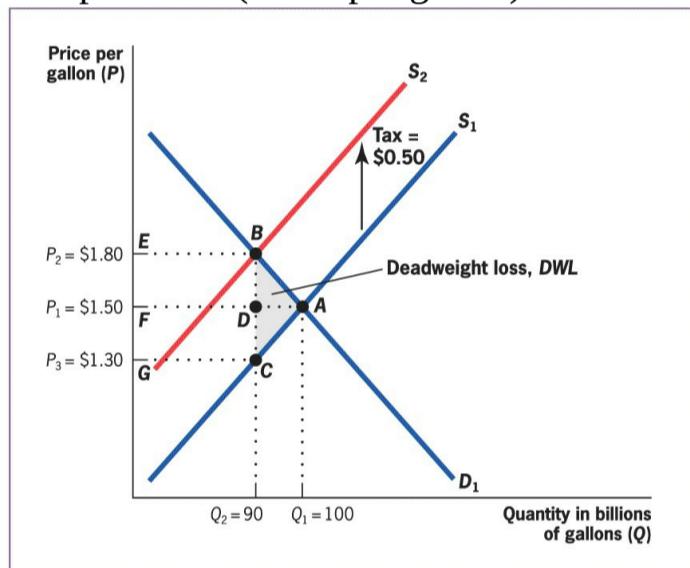
The remainder of the chapter uses these general lessons to explore the determination of the optimal taxation of commodities (goods such as cereal and cars) and income. We show how the tools of economic theory can be used to describe the ideal tax system across goods or people and discuss how economists use empirical evidence to advise policy makers on constructing more efficient tax systems in the real world.

## 20.1 Taxation and Economic Efficiency

As we move from discussing the effects of taxation on equity (how the economic pie is distributed among market participants, the topic of [Chapter 19](#)) to discussing the effects of taxation on efficiency (how taxes affect the size of the economic pie), we shift our focus from the effect of taxes on market *prices* to their effect on market *quantities*. The discussion of tax incidence was about who bore the burden of taxation through tax payments and price changes. This discussion of tax efficiency is about the amount of social efficiency sacrificed by society when trades are impeded by the presence of taxation; the social efficiency effects of taxation are determined by the effect of taxes on quantities.

### Graphical Approach

For modeling the efficiency consequences of taxation, it is useful to start with a graphical approach. [Figure 20-1](#) shows the impact of a 50¢ per gallon tax levied on producers of gasoline. Before the tax is imposed, the demand curve for gasoline is  $D_1$ , the supply curve is  $S_1$ , and the market is initially in equilibrium where they intersect at point A, with quantity  $Q_1$  (100 billion gallons) and price  $P_1$  (\$1.50 per gallon).



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■ FIGURE 20-1

**Deadweight Loss of a Tax** • When a tax is imposed, the supply curve shifts from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , and the equilibrium quantity in the market falls from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ , creating a deadweight loss triangle  $BAC$ . The *DWL* arises because there are trades ( $Q_1 - Q_2$ ) for which social marginal benefits (demand curve) exceed social marginal costs (supply curve) that are not made.

Recall from [Chapter 2](#) that, in a perfectly competitive market, the demand curve measures the social marginal benefit of gasoline consumption, and the supply curve measures the social marginal cost of gasoline production. At the competitive market equilibrium (point A), all gallons of gasoline that have a social marginal benefit greater than their social marginal cost are produced and consumed. The 100 billionth gallon ( $Q_1$ ) has both a social marginal benefit and social marginal cost of \$1.50, so this is the competitive market equilibrium. All previous units sold have a social marginal cost below \$1.50 (because they are farther down on the supply curve) and a social marginal benefit above \$1.50 (because they are higher up on the demand curve). At equilibrium, the sum of consumer surplus and producer surplus is at its

maximum.

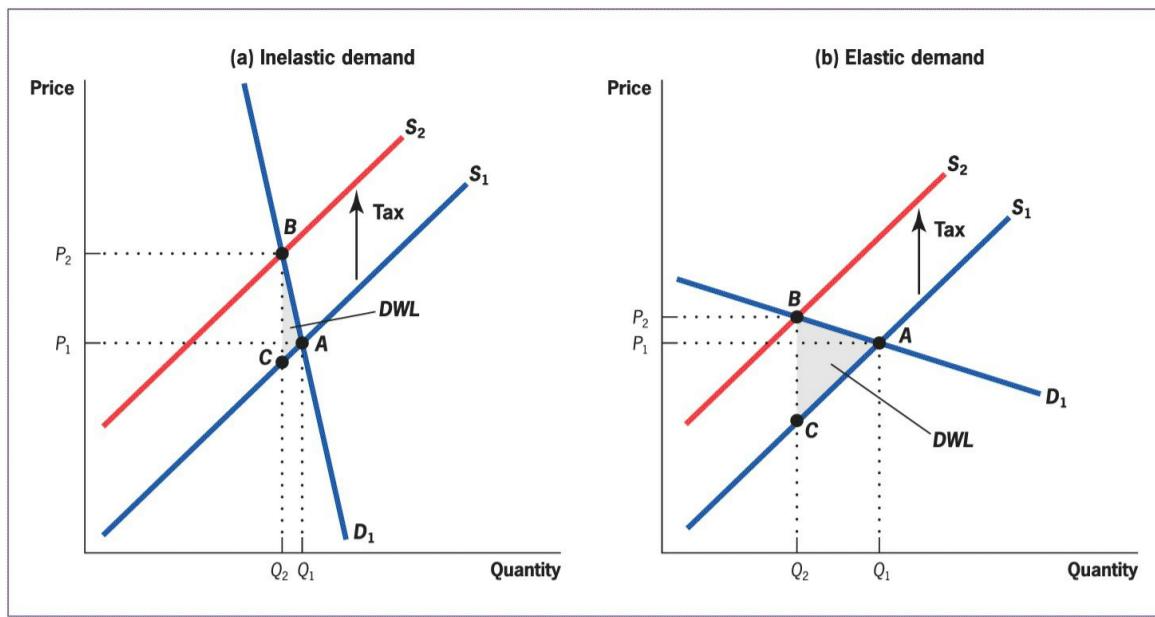
The 50¢ tax acts like an increase in producers' costs, causing them to decrease the quantity supplied at each price, which shifts the supply curve in from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ . The new equilibrium is at point  $B$ ; the quantity of gasoline sold has fallen from  $Q_1$  (100 billion gallons) to  $Q_2$  (90 billion gallons), and the price has risen from  $P_1$  (\$1.50) to  $P_2$  (\$1.80). The reduction in sales to a level below the competitive equilibrium quantity  $Q_1$  means that, because of the tax, trades that would be beneficial to both producers and consumers of gasoline (trades on which there is positive consumer and producer surplus) are not being made. The units between 90 billion and 100 billion (between  $Q_2$  and  $Q_1$ ) are units for which the social marginal benefit of consumption exceeds the social marginal cost of production: they are valued at more than \$1.50 by consumers and cost less than \$1.50 to produce (the pre-tax demand curve is above the pre-tax supply curve). Yet these units are not being produced and consumed once the tax is in place.

This reduction in quantity creates a *deadweight loss* (DWL) of the area  $BAC$ . Because the competitive equilibrium quantity maximizes social efficiency, the reduction in quantity below  $Q_1$  causes social efficiency to fall. Because consumers value the units between  $Q_2$  and  $Q_1$  above their price of \$1.50, they would have purchased them. After the tax is levied, they forgo these purchases, and consumer surplus falls by the trapezoid  $EBAF$ . Because producers could make profits on the forgone sales of the units between  $Q_2$  and  $Q_1$ , producer surplus falls by the trapezoid  $FACG$ . Much of this reduced social surplus is transferred to the government in the form of higher tax revenues (the rectangle  $EBCG$ ), but some of it (triangle  $BAC$ ) disappears because many surplus-producing trades are not made. Deadweight loss therefore measures the inefficiency of taxation, the amount of consumer and producer surplus society loses by imposing a tax—that is, surplus that is lost and not recaptured in the form of tax revenues. Deadweight loss is determined by changes in quantities when a tax is imposed because this change captures the number of socially efficient trades that are not being made.

From the second rule of tax incidence, it should be clear that the outcome of this efficiency analysis would be the same if the tax were imposed on consumers instead of producers. In that case, market prices would fall (to \$1.30 per gallon) instead of rising (to \$1.80 per gallon), but the change in quantity would be the same. The efficiency effects of a tax are determined by the change in quantity, so this would not affect the computation of deadweight loss.

## Elasticities Determine Tax Inefficiency

Just as the price elasticities of supply and demand determine the distribution of the tax burden among market participants, they also determine the inefficiency of taxation: as demand and supply elasticities rise, the deadweight loss of taxation grows. This lesson is illustrated in [Figure 20-2](#) for a tax on producers in two different markets. In panel (a), demand is relatively inelastic. A tax on producers shifts the supply curve upward from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ . This leads to a large rise in market prices from  $P_1$  to  $P_2$  and a relatively small reduction in market quantity from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ . Deadweight loss is determined by the reduction in socially efficient trades, so the deadweight loss in this case (area  $BAC$ ) is small. If the government were to tax insulin, for example, there would be very little effect on the quantity of insulin demanded, and therefore little deadweight loss.



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■ FIGURE 20-2

**Deadweight Loss Rises with Elasticities** • The deadweight loss of a given tax is smaller when the demand curve is less elastic, as in panel (a), than when it is more elastic, as in panel (b).

In panel (b), demand is more elastic. Thus, when the tax on suppliers shifts the supply curve from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , there is a small rise in market prices from  $P_1$  to  $P_2$ , but a relatively large reduction in market quantity from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ . As a result, the deadweight loss triangle ( $BAC$ ) is much larger because many socially efficient trades (where the pre-tax demand is above the pre-tax supply) are not being made. Suppose, for example, that the government levied a tax on a particular fast-food restaurant, McGruber's. This tax would cause a large reduction in demand for McGruber's meals because individuals would shift their consumption to close substitutes (like Gruber King). This change is inefficient, however, because the fact that individuals were eating at McGruber's before the tax indicates that McGruber's meals are their preferred choice. The large deadweight loss occurs because many individuals move away from their preferred choice in response to the tax.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *The Window Tax*<sup>2</sup>

Most of the empirical applications we review in this book involve fairly sophisticated analyses of large data sets. But sometimes a relatively straightforward analysis of a smaller amount of data can make a compelling point. This is illustrated nicely by the analysis of the Window Tax in the United Kingdom in [Oates and Schwab \(2015\)](#).

In 1696, English King William III needed money to finance an ongoing war with France. To raise this revenue, the king imposed a new tax based on the number of windows in a home.<sup>3</sup> The idea was not to punish people for having a lot of windows per se, but rather to use the number of windows as an indicator of a home's value: more valuable homes would have more windows and, therefore, be taxed more highly.

The problem with this approach was that individuals could minimize their tax by boarding up or otherwise removing windows. This rendered the tax a less efficient measure of home value and created a deadweight loss by making it less pleasant (and therefore of less value to residents) to live in these homes.

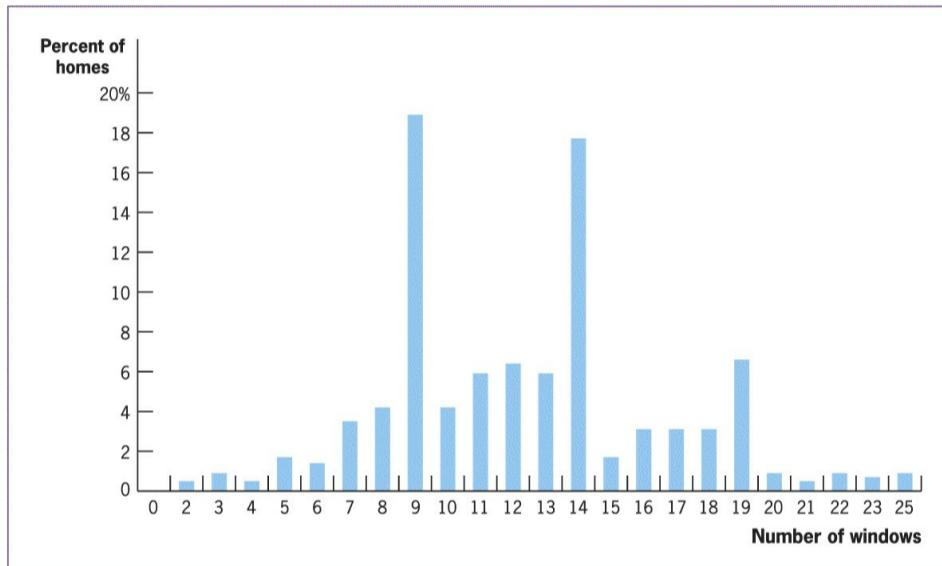
Boarding up and removing windows resulted not only in a reduction in sunlight but, more importantly, a reduction in ventilation. A series of studies by physicians found that lack of proper ventilation led to the propagation of diseases such as dysentery, gangrene, and typhus. Indeed a typhus epidemic in Carlisle in 1781 was traced to a house inhabited by six poor families where: "In order to reduce the window tax, every window . . . was built up, and all source of ventilation was thus removed. The smell in this house was overpowering, and offensive to an unbearable extent. There is no evidence that the fever was imported into this house, but it was propagated from it to other parts of town, and 52 inhabitants were killed" ([Oates and Schwab, 2015](#)).

This nonscientific observation assumed a causal relationship between the numbers of boarded-up windows and the size of the window tax. But it is possible that the windows in houses of this time were boarded up for other reasons that had nothing

to do with the window tax. Oates and Schwab presented an elegant and straightforward test for whether this was the case: they looked at whether the number of windows responded to “notches” in the tax schedule. From 1747 to 1757, the tax was structured as follows: there was no tax if the house had fewer than 10 windows, a tax of 6 pence per window for 10 to 14 windows; a tax of 9 pence per window if there were 15 to 19 windows; and a tax of 1 shilling (12 pence) per window for more than 20 windows or more. Thus, the marginal tax rate jumped enormously upon building the 10th, 15th, or 20th window. Consider a building with 9 windows. If the owners adds a 10th window, they go from paying no tax to paying 60 pence (6 pence for each of 10 windows). Thus, the marginal rate of the 10th window is 60 pence. Adding an 11th, 12th, 13th, or 14th window would raise the tax bill by 6 pence per window (a marginal rate of only 6 pence per window). Adding a 15th window, however, would mean moving from paying  $(6 \text{ pence} \times 14 \text{ windows}) = 84$  pence tax to  $(9 \text{ pence} \times 15 \text{ windows}) = 135$  pence, a marginal tax of 51 pence, or more than eight times the 6 pence marginal tax rate on the 11th to 14th windows.

At the same time, there is no reason to think that the utility to families of a 10th window is appreciably different than the utility of a 9th or 11th window or that the utility of a 15th window is very different than the utility of a 14th or 16th window. Therefore, one test for whether this tax is affecting behavior is to ask whether there are a disproportionate number of households with 9, 14, or 19 windows, the numbers of windows just before the tax increases. There is no reason for this to be the case other than trying to minimize taxes.

To test this point, Oates and Schwab actually went back to old British tax records to collect data on the number of windows in almost 500 homes. This is a much smaller number of data points than is used by the other empirical applications in this text. But when the test is straightforward and the effects are large, huge data are not necessarily needed. This was indeed the case, as shown in [Figure 20-3](#). This figure shows the distribution of the number of windows across homes in their sample. There are obvious spikes at 9, 14 and 19 windows, exactly what we would predict from the effects of this tax. For example, about 4% of homes had 8 windows or 10 windows—but 19% had 9 windows!



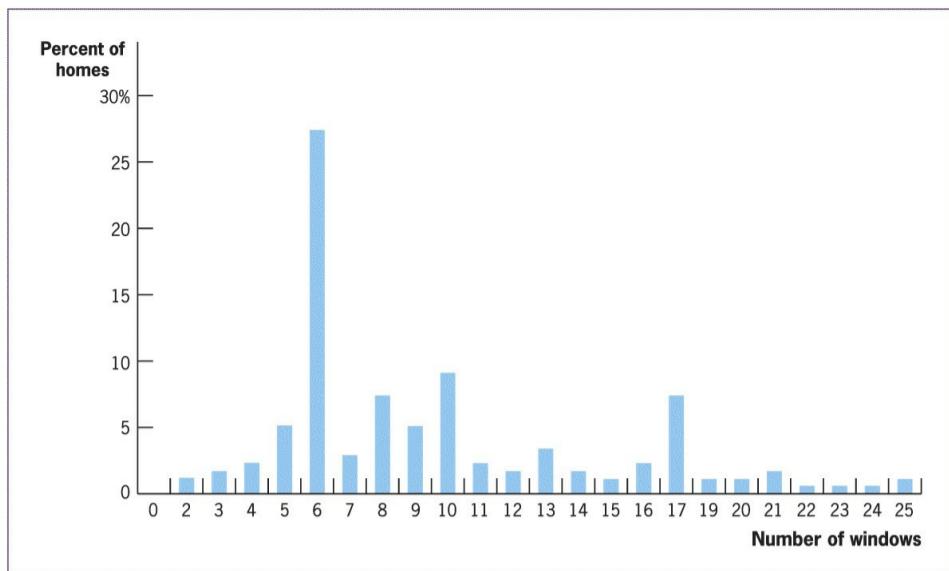
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### FIGURE 20-3

Effects of the Window Tax, 1747–1757 • It was most common for a house to have 9, 14, or 19 windows, at 19%, 17.7%, and 6.5% of total houses, respectively. The per pane tax increased at 10, 15, and 20 windows.

Data from: [Oates and Schwab \(2015\)](#).

If we wanted to be picky, we could argue that perhaps there was some British custom or some other reason for having 9, 14, or 19 windows in a house, a custom that drove what we see in the [Figure 20-3](#). But Oates and Schwab address this point by using the fact that in 1761, the government added a provision that houses with 8 or 9 windows would pay 1 shilling per window. This means that, after 1761, there was suddenly an incentive to keep the number of windows to 7 or fewer. And that is exactly what happened, as shown in [Figure 20-4](#). In data from 1761 to 1765, the authors found that 27% of houses had 7 windows, while only 5% had 6 windows and 3% had 8 windows. This was a ninefold increase from the 3% of buildings with 7 windows from just a few years earlier as shown in [Figure 20-3](#). Clearly, this was a response to the tax.



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■ FIGURE 20-4

Effects of the Window Tax, 1761–1765 • The new tax on houses with 8 or 9 windows resulted in a strong preference for 7 windows.

Data from: [Oates and Schwab \(2015\)](#).

The inefficiency of this tax and the consequences of tax avoidance were eventually recognized by the British government, and the tax was repealed in 1851.

As the insulin and McGruber's examples show, the *inefficiency of any tax is determined by the extent to which consumers and producers change their behavior to avoid the tax; deadweight loss is caused by individuals and firms making inefficient consumption and production choices to avoid taxation*. The competitive equilibrium quantity maximizes social surplus. Any change in quantity from the equilibrium point leads to inefficiency because trades that have a benefit larger than their cost are not made. Inefficiency is therefore proportional to the change in quantity induced by the tax. For insulin, there is little change in quantity induced by the tax, so there is little inefficiency. The tax on McGruber's fast-food restaurant induces a large change in quantity, so there is substantial inefficiency. The more elastic the demand or supply of a good is, the larger the change in quantity induced by the tax, and the larger the inefficiency of the tax.



## APPLICATION

### Tax Avoidance in Practice

The legendary economist John Maynard Keynes once remarked, “The avoidance of taxes is the only pursuit that still carries any reward.” His comment appears to have been taken to heart by many individuals whose elastic behavior allows them to avoid taxes. Some examples:

- Centuries ago, when the Papal State dominated Tuscany, these rulers imposed an extremely high tax on salt. As a form of protest, Tuscan bakers began to make their bread without salt. Gradually, the taste for bread made entirely without salt became widespread, and to this day, Tuscan bread is saltless.<sup>4</sup>
- An Englishman visiting Cyprus in the early 1980s asked a tour guide why so many of

the houses seemed to have steel reinforcement bars jutting out from their top floors. The guide informed him that Cyprus had a building tax that applied only to finished structures. Owners of those houses could thus claim that they were still in the process of finishing the roof. The process, of course, never ended.<sup>5</sup>

- The Thai government levies a tax on external signs placed in front of businesses. The tax rate depends on whether the sign is completely in Thai (low), in Thai and English (medium), or completely in English (very high). A walk around Bangkok thus reveals many businesses hanging English signs with a small amount of Thai writing in the upper-right corner. Some businesses manage to avoid the tax entirely by printing the message on curtains that are hung in the front window, rendering the sign “internal” and thus tax-exempt.<sup>6</sup>
- Ireland’s artists and musicians are exempt from paying tax on income from sales of their work. While originally intended to ease the financial stress of struggling artists, the exemption also helped established high-earners boost their profits. However, in 2006, Ireland capped the exemption at 250,000 EUR. At the time, only seven artists claiming the tax exemption made over 1 million EUR per year. Among them was the Irish band U2, which grossed over 220 million EUR from a worldwide tour the previous year. In response to the cap, U2 moved most of their business operations to the Netherlands, where they are only required to pay tax on what they earn in the Netherlands—likely a small portion of their earnings. In 2011, Ireland reduced the cap to 40,000 EUR, but raised it to 50,000 EUR in 2015.<sup>7</sup> ■

## Determinants of Deadweight Loss

The appendix to this chapter mathematically derives the formula for deadweight loss as a function of the elasticities of supply and demand and the size of the tax. Here, we show that the formula for *DWL* is

$$DWL = -\frac{\eta_s \eta_d}{2(\eta_s - \eta_d)} \times \tau^2 \times \frac{Q}{P}$$

where  $\eta_d$  is the elasticity of demand,  $\eta_s$  is the elasticity of supply, and  $\tau$  is the tax rate. From this equation, we learn two important lessons. First, deadweight loss rises with the elasticities of demand and supply: the more opportunities market participants have to consume or produce substitutes (the more elastic is demand or supply), the greater the inefficiency they will create by substituting.

As we discuss in the appendix, the appropriate elasticities to use for this calculation are ones that reflect substitution effects only, not income effects (called the *compensated* elasticity). This is because any government revenue raising has income effects as income is transferred from individuals to the government, so what determines the inefficiency of a particular tax is how much the tax distorts behavior due to substitution effects. In practice, however, it is typically difficult to distinguish the substitution and income effects of a price change, so we generally rely on the total (or *uncompensated*) elasticity when computing deadweight loss. We use the overall response of quantity to price, not the theoretically appropriate response that reflects substitution effects only.

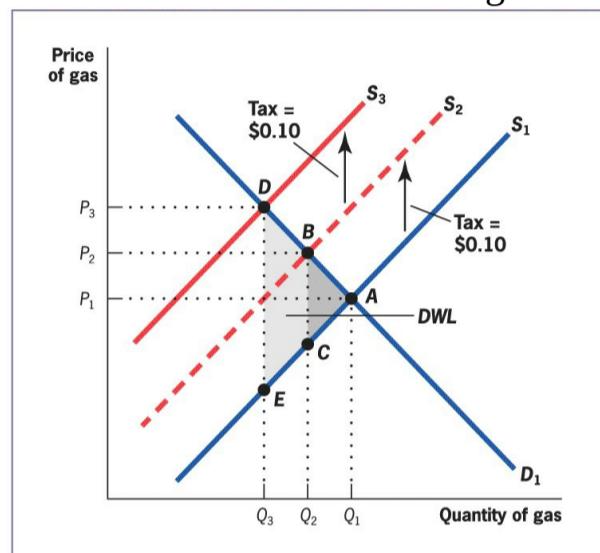
Second, the deadweight loss rises with the square of the tax rate ( $\tau^2$ ), so that the

distortion from any given amount of tax is greater as the existing tax rate increases. Thus, the distortion from a nickel tax on gas is much greater if it is the last nickel of a 25¢ tax increase than if it is the first nickel of a 5¢ tax increase. The **marginal deadweight loss**, the increase in deadweight loss per unit increase in the tax, rises with the tax rate.<sup>8</sup>

#### **marginal deadweight loss**

The increase in deadweight loss per unit increase in the tax.

This point is illustrated graphically in [Figure 20-5](#). The gas market is initially in equilibrium at point A, with quantity  $Q_1$  and price  $P_1$ . The government then imposes a 10¢ per unit tax on producers, causing the supply curve to shift in from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  as producers face a higher cost per unit produced (and so produce less at each price). Quantity falls to  $Q_2$  at the new equilibrium point B. This tax creates a deadweight loss triangle with area  $BAC$ .



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■ FIGURE 20-5

Marginal Deadweight Loss Rises with Tax Rate • An initial \$0.10 tax on suppliers causes a deadweight loss triangle  $BAC$ . An additional \$0.10 tax causes a much larger deadweight loss,  $DAE$ . The trapezoid  $DBCE$  is the marginal deadweight that is added to the initial deadweight loss of triangle  $BAC$ .

The government then levies a second tax of 10¢ per unit on producers, which causes the supply curve to shift in even farther to  $S_3$ . Quantity now falls to  $Q_3$  at the new equilibrium point D. The additional deadweight loss from this second tax is the trapezoid  $DBCE$ , which is much larger than the triangle  $BAC$ . The marginal deadweight loss from the second 10¢ tax (which brings the total tax to 20¢) is much larger than the marginal deadweight loss from the first 10¢ tax. After both taxes have been levied, the total DWL from the 20¢ tax is the triangle  $DAE$ .

The intuition behind this outcome relates to the Quick Hint about deadweight loss on [page 51 of Chapter 2](#). Small deviations from the competitive market equilibrium are not very costly in terms of lost social surplus because the transactions made close to the equilibrium are not the ones that generate a lot of social surplus. Indeed, a tax that reduced the quantity sold by only one unit would have approximately zero deadweight loss because the last trade was one for which consumers valued the good at roughly its price (no consumer surplus), and producer costs were roughly equal to price (no producer surplus). The 100 billionth gallon of gas has neither producer nor consumer surplus, so ending the sale of that particular gallon has little consequence for society.

As the market moves farther and farther from the competitive equilibrium, however, the trades that are impeded by taxation (trades for quantities between  $Q_2$  and  $Q_1$  for the first 10¢ tax, and trades for quantities between  $Q_3$  and  $Q_2$  for the second 10¢ tax) are trades that have more and more social surplus, as indicated by the widening gap between demand and supply. The loss of these higher-surplus trades means that deadweight loss is larger as the market moves farther from the competitive equilibrium.

## Deadweight Loss and the Design of Efficient Tax Systems

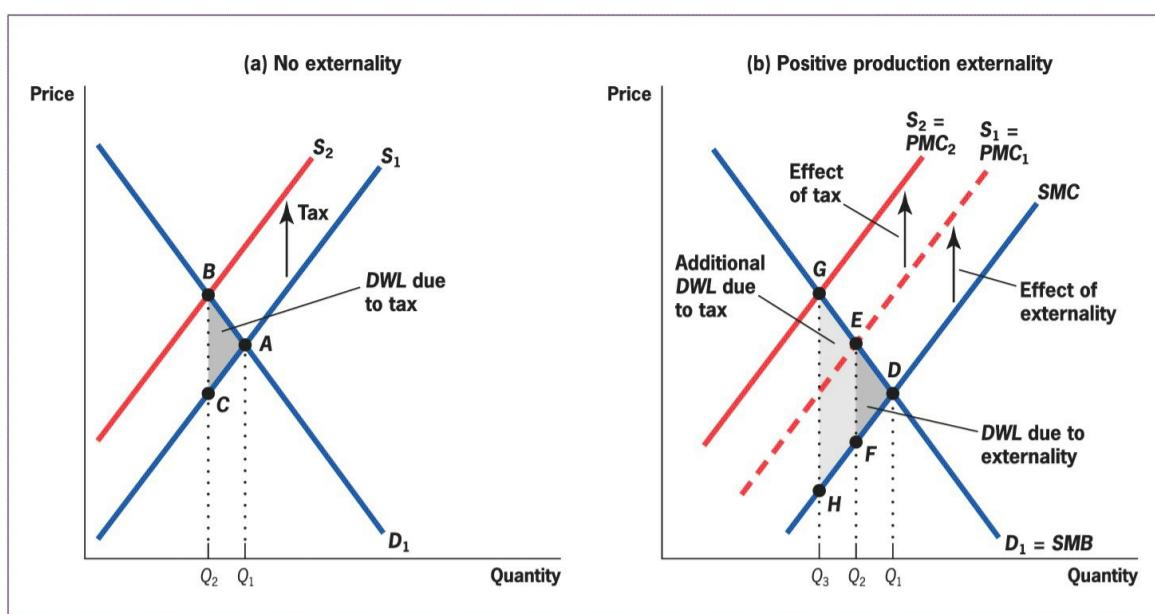
The insight that the marginal deadweight loss of a tax rises with the tax rate has a number of important implications for the design of efficient tax policy. In this section, we provide two examples.

### A Tax System's Efficiency Is Affected by a Market's Preexisting Distortions

The fact that the marginal deadweight loss rises with the tax rate means that [preexisting distortions](#) in a market, such as externalities, imperfect competition, or existing taxes, are key determinants of the efficiency of a new tax. Consider the two goods markets depicted in [Figure 20-6](#). In the first market, shown in panel (a), there are no externalities, and the initial equilibrium is at point  $A$ , where quantity is  $Q_1$ . In the second market, shown in panel (b), there are positive production externalities (like the donut shop and the police in [Chapter 5](#)). The positive externalities cause the social marginal cost of production (the  $SMC$  curve) to be below the private marginal cost (the  $S_1$  curve) because the firm does not incorporate the positive benefits for others into its supply decision. The firm chooses to produce at point  $E$ , where supply equals demand, but social surplus is maximized at point  $D$ , where  $SMC$  equals demand. So the firm underproduces at quantity  $Q_2$ , where the social efficiency maximum is at quantity  $Q_1$ . Any reduction in production below  $Q_1$  is inefficient because units for which social marginal benefit (measured by the demand curve) exceeds social marginal cost (the  $SMC$  curve) are not being produced. Thus, there is underproduction of the good, and a deadweight loss of area  $EDF$  because trades with a positive social surplus (those between  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$ ) are not being made.

#### preexisting distortions

Market failures, such as externalities or imperfect competition, that are in place before any government intervention.



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FIGURE 20-6

**Preexisting Distortions Matter** • In panel (a), a tax in a market with no preexisting distortions (such as externalities) creates a deadweight loss equal to triangle  $BAC$ . In panel (b), a positive externality in the market has created a deadweight loss triangle  $EDF$ ; imposing a tax on this market results in a deadweight loss that is larger by the area of trapezoid  $GEFH$ . The total  $DWL$  in the market with a positive externality and a tax is the area of triangle  $GDH$ .

Now suppose that the government imposes an equal-sized tax of \$1 per unit sold on suppliers in both markets. This tax shifts the supply curves up from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  in both panels and causes the producer to cut back production to  $Q_2$  in panel (a) and  $Q_3$  in panel (b). For the market in panel (a), which has no externalities, the tax causes a small deadweight loss of  $BAC$ . For the market in panel (b), the market that already has a pre-tax deadweight loss because of its positive production externalities, the tax adds a large deadweight loss (the area of trapezoid  $GEFH$ ). This trapezoid is much bigger than the triangle  $BAC$  in panel (a) because the tax in the second market moves the market outcome to  $Q_3$ , even farther away from the social efficiency maximizing level of production  $Q_1$  than is  $Q_2$ . Once a market is already underproducing, the drop in quantity from a tax is especially costly because the trades that are not occurring are ones for which marginal social benefits significantly exceed marginal social costs.

This point also has important implications for taxation in markets that are imperfectly competitive, such as monopolies. Because imperfectly competitive firms already underproduce their goods relative to competitive equilibrium, the efficiency cost of imposing a tax on them is greater than the cost of imposing the same size tax on a market that is initially in competitive equilibrium. Of course, if there are negative externalities in a market, then the conclusion of the analysis is the opposite: a tax might have *no* deadweight loss, rather than a small deadweight loss, because it is correcting an externality (as in [Chapter 5](#)).

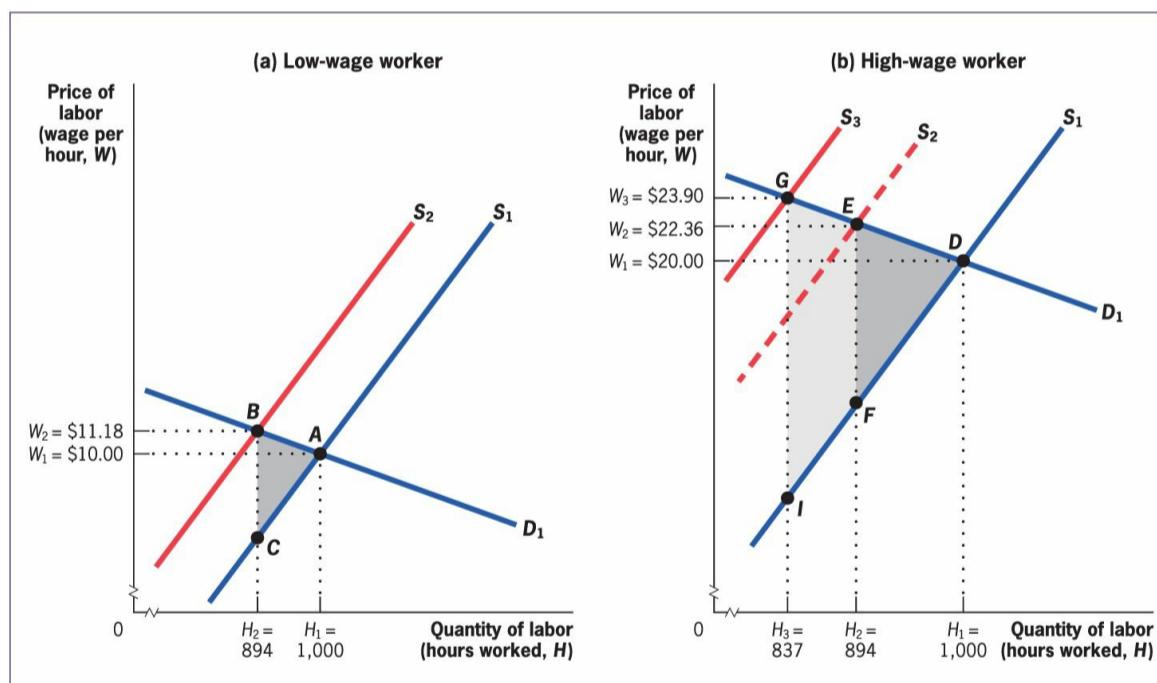
## Progressive Tax Systems Can Be Less Efficient

The insights about deadweight loss described here apply not only to taxation of goods but to taxation of income as well. Another implication of these rules about deadweight loss is that there can be large efficiency costs to moving from a proportional (equal average tax rates on all) to a progressive (higher average tax rates on the rich) tax system. Moving to a progressive system means narrowing the base for taxation—that part of the tax that applies to the rich is levied on only the narrow income base of the rich. Assume for now that the poor and the rich

have the same elasticity of income generation with respect to the tax rate so that a percentage rise in the tax rate lowers taxable income by the same percentage amount for both groups. Under this assumption, it is more efficient to tax all individuals at an equal rate than to exclude some individuals from taxation and tax other individuals at a higher tax rate to make up for the lost revenues. The efficiency lost by taxing a subset of individuals more highly is larger than the efficiency gained by excluding some individuals from taxation.

This point is best illustrated through an example. Consider a society of two individuals, one of whom has an hourly wage of \$10 and one of whom has an hourly wage of \$20. For both individuals, a 10% rise in wages leads them to supply 10% more labor supply: their elasticity of labor supply with respect to after-tax wages is 1. The elasticity of labor demand with respect to wages is -1: for each 10% rise in wages, firms demand 10% fewer hours of labor.

The initial equilibrium for each worker is shown in [Figure 20-7](#).<sup>9</sup> Without any taxes, the low-wage worker works 1,000 hours ( $H_1$ ) and earns \$10 per hour ( $W_1$ ), as shown in panel (a), while the high-wage worker also works 1,000 hours ( $H_1$ ) but earns \$20 per hour ( $W_1$ ), as shown in panel (b). The table below the figure shows taxes, hours, and DWL in the initial equilibrium and after the government imposes taxes, as described in the following examples.



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**FIGURE 20-7**

**Low Rates Imposed on a Broad Base Are Desirable** • Initially, the government imposes an equal tax on the low-wage worker and the high-wage worker, which results in deadweight losses of triangles  $BAC$  and  $EDF$  in panels (a) and (b). When the government replaces this system with one of no tax on the low-wage worker, there is then no DWL for this worker, but the DWL for the high-wage worker increases by the trapezoid  $GEFI$ , resulting in an overall increase in deadweight losses.

	Low-Wage Worker (panel a)			High-Wage Worker (panel b)			
	Tax Rate Below \$10,000	Tax Rate Above \$10,000	Hours of Labor Supply	Deadweight Loss from Taxation	Hours of Labor Supply	Deadweight Loss from Taxation	Total Deadweight Loss
No tax	0	0	1,000	0	1,000	0	0

			$(H_1)$		$(H_1)$		
Proportional tax	20%	20%	$\frac{894}{(H_2)}$	\$115.71 (area <i>BAC</i> )	$\frac{894}{(H_2)}$	\$231.42 (area <i>EDF</i> )	\$347.13 ( <i>BAC + EDF</i> )
Progressive tax	0%	60%	$\frac{1,000}{(H_1)}$	0	$\frac{837}{(H_3)}$	\$566.75 (area <i>GDI</i> )	\$566.75 ( <i>EDF + GEFI</i> )

Suppose that the government imposes a payroll tax of 20% on all of a worker's earnings (a proportional tax). This tax lowers the income that both workers receive from work, making them less willing to supply labor, as reflected in the shift in the labor supply curve from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$  in both panels. For the low-wage worker, labor supply falls from 1,000 hours ( $H_1$ ) to 894 hours ( $H_2$ ), at a higher pre-tax wage of \$11.18. As a result, the tax has created a deadweight loss of area *BAC*, which has an area of \$115.71. For the high-wage worker, the quantity of labor supplied also falls from 1,000 hours to 894 hours at a higher pre-tax wage of \$22.36, creating a deadweight loss of area *EDF*, which has an area of \$231.42.



Quick Hint Why is the deadweight loss larger for the higher-wage worker despite the same reduction in hours worked? In a competitive labor market, the wage rate equals the marginal product of labor, so the high-wage worker has a higher marginal product of labor. As a result, society loses more efficiency when the high-wage worker reduces her hours (at a marginal product of \$20 per hour) than when the low-wage worker reduces her hours (at a marginal product of \$10 per hour).

Now suppose that society decides to switch to a progressive tax schedule: no tax on the first \$10 of hourly earnings, but a 60% tax rate on the next \$10 of hourly earnings. This progressive tax system will raise the same amount of revenues as the proportional 20% tax on all earnings. Yet these two different tax systems have very different efficiency consequences.

[Figure 20-7](#) illustrates this point. In panel (a), the change to the progressive tax schedule raises the benefits of working to the low-wage worker (because she is no longer taxed) and causes her labor supply curve to shift back to  $S_1$ . She is now back to her original optimum at point A: 1,000 hours of work at \$10 per hour. The deadweight loss associated with the low-wage earner falls from \$115.71 to zero. In panel (b), the change in the tax schedule further reduces the benefits of working to the high-wage worker and shifts her supply curve in to  $S_3$ , so that her hours fall from 894 to 837 ( $H_3$ ). This change increases the size of the deadweight loss triangle to *GDI*, by adding the area of the trapezoid *GEFI*. The *DWL* in panel (b) now has a total area of \$566.75.

This shift in the tax schedule has reduced *DWL* by \$115.71 for the low-wage worker and raised it by \$335.33 for the high-wage worker. On net, *DWL* has increased from \$347.13 to \$566.75, an increase of 63% (\$219.62).

The large increase in *DWL* arises because this more progressive tax is levied on a smaller tax base. The proportional tax is levied on a total of \$30,000 of earnings (\$10,000 of earnings for the low-wage worker and \$20,000 of earnings for the high-wage worker). The progressive tax is levied on a total of only \$10,000 of earnings (the second \$10,000 of earnings of the high-wage worker). To raise the same amount of revenues on this smaller tax base, the

progressive tax must impose a higher tax rate, and a higher tax rate means a higher marginal deadweight loss. The low-wage taxpayer sees a reduction in her marginal tax rate from 20% to zero, while the high-wage taxpayer sees an increase in her marginal tax rate from 20 to 60%. Because the deadweight loss rises with the square of the tax rate, the efficiency gains from reducing the low-wage tax rate by 20% are smaller than the efficiency costs of raising the high-wage tax rate by 40%.

This example illustrates the larger point that the more you load taxes on one source, the faster deadweight loss rises. By that logic, the most efficient tax systems are those that spread the burden of taxation the most broadly, so that the tax rate, the driver of deadweight loss, can be minimized. The guiding principle for efficient taxation is to create *a broad and level playing field* rather than taxing some groups or goods particularly highly and others not at all.

## Governments Should “Smooth” Tax Rates over Time

The fact that the marginal deadweight loss rises with the tax rate implies that governments should not raise and lower taxes as they need money but should instead set a long-run tax rate that will meet their budget needs on average, using deficits and surpluses to smooth out its short-run budget fluctuations. For example, suppose that a nation has a tax rate of 20% that finances its revenue needs. Now also suppose that the nation decides to enter a one-year war, which it estimates will double its revenue needs for one year, after which these will return to normal. The government should *not* finance its needs by raising the tax rate to 40% next year and then lowering the rate back to 20% in the year after. Rather, the government should raise its tax rate by a small amount in all future years, for example by 1% for 20 years, to finance this war.

This course of action is suggested by the fact that the marginal deadweight loss rises with the tax rate. Suppose that the government implements a 1% rise in taxes from 20 to 21% for 20 years, and someone suggests replacing that with a 20% tax increase from 20 to 40% for one year. This replacement with a 20% one-year tax increase would reduce efficiency: the marginal deadweight loss associated with the increase in rates from 20 to 40% in one year is larger than the savings in deadweight loss going from a rate of 21 to a rate of 20% for 20 years. Just as individual utility is maximized by full consumption smoothing, government efficiency in taxation over time is maximized by *tax smoothing*, by having a relatively constant tax rate over time rather than high taxes in some periods and low taxes in others.



### APPLICATION

## Misperceived Taxes

The discussion so far has assumed that individuals completely understand and respond to the complicated incentives that exist under our tax system. But recent evidence suggests that this isn’t the case. Instead, individuals misperceive tax incentives with important implications for how taxes affect behavior and the optimal design of tax systems.

A compelling example is presented by [Feldman et al. \(2016\)](#). They studied what happened when households lost eligibility for their child tax credit when their children turned 17. This credit is a predictable flat amount, and has no impact on marginal tax rates—and therefore should have had no effect on labor supply decisions. Nonetheless, the study found that when the credit ended at age 17, households significantly reduced their reported labor income. This behavior suggests that households were misperceiving a flat change in their tax obligation as

a change in their marginal rate on the next dollar earned.

Another example comes from [Abeler and Jager \(2015\)](#). They ran an experiment in which individuals performed basic tasks for an hourly wage. Then they imposed different kinds of tax rates on that wage. In particular they compared two tax regimes with identical incentives, but one was much more complicated than the other. They found that individuals facing the more complicated tax schedule were less responsive to the tax incentives than those facing a less complex schedule. In fact, some individuals ignored taxes entirely when the schedule got too complicated.

[Rees-Jones and Taubinsky \(2018\)](#) pursued a different approach. They recruited a panel of taxpayers and asked them a series of questions about taxes that would be owed by a hypothetical tax payer as income varied. They found that taxpayers made two kinds of systematic mistakes. First, taxpayers believed that the tax schedule was “flatter” than it truly was, meaning that they overestimated the average tax rate of low-income taxpayers and underestimated the average tax rate of high-income taxpayers. Second, taxpayers perceived the tax system as linear, with a marginal tax rate equal to their average tax rate. That is, they believed that no matter how much more or less they earned, the incremental tax that they would owe was similar to what they paid on average currently.

Rees-Jones and Dubinsky went on to discuss the implications of their findings for tax policy. They concluded that these misperceptions reduced the deadweight loss of taxation. For example, because individuals didn’t think about the fact that higher earnings would lead to a higher tax rate, they weren’t as distorted from increasing their earnings from a progressive tax system. Similarly, because individuals thought that taxes on lower earners were higher than they actually were, and that taxes on higher earnings were lower than they actually were, the earnings disincentives of the tax system were reduced further. Their model implied that the efficiency gains for tax collectors from these misperceptions amounted to between 0.9 and 4.4% of total tax collections. ■

## 20.2 Optimal Commodity Taxation

[Section 20.1](#) has provided us with the necessary tools to turn from the *positive* question of how to measure deadweight loss to the *normative* question of how the existence of a deadweight loss should be taken into account in the design of the tax system. We address this normative question with reference to two different types of taxes. This section looks at *commodity taxation*, the taxation of goods. The next section discusses the taxation of income.

### Ramsey Taxation: The Theory of Optimal Commodity Taxation

The theory of [optimal commodity taxation](#) began with the early twentieth-century economist Frank Ramsey, who considered the problem of a government with a given budgetary requirement and the ability to set different tax rates for different commodities (food, clothing, tobacco, etc.). Ramsey formulated the problem of optimal taxation by asking the question: How can we raise a given amount of revenue with the least amount of distortion? In other words, how should a government set its tax rates across a set of commodities to minimize the deadweight loss of the tax system while meeting its budgetary requirement?

#### optimal commodity taxation

Choosing the tax rates across goods to minimize deadweight loss for a given government revenue requirement.

The appendix to this chapter presents the mathematics of Ramsey's elegant solution. Here, we discuss the key lesson of his model: *the government should set taxes across commodities so that the ratio of marginal deadweight loss to marginal revenue raised is equal across commodities:*

$$\textbf{Ramsey Rule : set commodity taxes such that } \frac{MDWL_i}{MR_i} = \lambda$$

#### Ramsey Rule

To minimize the deadweight loss of a tax system while raising a fixed amount of revenue, taxes should be set across commodities so that the ratio of the marginal deadweight loss to marginal revenue raised is equal across commodities.

$MDWL$  is the marginal deadweight loss from increasing the tax on good  $i$ ,  $MR$  is the marginal revenue raised from that tax increase, and  $\lambda$  is the [value of additional government revenues](#). This constant measures the value of having another dollar in the government's hands relative to its next best use in the private sector. If  $\lambda$  is large, it implies that additional government revenues are quite valuable relative to keeping the money in private hands; if  $\lambda$  is small, then additional government revenues have little value relative to the value private individuals place on having that money.<sup>10</sup>

#### value of additional government revenues

The value of having another dollar in the government's hands relative to its next best use in the private sector.

This rule states that the deadweight loss per dollar of tax revenue associated with an additional dollar of taxes on commodity  $i$  should be equal for all commodities. If the tax on good  $A$  has an  $MDWL/MR$  that is higher than the  $MDWL/MR$  from taxing good  $B$ , taxing good  $A$  causes more inefficiency per dollar of revenue raised than does taxing good  $B$ . Recall that  $MDWL$  is a positive function of the tax rate; as discussed earlier, higher taxes lead to a higher marginal deadweight loss because they move the market farther from the competitive equilibrium (the deadweight loss is determined by the square of the tax rate). Therefore, to minimize inefficiency in the market, the government should reduce taxation of good  $A$ , thus reducing its  $MDWL$ , and raise the tax on good  $B$ , increasing its  $MDWL$ . These adjustments

should continue until the  $MDWL/MR$  ratios for both goods are equal to  $\lambda$ , so that both goods have the same efficiency cost per dollar of revenue raised.

If  $\lambda$  is large, then additional resources to the government have a high value, so the  $MDWL/MR$  should be large for all commodity taxes (tax rates should be high); if  $\lambda$  is small, then additional resources to the government have a low value, so the  $MDWL/MR$  should be small for all commodity taxes (tax rates should be low). In other words, the government should be willing to have potentially inefficient (high  $MDWL$ ) taxes when it has large budgetary needs. This tells the government to set the *marginal cost* of taxation ( $MDWL/MR$ ) equal to its *marginal benefit* ( $\lambda$ ).

In principle, the Ramsey Rule can tell us the optimal *level* of taxation across commodities. In practice, policy analysts typically do not have a measured value for  $\lambda$ , the value of additional revenues to the government, so the Ramsey Rule is typically used when talking about *tax reform* and the costs and benefits of shifting from an existing pattern of commodity taxes to another pattern that raises the same amount of revenue. The application on [pages 332–335](#) discusses the use of the Ramsey Rule to inform tax reform.

## Inverse Elasticity Rule

It is convenient to express the Ramsey result in a simplified form that allows us to relate it to elasticities of demand. As we show in the appendix, if we assume that the supply side of commodity markets is perfectly competitive (elasticity of supply is infinite), then the Ramsey result implies that

$$\tau_i^* = -1/\eta_i \times \lambda$$

where  $\tau_i^*$  is the optimal tax rate for commodity  $i$ , and  $\eta_i$  is the elasticity of demand for commodity  $i$ . This equation indicates that the government should set taxes so that the tax rate on each commodity is proportional to 1 over the elasticity of demand; elastically demanded goods (a higher value of  $\eta_i$ ) should be taxed less and inelastically demanded goods taxed more.

This formulation of the Ramsey Rule shows that two factors must be balanced when setting optimal commodity taxes:

- *The elasticity rule:* When elasticity of demand for a good is high, it should be taxed at a low rate; when elasticity is low, the tax rate should be high. The deadweight loss from any tax rises with the elasticity of demand, so efficiency is enhanced by taxing inelastically demanded goods more than elastically demanded goods.
- *The broad base rule:* It is better to tax a wide variety of goods at a moderate rate than to tax very few goods at a high rate. Because the marginal deadweight loss from a tax rises with the tax rate, the government should spread taxes across a large number of commodities and not tax any one commodity at a very high rate. This is a corollary of the “tax smoothing” result described earlier: better to tax many goods at 1% than just a few goods at 2% because the rise from 1 to 2% in the tax rate has a larger marginal DWL than moving from 0 to 1%.

To balance these two recommendations, the government should tax inelastically demanded goods at a higher rate but should not look to collect *all* its taxes from these goods unless the

price elasticity of demand is perfectly inelastic. If a government cared only about the elasticity rule, it would find the most inelastic good and raise all revenues from taxing that good. The broad base rule, however, tempers that tendency. Thus, while the government should tax inelastic goods more highly, it should tax other goods as well.

## Equity Implications of the Ramsey Model

This inverse elasticity formulation of the Ramsey model highlights the fairly nasty equity implications of the Ramsey approach. Imagine that the government had only two goods it could tax, cereal and caviar. The elasticity of demand for caviar is much higher than that for cereal, so the inverse elasticity rule would suggest that the government should tax cereal much more highly than caviar. This would mean imposing a tax on a good consumed exclusively by higher-income groups that was much lower than the tax imposed on a good consumed by all. This outcome, while efficient, might violate a government's sense of tax fairness across income groups (vertical equity).

An optimal commodity tax framework can address equity concerns by taking into account not only the elasticity of each commodity but also the income distribution of its consumers. Goods that are disproportionately consumed by higher-income consumers could have a tax rate above that implied by the inverse elasticity rule, and goods that are disproportionately consumed by lower-income consumers could have a tax rate below that implied by the inverse elasticity rule. How much of this "reweighting" of optimal taxes across commodities should be done is a function of the extent to which governments want to trade efficiency for equity. As the government moves away from the Ramsey efficiency rule by bringing in equity issues, the tax system becomes less efficient but more equitable.

Perhaps because of these distributional concerns, there is relatively little reliance on commodity taxation in the United States. Most of our tax revenues come from taxing individual incomes, which we discuss in [Section 20.3](#).



### APPLICATION

#### Price Reform in Pakistan

Although commodity taxes are not widely used in the United States, they are a primary source of revenue in developing nations, where income is very difficult to measure and consumption is a more reliable basis for taxation. Moreover, in developing nations, another important tool of public policy is to *subsidize* many staple consumption goods, such as rice. Such subsidies usually work in the following manner: the government purchases the good from producers at market prices and then sells it to consumers at below market prices (with the government making up the difference in price from its revenues). These subsidies are motivated by equity concerns (the government is subsidizing the cost of living of low-income groups), but they also have efficiency costs. The logic of tax inefficiencies works with subsidies as well: any government intervention that moves consumption away from its optimal level is inefficient. With taxation, there is underconsumption of a good relative to the efficiency-maximizing point; with subsidies, there is overconsumption. Because the good is made artificially cheap for consumers, they consume in a range where their social marginal benefit of consumption is actually below the social marginal cost of production.

Nobel prize-winning economist [Angus Deaton \(1997\)](#) studied the demands for commodities in several developing nations. He used variation in prices encountered by

consumers of rice, wheat, and other commodities to estimate their elasticities of demand. He also estimated the preexisting distortions to demand from the existing subsidies or taxes on these goods. He then put this information together to develop estimates of the optimal changes in commodity taxes and subsidies in each nation.

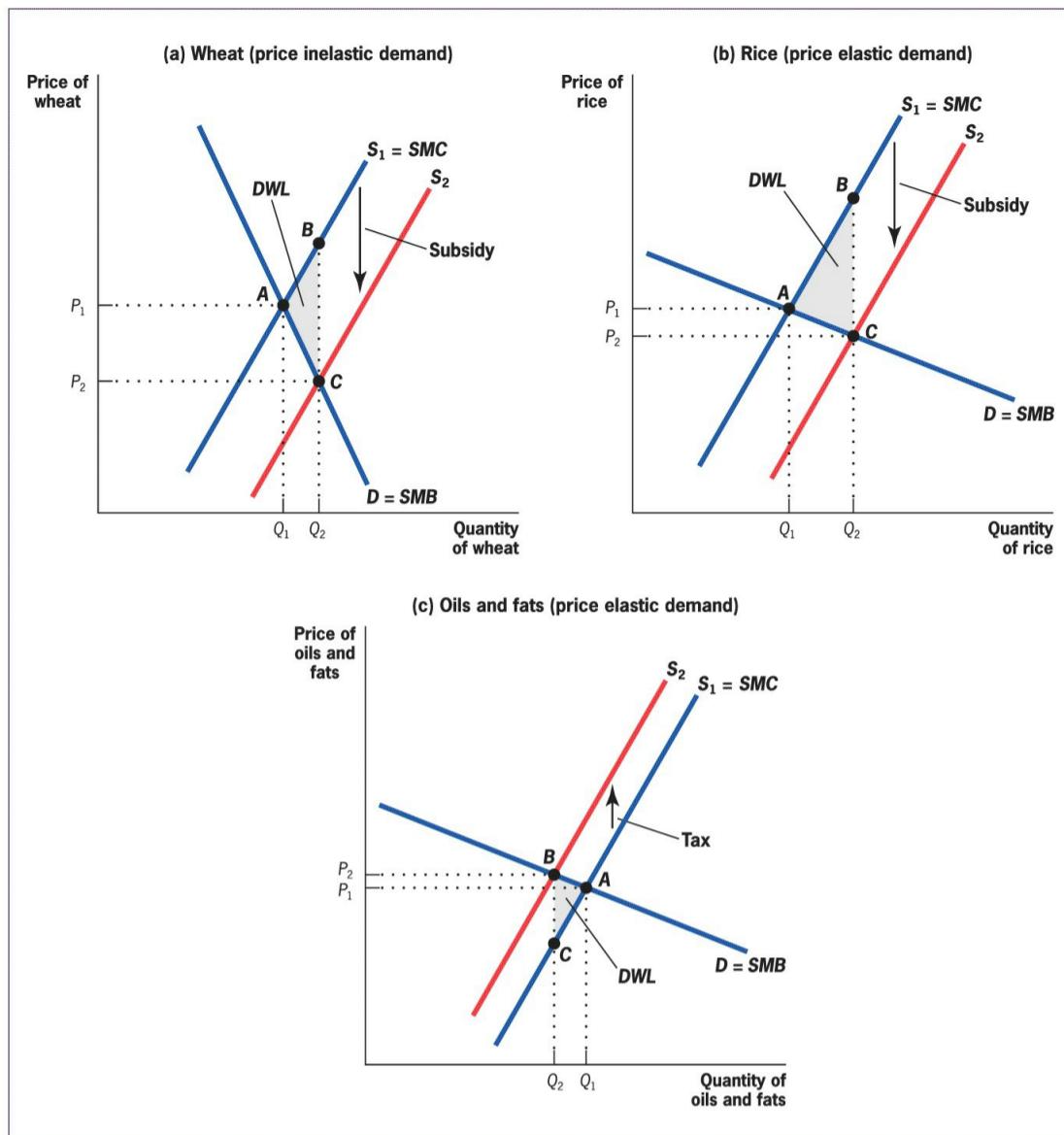
His analysis of the data from Pakistan is particularly revealing. In 1984–1985, the Pakistani government was paying subsidies of 40% on wheat and on rice so that consumers paid 40% less than the market price for these goods, and the government was collecting a 5% tax on oils and fats. Demand for wheat was price inelastic, with a price elasticity of demand of −0.64, while demand for rice and for oils and fats was very price elastic, with a price elasticity of demand of −2.08 for rice and −2.33 for oils and fats: for the latter two categories of goods, demand fell by more than 2% for every 1% rise in price (or rose by more than 2% for every 1% subsidy to price). There were also other taxes and subsidies in place, but we focus our discussion on these three goods to illustrate the lessons of Deaton's analysis.

These conditions are summarized in [Table 20-1](#), and the markets for these commodities are illustrated in [Figure 20-8](#). Panel (a) of the figure shows the market for wheat. This market is initially in equilibrium at point A, where D intersects  $S_1$  at a price of  $P_1$  and a quantity of  $Q_1$ . The subsidy to wheat increases the supply of wheat, shifting the supply curve out to  $S_2$ , and raising the consumption of wheat to  $Q_2$ . The consumption of wheat between  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$  is inefficient because the social marginal benefit (the demand curve) is below the social marginal cost ( $S_1$ ), so there is a deadweight loss of  $BAC$ . Panel (b) of the figure shows the market for rice. The analysis here is similar to that in panel (a), but the deadweight loss from the subsidy is much larger because the demand for rice is more elastic than the demand for wheat. As with taxes, a higher elasticity of demand leads to a larger deadweight loss from subsidies, so there is more socially inefficient consumption (between  $Q_1$  and  $Q_2$ ). Panel (c) shows the market for oils and fats. Here, the market is initially in equilibrium at point A, and the tax shifts supply in from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ , lowering quantity consumed from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$  and causing a deadweight loss of  $BAC$ .

**TABLE 20-1 Demand for Various Commodities in Pakistan**

Good	Subsidy	Price Elasticity	Policy Change	Welfare Gain	Include Distribution Concerns
Wheat	40%	−0.64	Reduce subsidy	Small	Don't reduce subsidy
Rice	40%	−2.08	Reduce subsidy	Large	Reduce subsidy
Oil/fat	−5%	−2.33	Reduce tax	Large	Reduce tax further

Different goods in Pakistan have different levels of subsidies and taxes, as well as different price elasticities. This table shows the welfare gain from government reforms to the subsidies/taxes on three of these goods. Optimal tax simulations suggest that there are small welfare gains from reducing the subsidy on wheat (since it is inelastically demanded) and that income distribution concerns further argue against subsidy reduction. On the other hand, there are large welfare gains from reducing the subsidy on rice (since it is elastically demanded), and large welfare gains from reducing the tax on oils and fats; income distribution considerations only strengthen those conclusions.



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■ FIGURE 20-8

Efficiency Consequences of Subsidies and Taxes in Pakistan • In panel (a), the market for wheat, demand is fairly inelastic and supply is subsidized, leading quantity to increase from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$  with a deadweight loss of  $BAC$ . In panel (b), the market for rice, demand is very elastic, so when supply is subsidized the quantity rises by much more (from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ ), and the deadweight loss is larger ( $BAC$ ). In panel (c), the market for oils and fats, demand is also very elastic, so even the small tax leads to a large reduction in quantity from  $Q_1$  to  $Q_2$ , with a deadweight loss of  $BAC$ .

Using a framework similar to Ramsey's, Deaton computed the social cost of raising the tax or reducing the subsidy on particular goods. He found that there was a modest social benefit to reducing the subsidy on wheat, as shown in the fifth column of [Table 20-1](#), and a large social benefit to reducing the subsidy on rice. This is apparent from [Figure 20-8](#). Reducing the subsidy on wheat would remove a small deadweight loss triangle, while removing the subsidy on rice would remove a larger deadweight loss triangle. The social benefits of reducing the subsidy for rice are larger than those for reducing the subsidy for wheat because rice demand is much more price elastic than wheat demand, so the distortions from subsidizing rice are even larger.

Deaton also found that there were social costs to the taxation of oils and fats and that society would be better off reducing that commodity tax by removing the deadweight loss of  $BAC$  in panel (c) of [Figure 20-8](#). Because oils and fats are very elastically demanded, they should be taxed at a lower rate than other goods for which the demand is less elastic. Thus,

Deaton suggested a tax reform that would increase efficiency: reduce the tax on oils and fats, while making up for the lost tax revenues by reducing the subsidies to rice (especially) and to wheat. Without changing net government revenues, efficiency would be improved.

Deaton also considered whether distributional considerations offset these tax reform conclusions. He found that wheat is consumed heavily by the poor. Thus, if redistributional concerns are important, subsidies for wheat should not be scaled back. In contrast, rice is consumed fairly evenly by people at all income levels, so rice subsidies should end even if society places high weight on helping the poor. The tax on oils and fats should be reduced even further if helping the poor is a concern because fats and oils are consumed relatively heavily by the poor.

Thus, the rather abstract notions of optimal commodity taxation can find very useful application in practice. Armed with these concepts and the tools of empirical analysis, economists can provide important advice to policy makers on appropriate reforms to commodity tax and subsidy systems.<sup>11</sup>

## 20.3 Optimal Income Taxes

In the United States and most other developed countries, income taxation is a much more important source of revenue raising than commodity taxation. In designing optimal income taxes, the government's goal is still to meet its revenue requirements while minimizing the distortions due to taxation, but with income taxes the government also explicitly cares about another goal: the vertical equity of the resulting tax system. The goal of the government is to raise revenues in a manner that maximizes the nation's *social welfare function*, the function that aggregates individual utilities into an overall level of social well-being. In this section, we develop the theory of **optimal income taxation** and then illustrate how this theory can be applied to construct examples of optimal income tax systems. Just as the optimal commodity tax system consists of a set of tax rates (and subsidies) across commodities, the optimal income tax system consists of a set of tax rates (and income transfers) across income groups. Rather than setting optimal tax rates across goods, the optimal income tax is setting optimal tax rates across individuals.

### optimal income taxation

Choosing the tax rates across income groups to maximize social welfare subject to a government revenue requirement.

## A Simple Example

It is helpful to begin with a simple example that makes the following assumptions:

1. Everyone in society has the same utility functions ( $U_1 = U_2 = \dots$ ).
2. These utility functions exhibit diminishing *MU* of income.
3. The total amount of income in society is fixed (so incomes are not determined by individual choices that might respond to tax rates).
4. Society has a utilitarian social welfare function ( $V = U_1 + U_2 + \dots$ ) under which each individual's utility is weighted equally in determining social welfare.

Under these assumptions, the optimal income tax system is one that leaves everyone with the *same level of post-tax income*, which is the total post-tax income in society divided by the number of persons in society. Any individuals with incomes below this level would receive a transfer from the government that would increase their incomes to the average amount. Any individuals with incomes above this level would have their incomes taxed away until their post-tax income equaled the average amount.

With this system, the marginal tax rate is 100%: each additional dollar of earnings either reduces one's transfer by \$1 (if below the average income level) or raises one's tax by \$1 (if above the average income level). The average tax rate is negative below the average income level because those individuals receive a transfer (pay negative taxes), positive above the average income level, and everywhere rising with income.

This may sound like an extreme system, but it is not that far from historical reality. At its peak (in 1945), the top marginal tax rate in the United States was 94%! But this example imposes very unrealistic assumptions. Perhaps the most unrealistic is the assumption that incomes are fixed, which implies that individuals won't work less if they face a 100% marginal tax rate. This is at odds with common sense and empirical evidence.

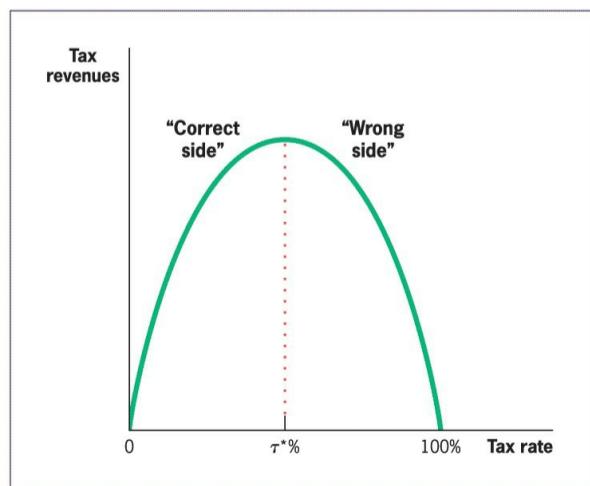
## General Model with Behavioral Effects

As discussed in [Chapters 2](#) and [17](#), in redistributing resources across individuals, the government typically faces an *equity-efficiency trade-off*. When society redistributes resources, it likely shrinks the total size of the economic pie by reducing income generation while at the same time it equalizes the distribution of the slices of the pie. In the previous example, there was no trade-off; that is, total incomes in society were fixed, so there was no efficiency cost of raising taxes. Thus, the optimal system focused solely on equity, ensuring that all individuals had equal incomes.

In reality, taxation affects the size of the pie, too: the rate at which incomes are taxed will generally determine the size of the incomes that are subject to taxation. Thus, in designing optimal income taxes the government needs to consider the effect of raising tax *rates* on the size of the tax *base*.

Consider the example of a tax on labor income. The revenues raised by this tax are equal to the tax rate times the tax base of labor earnings. Assume that workers reduce the amount of labor they supply to the market as their after-tax wage falls (we discuss this assumption more fully in [Chapter 21](#)). An increase in the tax rate on labor income will, therefore, have two effects on tax revenues. First, tax revenues will rise for a given level of labor income. Second, however, at some point workers will reduce the amount of labor income they earn, and the tax base will shrink. For low tax rates, the first effect will dominate: if we start from a tax rate of zero, there is no tax base to shrink by raising the tax rate, so only the first effect can operate. But as tax rates rise, the second effect will become increasingly important: at a tax rate of 100%, no one would work, the base would be zero, and taxes would raise no revenue.

These two effects are the genesis of the famous *Laffer curve*, which was an intellectual underpinning of the large tax cuts of the early 1980s in the United States. [Figure 20-9](#) shows that curve, with tax revenues on the vertical axis and the tax rate on the horizontal axis. When the tax rate is either zero or 100%, the tax raises no revenues. As the tax rate moves upward from zero, revenue increases, but after reaching its maximum at the tax rate  $\tau^*$ , revenues eventually decrease and fall back to zero again at a 100% tax rate. Thus, when we are on the “wrong” (right-hand) side of the Laffer curve, we can actually *raise revenues by cutting the tax rate*. In the early 1980s, the belief that we were on the wrong side of the Laffer curve led Congress to pass tax cuts on higher-income individuals. In fact, evaluations of the type that we discuss later in this chapter and in [Chapter 25](#) suggest that we were still on the “correct” (left-hand) side of the Laffer curve at this point and that cutting taxes on the wealthy reduced revenues.



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■ FIGURE 20-9

The Laffer Curve • As tax rates rise from 0 to  $\tau^*$ , tax revenues rise; but when tax rates rise above  $\tau^*$  toward 100%, tax revenues fall.

The goal of optimal income tax analysis is to identify a schedule of tax rates across income groups that maximizes social welfare, while recognizing that raising tax rates has conflicting (and, if taxes are high enough, negative) effects on revenues. The appendix to this chapter shows the mathematical formulation of this analysis and concludes that the optimal income tax system meets the following condition:

**set income tax rates across groups such that  $MU_i/MR_i = \lambda$**

where  $MU$  is the marginal utility of individual  $i$ ,  $MR$  is the marginal revenue raised from taxing that individual, and  $\lambda$  is the value of additional government revenues (as discussed in the context of optimal commodity taxation). The optimal income tax system is one in which the marginal utility per dollar of revenue raised is equalized across individuals.

Individual marginal utility is a declining function of individual consumption, due to the principle of diminishing marginal utility discussed in [Chapter 2](#). By lowering after-tax income, higher taxes lead to lower individual consumption and higher marginal utility of consumption for individual  $i$ . If the income tax system is such that it leaves individual  $i$  with a higher marginal utility per dollar of revenue than individual  $j$ , then this formulation suggests that taxes should be lowered on individual  $i$  and raised on individual  $j$ . Such a shift will raise the after-tax income of individual  $i$ , increasing her consumption and lowering her marginal utility, and it will lower the after-tax income of individual  $j$ , decreasing his consumption and raising his marginal utility. These adjustments should continue until the  $MU/MR$  ratios for all individuals are equal to  $\lambda$ .

Much like optimal commodity taxation, this outcome represents a compromise between two considerations. In the case of commodity taxation, optimal taxes trade off the elasticity rule (tax inelastic commodities more highly) and the broad base rule (spread taxes broadly to minimize tax rates). In the case of income taxation, the optimal tax system reflects a different balancing:

- *Vertical equity:* Social welfare is maximized when those who have a high level of consumption, and thus a low marginal utility, are taxed more heavily, and those who have a low level of consumption, and thus a high marginal utility, are taxed less heavily; those with high consumption will “miss the money less” when it is taxed away.
- *Behavioral responses:* As taxes rise on any one group, individuals in that group may respond by earning less income. This means that an additional increase in taxes will raise less revenue because the base of taxation is smaller.

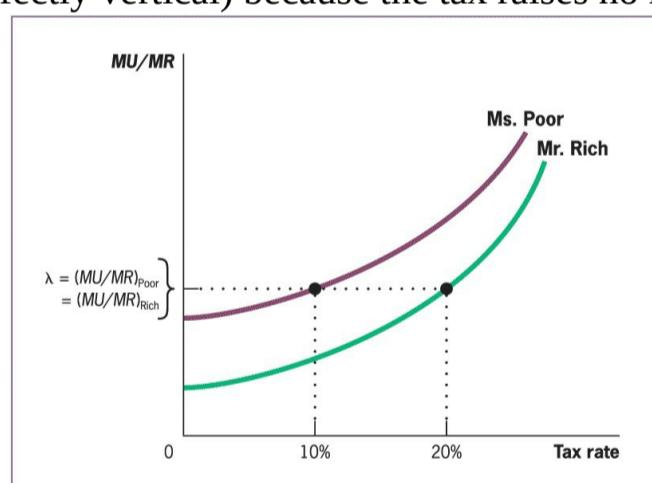
In considering whether to move to a more progressive tax system, therefore, the government needs to balance the fact that this will bring the marginal utilities of the rich and poor into equality (by lowering the consumption of the rich) against the fact that by taxing the rich more highly, they will work less hard, thus lowering the marginal revenue raised by taxation. This latter point is strengthened by that previously noted: the marginal inefficiency of a tax rises with the tax rate, and the rich are the most productive elements of society, so the reduction in output will be the greatest. So, raising taxes on the rich while lowering them on the poor leads to an overall efficiency reduction.

## An Example

Imagine a world with no taxation, where the government wants to introduce a small income tax of 1%. In such a world,  $MU/MR$  is much lower for a rich person than a poor one.  $MU$  is much lower for the rich person because he or she already has such a high level of consumption, and  $MR$  is also higher for that rich person because a 1% tax raises more money off a higher base of income. So the ratio  $MU/MR$  is much lower for the rich than the poor.

As we tax the rich more, however, their ratio of  $MU/MR$  rises. The numerator rises because their consumption is falling, so  $MU$  is higher. The denominator falls through behavioral responses of labor supply: the higher tax causes them to work less hard, the tax base gets smaller, and thus the tax raises less revenue. At some point, when the tax on the rich is high enough, their  $MU/MR$  will actually fall below that of the poor. Tax rates should be higher for the rich than for the poor, but the government shouldn't totally "soak" the rich; it should drive their  $MU$  up, but not so much that their  $MR$  from the tax becomes very small (or even negative, as on the wrong side of the Laffer curve).

[Figure 20-10](#) illustrates this point. On the  $x$  axis in this diagram is the tax rate, and on the  $y$  axis is the ratio of  $MU/MR$ . The curves on the graph show how  $MU/MR$  changes as tax rates rise. These curves slope upward. As tax rates rise,  $MU$  rises (as a result of diminishing marginal utility), and  $MR$  falls (as a result of the reductions in labor supply when tax rates rise). Indeed, the simultaneous rise in the numerator and reduction in the denominator lead to curves that not only slope upward but slope upward at an increasing rate (the curves are becoming steeper as tax rates rise). In the limit, with a 100% tax rate,  $MU/MR$  is infinity for everyone (the curve is perfectly vertical) because the tax raises no money.



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■ FIGURE 20-10

**Optimal Income Taxation** • The ratio of marginal utility to marginal revenue rises as tax rates rise for any taxpayer, but this ratio for Mr. Rich is everywhere below the ratio for Ms. Poor. Optimal income tax rates are those that equate this ratio across taxpayers. Here, the optimal rates are 10% for Ms. Poor and 20% for Mr. Rich.

Consider two individuals, Mr. Rich, who has a high income, and Ms. Poor, who has a low income. Mr. Rich's curve starts below Ms. Poor's, because Mr. Rich has a lower  $MU$  for each additional dollar of income. If we tax both individuals at 10%, then  $MU/MR$  for Mr. Rich is well below  $MU/MR$  for Ms. Poor.

As we raise the tax on Mr. Rich, his  $MU$  rises, and his  $MR$  falls. By the time the tax rate on Mr. Rich is 20%, his  $MU/MR$  equals Ms. Poor's at the 10% rate. This is the optimal pair of income tax rates because  $MU/MR = \lambda$  for both taxpayers.

## 20.4 Tax-Benefit Linkages and the Financing of Social Insurance Programs

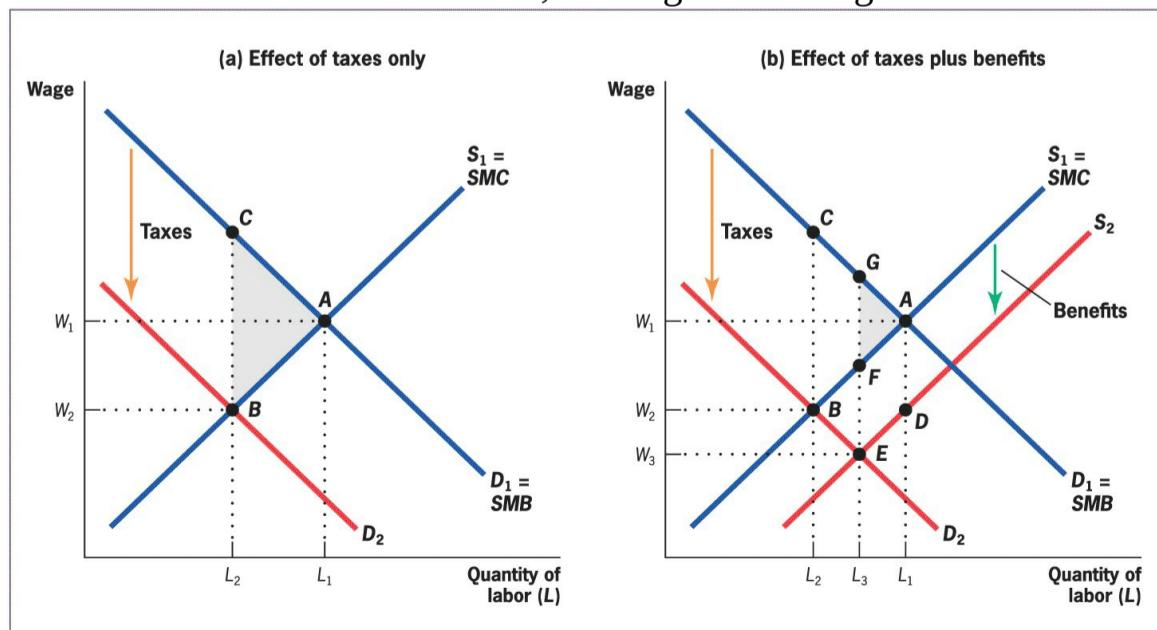
In the previous two chapters, we focused on the equity and efficiency implications of taxation while ignoring the disposition of tax revenues. By doing so, however, we ignored the possible effects of **tax-benefit linkages**, direct ties between taxes paid and benefits received. These linkages can significantly affect the equity and efficiency of a tax. This point was made forcefully by [Summers \(1989\)](#) in the context of government social insurance programs. He showed that the link between payroll taxes and the social insurance benefits they finance can cause the incidence of payroll taxation to fall more fully on workers than might be presumed from the analysis of [Chapter 19](#). The link can also lead the efficiency cost of financing social insurance programs to be lower than might be presumed from the analysis of this chapter. Because payroll taxes to finance social insurance programs constitute such a large share of the tax burden in the United States and elsewhere, it is important to understand and assess this argument.

**tax-benefit linkages**

Direct ties between taxes paid and benefits received.

### The Model

To illustrate the effect of payroll taxes that finance social insurance programs, we consider a *workers' compensation* program (which provides reimbursement to injured workers) financed by a payroll tax. Consider a labor market that starts with no workers' compensation program, as shown in panel (a) of [Figure 20-11](#). This market is initially in equilibrium at point A where quantity of labor  $L_1$  is supplied at a wage of  $W_1$ . The government then introduces a workers' compensation program, financed by a payroll tax on employers. This tax imposes a significant new cost of production on employers, causing them to decrease the quantity of labor they demand at all wage levels and shifting the demand curve inward from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$ . The equilibrium moves to point B, the intersection of  $D_2$  and the original supply curve  $S_1 = SMC$ . The equilibrium wage falls to  $W_2$  and the equilibrium quantity of labor falls to  $L_2$ . At this reduced quantity of labor, there are many workers ( $L_1 - L_2$ ) who would like to work and would accept a wage that would be profitable for the firm if there were no tax. The hiring of these workers is not profitable for the firm once the tax is in place, however, so these efficient labor market matches are not made, causing a deadweight loss of the area CAB.



■ FIGURE 20-11

Tax-Benefit Linkages • (a) A pure tax on labor would shift the demand curve from  $D_1$  to  $D_2$ , reducing labor from  $L_1$  to  $L_2$  and creating the deadweight loss triangle  $CAB$ . (b) If those taxes are tied to benefits provided to workers, then supply shifts out to  $S_2$  because the benefits act as an effective rise in wages and make supplying labor more attractive. Labor supply falls only to  $L_3$ , and the deadweight loss triangle shrinks to  $GAF$ .

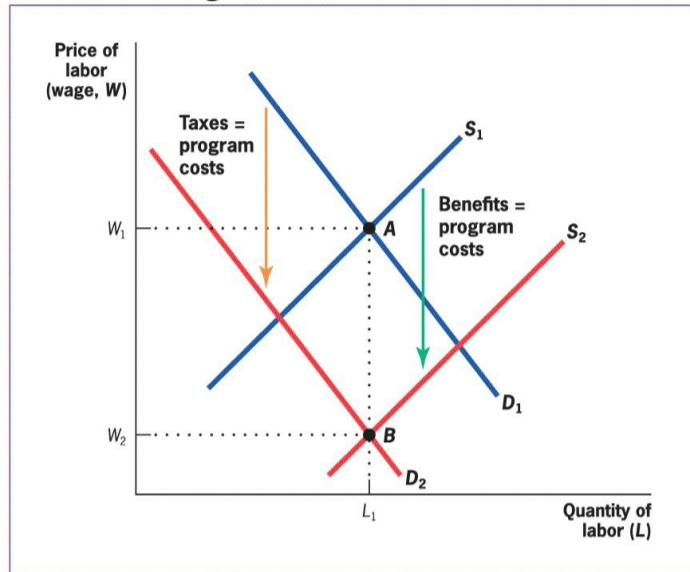
This analysis is accurate as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough because it ignores the reason the tax is in place. The payroll tax is financing a benefit for workers: insurance if they are injured. Before workers' compensation existed, if a worker on a risky job was injured and had to miss work, then the worker lost her wages for the time away from work *and* the medical costs of recovering from the injury. Workers in risky jobs would therefore demand compensating differentials of the type discussed in [Chapter 8](#): they would demand wages higher than those paid for comparable jobs without risk to compensate for these potential post-injury costs. With workers' compensation, however, workers don't require such a large compensating differential from their employer because the government will reimburse them for lost income and medical expenditures. Workers are therefore willing to supply their labor to the market for a lower wage.

[Figure 20-11](#), panel (b), shows what happens to the deadweight loss from the tax when benefits are taken into account. At wage  $W_1$ , workers were initially willing to supply quantity of labor  $L_1$  (point A), but after workers' compensation is introduced, they are willing to supply the same quantity for the lower wage of  $W_2$  (point D). Because this change occurs at every quantity, the supply curve shifts outward to  $S_2$ . The new equilibrium occurs at point E, the intersection of  $D_2$  and  $S_2$ : the wage falls to  $W_3$ , and labor supply increases to  $L_3$ . The increase in the quantity of labor in the market relative to panel (a) reduces the efficiency cost of the tax because there are now fewer efficient employer-worker matches that are not occurring due to the tax (only those between  $L_3$  and  $L_1$ , instead of the larger set of those between  $L_2$  and  $L_1$ ). The deadweight loss triangle therefore shrinks to  $GAF$ .

Why is the deadweight loss triangle  $GAF$  when the new equilibrium is at point E? This is an excellent illustration of the hazards of correctly identifying deadweight loss triangles. Remember that deadweight loss is defined as the reduction in social surplus due to units that are not sold and that have a social marginal benefit exceeding their social marginal cost. The social marginal benefit of labor is measured by the pre-intervention demand curve ( $D_1$ ), and the social marginal cost of labor is measured by the pre-intervention supply curve ( $S_1$ ), so deadweight loss must be drawn with reference to those curves. At the new quantity of labor  $L_3$ , the trades that increase social efficiency that are not made are those between  $L_3$  and the original equilibrium  $L_1$ . Thus, deadweight loss consists of the difference between the social marginal benefit (curve  $D_1$ ) and the social marginal cost (curve  $S_1$ ) for those units between  $L_3$  and  $L_1$ .

Indeed, if workers fully valued the benefit of the workers' compensation insurance at its

cost to the employer, then there would be *no deadweight loss* from this program. This possibility is illustrated in [Figure 20-12](#), which shows an outward shift in the supply curve to  $S_2$  that fully offsets the downward shift in the demand curve to  $D_2$ . The quantity of labor remains at  $L_1$  in the initial equilibrium (point A) and the new equilibrium (point B). Equilibrium wages fall by the full cost of the program to  $W_2$ , which is below  $W_1$  by the exact program cost. Thus, *the cost of the workers' compensation tax is fully shifted to the workers* in the form of lower wages. When the government puts in a workers' compensation program, and workers value that benefit at its cost to employers, the government is essentially replacing workers' wages with this insurance benefit, with no change in labor cost to employers and, therefore, no deadweight loss.



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■ FIGURE 20-12

Taxation with No Deadweight Loss due to Linkages • When workers value the tax-financed benefit so highly that they are willing to accept its full cost in lower wages, there is no change in employment when the tax is imposed. Because the increase in labor supply exactly offsets the reduction in labor demand, wages fall to  $W_2$ , while the quantity of labor remains at  $L_1$ .

## Issues Raised by Tax-Benefit Linkage Analysis

This analysis of the efficiency of tax-benefit linkages raises a series of interesting questions.

**If There Is No Inefficiency to Providing a Benefit, Why Doesn't the Employer Just Do So Without Government Involvement?**

In [Figure 20-12](#), there is no inefficiency associated with providing workers' compensation; workers value the benefits from the program at its employer cost and are willing to reduce their wages by the full cost to finance the program. In this case, why didn't the employer simply provide the program in the first place? Why does the government need to get involved?

The answer is that there may be market failures that lead employers to not reflect workers' valuation of this program without a government mandate. For example, there could be adverse selection in the market. Suppose that you owned a firm and your employees came to you offering to reduce their wages by the full amount of a new workers' compensation insurance policy if you will buy one. No other firms in town have such a plan. You might be worried that if you were the first to offer such a plan, all the clumsy workers in town (or those who like to pretend to be injured) will come to work for you, driving up your workers'

compensation costs. This standard adverse selection problem may keep employers from offering benefits that are fully valued by employees.<sup>12</sup>

## When Are There Tax-Benefit Linkages?

The tax-benefit linkage is strongest when taxes paid are linked directly to a benefit for workers. When those taxes are used to provide benefits for nonworkers as well, the tax-benefit link is broken. Consider a new payroll tax that will be used to finance national health insurance for all citizens. As in our workers' compensation example, this tax will reduce labor demand. In this case, however, there will be no associated rise in labor supply, because one doesn't have to work to get the benefits financed by this tax. There is no link between paying taxes and receiving benefits; everyone receives the national health insurance, regardless whether they pay the tax. So standard tax analysis involving deadweight losses applies here.

## What Is the Empirical Evidence on Tax-Benefit Linkages?

There are numerous studies that have investigated the impact of social insurance contributions on wages and employment. Many of these studies compare wages and employment across states or groups of workers where social insurance contribution rates change. For example, [Gruber and Krueger \(1991\)](#) estimated the impact on wages and employment of changes in the costs of workers' compensation across states over time, and [Anderson and Meyer \(2000\)](#) studied the impact of changes in unemployment insurance payroll taxes across firms over time. Both studies concluded that, on average, the costs of financing these programs are largely paid through (shifted to) lower wages, with relatively little effect on employment.

Thus, the existing literature suggests that the cost of social insurance financing is borne by workers in the form of lower wages and not lower employment. The taxes that fund the social insurance programs do not appear to cause significant deadweight loss, as Summers's original analysis suggested.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *A Group-Specific Employer Mandate*

[Gruber \(1994\)](#) examined the impact on wages and labor supply of a group-specific mandated benefit, a benefit mandated for a specific group within the workplace. This paper studied the effect of state laws (and a follow-up federal law) in the mid-1970s that mandated the costs of pregnancy and childbirth be covered comprehensively. Before this time, health insurance plans provided very little coverage for the costs associated with normal pregnancy and childbirth, while providing generous coverage for other medical conditions. This distinction was viewed as discriminatory by some state governments, leading to the state laws mandating that pregnancy costs be covered as completely as other medical costs.

These laws significantly increased the insurance costs for women of child-bearing age in those states, thereby raising the costs of employing a specific group of workers (or their spouses, who may provide them with insurance). These workers became the treatment group for the analysis. There were two possible control groups: similar workers in other states that did not pass these laws or other groups of workers within the states that did pass these laws. Gruber's study compared the changes in wages and labor supply of the treatment group around the time of the passage of these laws to the changes in both of these control groups, using the type of difference-in-difference estimation techniques described in the [appendix to Chapter 14](#). The results show that the cost of this new mandate was fully passed on to the wages of the affected groups, with little effect on their labor supply.

In the wake of these state laws, the federal government passed the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, which mandated equal coverage of pregnancy and other medical conditions in all states. This law allowed for a "reverse" quasi-experimental analysis: now the states that had originally passed their own laws were the control group (because there was no change), and the states that had not yet passed laws were the treatment group (because they were now newly subject to this mandate). Gruber studied this "reverse" quasi-experiment as well and found similar results, confirming the conclusion that the costs of the mandate were fully passed through to wages.<sup>13</sup>

These findings have important implications for debates over group-specific mandates, such as mandated maternity leave (unpaid or paid time off for mothers or fathers when new children are born). These laws are typically criticized as lowering the demand for women of child-bearing age and reducing their employment prospects. The evidence from these studies suggests that the total employment of such groups will not fall; only their wages will fall. This outcome is good for

efficiency; there is no deadweight loss created by the regulations. The outcome may be viewed as bad from an equity perspective, however, because women are fully absorbing the cost of this new benefit in the form of lower wages.

## 20.5 Conclusion

The fundamental issue in designing tax policy is the equity–efficiency trade-off. In [Chapter 19](#) we discussed the distribution of the tax burden, or how taxes affect equity (the distribution of the economic pie). In this chapter we discussed how taxes affect efficiency (the size of the economic pie), and the implications of those effects for the optimal design of commodity and income tax systems. While this analysis can be complicated, understanding tax efficiency really comes down to remembering two key principles. First, the more elastically supplied or demanded the good, the larger the deadweight loss from the tax. Second, the higher the tax rate, the larger the incremental deadweight loss of taxation. Trading off these two considerations is the key to understanding the efficiency aspects of the tax policies that we analyze throughout the remainder of this book.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The efficiency cost of taxation is measured by the deadweight loss arising from reduced consumption of a good.
- This efficiency cost rises with the elasticities of supply and demand and with the square of the tax rate.
- The latter point implies that taxes have larger efficiency costs in the presence of preexisting distortions, such as externalities, subsidies, and existing taxes, and that progressive taxes have a larger efficiency cost than proportional taxes.
- Optimal commodity taxation involves trading off the desire to tax inelastically demanded goods at a higher rate against the desire to tax the broadest set of commodities and minimize overall tax rates, leading under some assumptions to the “inverse elasticity” rule of taxing goods in inverse proportion to their elasticity of demand.
- Optimal income taxation involves trading off the desire for equity against the distortion costs associated with taxing higher-income groups at a higher rate. Simulations suggest that, as a result, the optimal income tax system has flat or falling marginal tax rates but rapidly rising average tax rates.
- Accounting for tax-benefit linkages can reduce the measured deadweight loss of payroll taxation and increase the expected burden of payroll taxes on workers. Since such linkages are prominent in social insurance programs, both theory and evidence suggest that the burdens of those taxes are fully borne in the form of lower worker wages.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. The market demand for super-sticky glue is  $Q = 240 - 6P$  and the market supply is  $Q = -40 + 2P$ .
1. Calculate the deadweight loss of a tax of \$4 per unit levied on producers of super-sticky glue.
  2. How does deadweight loss change if the tax is levied on consumers of super-sticky glue?
2. The government of Washlovia wants to impose a tax on clothes dryers. In East Washlovia the demand elasticity for clothes dryers is  $-2.4$  while in West Washlovia the demand elasticity is  $-1.7$ . Where will the tax inefficiency be greater? Explain.
3. On a recent visit to Amsterdam, you noticed that houses facing the canals are tall, deep, and extremely narrow. Your host tells you that this is due to builders' desires to avoid taxes. Describe a tax system that would induce this kind of behavior.
4. Suppose that the government of Michconsin imposes a tax on cheese curd production. When will the efficiency costs of the tax be greater, in the short run or in the long run—and why?
5. State Representative Foard has just suggested levying a sizable per-garage-space tax on single family homes, arguing that garages, and especially multi-car garages, are an excellent indicator of the earnings of the residents. What are some potential problems with this tax? What changes in single-family homes might you predict if the new tax is implemented?
6. The city of Hamiltown decides to build a new stadium to attract a basketball team from the city of Jacksondale. One economic advisor suggests that the stadium should be financed by a 2-year sales tax of 10%, while another advisor suggests that the stadium should be financed with a 20-year sales tax of 1%. Assume the interest rate is zero. Which approach will yield a more efficient outcome? Why?
7. You are a consultant to the government of Buttony. The government has decided to cut taxes on one of the following: apples, bananas, or cantaloupe. The government wants your input on which fruit would be the best choice for a tax cut. It provides you with the following information. What is your recommendation, and why?

Good	Unit Price	Sales (thousands)	Unit Tax	Marginal Tax Revenue (thousands of dollars per \$1 additional tax)	Marginal Deadweight Loss (thousands of dollars per \$1 additional tax)
Apples	\$1	100	\$0.10	20	5
Bananas	\$2	100	\$0.25	30	20
Cantaloupe	\$4	50	\$0.15	10	20

8. Luxury goods often have much higher elasticities of demand than do staple goods like basic foods and clothing that are purchased by a broad base of people. Why, then, are governments more likely to tax luxuries than staple goods?
9.  Consider a social insurance program, such as unemployment insurance, that is financed by a payroll tax and for which only working individuals are eligible for benefits. Now suppose that policy makers decide to change the program so that *all* individuals become eligible. For example, suppose that the unemployment insurance rules are changed so that all individuals, regardless of their work history, are now eligible. In light of the empirical studies by [Gruber and Krueger \(1991\)](#) and [Anderson and Meyer \(2000\)](#) discussed in the text, what do you predict would happen to the *pre-tax* wages of workers? What would happen to the deadweight losses from the program?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

10. Suppose that in the country of Tributia a worker's supply of labor is given by  $H = 140W$ , and a firm's demand for labor by  $H = 2000 - 2W$ , where  $W$  is wage per hour, and  $H$  is quantity of hours worked.
- Suppose that the government of Tributia decides to impose an income tax. Calculate the deadweight loss that would be expected if the government imposes a proportional tax of 25% on all of the worker's earnings.
  - Suppose that the government of Tributia tries an experiment in which workers are randomly assigned to two groups. In Group A, the proportional tax is withheld from each paycheck, and in Group B, no tax is immediately withheld from paychecks, but instead the proportional tax is implemented by asking the worker to file and pay taxes on all wages earned at the end of each year.
- In each group, the proportional tax is the same, 25% of total earnings. The government finds that the equilibrium labor supply of Group A is reduced according to projections in part (a), while the equilibrium labor supply of Group B is 1,715 hours. What might explain this result?
11. The market demand for stuffed fleece rabbits is  $Q = 2,600 - 20P$ , and the government intends to place a \$4-per-bunny tax on stuffed fleece rabbit purchases. Calculate the deadweight loss of this tax when:
- Supply of stuffed fleece rabbits is  $Q = 400$ .
  - Supply of stuffed fleece rabbits is  $Q = 12P$ .
  - Explain why the deadweight loss calculations differ between (a) and (b).
12. Festwalia has two types of workers: low-skill workers, who earn \$10 per hour, and high-skill workers, who earn \$20 per hour. The government of Festwalia currently imposes a 20% proportional tax on all labor earnings. It is considering replacing this tax with a new, regressive tax. The new tax system will raise the same total revenue as the original system, but it will do so by taxing the low-skill workers at a rate above 20% and exempting the high-skill workers from paying any tax at all. Will this new, regressive tax system be more or less efficient than the old, proportional tax system?
13. Schmeeze and Schmoozle are two advisors for the government of Feldspar. Schmeeze says that since the elasticity of demand for granite countertops is  $-3$  and the elasticity of demand for sinks is  $-1.5$ , taxes should be raised entirely from granite countertops. Schmoozle argues that it is better to levy taxes on both goods anyway. Which advisor should the Feldspar government listen to? Why?
14. What is the theoretical justification for the Laffer curve? Based on the empirical evidence described in the text, should the United States raise or lower its tax rates in order to increase tax revenues? Explain.
15. The demand for snorkels in Berhama is given by  $Q_s = 500 - 8P_s$  and the supply of snorkels in Berhama is given by  $Q_s = 200 + 4P_s$ . The demand for kayaks is given by  $Q_k = 650 - 6P_k$  and the supply of kayaks is given by  $Q_k = 50 + 1.5P_k$ . Both goods are currently untaxed, but the government of Berhama needs to raise \$5,000 (to finance a new lighthouse) by taxing snorkels and kayaks. What tax should it levy on each of the two goods?
16.  Suppose that a state mandates that both women and men be provided family leave by their employers following the birth of a child.
- How would you empirically test how this policy change affects the relative wages of men and women in the state?
  - Based on the empirical evidence on group-specific employer mandates described in the text, what do you expect to happen to the relative wages of men and women in the state?
17. The government of Granita is thinking about imposing a very small tax on one or more of the following goods: anvils, books, and cardigans. Anvils and books are both produced in competitive markets with constant marginal costs, while

cardigans are produced by a monopoly with constant marginal costs. The elasticities of demand for the three goods are  $-3$ ,  $-1.5$ , and  $-1.2$ , respectively. What good or goods should the government put the very small tax on if it wants to minimize the deadweight burden?

- The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 20 The Mathematics of Optimal Taxation



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

In this appendix, we develop mathematically a number of points made intuitively and graphically in the text.

## Deriving the Formula for Deadweight Loss

The most straightforward means of computing the deadweight loss of a tax is to use the formula for the area of a triangle: **area =  $1/2 \times \text{base} \times \text{height}$ .** The base of the deadweight loss triangle is the change in quantity induced by the tax ( $\Delta Q$ ), and the height is the size of the tax, so

$$DWL = -1/2 \times \Delta Q \times \tau$$

The  $DWL$  is positive because quantity is falling ( $\Delta Q < 0$ ).

Recall from the appendix to [Chapter 19](#) that

$$\Delta Q/Q = \eta_s \times \Delta P/P \text{ and}$$

$$\Delta P = \frac{\eta_d}{\eta_s - \eta_d} \times \tau$$

Combining and rearranging these equations yields an equation for  $\Delta Q$ , the tax-induced change in quantity:

$$\Delta Q = \frac{\eta_s \eta_d}{\eta_s - \eta_d} \times \tau \times \frac{Q}{P}$$

Substituting this equation into the formula for  $DWL$ , and we obtain

$$DWL = -\frac{\eta_s \eta_d}{2(\eta_s - \eta_d)} \times \tau^2 \times \frac{Q}{P}$$

# Behavioral Responses to Taxation and Deadweight Loss: A Technical Point

Taxes have two effects: they redistribute income and they cause market participants to substitute untaxed activities for taxed activities. The deadweight loss of taxation arises only from the second of these effects, the actions that economic agents take to avoid taxation.

The best way to see the contrast between the distribution and substitution effects of taxation is to compare the types of taxes we have discussed thus far with a *lump-sum tax*, a fixed sum that a person pays in taxation independent of that person's income, consumption of goods and services, or wealth. A lump-sum tax would tax individuals a fixed amount regardless of their income, and there would be no way to change the amount of tax owed by changing one's behavior. In contrast, the taxes we have discussed thus far are *distortionary taxes*, whereby economic agents can change their tax payments by changing their behavior. A lump-sum tax is the most efficient way possible to raise revenues because individuals will not change their behavior in response to the tax.

It is unfair to compare the efficiency effects of a tax to a world without taxation because the government has some revenue requirement that is being met by taxation. As a result, to analyze tax efficiency in raising a given amount of revenue, we should compare the efficiency of any existing or proposed tax to the most efficient tax, the lump-sum tax. Lump-sum taxes have no substitution effects on behavior, only income effects. Thus, the efficiency cost of distortionary (non-lump-sum) taxes results only from the substitution effect of taxation, not the income effect.

To avoid counting changes in demand or supply due to income effects as distortionary, we cannot carry out efficiency analysis with standard demand and supply curves. For example, a standard demand curve would show demand falling from a lump-sum tax: consumers would be poorer because of higher prices (due to income effects). So the decrease in equilibrium quantity would appear to cause a deadweight loss, but this is not the case; a deadweight loss occurs only when individuals substitute across goods due to the tax.

To be technically accurate when looking at the efficiency costs of a tax, we should use a *compensated demand curve*, or a demand curve along which utility is constant, so that it reflects only the substitution effects of price changes. Similarly, when we compute the deadweight loss of taxation, we should not use the overall elasticity of demand but the *compensated elasticity of demand*, or the percentage change in quantity demanded in response to a percentage change in price, holding utility constant. A parallel point arises with supply curves; we should analyze supply responses to taxation using a *compensated supply curve* and the *compensated elasticity of supply*.

The distinction between the measured elasticity of demand or supply and the compensated elasticities is a clean one in theory but is often hard to carry out in practice. As a result, many of the studies that we will discuss in this set of tax chapters simply focus on measured (or *uncompensated*) elasticities rather than on the appropriate compensated elasticity.

# Deriving Optimal Commodity Tax Rates

The Ramsey optimal commodity tax problem is to minimize the deadweight loss associated with a set of commodity taxes, subject to a revenue-raising constraint

$$\min (DWL_1 + DWL_2 + DWL_3 + \cdots + DWL_n)$$

**subject to the revenue target:**  $R_1 + R_2 + R_3 + \cdots + R_n = \underline{R}$

where  $R_i$  stands for the revenues raised by tax  $i$ ,  $R$  is the government's total revenue target, and the indicators  $1, 2, \dots, n$  are the various commodities that can be taxed by the government. The government chooses a set of tax rates  $\tau_1, \tau_2, \dots, \tau_n$  to solve this maximization problem.

To solve this problem, we set up the *Lagrangian*, which is a mathematical formulation for constrained optimization. The Lagrangian is equal to the maximand (such as utility) minus the budget constraint times a multiplier,  $\lambda$ . Differentiating these expressions with respect to the tax rate on each commodity and setting them equal to zero gives us a set of equations that can be solved to yield the solution to the problem. This procedure is equivalent to the mathematics we used in the appendices to [Chapters 2](#) and [7](#), where we plugged the budget constraint into the utility function. In cases such as the Ramsey problem, however, we can't easily avail ourselves of this shortcut, so we must use the formal Lagrangian analysis.

In this Ramsey problem, the Lagrangian is

$$(DWL_1 + DWL_2 + DWL_3 + \cdots) - \lambda \times (R_1 + R_2 + R_3 + \cdots - \underline{R})$$

Differentiating these expressions with respect to the tax rate on each commodity and setting them equal to zero, we obtain expressions of the form (labeled *first order conditions*)

$$\begin{aligned} MDWL_1 &= \lambda MR_1 \\ MDWL_2 &= \lambda MR_2 \\ \text{etc. . .} \end{aligned}$$

where

$$\begin{aligned} MDWL &= \delta(DWL) / \delta\tau \\ MR &= \delta R / \delta\tau \end{aligned}$$

This implies the general Ramsey Rule: set  $MDWL_i / MR_i = \lambda$ , for all  $i$ .

From the previous, we know that the general deadweight loss formula is

$$DWL = -\frac{1}{2} \frac{\eta_s \eta_d}{(\eta_s - \eta_d)} \times \tau^2 \times \frac{Q}{P}$$

We can simplify by assuming that  $P = 1$ , and that there is a perfectly competitive

supply side ( $\eta_s = \text{infinity}$ ). Then the expression for  $DWL$  is

$$DWL = -1/2\eta_d Q\tau^2$$

From this, we can derive that

$$-MDWL = \delta DWL / \delta \tau = -\eta_d Q\tau$$

We also know that revenues  $= \tau \times Q$ , so that marginal revenues are simply  $Q$ . Thus, implementing the Ramsey Rule, we obtain

$$MDWL/MR = \lambda \rightarrow t = -1/\eta_d \times \lambda$$

## Deriving Optimal Income Tax Rates

The goal of optimal income tax analysis is to choose the pattern of tax rates across individuals that maximizes social welfare, subject to a revenue target. Thus, for a utilitarian SWF, the problem can be expressed as

$$\begin{aligned} \max \quad & V = U_1 + U_2 + \dots \\ \text{subject to} \quad & R_1 + R_2 + \dots = \underline{R} \end{aligned}$$

As above, we can set up a Lagrangian expression and solve this, yielding expressions of the form

$$MU_i / MR_i = \lambda$$

# Chapter 21 Taxes on Labor Supply



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

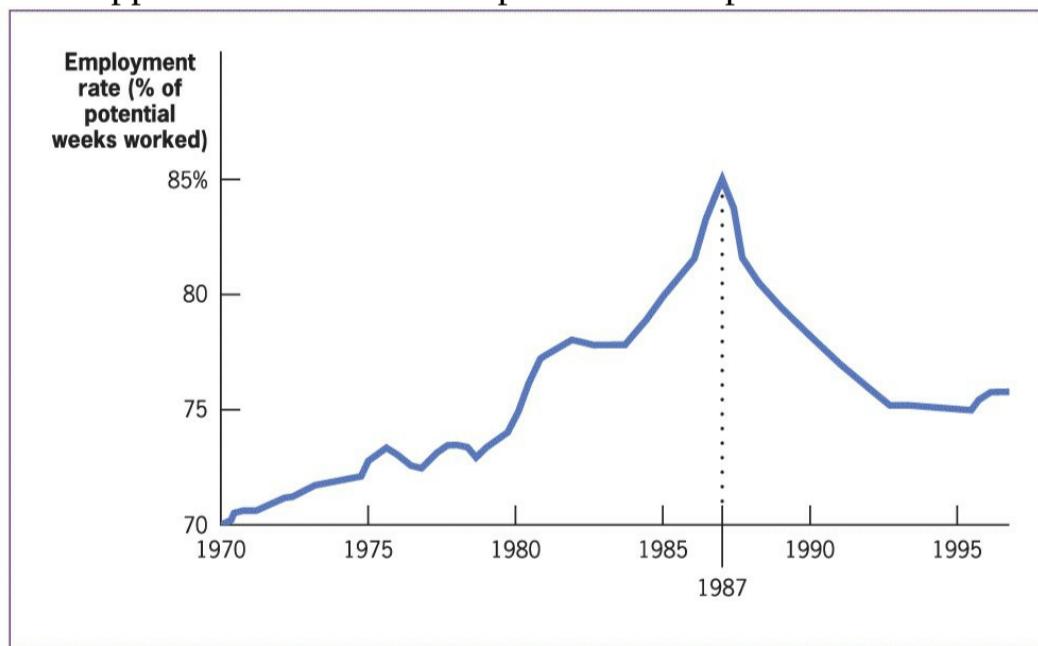
- [21.1 Taxation and Labor Supply—Theory](#)
- [21.2 Taxation and Labor Supply—Evidence](#)
- [21.3 Tax Policy to Promote Labor Supply: The Earned Income Tax Credit](#)
- [21.4 The Tax Treatment of Child Care and Its Impact on Labor Supply](#)
- [21.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How should taxes affect labor supply in theory, and how do they do so in practice?
- How does the Earned Income Tax Credit work, and how does it affect labor supply?
- What is the proper tax treatment of child care expenses?

Between 1987 and 1988, Iceland overhauled its tax system. Before the overhaul, workers had paid taxes on the previous year's income (much as we do in the United States), and the average tax burden was 14.5% of income, with marginal rates as high as 56.3%. The new system was "pay-as-you-go," with workers paying a flat 32.5% income tax as they earned each paycheck. During the transition to this new system, workers paid taxes on their 1986 income in 1987, and paid taxes on their 1988 income in 1988. Their 1987 income thus was never taxed! For one year, both average and marginal tax rates on labor income were zero.

Did this radical change in the tax burden actually affect workers' decisions about how many hours to work? [Bianchi et al. \(2001\)](#) investigated this issue by examining the response of Icelandic workers to this one-year "tax holiday," and they found large effects on labor supply and economic growth. On average, each 1% rise in after-tax wages led workers to work 0.4% more weeks than they had previously, so that by one measure, overall employment spiked in 1987 from 78 to 85%, as shown in [Figure 21-1](#). Real GDP also leapt from an annual growth rate of 4.3 to 8.5%. The effects were, however, transitory. By 1988, these figures had dropped back to levels comparable to the pre-tax-reform levels.



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■ FIGURE 21-1

Iceland's Supply-Side Experiment • For a single year in 1987, Icelandic citizens paid no tax on their income. The result was a noticeable one-year spike in the employment rate.

Data from: [Bianchi et al. \(2001\)](#).

This striking response to a change in tax policy shows that taxes can have effects on important decisions, such as how much to work. The existence of such responses highlights the tension between equity and efficiency in the design of government tax policy. As we saw in [Chapter 20](#), a society's desire for a more equitable distribution of income may lead to a

higher desired level of taxes, but the higher level of taxes may have a detrimental effect on the economy: higher taxes may discourage people from earning income and shrink the size of the economic pie on which those taxes can be levied. Whether this reduction in the tax base actually occurs depends on how responsive the size of the pie is to the taxes that are levied on various economic activities.

In an effort to understand how tax rates affect the economy, in the next three chapters we address the question of how responsive individual economic decisions are to taxation. We discuss three types of taxation: taxes on labor, taxes on savings, and taxes on wealth and risk taking. In each case, we begin by discussing the theory of how taxation might affect individual decisions, such as how hard to work, how much to save, and how much risk to take with one's investments. We then turn to the empirical evidence on the impact of taxation on these behaviors. Finally, in each case, we discuss key tax policies in the United States that affect these behaviors.



*"I suppose one could say it favors the rich, but, on the other hand, it's a great incentive for everyone to make two hundred grand a year."*

Lee Lorenz/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

This chapter begins with a discussion of the taxation of the earnings from work in the market, which economists generally refer to as *labor supply*. In this case, we draw on a rich body of evidence from both public finance and labor economics developed over the past three decades, which allows us to draw some fairly general and uncontroversial conclusions. We then turn to one of the most important current government tax policies to promote labor supply, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a wage subsidy program for low-income families. Studying the EITC presents an opportunity to apply the theoretical analysis of taxation and labor supply and to understand, based on solid empirical evidence, how government tax policy can affect labor supply in practice. Finally, we consider the appropriate tax treatment of child care expenditures, which may be a primary determinant of the work behavior of parents.

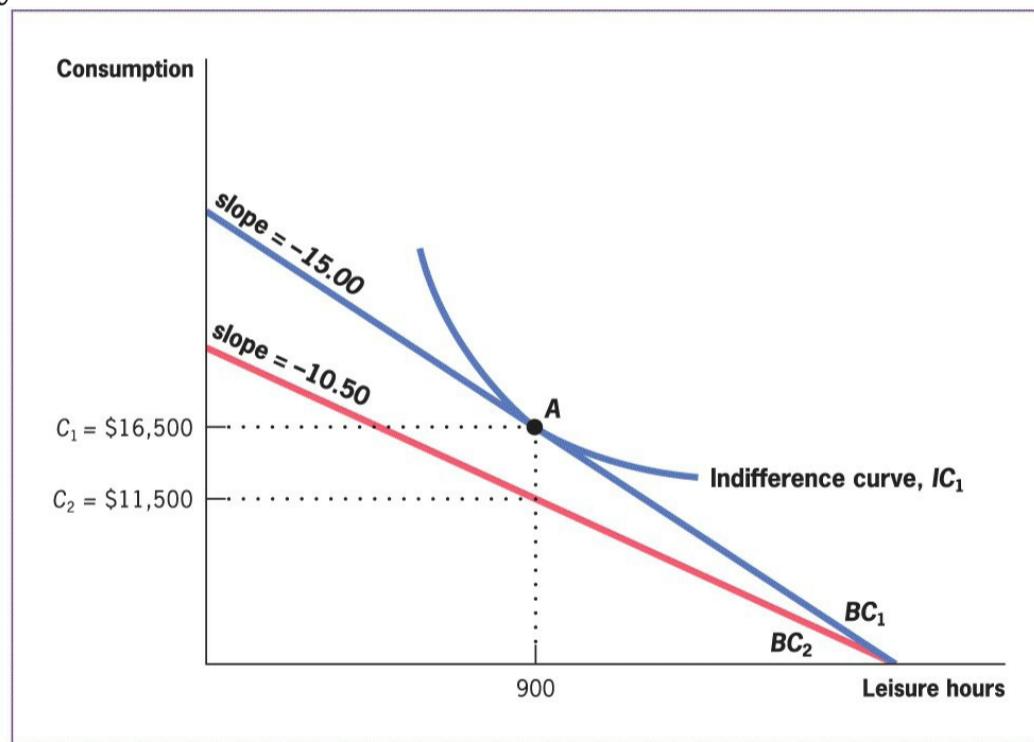
## 21.1 Taxation and Labor Supply—Theory

The optimal income tax analysis of [Chapter 20](#) illustrated the importance of understanding how labor supply responds to changes in taxation. If individuals greatly reduce their work effort as income taxes rise, income taxes could impose large deadweight losses on society.

### Basic Theory

The theoretical framework for assessing how income taxes affect labor supply is the same as that used to model the effect of cash welfare on labor supply in [Chapters 2](#) and [17](#). [Figure 21-2](#) illustrates Taylor's possible choices between hours of leisure and dollars of consumption. Recall that we solve for optimal leisure, and then compute labor as total possible hours per year minus hours of leisure. Recall also that before taxes the slope of the budget constraint, the wage rate (assumed to be \$15 per hour), is the price of leisure because it is the opportunity cost of taking leisure rather than working. Before taxes are imposed, Taylor enjoys an initial level of leisure of 900 and a level of consumption of  $C_1 = \$16,500$  (point A).

Now let's suppose that a tax  $\tau$  of 30% is imposed on each dollar of wages earned. The slope of Taylor's budget constraint is now the *after-tax wage*,  $\$15.00 * (1 - 0.3) = \$10.50$ , because this is what she (and all workers with the same gross wage) see as the monetary return for their work. A flat tax on earnings at rate  $\tau = 0.3$  causes the budget constraint to pivot inward from  $BC_1$  to  $BC_2$ . At the same amount of labor, 900 hours, and thus the same amount of leisure, Taylor can now consume fewer goods,  $C_2 = \$11,500$  because some of her income goes to tax payments.



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■ FIGURE 21-2

Taxation and the Consumption-Leisure Trade-Off • Before taxes are introduced, Taylor loses \$15.00 worth of consumption for each hour of leisure she takes. After tax  $\tau = 0.3$  is imposed, Taylor's after-tax wage is  $\$15.00 * (1 - 0.3) = \$10.50$ . Because some of Taylor's wages go to pay taxes, she now gets less consumption ( $C_2 = \$11,500$ ) for the same amount of work/leisure.

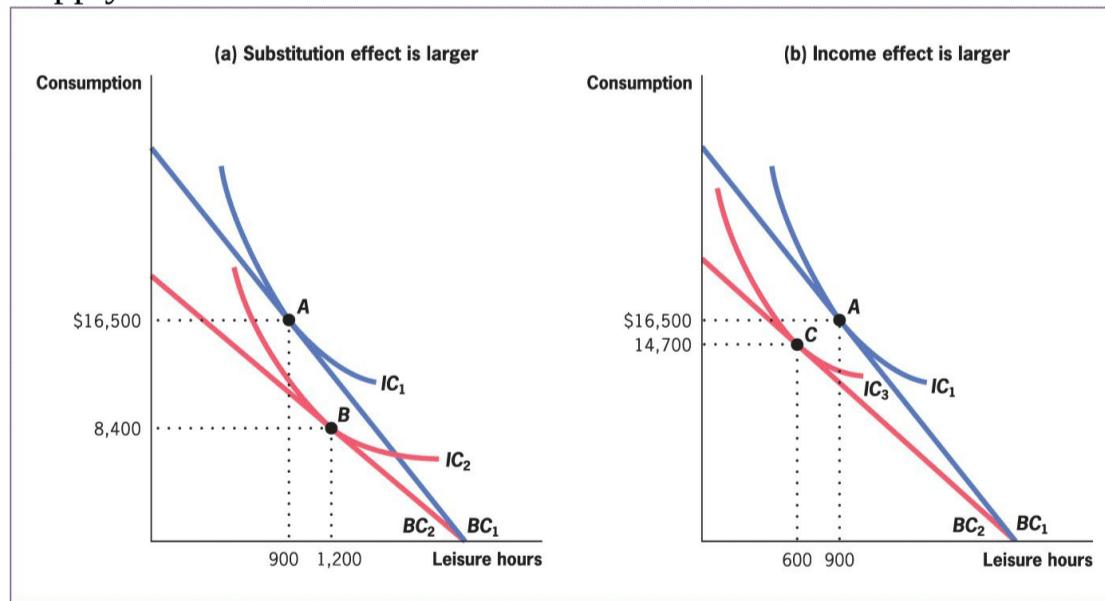
### Substitution and Income Effects on Labor Supply

We cannot tell for certain what will happen to labor supply as a result of this tax because it has two offsetting effects. The after-tax wage is the effective price of leisure. Because the after-tax wage is lower than the pre-tax wage, the price of leisure has fallen. The decrease in

the price of leisure will induce a *substitution effect* toward more leisure and less work. However, the decrease in the returns to work also means that Ava is poorer at any given level of labor supply. This reduction in income will have an *income effect* that causes her to buy fewer of all normal goods, including leisure; and fewer hours of leisure means more hours of work. Because the substitution and income effects on labor supply pull in opposite directions, we cannot predict clearly whether labor supply rises or falls in response to tax  $\tau$ .

 Quick Hint To understand the intuition of the income effect on labor supply, it is sometimes helpful to think about an individual's income target, her goal of earning a fixed amount of income. Imagine that the only reason that Taylor works is to buy four Java Chip Frappuccinos each week. If she earns \$5 per hour, and her beverages cost \$20, she will work four hours each week. If the government imposes a 20% tax on labor earnings, her after-tax wage will fall to \$4. To buy the same number of coffee drinks, Taylor will now have to work five hours per week. Thus, she works harder, even though her after-tax wage has fallen, because she has a target income she wants to earn. In this case, the income effect dominates the substitution effect, and the quantity of labor supplied increases.

The two panels of [Figure 21-3](#) illustrate two possible effects of taxing labor income. In panel (a), the substitution effect of taxation (which reduces the price of leisure, leading Taylor to desire more leisure) is larger than the income effect of lower after-tax income (which leads to less leisure). In this case, Taylor's leisure rises from 900 hours to 1,200 hours, implying lower labor supply. In panel (b), the income effect of the lower after-tax income is larger than the substitution effect of taxation, and Taylor works harder to earn more income so that she can afford more consumption. In this case, Taylor's leisure falls from 900 to 600, implying higher labor supply.



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 FIGURE 21-3

**Substitution Versus Income Effect** • In both panels, a tax on labor income shifts the budget constraint inward from  $BC_1$  to  $BC_2$ . (a) If the substitution effect of the change in the after-tax wage is larger, work is less attractive, and Taylor chooses to have more leisure, moving to 1,200 hours of leisure at point B. (b) If the income effect is larger, Taylor feels poorer and thus reduces her leisure (increases her work hours) in order to regain some of that lost income, moving to 600 hours of leisure at point C.

These two possibilities imply different shapes for the supply curve in the labor market. If substitution effects dominate, as in the first case, then the labor supply curve is the typical

upward-sloping shape we have discussed thus far. If income effects dominate, as in the second case, then the labor supply curve will slope downward, with higher wages leading individuals to supply a lower quantity of labor. It seems very unlikely that labor supply curves can be downward sloping everywhere because income effects on labor supply are proportional to hours worked before the wage change. If individuals have not been working at all, and wages are taxed, then there is a substitution effect on their labor supply decision, but no income effect: they can't be poorer because they weren't earning anything before taxation. Thus, at low levels of labor supply, it seems unlikely that income effects could be larger than substitution effects. At higher levels of labor supply, where there is a larger income loss from taxation of wages, income effects could become larger than substitution effects, and taxation could lead to more, not less, labor supply.

## Limitations of the Theory: Constraints on Hours Worked and Overtime Pay Rules

The basic theory of taxation's effect on labor supply assumes an idealized view of the labor market, where individuals can adjust their hours freely and incrementally as government tax policy changes. In most labor markets, however, individuals cannot adjust their hours of work freely to find the exact tangency of their indifference curve and budget constraint. Firms may, for example, require workers to be on the job for a certain number of hours. This restriction could be due to *production complementarities*, features of the production process that make it important to have many workers on the job at the same time. A worker who is part of a production line in a manufacturing plant can't work only 32 hours per week, even if that is his optimum, when all the other workers on the line are working 40 hours per week.

Another constraint on increasing worker hours is the existence of **overtime pay rules**, which mandate that workers paid by the hour be paid one and a half times their regular hourly pay if they work more than 40 hours per week.<sup>1</sup> These laws make it very expensive for firms to have workers work more than 40 hours per week, which means that they will be reluctant to allow workers to do so even if that is the optimum for the worker. Overall, such hour constraints will force workers toward uniform work schedules, thus lowering the responsiveness of hours worked to after-tax wages.

### **overtime pay rules**

Workers in many jobs must legally be paid one and a half times their regular hourly pay if they work more than 40 hours per week.

## 21.2 Taxation and Labor Supply—Evidence

There is an extensive econometric literature that estimates the effects of taxes on labor supply. This literature typically makes a distinction between primary and secondary earners.

**Primary earners** are the family members who are the main source of labor income for a household, while **secondary earners** are other workers in the family. Because primary earners are the family members most attached to the labor force, secondary earners are likely to be the family members in charge of other household activities, such as child care.

**primary earners**

Family members who are the main source of labor income for a household.

**secondary earners**

Workers in the family other than the primary earners.

The general conclusion from the literature is twofold. First, the work decisions of primary earners are not very responsive to changes in their wages (such as those induced by taxes). For every 10% reduction in after-tax wages, primary earners work about 1% fewer hours, for an elasticity of labor supply with respect to after-tax wages of 0.1. These studies also find that secondary earners are much more responsive to wages (and thus taxes), with elasticities of labor supply with respect to after-tax wages typically estimated to range from 0.5 to 1; for secondary earners, each 1% rise in after-tax wages increases the labor supply by 0.5 to 1%. Most of the response of secondary earners comes from the decision to work at all (labor force participation), with a smaller part of the response coming from the decision over how many hours to work.

These findings are sensible in the historical context. The elasticity of labor supply with respect to after-tax wages is determined by the availability of substitute options for labor supply: when there are better substitutes for work, labor supply will be more elastic. Traditionally, primary earners were males who had few outside alternatives to work, given the expectation that primary earners in the United States would work fulltime. However, secondary earners, traditionally females, had a natural outside option: providing child care. Thus, they were more elastic in their decisions to supply labor. The findings are also sensible given the hour constraints discussed in the previous section: men traditionally had the types of production-sector jobs for which hour constraints were important, so that they had little leverage for adjusting their hours to a desired level. Women traditionally worked in service-sector jobs, for which work hours were more flexible.

## Limitations of Existing Studies

One important issue raised by this literature is the blurring of lines between primary and secondary earners. Although only 31.9% of married women worked in 1970, by 2013, 57% were working. Almost half of married couples in the United States now have both partners working, while of the 27% of families with only one earner, 19% of earners were husbands and just 7% wives. In only 29% of married couples where both spouses have earnings does the woman earn more over the year than the man.<sup>2</sup> This makes it hard to decide who should be called the primary earner and who should be called the secondary earner when analyzing labor markets. [Blau and Kahn \(2007\)](#) found that the married female labor supply elasticity fell by half from 1980 to 2000, from an elasticity of 0.8 in 1980 to an elasticity of 0.4 by 2000. This finding indicates that as secondary earners become more established in the labor force, their wage elasticities are falling toward those of primary earners, and they are becoming less responsive to taxation in their work decisions. More recent research supports this conclusion and finds that secondary earners' responses to taxation are becoming more similar to the responses of primary earners ([Chetty et al., 2011](#)).

## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Estimating the Elasticity of Labor Supply*

Four approaches have been used to estimate the elasticity of labor supply with respect to the after-tax wage:

*Cross-Sectional Linear Regression Evidence:* The first type of evidence comes from cross-sectional studies using linear regression analysis of the type discussed in [Chapter 3](#). These studies estimate regressions of labor supply as a function of the after-tax wage and other control variables. Models such as these typically estimate a large effect of after-tax wages on the labor supply of secondary earners, but a very small (or even negative) effect on primary earners.

These cross-sectional regression analyses suffer, however, from potentially important bias in estimating the effects of wages on labor supply. Recall from [Chapter 3](#) that bias can arise whenever there are factors that differentiate the treatment group (high-wage individuals) from the control group (low-wage individuals) that are correlated with the decision to supply labor. In fact, such bias seems likely. Those individuals who earn high wages may be people with driven personalities who would work long hours no matter the wage. Because the included  $X$  variables can't effectively control for underlying "drive" in this regression analysis, there is a bias to these estimates of the impact of wages on labor supply.

*Experimental Evidence:* Another approach suggested in [Chapter 3](#) for assessing the causal impact of taxation on labor supply is a randomized experiment. In fact, one of the most significant social experiments in the United States was a randomized evaluation of a negative income tax (NIT) system. The NIT experiment was run between 1968 and 1976, initiated by the Office of Economic Opportunity, a federal agency established by President Lyndon Johnson. In this study, randomly selected individuals were placed into treatment and control groups. For the treatment group, the government replaced their existing tax schedule with a fixed income guarantee, with a benefit reduction/tax rate. For example, a family of four might be offered a \$4,000 guarantee (at the time, half of the poverty level, which was about \$8,000 for a family of that size) and a benefit reduction/tax rate of 50%. If a family had no income, it would receive \$4,000; once it had income of \$8,000, it would receive nothing, and half of any income above \$8,000 would be paid in tax. The amount of the guarantee and the reduction rate were randomly varied across treatment groups in various parts of the country, and the results for each treatment group were compared to the other treatment groups and to the control groups. Because assignment to treatment and control groups was random, this study provided a means by which economists could understand how income and variation in the after-tax wage affect labor supply.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence from the NIT experiment is primarily focused on males. The findings are surprisingly consistent with the cross-sectional regression estimates. The overall responsiveness of male labor supply to after-tax wages is small, with the elasticity of labor supply with respect to after-tax wages estimated at around 0.1.

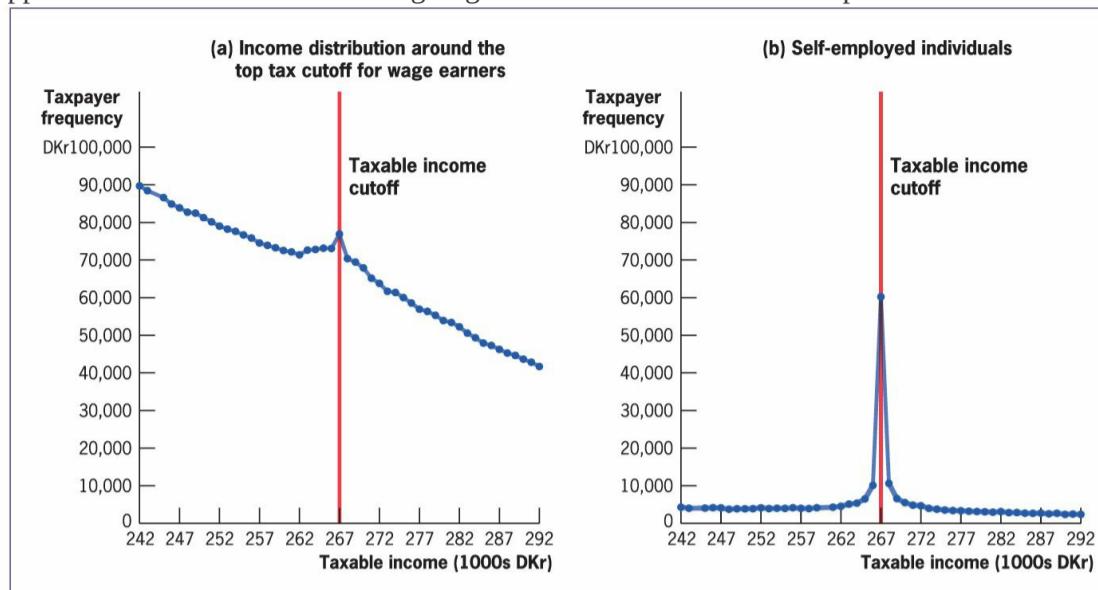
*Quasi-Experimental Evidence:* A third approach to estimating the elasticity of labor supply is to use quasi-experimental studies of the type discussed in [Chapter 3](#). Perhaps the best known of these studies is Nada Eissa's studies of the impact of the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (TRA 86) on labor supply. [Eissa \(1995\)](#) noted that this major tax reform lowered the tax rates on the very-highest-income taxpayers much more than it lowered rates on those who had moderately high incomes. Her treatment group, therefore, was wives of very-high-earning men (above the 99th percentile of the earnings distribution), whose tax rates were greatly reduced by this tax law change. The problem that she faced was that other factors were changing over time that would naturally cause the labor supply of high-earning women to increase (e.g., increasing opportunities for women in the labor force during the late 1980s). To deal with this problem, she compared this treatment group to a control group of wives of moderately high-earning men (at the 75th percentile of the earnings distribution), who did not see much change in their tax rates.

Eissa pursued a "difference-in-difference" approach to analyzing this quasi-experiment, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#): she compared the change in labor supply from before and after TRA 86 for wives of very-high-earning men, who saw a large reduction in tax rates, to the change in labor supply over this same period for wives of moderately-high-earning men, who saw little change in their tax rates. She found that labor supply went up significantly for the wives of men who experienced a reduction in tax rates, relative to the less-rich group, which did not experience a reduction in tax rates: each 10% rise in after-tax wages led to an 8% greater labor supply by wives. Using the same approach, Eissa found that these tax changes had little effect on the labor supply of the very-high-income men, relative to a control group of somewhat less-high-income men. [Crossley and Jeon \(2007\)](#) found similar results for a tax reform in Canada that greatly reduced the taxation of wives of high-earning husbands.

*Evidence from "Bunching" Around Jumps in the Tax Schedule:* The newest approach that is being applied to estimate taxation's effect on labor supply is to focus on a particular feature of tax schedules: a jump in a tax schedule that implies very large marginal tax rates on additional earnings. For example, [Chetty et al. \(2011\)](#) studied the case of Denmark, which had a very large jump around its top income tax bracket. In the year 2000, for example, workers who earned just below 267,600 kroner paid a tax rate of 45% on each krone earned; but for earnings above 267,601 kroner, they paid a tax rate of 63%. Given this jump, one would expect that workers who have flexibility in their earnings around this point will endeavor to push more of their earnings below the limit to avoid being taxed at the higher rate.

Chetty et al. used detailed data on the reported wage earnings of workers in Denmark to evaluate how they responded to this rate increase. The findings for 1997 are illustrated in [Figure 21-4](#). Each panel of this graph shows the density of the taxpayer distribution at each income level; that is, the share of the sample that reports income at each level. Each dot on the graph represents the number of taxpayers earning exactly that income level, and the vertical line shows where the tax rate rises. The graph focuses in on the range of 25,000 kroner on either side of this line. If there is no response to the rise in the

tax rate, then this distribution should smoothly decline as fewer and fewer taxpayers have higher and higher incomes. But instead what is apparent is that there is a “bunching” right before the increase to the top tax bracket.



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FIGURE 21-4

**Distribution of Incomes Around a Tax Rate Increase** • This figure illustrates the effect of taxes on labor supply by showing how earners “bunch” their earnings right before taxes increase to minimize the amount of taxes they have to pay. In panel (a), we see that the number of wage-earning taxpayers with taxable incomes steadily decreases as incomes grow larger. However, there is a break in the trend between those earning 262,000 Danish kroner (DKr) and those earning 267,000 DKr, the income at which the tax rate increases, with a sizeable “bunching” of taxpayers right before that cutoff. Panel (b) shows that the number of self-employed taxpayers filing with high incomes is relatively low compared to wage earners, but they show far more responsiveness to the tax rate increase.

Data from: [Chetty et al. \(2011\)](#).

In panel (a), we see that for those who are wage earners (i.e., whose income is reported by their employers and who may have less control over their hours and earnings), there is noticeable bunching right before the tax rate increase line, and a particularly large jump in the number of filers right at the line. Chetty et al. then interpreted what this evidence implies for the elasticity of labor supply with respect to (after-tax) wages, where labor supply is measured by amount of earnings. Despite this impressive graphical evidence, the implied elasticities are modest (less than 0.025); tax increases that lower after-tax wages don’t much affect labor supply. This is consistent with modest responses to taxes for primary earners, although the elasticities are lower than estimated elsewhere for married women.

In contrast, panel (b) shows that for those who are self-employed (i.e., who control their own hours, earnings, and reporting of income), there is an enormous jump in the number of filers right at the point that rates increase. This result implies an elasticity of reported earnings in the range of 0.25, far greater than the 0.025 for wage earners. It is unclear, however, whether this larger response to the tax rate increase reflects larger labor supply responses by the self-employed or a change in the income that the self-employed report to tax authorities (a distinction we discuss in [Chapter 25](#)).

Another important limitation of this literature has been its focus on only a subset of the possible measures of labor supply: labor force participation and hours of work. In fact, other measures of labor supply might respond to taxation. For example, suppose that you can earn a higher wage by providing more effort per hour of work at your job, but this effort is costly, so you will provide more effort only if the rewards in terms of higher wages are great enough. When tax rates are low, you may put in this effort because the after-tax wage is high enough to reward you for the effort. Once tax rates rise, however, the after-tax wage may not be enough of a reward to offset the costs of increased effort, and you may not put in the effort. Similarly, suppose that you are considering two jobs: in one, you are more productive but more stressed out, and in the other, you are less productive but more relaxed (which, we’ll assume, you prefer!). You will take the higher-stress job only if the after-tax wage earned is high enough to compensate you for the higher level of stress. In this example, as tax rates rise, you will be less likely to take the more-stressful, higher-paying job. Another measure of labor supply that might respond to changes in taxes is the decision over how much *human*

*capital* to obtain; the effects of taxes in this realm, which are more complicated, are discussed in [Chapter 23](#).

What matters for the social efficiency consequences of taxation is how taxes affect the *total product* of society. If individuals don't change their work hours as a result of taxation, but take less productive jobs or work less hard per hour, then taxation distorts individual labor supply decisions and reduces total social efficiency. In [Chapter 25](#), we will come back to the question of how total incomes (not just hours of work) are affected by taxation. It is worth noting, however, that the [Chetty et al. \(2011\)](#) research reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box focused on total earnings, not just hours worked, and found small elasticities even using this broader measure.

## 21.3 Tax Policy to Promote Labor Supply: The Earned Income Tax Credit

In the previous sections, we discussed in general how income tax rates can affect the labor supply decisions of primary and secondary earners. In this section we apply those lessons to study the effects of the **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)**, an income tax policy aimed specifically at low-income wage earners. The EITC subsidizes the wages of low-income earners to accomplish two goals: to redistribute resources to lower-income groups and to increase the amount of labor supplied by these groups.

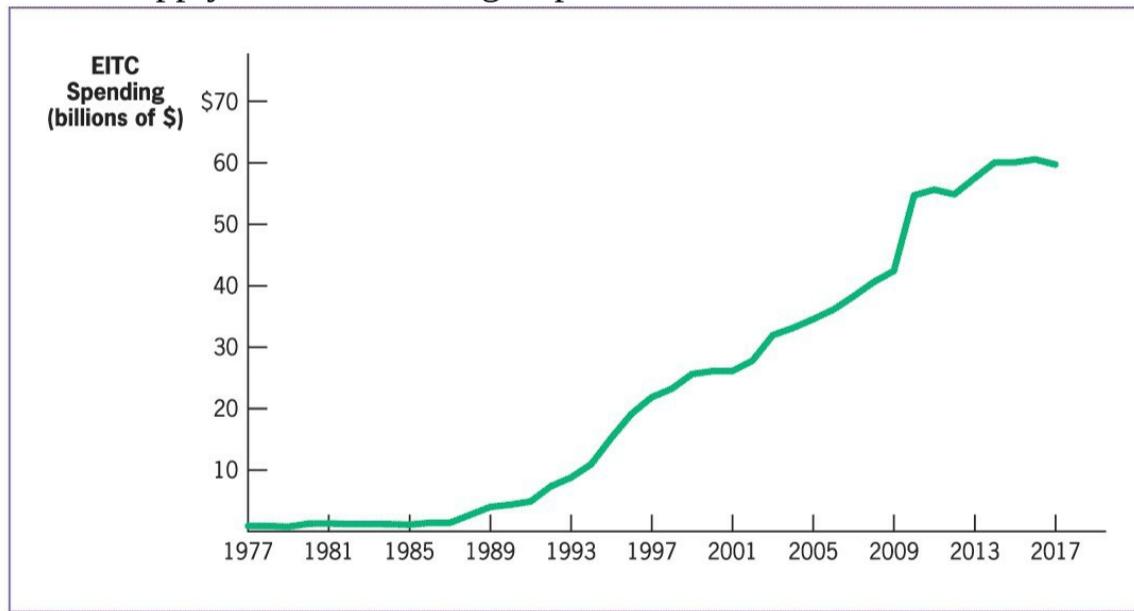
**Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)**

A federal income tax policy that subsidizes the wages of low-income earners.

In [Chapter 17](#), we discussed the standard trade-off in programs that redistribute income: they increase vertical equity by redistributing but may lower social efficiency by reducing the incentives for lower-income groups to earn income. The EITC holds out the promise of breaking this “iron triangle.” By redistributing income through wage subsidies, the program aims to increase vertical equity and promote work among low-income populations.

### Background on the EITC

The EITC was introduced in 1976 and has grown tremendously over time, as shown in [Figure 21-5](#). The federal government now spends around \$60 billion annually on the EITC, making it the nation’s single largest cash anti-poverty program.<sup>4</sup> The EITC has clearly been successful in vertical equity terms: more than 90% of its benefits go to those with incomes below \$30,000. In this section, we review evidence on the other goal of the program: to promote the labor supply of low-income groups.



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■ FIGURE 21-5

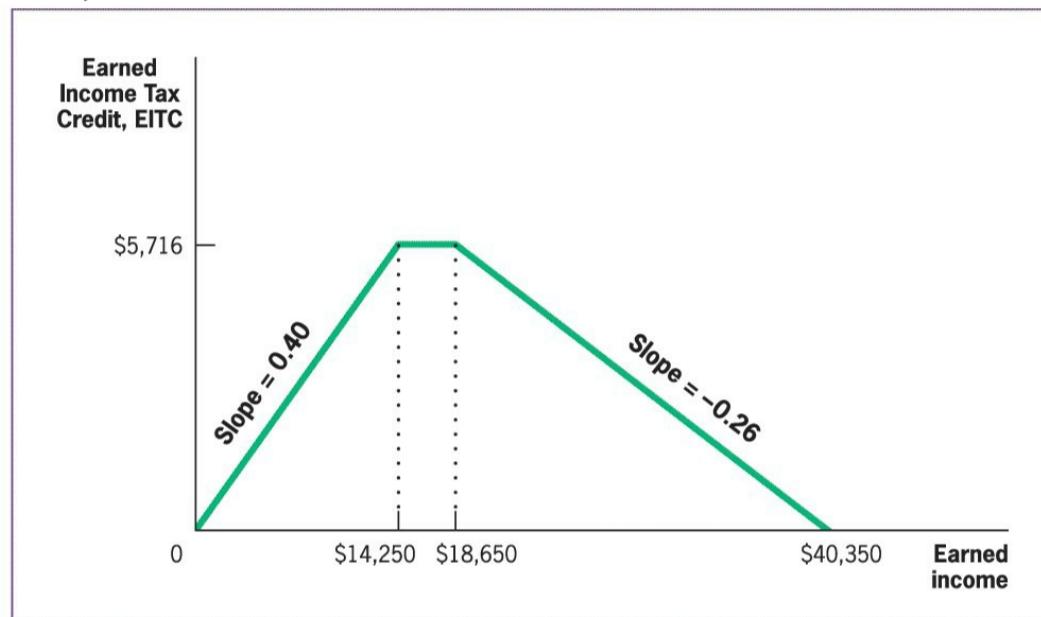
The Growth of the Earned Income Tax Credit • The EITC program has grown from less than \$1 billion in 1976 to nearly \$60 billion today. Numbers are measured in current dollars.

Data from: [Office of Management and Budget \(2018\)](#), Table 8.5.

To be eligible for the EITC, a family must have annual earnings greater than zero and below about \$46,010 if supporting one child, \$51,492 if supporting two children, or \$54,884 if supporting more than two children. A family that supports no children must have earnings greater than zero and below about \$20,950. For childless families, the EITC is significantly

smaller (about 15% of the maximum amount that a family with one child can receive). Importantly, for all types of families, the EITC is *refundable*: even if the family owes no other taxes, it can still qualify for this credit, and the government will send the family a check for the amount as a tax rebate.<sup>5</sup>

The current structure of the EITC is illustrated in [Figure 21-6](#) for Stacey, a single earner with two children. For the first \$14,250 of Stacey's earnings, the government pays her 40¢ per dollar of wages earned (40%), up to a maximum credit of \$5,716 (40% of \$14,250). So the slope of the first segment in [Figure 21-6](#) is 0.4. For the next \$4,400 of earnings (up to a total of \$18,650), the credit is held constant at \$5,716, so the graph is flat between \$14,250 and \$18,650. Once Stacey's earnings exceed \$18,650 however, the government begins to reduce this credit, at a rate of about 26¢ per dollar earned (26%), so that for those earning \$40,350 and above, there is no EITC.



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■ FIGURE 21-6

The Earned Income Tax Credit • For the first \$14,250 of earned income, Stacey receives an EITC payment of 40¢ per dollar of earnings, to a maximum of \$5,716. Between \$14,250 and \$18,650 of earnings, the EITC payment is flat at \$5,716. From \$18,650 to \$40,350 of earnings, the EITC payment falls by about 26¢ per dollar earned, until it reaches zero.

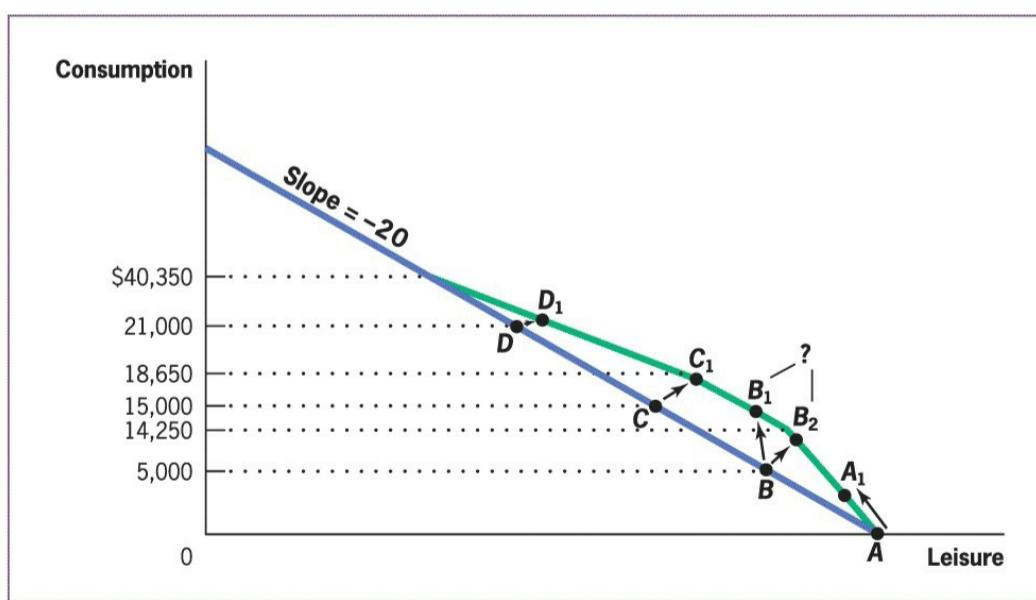
## Impact of EITC on Labor Supply: Theory

Like most income tax policies, the EITC has both income and substitution effects on labor supply decisions. This can be seen by adding the EITC to our standard consumption-leisure trade-off diagram, as in [Figure 21-7](#) (the figure is not drawn to scale in order to provide space to illustrate the labor supply effects clearly). The blue line is the original budget constraint before the EITC is introduced, assuming a wage rate of \$20 per hour; the green line represents the new budget constraint after the EITC is added (until \$40,350, at which point it reverts to the old blue budget constraint). This figure illustrates the impact of the EITC on four distinct groups:

1. For people not in the labor force at all, such as person A, the EITC will likely raise their labor supply because the only way they can get the credit is to enter the labor force. The EITC has no income effect on this group because they start with no labor income. The EITC does have a substitution effect, however: by raising the returns for being in the labor force at any earnings level below \$40,350, it encourages nonworkers to enter the

labor force, moving to point  $A_1$ .

2. People already in the labor force who earn less than \$14,250, such as person  $B$  earning \$5,000, are on the upward-sloping “phase-in” portion of the EITC schedule, receiving more EITC for each hour of work. The effects on this group’s labor supply are ambiguous. The subsidy has substitution effects leading to more work because each hour of work brings a higher wage, but the subsidy also has income effects that lead to less work because workers are wealthier as a result of this subsidy. If substitution effects dominate, workers will move to a point such as  $B_1$ , with leisure falling and labor supply increasing; if income effects dominate, workers will move to a point such as  $B_2$ , with leisure rising and labor supply falling.
3. People already in the labor force and earning between \$14,250 and \$18,650, such as person  $C$  earning \$15,000, are on the “flat portion” of the EITC schedule, receiving the same amount of EITC no matter how little or how much they work within this range. This benefit configuration amounts to a parallel shift outward in the budget constraint, which will lower labor supply. Because the EITC does not raise their hourly wage for additional hours of work, there is no substitution effect. Because they are richer from the subsidy earned on past hours of work, however, the income effect may lower the number of hours that they work, moving them to a point such as  $C_1$ .
4. People already in the labor force earning between \$18,650 and \$40,350, such as person  $D$  earning \$21,000, are on the downward-sloping “phase-out” part of the EITC schedule, where the amount of their EITC is falling as people work more. This outcome causes the slope of the budget constraint to fall relative to the previous segments. The substitution effect now works to reduce labor supply because the government transfer falls with each additional hour of work, and the income effect continues to work to reduce labor supply because there is still some transfer of income to the worker. So labor supply definitely falls for this group, moving to a point such as  $D_1$ .



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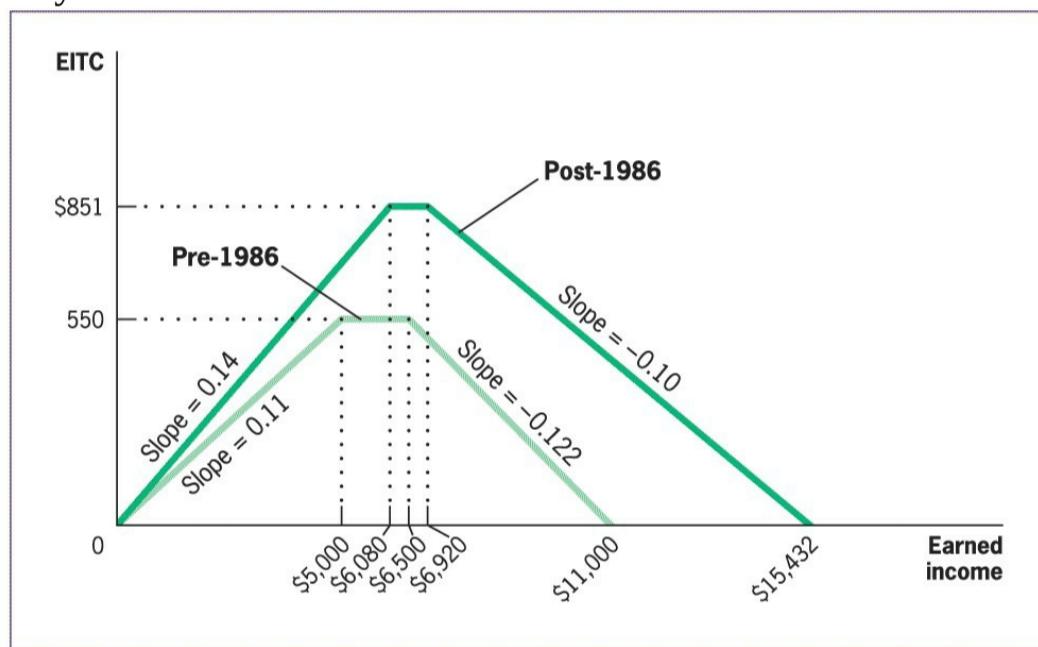
■ FIGURE 21-7

**EITC’s Effect on Labor Supply** • The EITC unambiguously raises the labor supply of those not working (such as person  $A$ , who moves to point  $A_1$ ); has an ambiguous effect on the labor supply of those with low earnings, who receive the wage subsidy (such as person  $B$ , who may move to either point  $B_1$  or point  $B_2$ ); reduces the labor supply of those on the flat maximum subsidy (such as person  $C$ , who moves to point  $C_1$ ); and reduces the labor supply of those on the phase-out portion (such as person  $D$ , who moves to point  $D_1$ ). Note that the figure is not to scale.

If we put all these groups together, the theory's prediction about the net impact of the EITC on the total labor supply of low-income populations is ambiguous. This ambiguity has motivated many studies of the EITC's labor supply effects.

## Impact of EITC on Labor Supply: Evidence<sup>6</sup>

The empirical literature on the impact of the EITC has focused on studying how changes in the structure of the EITC over time have affected labor supply. An example of this is shown in [Figure 21-8](#), which illustrates the change in the EITC due to TRA 86. Before this law change, the EITC was much more modest than it is today, with a subsidy rate of only 11%, a maximum credit of only \$550, and a phase-out rate of 12.2%. The 1986 law raised the subsidy rate to 14% and the maximum credit to \$851, and lowered the phase-out rate to 10%. The combination of the higher maximum credit and the slower phase-out led to a large expansion in eligibility for the credit: workers with earnings between \$11,000 and \$15,432 became eligible for the first time. Note, however, that both of these programs were much less generous than the current EITC ([Figure 21-6](#)) because there have been even larger expansions since 1986, particularly in 1993. Also, unlike today, both before and after TRA 86, the EITC was available only to families with children.



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■ FIGURE 21-8

**Changes in the EITC Structure** • The Tax Reform Act of 1986 changed the structure of the EITC, raising the subsidy rate, increasing the maximum rate, and reducing the phase-out rate, so that a wider range of earnings was eligible for the subsidy. These changes in turn allowed economists to test the effects of the EITC by comparing those who were affected by these changes to those who were not.

Data from: [Eissa and Leibman \(1996\)](#).

The post-1986 expansion in EITC generosity had ambiguous effects on labor supply. For those not working, there was a clear increase in the return to work, so labor supply should have increased. For those already working, the substitution effect toward *more* work was strengthened, both by increasing the subsidy rate along the phase-in portion and by reducing the rate at which the subsidy was phased out. At the same time, the income effect toward *less* work was strengthened by increasing the maximum level of the EITC from \$550 to \$851. Moreover, recalling the discussion of the iron triangle in [Chapter 17](#), a new set of individuals for whom the EITC had been previously irrelevant (those earning between \$11,000 and \$15,432) were now eligible, and for those individuals, there were income and substitution effects, both of which led to a lower labor supply.

The literature assessing the effect of the EITC has reached several clear conclusions, discussed in upcoming sections.

## Effects on Labor Force Participation

Most studies in this area have examined the impact of the EITC on the labor force participation of single mothers (i.e., on their decision to work). There is a strong consensus across these studies that the EITC has played an important role in increasing the share of single mothers who work. For example, as described in the Empirical Evidence box, [Eissa and Leibman \(1996\)](#) estimated that single mothers were 1.4 to 3.7 percentage points more likely to work as a result of an expansion of the EITC in 1986.

There is growing international evidence on the impact of labor market subsidies of this type. [Blundell and Hoynes \(2004\)](#) summarized evidence from an EITC-like program in the United Kingdom and found that the effects were in the same direction as the effects of the EITC, but smaller. They argue that this is because the expansions in the UK program were accompanied by contemporaneous expansions in programs that benefitted those who do not work, offsetting the net gains from expanding work incentives. [Bravo and Rau \(2013\)](#) studied a wage subsidy program for youth in Chile and found very large increases in labor force participation in the first year that were somewhat mitigated over time. Thus, the general finding appears to be that EITC-like wage subsidies increase labor force participation, although the magnitude may vary.

## Effects on Hours of Work

Following the theory that we just discussed, the 1986 expansion in the EITC would have been expected to increase labor force participation, but it might also have reduced hours worked by those already in the labor force, particularly people with incomes in the phase-out range. In most of that range, the marginal tax rate on additional earnings was 42.5% (a 15% federal marginal tax rate, a 15.3% payroll tax, and a 12.2% phase-out rate for the EITC). This high tax rate might have discouraged labor supply. Eissa and Leibman also examined the impact of the EITC expansion on hours of work among those in the labor force, and, surprisingly, they found no effect. That is, the wage subsidy of the EITC has had a large effect on getting people into the labor force; however, once people are in the labor force and working, taxes on marginal earnings through the EITC don't have a huge effect on how many hours they work. This outcome could occur because the decision to participate in the labor force with respect to wage subsidies is elastic, but the decision on how many hours to supply with respect to the taxation of wages is not elastic. Alternatively, this outcome could occur because individuals in the phase-out income range don't really understand the complicated disincentives of the phaseout, so they don't respond to it by cutting back their work hours despite the financial incentives to do so.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *The Effect of the EITC on Single-Mother Labor Supply*

As noted, studies of the effect of the EITC on the single-mother labor supply typically exploit quasi-experimental changes in the nature of the EITC over time. One example of this analysis is the paper by [Eissa and Leibman \(1996\)](#), who studied the major expansion of the EITC in 1986 just discussed. Eissa and Leibman studied the impact of the EITC policy change by comparing the labor supply of single women with children (the treatment group, which was affected by this policy change) to the labor supply of single women without children (the control group, for whom the EITC was not available in this era, although they became eligible in the 1990s). The researchers found a large effect of the EITC expansions on the labor supply of single mothers: they estimated such women were 1.4 to 3.7 percentage points more likely to work as a result of this program.

Although this is an interesting set of findings, one could argue that single women without children do not form a valid control group for single women with children, causing bias in the estimates of the EITC. This could arise if any other factors besides the EITC were changing over this period in a way that affected these groups differently. For example, over this

period, there was an increasing acceptance of mothers of small children working for pay, which could have led single mothers to enter the labor force at a higher rate even without the EITC expansion.

Eissa and Leibman's paper, as well as work by [Meyer and Rosenbaum \(2000\)](#), proposed a series of additional tests to confirm that these labor supply changes are true EITC effects. These tests seek to provide additional treatment-control comparisons that can confirm the causal effect of the EITC, much as with the study of unemployment insurance in [Chapter 14](#). For example, there were additional expansions of the EITC in 1993, which were modest for families with only one child but much larger for families with two or more children. Thus, an alternative difference-in-difference strategy is to compare the labor supply of single mothers with two or more children (the treatment group) to the labor supply of those with only one child (the control group) around the 1993 change in the EITC. Because both groups of women have children, this comparison would be free of any bias caused by changing norms about working mothers. These additional tests confirmed the large role of the EITC in increasing the single-mother labor supply.

## Impact on Married Couples

Although the EITC appears to have positive effects for the labor supply of single mothers, it might have negative impacts on a married couple's labor supply decisions. Consider a married couple making a sequential labor supply decision: the husband first decides how many hours he will work, and then the wife decides how many hours she will work.<sup>7</sup> For the husband, the theoretical effects of the EITC are the same as for a single mother (those who are not in the labor force will start to work, but the labor supply effects on those already working are ambiguous). For the wife, however, the effects of the EITC will be more negative because the EITC is computed on the basis of *total family earnings*. For most low-wage families with children, this means that the family will already be at the maximum credit level based on the husband's earnings so that the wife will face only the downward-sloping phase-out range in her decision on how much to work. Indeed, among couples with low education and children, 9% are on the phase-in, 6% are on the plateau (maximum benefit), and 43% are on the phaseout.<sup>8</sup> As noted, on the phaseout, there are strong disincentives to work because each additional dollar of earnings lowers EITC payments by 21¢. Thus, secondary earners have a strong disincentive to work through the EITC.

[Eissa and Hoynes \(1998\)](#) studied the impact of the EITC on married couples. They found that there was no effect on men's work. This outcome is consistent with the single-mother findings (that the EITC increased the labor force participation of single mothers but did not affect their hours once they were working) because almost all men participate in the labor force to begin with. At the same time, the researchers found a modest reduction in the labor supply of married women, an effect that offsets to some extent the labor supply increases for single women.

## Summary of the Evidence

Overall, the experience with the EITC in the United States seems fairly successful. It is a powerful redistributive device that now delivers more cash to low-income families than any other welfare program in the United States. And it has done so without reducing overall labor supply, the problem with standard cash welfare. Instead, this redistribution has been associated with increased labor supply among single mothers (increased labor force participation with no offsetting reduction in hours worked), no effect on fathers, and a modest reduction in labor supply among married mothers.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a series of recent studies have demonstrated longer-run benefits for children from higher EITC payments: a reduced incidence of low birthweight births, improved school performance, and higher rates of college enrollment.<sup>10</sup>



## EITC Reform

While the EITC has been a major success story, there are significant flaws in its design, as discussed at length in [Furman \(2006\)](#). For example, there is only a very small EITC for childless workers, with a maximum of only \$496 per year. As a result, the federal tax rate for families with children at the federal poverty level has fallen from 15% in 1986 to 10% today, while for those without children, it has remained at roughly 15%. [Weissmann \(2016\)](#) estimated that 7.5 million childless Americans are “taxed into poverty” each year due to the lack of an EITC-like mechanism for that group. Given the powerful effects that the EITC can have on labor supply, while redistributing income to the needy, the EITC could be increased for childless adults to encourage work among this population.

Another flaw is that families receive no additional EITC transfer as family size grows beyond two children; the EITC maximum is \$3,461 for families with one child, and rises to its highest value of \$6,431 for families with three or more children. Perhaps as a result of this feature of the EITC, while the poverty rate for those with one or two children is about 12%, it rises to more than 20% for those with three children, and almost 35% for those with four children. Poverty among families with children therefore could be decreased by raising the EITC for larger families. Even a budget-neutral shift to a lower maximum for those with two children and a higher maximum for those with three or more would likely lower overall poverty rates for this population.

Another major objection to the current form of the EITC is that it penalizes many single parents who subsequently marry because the credit is based on the income of the tax-filing unit, regardless of whether that includes one or two people. For example, if a single mother with two children and annual income of \$12,000 marries a man whose income is also \$12,000, together their \$24,000 income qualifies them for an EITC of \$5,128, even though the two single parents on their own would have received the maximum credit of \$6,500.<sup>11</sup> Getting married thus costs the couple \$1,372, a *marriage penalty* of the type discussed in [Chapter 18](#). Because of this penalty, one editorial lamented that “the federal government, through the EITC, says, ‘If you get married, it’ll cost you. And it’ll cost you big time.’”<sup>12</sup>

Not all marriages are penalized by the EITC, however. Take the case of a single mother with two children and no income. If she marries someone whose annual income is \$12,000, then together they qualify for the maximum credit of \$4,810, even though on her own she would not receive any credit. The EITC thus tends to penalize single mothers with low earnings who marry those with their own earnings, while it subsidizes single mothers with no earnings who marry people with low earnings.

[Ellwood \(2000\)](#) investigated the balance between marriage penalties and bonuses and found that newly married couples with children prior to their marriage were three times as likely to receive a lower rather than a higher credit because of their marriage. Ellwood also found that the average marriage penalty was around \$1,600, a figure that agrees roughly with one estimate placing the total cost of the EITC marriage penalty at around \$5 billion for low-income families.<sup>13</sup> One way to address the marriage penalty would be to raise the EITC level for married couples, relative to single parents with children. Alternatively, [Ellwood and Sawhill \(2000\)](#) suggested allowing low-income couples to calculate their EITC using an income-splitting method. Under this system, couples divide their total income in half and calculate their EITC based on that number. For the couple each earning \$12,000, this would return their EITC to the woman’s level before she married, thus removing the penalty that she

receives for marrying.

Finally, the EITC is very complex. Perhaps as a result, about one-seventh of those eligible for the EITC do not participate, and the majority of EITC recipients spend some of their low incomes on hiring professionals to prepare their taxes. [Bhargava and Manoli \(2015\)](#) distributed an experimental mailing to tax filers who failed to claim the EITC and found that simplifying the application process led to a significant increase in benefits claiming. Making it easier to apply for EITC, then, could expand its power as a poverty-fighting tool.

In early 2015, President Obama proposed a package of EITC changes to address these shortcomings of the program. He proposed expanding the EITC for childless couples by both raising the maximum credit and lengthening the range over which that credit is phased out; increasing the maximum EITC for families with more than two children; and expanding EITC eligibility for married couples to reduce the marriage penalty. With the arrival of a new administration two years later, these changes were not enacted.<sup>14</sup> ■

## 21.4 The Tax Treatment of Child Care and Its Impact on Labor Supply

A primary lesson from the empirical literature on labor supply is that the labor supply decisions of secondary earners are very sensitive to after-tax wages. Yet wages are clearly not the only factor that determines such work decisions. Another important factor is likely to be the cost of [child care](#) for the children of working parents. Currently, only 21.3% of preschool-age children are cared for primarily by a parent. Instead, 33.7% are cared for by other relatives and 32.9% are placed in nonrelative care such as nurseries, daycares, and baby-sitters' homes. In households with income greater than \$54,000, only 24% of preschool-age children are cared for primarily by their parents, with 57% placed in child care centers. Between parents' expenditures and government subsidies, total child care expenditures in the United States are well over \$80 billion annually.<sup>15</sup>

### child care

Care provided for children by someone other than the parents of those children.

Theoretically, child care expenditures for working parents operate in exactly the same way as wage taxation. The higher the child care expenditures, the lower the net returns from working. Thus, child care expenditures have substitution effects that lead to less work and income effects that lead to more work; for secondary earners, the empirical literature suggests that the substitution effects dominate, causing secondary earners to work less ([Anderson and Levine, 2000](#)).

## The Tax Treatment of Child Care

The tax treatment of child care also raises interesting additional questions that relate to the discussion of the Haig-Simons comprehensive income standard introduced in [Chapter 18](#). Under the U.S. income tax system, labor delivered through the market is taxed, while labor delivered through nonmarket activities, such as home child care, is not taxed. This approach is inequitable because families that choose to provide child care themselves, rather than earn income and then buy child care services, pay lower taxes. It is also inefficient because it subsidizes home over market child care.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *The Effect of Child Care Costs on Maternal Labor Supply*

The potential barrier to secondary earner participation in the labor market posed by child care costs has led to a number of studies of the responsiveness of labor supply to child care costs. Most past literature, nicely reviewed by [Anderson and Levine \(2000\)](#), has investigated this question by modeling female labor force participation as a function of the costs of child care in a given area, asking in essence whether mothers are less likely to work when child care is more expensive. The problem with this approach, however, is that the main determinant of the cost of child care is the wages of child care workers, which in turn reflect the general demand for labor in the area. Thus, in areas where labor demand is high, child care worker wages will be high, and child care will be expensive. But expensive child care will not necessarily be associated with less female labor supply because the high demand for labor may bring women into the labor force. In other words, we have a classic bias problem: there is a third factor (the level of labor demand) that affects both the dependent variable (whether a mother works) and the explanatory factor of interest (child care costs).

Several studies have suggested clever approaches to surmounting this problem. [Berger and Black \(1992\)](#) looked at women on welfare who applied for a limited pool of child care subsidies. These subsidies were allocated randomly in the county that Berger and Black analyzed, so that women who received subsidies and those who did not were otherwise identical: the only difference between them was their luck in the lottery. As a result, the only difference between these women in their labor supply was the receipt of child care subsidies by the lottery winners. Berger and Black found that labor supply is higher among lottery winners, but that the effect is relatively modest, with an elasticity of labor supply with respect to child care costs of only 20.1 to 20.35.

[Gelbach \(2002\)](#) pursued an alternative innovative strategy, taking advantage of kindergarten birthday cutoffs. Consider two children born one day apart, on August 31 (Emily) and September 1, 2002 (Caroline). Suppose that they live in a school district with a kindergarten birthday cutoff of August 31: that is, children can attend kindergarten as long as they were born

before September 1 five years earlier. In this situation, Emily can attend kindergarten in the fall of 2007, when she has just turned five. But Jada, who differs only in being born one day later, cannot; she must wait a full year to attend, until she is almost six. Gelbach used this fact to compare the labor supply of mothers whose youngest child was born before (treatment group) and after (control group) school cutoff dates; the women whose children could go to kindergarten essentially got free child care from the public schools one year before those whose children had to wait a year. As expected from theory, he found that mothers whose youngest children were born before the cutoff date were more likely to work than mothers with children born after the cutoff date, although once again, the elasticity with respect to child care costs was fairly modest, at 20.16 to 20.35.<sup>16</sup>

[Baker, Gruber, and Milligan \(2008\)](#) considered a third approach. In the late 1990s, the Canadian province of Quebec passed a law providing universal access to child care for all families in the province for only \$5 per day, reflecting a subsidy of about 85% off the market price for child care at the time. There were no notable changes in the price of child care for married women in other provinces (there were many other changes for single women throughout Canada due to that nation's version of welfare reform). Thus, the researchers pursued a quasi-experimental difference-in-difference analysis of the labor supply of married women before and after this policy change in Quebec, relative to the rest of Canada. Similar to these other studies, they found a relatively modest elasticity of labor supply with respect to child care costs of only 20.24. Similar to the types of checks pursued in EITC studies, they confirmed their finding by showing that there was no effect on the labor supply of married women with older children at this same time.

Consider the Gonzalez family, where Sam is the primary earner. He and his wife Sofia are facing the choice of whether she should look after their three children or send them to child care and go into the market to work. Suppose that Sofia can earn \$25 per hour and that child care for each child costs \$5 per hour, for a total of \$15 per hour. Suppose further that the tax rate on Sofia's market earnings is 50%, including federal income taxes, payroll taxes, and state income taxes. Finally, suppose that Sofia is equally happy working or caring for the children, so she and Sam decide to make this decision purely on financial grounds. This example is illustrated in [Table 21-1](#).

TABLE 21-1 Child Care Choices

	Pre-tax, Pre-Child-Care Earnings	Child Care Costs	Child Care Deduction	Imputed Earnings	Taxes Owed if Work Tax Rate = 50%	Taxes Owed if Home	After-Tax Value of Work	After-Tax Value of Home
Base	\$1,000	\$600	0	0	\$500	0	\$500	\$600
Impute	\$1,000	\$600	0	\$600	\$500	\$300	\$500	\$300
Deduct	\$1,000	\$600	\$600	0	\$200	0	\$800	\$600

In the first row of this table, when individuals work, they earn an after-tax wage of only \$500, but they have to pay a pre-tax cost of \$600 for child care, so they won't work. In the second row, the value of child care delivered at home is imputed as income, so after-tax income is higher if individuals work (\$500 versus \$300). In the third row, child care costs are deductible from taxable income, so after-tax income is also higher if individuals work (\$800 rather than \$600).

If Sofia works 40 hours per week, she would make \$1,000 each week, but then she and Sam would have to put their children in child care for those 40 hours, at a cost of \$600. They would owe \$500 in taxes on her market earnings, so that after taxes, Sofia would be earning \$500 for the week, which is less than the \$600 that the family would pay in child care. So, even though Sofia's pre-tax wage of \$1,000 is higher than the cost of child care, her after-tax wage is lower. In other words, in after-tax terms, the child care that Sofia delivers at home is worth \$600 per week (the last column), while the after-tax wage that she brings home from market work is only \$500 (the next-to-last column). The taxation of market work but not home work (her value in caring for the kids) has created a *tax wedge* that puts market work at a disadvantage. Tax wedges are created whenever two comparable activities are taxed at different rates.



Quick Hint We have used the term *tax wedge* in two different ways in [Chapter 19](#) and in this discussion. In [Chapter 19](#), we discussed tax wedges within a single market; in that context, tax wedges are the difference that taxes cause between producer and consumer prices in this one market. Here, we refer to tax wedges across input markets,

where tax wedges are the difference between the returns to the input (labor supply) in the different markets. Both of these are valid definitions and are a subset of the [\*\*broadest definition of tax wedges\*\*](#), any difference between pre- and post-tax returns to an activity caused by taxes.

#### broadest definition of tax wedges

Any difference between pre- and post-tax returns to an activity caused by taxes.

## Options for Resolving Tax Wedges

The Gonzalez family example raises a general point about tax wedges between taxed and untaxed activities: *such tax wedges distort behavior by encouraging people to undertake the untaxed activities and cause deadweight loss*. By taxing market labor but not home labor, we reduced total productivity by \$400, because in our example, Sofia gave up the chance to earn \$1,000 in order to stay home and provide \$600 worth of child care. This reduction in productivity increases deadweight loss: the social efficiency pie is now smaller by \$400 because Sofia is engaging in the activity for which she has a lower marginal product. Public finance economists often say that such tax wedges create an *uneven playing field* across economic activities, where individuals are treated differently because of the choices that they make.<sup>17</sup>

### Imputing Home Earnings

In this case, there are two ways that policy makers could level the playing field in favor of market work, as illustrated in rows two and three of [Table 21-1](#). One would be to tax at-home work just as we tax work in the market. The government would do so by [\*\*imputing home earnings\*\*](#), or assigning a home earnings value to Sofia based on the amount of child care she delivers. Thus, the government could impute that she delivers \$600 worth of home child care because that is what it would cost if she and Sam had their children in market care. The Gonzalez family would then be taxed on that home child care so that if Sofia didn't work in the market, the family would pay \$300 in taxes (50% of the \$600 in imputed home earnings) and have an after-tax value of home work of \$300. With this tax system in place, the family would increase their income by \$200 if Sofia works (\$500 rather than \$300), so she will go to work.

#### imputing home earnings

Assigning a dollar value to the earnings from work at home.

But, as you might suspect, this is an impractical solution. There are a number of daunting issues facing policy makers as they attempt to tax a good with no clearly assigned market value, such as child care delivered at home.

### Deductible Child Care Costs

The other alternative is to *make market child care costs deductible*. Suppose now that work at home is not taxed, but that the government allows each family to deduct the cost of child care from its taxable income. Under this rule, Sofia's taxable income would fall from \$1,000 to \$400 (because the family would deduct the \$600 paid for child care), and their tax bill on her earnings would fall to \$200. Sofia's after-tax earnings from work would be \$800, exceeding the \$600 in child care costs. On net, she and her family would gain \$200 per week from her market work, the same amount if home work were taxed. Thus, there are two ways to even a playing field: by taxing all activities equally or by subsidizing all activities equally.

## Comparing the Options

While both of these solutions level the playing field, their effects on the tax base are not identical: allowing a deduction for child care costs has *lowered the tax base*. When the

government taxes home work and Sofia decides to work, the government collects \$500 in taxes. But when the government subsidizes child care and Sofia decides to work, the government collects only \$200 in taxes. Thus, the cost of leveling the playing field for this child care decision is the \$300 reduction of the entire size of the tax base. As the size of the tax base falls, rates must increase to raise a given level of revenue, and deadweight loss will rise as tax rates rise.

Thus, we are faced with three choices, each with drawbacks. We can continue to have an uneven playing field, which lowers social efficiency by deterring mothers from market work. We can even the playing field by taxing home work, which makes the most economic sense but is an administrative nightmare. We can level the playing field by offering subsidies to market work, which reduces the overall efficiency of the tax system.

Ruling out the second option (taxing home work) on administrative grounds, how do we decide which of the remaining options causes less distortion to the economy and is thus more efficient? A system that has no deduction for child care costs has the cost of distorting mothers away from market work toward home work, but a system that has a deduction for child care costs lowers the tax base, and thus the overall efficiency of the tax system. Which is worse?

As highlighted in the previous chapter, these efficiency costs will depend on the elasticities of the taxed activities. The efficiency cost of lowering the overall tax base will be determined by the overall elasticity of economic activity to taxation: most estimates suggest that this elasticity is modest. The efficiency cost of distorting mothers away from market work will be determined by the elasticity of mothers' market labor supply with respect to the wage: as discussed earlier in this chapter, most estimates suggest that it is fairly large (although it is falling over time). Thus, it seems that subsidizing child care to reduce the tax wedge is the better of the two options.

In the United States, we have chosen a position between these two alternatives by partially subsidizing market child care. Families receive a tax credit for child care costs up to \$3,000 for one child or \$6,000 for two or more. The credit is calculated as an income-dependent percentage of those costs so that households with income under \$15,000 may claim 35% of child care costs (up to \$1,050 or \$2,100), while households with income greater than \$43,000 may claim 20% of child care costs (up to \$600 or \$1,200).<sup>18</sup>

## 21.5 Conclusion

The discussion of optimal income taxation in [Chapter 20](#) illustrated the key role played by behavioral responses to tax rates. If higher taxes lead people to change their behavior to supply less labor, these changes can offset the gains from tax increases and there might be a natural limit to the revenue that can be raised by income taxation.

In this chapter, we reviewed the evidence on how labor supply responds to taxation. Most studies show that tax rates have little impact on the labor supply of primary earners but a more substantial impact on secondary earners. We also reviewed one of the major tax policies to promote labor supply, the EITC, and discussed evidence showing that the EITC has raised the labor supply for low-income earners. Finally, we discussed the appropriate tax treatment of child care, one of the major impediments to labor supply by secondary earners.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Higher taxes on labor income have theoretically ambiguous effects on behavior: the substitution effect leads to less labor supply, but the income effect operates in the opposite direction if leisure is a normal good.
- A wide variety and number of studies indicate that the labor supply of primary earners is inelastic with respect to taxes, while the labor supply of secondary earners is fairly elastic.
- The largest federal subsidy to labor supply is the EITC, which provides a wage subsidy to the lowest-income families. The EITC is reduced when income rises above a certain level.
- The EITC has ambiguous theoretical implications for labor supply, but available evidence suggests that it clearly raises the labor supply of single mothers overall.
- A potential impediment to labor supply by secondary earners is the cost of child care. This impediment is worsened by income taxation in the United States because market work is taxed while home work (such as child care) is not.
- The tax wedge between market and home work can be resolved either by taxing home work, which is administratively impractical, or making the costs of child care deductible, which the United States does to some extent.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Suppose that for every hour you work, you can earn \$10 before taxes. Furthermore, suppose that you can work up to 16 hours per day, 365 days per year. Draw your annual budget constraint reflecting the consumption-leisure trade-off under each of the following income tax schemes.
  1. A flat income tax of 20% on all income earned
  2. An income tax where you pay no tax on the first \$10,000 earned and a tax of 25% on all income over \$10,000
  3. An income tax where you pay 10% on the first \$5,000 earned, 20% on the next \$10,000 earned, and 30% thereafter
2. For which group of workers is the substitution effect associated with a tax increase more likely to outweigh the income effect: primary earners or secondary earners? Explain.
3.  Over time, more women have become the primary (or sole) wage earners in their households. How does this fact complicate the empirical analysis of the effects of taxation on women's labor supply?
4. What is likely to happen to overall labor supply if
  1. the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) compensation rate increases from 30% to 50% for each dollar earned?
  2. the rate of reduction in the EITC phase-out period increases?
5. The country of Akerlovia currently has a tax system that gives each citizen \$5,000 in cash up front, exempts the first \$10,000 in earned income from tax, and taxes all earned income over \$10,000 at a 25% rate. It is considering replacing this system with an EITC system. The proposed new system would drop the \$5,000 cash giveaway and instead would subsidize the first \$10,000 in earned income at a 50% rate. All income earned over \$10,000 still would be taxed at the same 25% rate, and the EITC benefits would never be phased out. Describe the effects of this policy change on the labor supply of workers with various incomes.
6. How does making child care costs tax-deductible reduce the tax wedge associated with the fact that market work is taxed but home work is not? Does making child care costs deductible increase or decrease social efficiency?
7. Suppose that you can earn \$16 per hour before taxes and can work up to 80 hours per week. Consider two income tax rates, 10% and 20%.
  1. On the same diagram, draw the two weekly consumption-leisure budget constraints reflecting the two different tax rates.
  2. Draw a set of representative indifference curves such that the income effect of the tax increase outweighs the substitution effect.
  3. Draw a set of representative indifference curves such that the substitution effect of the tax increase outweighs the income effect.
8. Suppose that the government introduces an EITC such that for the first \$8,000 in earnings, the government pays 50¢ per dollar on wages earned. For the next \$3,000 of earnings, the credit is held constant at \$4,000, and after that point, the credit is reduced at a rate of 20¢ per dollar earned. When the credit reaches zero, there is no additional EITC.
  1. Draw the budget constraint that reflects this EITC for a worker who can work up to 4,000 hours per year at an hourly wage of \$10 per hour.
  2. Illustrate on your graph the portions of the budget constraint where the labor supply effects of the policy are positive, negative, or ambiguous, relative to the "no policy" status quo.
9. Congressman Perez proposes reducing the tax exemption for children in married families where only one parent works outside the home. Why would this proposal improve equity, from a Haig-Simons perspective?



## ADVANCED QUESTIONS



10. Suppose that you estimate the following female labor supply relationship:

$\text{Labor supply}_i = -320 + 85(\text{after-tax wage})_i + 320(\text{college graduate})_i - 120(\text{married})_i$ , where labor supply is measured in annual hours worked and wages are expressed in hourly wages.

1. Interpret the coefficient on after-tax wages. What does this coefficient imply about the effect of increasing wages from \$6 to \$10 per hour on labor supply?
  2. What can we learn from this estimate about the income and substitution effects of wages on labor supply?
  3. How might this coefficient estimate be biased? Explain.
11. Why does the EITC exacerbate the marriage penalty for low-income workers? Suggest an alternative method of calculating the EITC that reduces this penalty.
12. The National Bureau of Economic Research's TAXSIM model allows you to calculate tax liabilities for a given individual in different years. Navigate to <https://users.nber.org/~taxsim/taxsim27/> and fill in the blanks to "construct" two individuals—a lower-income individual with \$22,000 in earned income and a higher-income individual with \$82,000 in earned income. Assume that both individuals are 40-year-old single parents of two children aged 14 and 15, and that they do not own homes, have no child care expenses, and earn no dividend or capital gains income. Use the model to calculate these individuals' federal (effective) marginal tax rates and federal income tax liability in 1993, 1998, 2008, and 2018. Explain the pattern you find.
13. You graduate from college and take a job at a consulting firm with a wage of \$25 per hour. Your job is extremely flexible: you can choose to work any number of hours from 0 to 2,000 per year.
  1. Suppose that there is an income tax of the following form:
    - Income up to \$10,000: no tax
    - Income from \$10,000 to \$30,000: 20% tax rate
    - Income from \$30,000 up: 30% tax rateDraw a graph in hours worked/consumption space, showing your opportunity set with and without the tax system. With the tax system in place, are there any points that you are particularly unlikely to choose? Why or why not?
  2. Say you choose to work 1,500 hours per year. What is your marginal tax rate? What is your average tax rate? Do these rates differ? Why or why not?
14. Consider a couple, Gal and Pat, who are deciding whether Gal should return to work or stay at home to care for the couple's 3-year-old child. Using the NBER's TAXSIM model, discussed in Problem 12 and found at <https://users.nber.org/~taxsim/taxsim27/>, calculate the couple's total tax liability in two scenarios: one in which Gal stays at home, and another in which Gal returns to work. Use the simulation for year 2018, and use output for federal tax liability and state tax liability. You should also calculate the couple's Social Security (FICA) and Medicare payroll taxes, according to the discussion in [Chapters 13](#) and [15](#).

Pat makes \$300,000 per year, and Gal would earn \$38,000 per year if returning to work. The cost of child care in the couple's area is \$2,000 per month. They live in California, file taxes with the status of Married Filing Jointly, and are each 35 years old. They do not own their home and earn no dividend or capital gains income.

What is the after-tax value of returning to work this year? What is the after-tax value of staying at home this year? Will Gal return to work if the decision is purely based on these monetary considerations?

15. Fligrenia's tax system has several tax brackets, ranging from a 0% marginal rate to a 50% marginal rate. The marginal tax rate paid by married couples under the current system is based on the last dollar earned by either spouse. Fligrenia is changing its tax system, however. Under the new system, the higher earner in a household will continue to be taxed as before (based on the marginal rate associated with total household income). The marginal rate for the lower earner will now be based on that worker's income only, however. Which families do you expect to be most affected by this tax change, and why?

16.  Consider President Obama's early 2015 proposed package of EITC changes, discussed at the end of [Section 21.3](#) in the text.

1. Based on the evidence from the research literature described in this chapter, what types of individuals in what types of households do you expect will change their labor supply decisions in response to this package of changes?
2. Suppose a similar package is one day passed into law, and you wanted to run an empirical test of your hypotheses from part (a) about who will change their labor supply decisions. Are there any natural control groups for such a test?



The  icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# Chapter 22 Taxes on Savings



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [22.1 Taxation and Savings—Theory and Evidence](#)
- [22.2 Alternative Models of Savings](#)
- [22.3 Tax Incentives for Retirement Savings](#)
- [22.4 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How should taxes affect savings decisions?
- How does the impact of taxes vary with different underlying models of the savings decision?
- How do retirement savings incentives affect savings decisions?

On January 31, 2003, the Bush administration proposed the creation of Lifetime Savings Accounts and Retirement Savings Accounts, which would allow families to place up to \$30,000 each year into special savings accounts on which the interest earned would not be subject to income taxation. These new accounts featured fewer restrictions than existing tax-subsidized savings vehicles: individuals could withdraw from their Lifetime Savings Account for any reason, at any age, and from their Retirement Savings Account for any reason after age 58. When withdrawn, any interest earned on these accounts, or increases in the value of the assets in the accounts, would be exempt from taxation. The administration's stated goal was to simplify the current set of savings incentives and to increase Americans' retirement savings by reducing the taxation of the returns from these savings. Assistant Treasury Secretary for Tax Policy Pamela Olson declared, "These bold new accounts will give more hardworking Americans the chance to save."<sup>1</sup>

Opponents of the new plans, like the *Washington Post* editorial board, claimed that "the new accounts would drain tax revenue—potentially huge amounts—from the government down the road, when the money was withdrawn and no taxes were paid."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, many opponents, such as Democratic representative Charles Rangel, argued that "the new tax break will be used by people of means to shelter what they already will save," so savings would not actually increase.<sup>3</sup>

Politically, most Democrats and many Republicans agreed with Rangel's view that the revenue costs of such a plan would outweigh the benefits gained from any possible increase in savings. Within a week of the announcement, the Bush administration realized the new accounts had very little political support and began focusing on other tax-cutting measures.

President Barack Obama took a very different approach on September 5, 2009, when he announced his plan to help Americans save for retirement. In his weekly address, the president remarked, "The fact is, even before this recession hit, the savings rate was essentially zero. . . . Half of America's workforce doesn't have access to a retirement plan at work. And fewer than 10 percent of those without workplace retirement plans have one of their own." Obama's plan met with varied success. It consisted of initiatives based on research in behavioral economics that has shown systematic nudges to be very effective in increasing an individual's investment in retirement savings.

The first initiative encouraged small businesses to automatically enroll their employees in retirement savings accounts, such as 401(k)s or simple Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs), by reducing expensive fees that had previously discouraged the establishment of small business savings plans. Moreover, employers were encouraged to increase an employee's savings rate automatically each year or every time the employee gets a raise. As of this writing, Congress has not approved any legislation for federally mandated retirement accounts, but some states have taken it upon themselves to require employers to automatically enroll their employees in such plans. The second initiative, which was later acted on by the

IRS, enables workers to receive any amount of their tax refund in the form of U.S. savings bonds, rather than as cash. The third initiative made it easier for workers to deposit wages earned from overtime or unused vacation time into their savings accounts. The IRS ruled that this is permissible, but that it was up to the employer's discretion to offer this service to their employees. Last, the plan called for the creation of an easy-to-understand saving guide for employers and employees that details the available options for tax-favored retirement savings.<sup>4</sup> In response, the IRS created a simpler and more user-friendly version of their retirement planning website.

Although all four of these Obama administration initiatives have met with some success, critics have blamed the plan for not addressing the major problems with retirement savings, including the underfunding of state and local retirement plans. One ABC News reporter called the plan "a series of small rule changes" that are unlikely to cause any significant improvements.

These competing approaches to encouraging retirement savings provoke a number of questions, which we address in this chapter. Does the existing structure of income taxation in the United States reduce the amount that individuals save in this country? Should the government use the tax code to encourage Americans to save more? Or should the government instead rely on changes to the structure of retirement savings plans that provide behavioral incentives for people to save more?

This chapter, the second in our series of three chapters on taxation and individual behavior, focuses on savings decisions. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), the amount a society saves, which makes more capital available to businesses, is a key determinant of economic growth. Thus, a major source of policy debates in the United States and around the world is the appropriate role of **capital income taxation**, the taxes levied on the returns from savings.

**capital income taxation**

The taxation of the return from savings.

Recall that we began [Chapter 21](#) by discussing the traditional theory of how income taxation affects labor supply. Similarly, this chapter begins with a discussion of the traditional theory of how income taxation affects savings decisions. Unlike our findings about labor supply, however, there is relatively little evidence on the key question raised by this model: How responsive are savings to the after-tax interest rate? We then turn to two alternative models of saving, the precautionary model (in which savings are primarily serving as self-insurance against risk) and the self-control model (in which savings are determined through a competition between short-run impatience and long-run patience). These alternatives have important implications for the major policy to raise savings in the United States: tax-subsidized retirement savings accounts. We review the structure of these accounts, their effects on savings in theory, and the limited evidence on their effectiveness in reality.

## 22.1 Taxation and Savings—Theory and Evidence

The decision about how much of one's income to save and how much to spend, like the decision about how much labor to supply, is another major individual behavior that is affected by taxation. In this section, we discuss how taxes might affect savings decisions.

### Traditional Theory

In the traditional theory of savings, the role of savings is to smooth consumption across periods of time. Individuals have more income in some periods (such as their working lives) and less in others (such as retirement). With no savings, individuals would be forced to consume much less in periods when income is lower. Yet, due to diminishing marginal utility, such a consumption pattern is unlikely to maximize utility: individuals would prefer to smooth their consumption over time, consuming a constant amount rather than feasting in some periods and starving in others. By reducing spending in periods when it is high and raising spending in periods when income is low, savings play that consumption-smoothing role.

Under this model, called an **intertemporal choice model**, the choice about how much to save is really the choice about how to allocate one's consumption over time. As with modeling labor supply, we do not model savings directly, but rather model consumption over time. Because labor is a “bad,” we analyze the complementary “good,” leisure, and then compute labor supply as the difference between time available and leisure time taken. Similarly, saving is a “bad”—it is something that we do today to finance future consumption, but we don't get any direct utility out of the savings.<sup>5</sup> The corresponding “good” is today's consumption. **Savings** is the difference between a person's income and her current consumption.

#### intertemporal choice model

The choice about how much to save is really the choice about how to allocate one's consumption over time.

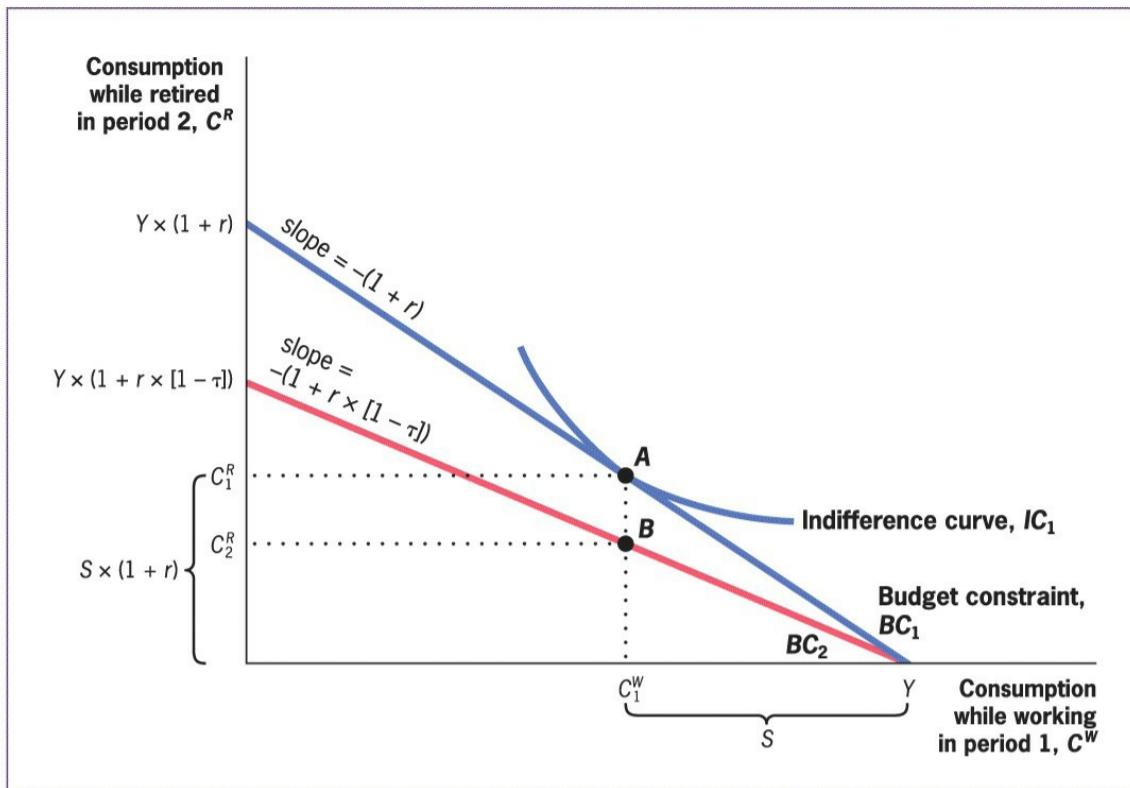
#### savings

The excess of current income over current consumption.

### A Simplified Model

Suppose that Stephany lives for two periods. Period one is her working life, during which she earns income  $Y$ ; period two is her retirement, during which she earns nothing. Her consumption during her working life,  $C^W$  (for working), is her income in period one minus any saving ( $S$ ) that she does. Those savings are put in the bank and earn a rate of interest  $r$ . In period two, retirement, Stephany's consumption,  $C^R$  (for retirement), is her savings from period one plus the interest earned on those savings,  $S \times (1 + r)$ . Given this information, Stephany chooses her optimal level of consumption in both periods.

In [Figure 22-1](#), we derive savings by analyzing Stephany's choice between consumption in periods one ( $C^W$ ) and two ( $C^R$ ), using the intertemporal choice model. This choice is made using the same type of utility maximization discussed throughout the book, where the choice is now between consumption in two different periods instead of between two different goods. The indifference curve  $IC_1$  represents the set of combinations of consumption in periods one and two, between which Stephany is indifferent. Stephany's taste for current versus future consumption (essentially her impatience), along with her desire for consumption smoothing over time (how quickly her marginal utility diminishes), determine the shape and position of her indifference curves.



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FIGURE 22-1

Taxation and the Intertemporal Consumption Decision • Before taxes are introduced, individuals lose  $S \times (1 + r)$  worth of consumption in period two ( $C^R$ ) for every dollar of consumption in period one ( $C^W$ ). Based on this budget constraint ( $BC_1$ ), individuals will choose to do some amount of savings,  $S$ , in the first period, and consume  $S \times (1 + r)$  in the second period. When taxes rise, the budget constraint pivots inward to  $BC_2$ . Individuals lose only  $- (1 + r \times [1 - \tau])$  worth of consumption in period two for every dollar of consumption in period one. This may raise or lower savings depending on which is more powerful, the income or substitution effect.

Before there is any taxation of savings, Stephany maximizes her utility subject to an **intertemporal budget constraint** ( $BC_1$ ), which relates her first- and second-period consumption to her earnings and savings decisions. If Stephany saves nothing, she can consume  $Y$  in the first period. If she saves her total income, she can consume  $Y \times (1 + r)$  in the second period. The relative price of first-period consumption is therefore  $1 + r$ , the slope of the budget constraint. This is because the *opportunity cost of first-period consumption is the interest not earned on savings for second-period consumption, plus the forgone second period consumption*. Just as the price of leisure in the labor supply model is the wage rate (the opportunity cost of leisure), the price of first-period consumption in this two-period model is the opportunity cost of first-period consumption,  $1 + r$ .

**intertemporal budget constraint**

The measure of the rate at which individuals can trade off consumption in one period for consumption in another period.

**Figure 22-1** illustrates a typical intertemporal consumption choice of  $C_1^W$  and  $C_1^R$  (point A). At this level of consumption, savings in the first period is  $S = Y - C_1^W$ , and consumption in the second period is then

$S \times (1 + r) = (Y - C_1^W) \times (1 + r)$ . We can next consider what happens when the government taxes interest payments on savings. Before doing so, however, it is important to remember that we are *not directly modeling savings*: just as we modeled leisure and solved for labor as a residual in [Chapter 21](#), here, we model consumption while working,  $C^W$ , and solve for savings as a residual.

Suppose now that the government taxes interest income. Such a tax would cause the after-tax return to savings to fall from  $r$  to  $r \times (1 - \tau)$  because the government takes a portion  $(r \times \tau)$  in taxes. This would flatten the budget constraint from  $BC_1$  to  $BC_2$ , as shown in [Figure 22-1](#), lowering the slope of the budget constraint from  $1 + r$  to  $1 + (r \times [1 - \tau])$ . That the budget constraint is flatter reflects the fact that the price of first-period consumption,  $C^W$ , has fallen: the opportunity cost of consuming in the first period has fallen because each dollar of savings yields less consumption in the second period. At a given level of first-period consumption, Stephany can now afford less second-period consumption, since her savings earn a lower rate of return.

## Substitution and Income Effects of Taxes on Savings

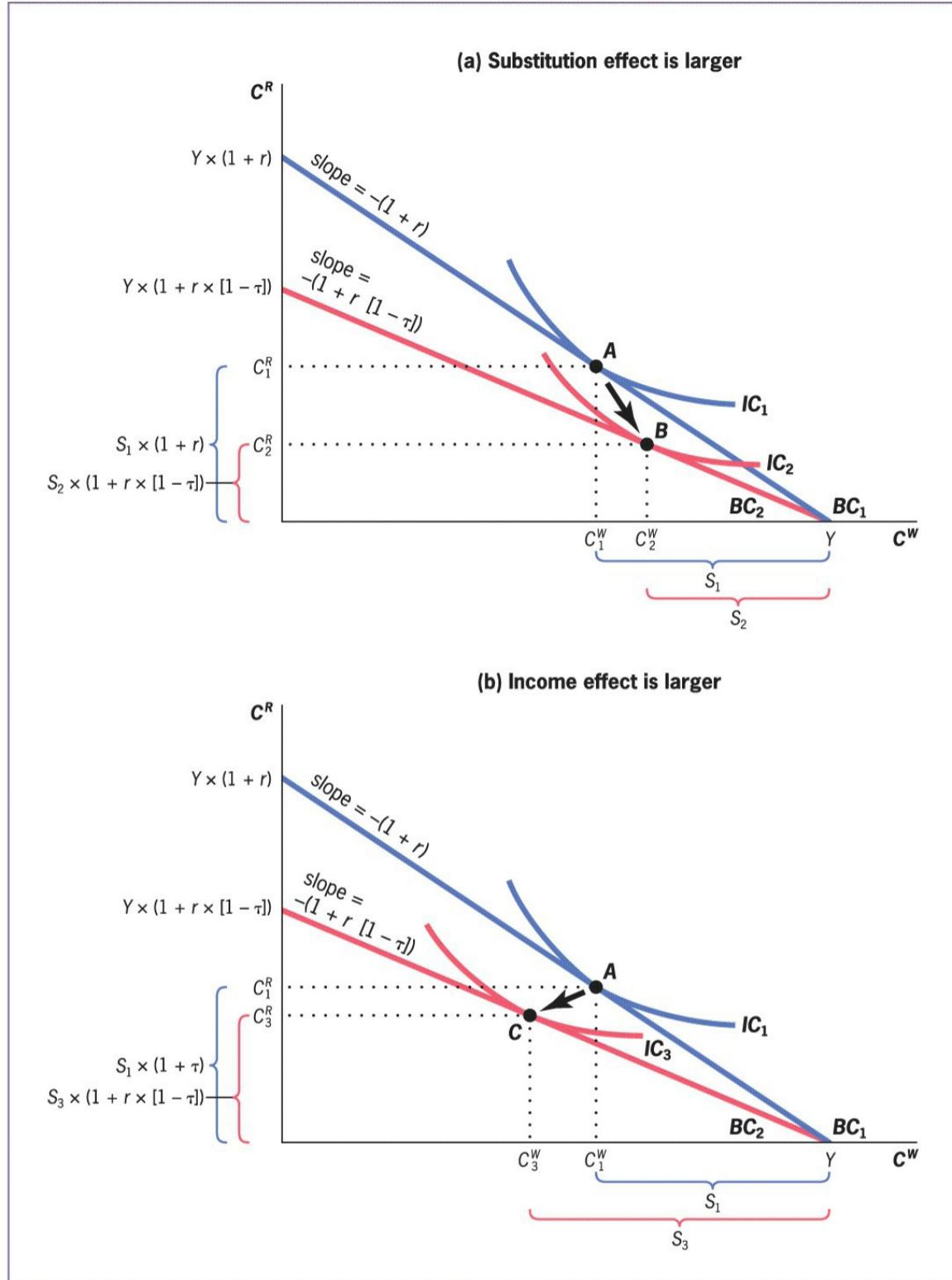
As always, the price change that results from the tax on savings interest will have two effects. The lower after-tax interest rate (lower price of  $C^W$ ) will cause consumption in period one to rise through the substitution effect. This will in turn lead savings to fall. There is also, however, an income effect of lower after-tax income. Stephany is now poorer at all levels of savings because the amount of interest she keeps from each dollar of savings has fallen, and a given level of savings buys her less  $C^R$ . For example, in [Figure 22-1](#), at the same level of first-period consumption (and thus the same level of savings) of  $C_1^W$ , Stephany can only afford second-period consumption of  $C_2^R$ . This drop in income will cause  $C_1^W$  to fall, and  $S$  to rise.



Quick Hint When thinking about the income effect of changes in the after-tax interest rate on savings, it is helpful to reflect on the extreme case of a target level of consumption for retirement in period two (as we did in [Chapter 21](#) with target earnings in the labor supply case). If Stephany has a certain amount of consumption that she wants in period two (such as a certain standard of living in her retirement), then when the after-tax interest rate falls, she must save more and reduce  $C^W$  in period one to achieve that target.

Because the substitution and income effects work in opposite directions, the net effect of interest taxation on savings is uncertain. The two panels of [Figure 22-2](#) illustrate this point. In panel (a), the substitution effect of the lower after-tax interest rate (the lower price of period-one consumption  $C^W$  causes Stephany to prefer more period-one consumption) is larger than the income effect of the lower after-tax income (lower income causes Stephany to consume less of everything, including period-one consumption). Stephany initially consumes at point A ( $C_1^W, C_1^R$ ). After a tax on interest is imposed (seen in the move from  $BC_1$

to  $BC_2$ ), Stephany moves to point  $B$ , with higher first-period consumption,  $C_2^W$ , lower savings (fall from  $S_1$  to  $S_2$ ), and much lower second-period consumption,  $C_2^R$ .



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■ FIGURE 22-2

**Intertemporal Substitution Versus Income Effect** • If the substitution effect is larger than the income effect [panel (a)], individuals will move from point  $A$  to point  $B$ , consuming more in the first period ( $C_2^W$ ) and thus saving less ( $S_2$ ). As a result, their consumption in period two ( $C_2^R$ ) falls by a lot. If the income effect is larger [panel (b)], individuals will move from point  $A$  to point  $C$ , consuming less in the first period ( $C_3^W$ ) and thus saving more ( $S_3$ ). Their consumption in period two ( $C_3^R$ ) still falls, but not by as much.

In panel (b), the income effect of the lower after-tax income is larger than the substitution effect of the lower after-tax interest rate, and Stephany moves to point C. First-period consumption falls from  $C_1^W$  to  $C_3^W$ , implying a rise in savings from  $S_1$  to  $S_3$ . Second-period consumption still falls in this case (to  $C_3^W$ ), but not by as much as in panel (a). This is because the income effect isn't large enough to lead Stephany to undo the reduction in income fully by saving more; if  $C^R$  didn't change at all, this would be the target income case described earlier, with savings rising by exactly enough to offset the reduction in the return to savings.<sup>6</sup>

## Evidence: How Does the After-Tax Interest Rate Affect Savings?

In contrast to the case of labor supply, there is little consensus on the impact of taxes or the interest rate on savings decisions. Indeed, economists aren't even in agreement on whether income taxes have a negative, zero, or even positive impact on savings. [Hall \(1988\)](#) used time series evidence to argue that the after-tax interest rate has no effect on consumption and savings. Other studies suggest that consumption decisions do respond strongly to the after-tax interest rate, although the estimated magnitudes vary ([Attanasio & Weber, 1995](#); [Cashin & Unayama, 2016](#); [Gruber, 2013](#)).

To be fair, studying the connections between after-tax interest rates and savings is a difficult problem. Determining the appropriate interest rate to use is one of the most difficult aspects of this problem: although we can measure a given worker's wage, it is hard to measure the appropriate interest rate for any given saver. Which interest rate is "appropriate" depends on the set of savings opportunities available to an individual, ranging from bank accounts to tax-subsidized pensions. Moreover, the interest that can be earned on any type of savings typically changes over time in the same way for all individuals, making it hard to find appropriate treatment and control groups for studying how savings respond to interest rate changes. Nevertheless, the elasticity of savings with respect to the after-tax interest rate remains a crucial parameter for policy analysis, and future work is clearly needed to assess its magnitude.

## Inflation and the Taxation of Savings

For a number of years in the 1970s and 1980s, the United States struggled with very high inflation rates, peaking at 13.5% in 1980. Before 1981, the tax brackets on which taxation is based (as shown in [Figure 18-3](#)) were denominated in constant dollars that did not change with inflation. This practice led to a phenomenon known as *bracket creep*, whereby individuals would see an increase in their tax rate despite no increase in their real (constant dollar) income. From 1979 to 1980, for example, prices rose by 11.3%. If incomes had risen by that same amount, consumers would have had constant earnings in real terms, so that their purchasing power would have been unchanged. The tax bracket amounts, however, remained the same in 1979 and 1980, which meant that individuals whose incomes rose just to offset inflation would pay more taxes, because more of their income would appear in higher tax brackets.

Suppose, for example, that Reese had an income of \$16,500 in 1979. That year, she would have faced a 21% marginal tax rate and would have paid taxes of \$2,370, leaving her an after-tax income of \$14,130. In 1980, Reese's income rose to \$18,365, exactly offsetting the 11.3%

inflation of that year, so that her *real income* (the amount of goods she could purchase with her income) did not change. The tax brackets were not indexed in 1980, so Reese would have faced a higher marginal rate of 24% because the 21% bracket ended at \$16,600 in income. She would have paid \$2,815 in taxes and would have had an after-tax income of \$15,550. Note that Reese's after-tax income grew by only 10%, while prices rose by 11.3%. Because of the fixed nominal tax brackets, her salary increase was too small to keep up with inflation. The solution to this problem was fairly straightforward: in 1981, Congress indexed the tax brackets for the regular income tax (although not for the Alternative Minimum Tax), so that the marginal tax rate was based on real income, not nominal income.

## Inflation and Capital Taxation

Indexing the income tax brackets did not remove inflation's impact on income taxation altogether because the rules about capital income taxation had remained the same. The interest rate earned on a bank account is determined by the **nominal interest rate**, while the actual improvement in purchasing power from savings is the **real interest rate**. Instead of being concerned about how much money you get next year, you should be concerned about how many goods you will be able to consume with that money next year.

**nominal interest rate**

The interest rate earned by a given investment.

**real interest rate**

The nominal interest rate minus the inflation rate; this measures an individual's actual improvement in purchasing power due to savings.

**Table 22-1** illustrates the impact of capital taxation in an inflationary environment. Suppose that Robin is going to save \$100 at a nominal 10% interest rate, and that she spends all of her money on Skittles, at \$1 per bag. Initially, there is no tax on interest earnings. She earns \$10 in interest, so her after-tax resources are \$110. At a Skittles price of \$1, with no inflation (first row of the table), she can buy 110 bags as a result of this savings. In the second row, a tax on capital income is introduced at 50%, which means that Robin gets to keep only half of her interest earnings, \$5. So she can buy only 105 bags of Skittles after taxation.

TABLE 22-1 Capital Taxation in an Inflationary Environment

Case	Inflation	Tax Rate on Interest	Savings	Nominal Interest Rate	Interest Earnings	After-Tax Resources	Price of Skittles	Bags of Skittles
No inflation	0%	0%	100	10%	\$10	\$110	\$1.00	110
	0%	50%	100	10%	\$10	\$105	\$1.00	105
Inflation	10%	0%	100	10%	\$10	\$110	\$1.10	100
	10%	50%	100	10%	\$10	\$105	\$1.10	95.5
Constant real rate	10%	0%	100	21%	\$21	\$121	\$1.10	110
	10%	50%	100	21%	\$21	\$110.5	\$1.10	100.5

In the first two rows, there is no inflation. Robin earns \$10 in interest on her \$100 in savings. With no taxation in the first row, she can buy 110 bags of Skittles; with interest taxation at 50% in the second row, she can buy only 105 bags of Skittles. The next two rows introduce 10% inflation but keep the nominal interest rate fixed at 10%; now Robin can afford only 100 bags of Skittles without taxation, and 95.5 bags with a 50% tax rate. The final two rows raise the nominal interest rate to 21%, so that the real interest rate remains at 10% despite the 10% inflation. With no taxation, Robin is as well off as before inflation. With capital income taxation, however, she is worse off; she can now afford only 100.5 bags of Skittles, compared to the 105 bags that she could buy in the second row when there was taxation but no inflation.

Suppose now that there is inflation at a 10% rate, so that a bag of Skittles costs \$1.10. In this case, with no taxation (third row), Robin can buy only 100 bags with her \$110 in resources, the same as today. Her purchasing power has not increased because her 10% interest earnings have been offset by 10% inflation. With taxation of capital income at 50%,

she now only has \$105 after taxes, and can buy only 95.5 bags of Skittles.

When there is inflation, however, it will affect the interest rate that Robin can earn on her savings. We can define the relationship between the real and nominal interest rates as

$$\text{Real interest rate } (r) =$$

$$[1 + \text{Nominal interest rate } (i)] / [(1 + \text{Inflation rate } (\pi))] - 1$$

When individuals make their savings decisions, they care about the real interest rate, or how much of an improvement in buying power they can obtain from their savings (in this example, how many bags of Skittles they can buy next year). As a result, when inflation rises, banks and corporations will have to pay a higher nominal interest rate to attract individual savings.

In principle, banks and corporations will offset inflation by raising nominal interest rates to keep the level of real rates the same. If inflation were 10%, a bank would pay a nominal interest rate of 21% to provide the same 10% real return that was received before inflation

(because  $\$121/\$1.10 = 110$  bags of Skittles). As the third row of the table shows, with a 21% interest rate and no taxation, Robin can once again purchase 110 bags of Skittles at a price of \$1.10 (as in the first row). So, if banks raise nominal interest rates to fully offset inflation, in the absence of taxation, inflation will not erode the purchasing power of savings.

The problem is that *taxes are levied on nominal, not real, interest earnings*. The final row of [Table 22-1](#) reintroduces taxes on interest earnings. Now, when Robin earns \$21 in interest, she pays \$10.50 in taxes on those interest earnings, leaving her with \$110.50 in after-tax resources. With that \$110.50, she can purchase only 100.5 bags of Skittles—which is below what she could purchase after tax but before inflation (105 bags in the second row).

Because taxes are levied on nominal interest rates, the increase in nominal interest rates by banks in inflationary periods will not compensate fully for the fall in real interest rates. Thus, even though bracket creep ended in 1981, the impacts of inflation on the tax code remain important. In particular, higher inflation lowers the after-tax real return to savings.

## 22.2 Alternative Models of Savings

In the standard intertemporal choice model, saving is undertaken solely to smooth consumption over time. Recent economic research has focused on two augmentations to this model that suggest other factors that might be important in determining savings, and that the after-tax interest rate may be less important than proposed by the traditional theory.

### Precautionary Savings Models

Another factor that will determine savings is the amount of uncertainty that individuals face in their financial prospects and their desire to use savings to ensure against negative financial shocks. Just as savings can smooth consumption over time, they can smooth consumption over states of the world as well, as highlighted by our discussion of self-insurance in [Chapter 12](#). Indeed, when people were asked about their reasons for saving, the top answer, along with saving for retirement, was saving for “emergencies,” such as unemployment or health problems.<sup>7</sup> This finding has led to the development of the **precautionary savings model** of savings, in which saving is motivated by the desire not only to smooth consumption across time but also to self-insure against risk.

**precautionary savings model**

A model of savings that accounts for the fact that individual savings serve to smooth consumption over future uncertainties, at least partly.

In this model, people face the risk of adverse events happening in the future: adverse health shocks (such as having a heart attack), unemployment, divorce, and so on. This model assumes that individuals are unable to borrow if they experience an adverse shock because they face **liquidity constraints**, barriers to borrowing. Such liquidity constraints may arise, for example, because banks are unwilling to lend to an individual with a major illness or who has just lost his job. As a result, individuals must build up a *buffer stock* of savings that is available should one of these adverse shocks occur, so they can smooth consumption between periods of good luck and periods of adverse shocks. The desire to have a buffer stock is another reason, besides intertemporal smoothing, that individuals have savings.

**liquidity constraints**

Barriers to credit availability that limit the ability of individuals to borrow.

### Evidence for the Precautionary Model

In support of the precautionary savings model, a number of studies have shown that more uncertainty leads to more savings and that reducing uncertainty reduces savings. Other studies have shown that expansions in social insurance programs that lower income uncertainty also lower savings, an outcome that is consistent with the notion that saving is motivated by precaution against risk. We review some of these studies in the upcoming Empirical Evidence box.

### Self-Control Models

An alternative formulation of the savings decision draws on the self-control type of models discussed in [Chapter 6](#) in the context of smoking. In this model, individuals faced the conflict between impatient, short-run preferences (I need a cigarette today) and patient, long-run preferences (I would like to quit tomorrow). Such a self-control problem is also likely to be important in the context of savings.<sup>8</sup> Individuals have a long-run preference to ensure enough savings for smooth consumption throughout their lives, but their impatient, short-run preferences may cause them to consume all of their income and not save enough for future periods. In this model, a key determinant of savings behavior is the ability of individuals to find ways to commit themselves to save, so that they can keep their income out of the hands of their impatient “short-run self.”

## Evidence for the Self-Control Model

There is growing evidence that is consistent with self-control models of savings. Recall from our discussion of self-control models in [Chapter 6](#) that individuals with self-control problems will demand *commitment devices* to help curb their self-control problems. Such commitment devices are widespread in the context of savings. A classic example is the “Holiday Club,” a bank account into which individuals put money throughout the year, at low or no interest, to make sure they have money available at the holidays to buy gifts. Another example is retirement savings accounts of the type described in the next section.

A second piece of evidence that is consistent with self-control explanations is the pattern of asset accumulation in the United States, which has a very strange feature: individuals have substantial savings in forms that are hard to access (housing or retirement accounts) but very little in more easily accessible forms, such as checking accounts. Even more puzzling, many individuals save money in forms that are hard to access, such as retirement accounts, at fairly modest interest rates (5% or less), while simultaneously borrowing money on their credit cards at high interest rates (10% or more). In the standard model, these individuals could make themselves better off by saving somewhat less at 5% and not borrowing at 10%. The fact that they don’t is very consistent with the self-control model: individuals are worried that if they have the money in their hands, they will spend it recklessly, but if they can commit to keeping it away from themselves, it will be saved. Thus, individuals can save successfully in forms such as housing or retirement accounts, but they can’t save successfully once they get their hands on the money!

A more specific test of the self-control model is presented in [Jones and Mahajan \(2015\)](#). These authors ran a field experiment involving low-income taxpayers who have an option of collecting their income tax refunds in cash or depositing them in an illiquid savings account. They find that when tax filers are asked on the spot, they much prefer the immediate payout. But when asked to make a decision for the future, they are more willing to deposit the refund in a savings account—exactly what the self-control model would predict. And when [Beshears et al. \(2015\)](#) ran an experiment in which participants were offered a chance to put their money in either a liquid or illiquid account, participants chose the latter, recognizing their own self-control problems.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Social Insurance and Personal Savings*

A central prediction of the precautionary savings model is that when the government provides insurance against income uncertainty, individuals will reduce the buffer stock of precautionary savings that they have built up to deal with that uncertainty. This is a natural implication of the crowd-out discussion of [Chapter 12](#): as the government expands social insurance, self-insurance, of which savings is a primary form, falls.<sup>2</sup> A number of papers have shown that this prediction holds true.

Perhaps the most striking is the study by [Chou et al. \(2003\)](#) of the introduction of National Health Insurance (NHI) in Taiwan in 1995. Before NHI was introduced, health insurance in Taiwan was incomplete. The introduction of NHI led to comprehensive health insurance coverage for all citizens, greatly reducing their need to save for their own medical expenses. In principle, one could measure whether savings in Taiwan fell around 1995 in order to assess whether individuals were saving for medical expenses but no longer felt the need to do so after NHI was in place. In practice, this is difficult because other things were changing in Taiwan around 1995 that might also have affected savings rates; in particular, strong economic growth in this era could have led to rising savings that masked any true reduction in savings from NHI.

Chou et al. recognized this difficulty and posed a sensible solution. They noted that before 1995, private-sector workers typically had health insurance for themselves through their jobs, but not for family members. Government workers, however, were provided with health insurance for their families as well as themselves. Thus, the introduction of NHI would likely have a relatively modest effect on government workers, who were completely insured before and after 1995, and a much larger effect on other workers, who were now gaining coverage for family members. In their difference-in-difference framework, Chou et al. compared the change in savings for the treatment group (nongovernment workers, who saw a large reduction in their uncovered family medical expenses) to that of the control group (government workers, who saw little

change in their uncovered family medical expenses).

The results of this analysis were striking. Among government workers, from before NHI to after, savings rose by \$30,000 Taiwanese dollars (U.S.\$1,165) on average, consistent with the strong economic growth of this era. Among nongovernment workers, from before NHI to after, savings fell by \$20,585 Taiwanese dollars (U.S.\$800), despite economic growth. Thus, the expansion of health insurance to nongovernment workers was associated with a reduction in their savings, consistent with the notion that individuals had been saving against medical uncertainty (and no longer had to do so).

Similar evidence is available for the United States as well. For example, [Gruber and Yelowitz \(1999\)](#) found that the Medicaid expansions discussed in [Chapter 16](#), which greatly reduced the risk of uncovered medical costs and thereby lowered the need for precautionary savings, significantly reduced the savings of low-income groups.

Finally, very convincing evidence for self-control models is found in an experiment run by economists [Richard Thaler and Shlomo Benartzi \(2004\)](#), who offered a unique retirement savings plan to employees at a mid-size manufacturing firm. With their “save more tomorrow” plan, employees committed a portion of their *future* pay increases to their retirement savings. Employees were given the option to make this savings commitment long before the actual pay increase appeared, so the decision seemed less difficult. Once employees joined, their contribution to the savings plan went up with every raise that the employees received.

Such a plan should have had no attraction for the type of rational, forward-looking savers in the standard intertemporal consumption model. They could save as much as they like from their income, so there was no need to precommit to a fixed savings plan. In other words, in the standard model, there is rarely a reason to restrict one’s behavior in this way; if a worker wants to save a share of future raises, she can simply do so when the raise is provided. Yet this plan would have great attractiveness to those with self-control problems, who would like to keep some of their future raises out of the hands of their impatient, short-term selves. Individuals with self-control problems might fear that if they don’t commit now to saving their raises, then when the raises actually happen, they will spend them in a fit of short-run impatience.

In fact, when this plan was introduced, 78% of employees offered the plan decided to join it, and 80% of those employees stayed on the plan through four pay raises. Most strikingly, the savings rates for plan participants jumped from 3.5% to 13.6% over the course of 40 months. The fact that a form of commitment that is useless in the standard model has such a large effect on savings behavior is once again consistent with the notion that employees have self-control problems over their savings. [Ashraf et al. \(2006\)](#) document a similar result for a commitment device for savings in the Philippines, while [Somville and Vandewalle \(2018\)](#) show that defaulting individuals into savings accounts in India substantially increased their savings, proving that self-control problems are a worldwide phenomenon!

## 22.3 Tax Incentives for Retirement Savings

As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), some economists and policy makers argue that we save too little in the United States and that our economic growth suffers as a result. Moreover, despite the existence of the Social Security program, some remain concerned that worker shortsightedness may cause workers to undersave for retirement. As a result of these concerns, the U.S. government has introduced a series of tax subsidies to encourage retirement savings. In this section, we review the structure and effects of these subsidies.

### Available Tax Subsidies for Retirement Savings

In the United States, there are a variety of tax-subsidized mechanisms available for retirement savings. In this section, we briefly review the four major tax incentives for retirement savings.

#### Tax Subsidy to Employer-Provided Pensions

One of the largest fringe benefits provided by employers to their employees is the [pension plan](#), whereby employers save to provide retirement income to their workers. Traditionally, employer-provided pension plans were [defined benefit pension plans](#), in which workers accrued pension rights during their tenure at the firm, and when they retired, the firm paid them a benefit that was a function of that workers' tenure at the firm and of their earnings. Over time, employer-provided pension plans have shifted to [defined contribution pension plans](#), in which employers set aside a certain proportion of a worker's earnings (such as 5%) in an investment account, and the worker receives these savings and any accumulated investment earnings when she retires.

##### pension plan

An employer-sponsored plan through which employers and employees save on a (generally) tax-free basis for the employees' retirement.

##### defined benefit pension plans

Pension plans in which workers accrue pension rights during their tenure at the firm, and when they retire, the firm pays them a benefit that is a function of that workers' tenure at the firm and of their earnings.

##### defined contribution pension plans

Pension plans in which employers set aside a certain proportion of a worker's earnings (such as 5%) in an investment account, and the worker receives these savings and any accumulated investment earnings when she retires.

Similar to employer-provided health insurance, the contributions that employers make to pension plans are not taxed as income to employees. Likewise, any interest that accumulates on this pension savings is not taxed as it is accrued. Instead, employees are taxed on their pension savings as regular income when it is withdrawn in retirement.

#### 401(k) Accounts

The most rapidly growing form of retirement savings is the [401\(k\) account](#), an individually controlled savings program offered through the workplace. These 401(k) accounts allow individuals to save for their retirement on a tax-favored basis through a paycheck withdrawal, with employers often matching employee contributions. A typical 401(k) option at a firm allows the worker to contribute up to 10% of her income to a retirement account, and any dollars contributed are not counted as taxable income. In addition, the employer matches, say, the first 5% of the employee's income that she contributes, by contributing to the account an amount equal to the worker's contribution. There is a limit on 401(k) contributions of \$18,500 (in 2018). When withdrawn in retirement, 401(k) account balances are taxed as ordinary income.

##### 401(k) accounts

Tax-preferred retirement savings vehicles offered by employers, to which employers will often match employees' contributions.

#### Individual Retirement Accounts

The problem with employer-provided pensions or 401(k) plans as retirement savings vehicles is that many individuals are not offered such plans by their employers; only 50% of workers in the private sector participate in an employer-provided pension plan.<sup>10</sup> In 1974, Congress introduced the **Individual Retirement Account (IRA)**, a tax-favored retirement savings vehicle for individuals not covered by employer-provided pensions. For low- and middle-income households (income below \$62,000 for a single head of household, or \$99,000 for a married couple), IRAs function as follows:<sup>11</sup>

- They are not a special type of savings. Almost any form of asset can be put in an IRA (from stocks to bonds to holdings of gold).
- Individuals can contribute up to \$5,500 tax-free each year (deducted from their taxable income).
- Unlike the interest on a regular savings account, the interest earned on IRA contributions accumulates tax-free.
- IRA balances can't be withdrawn until age 59½, and withdrawals have to start at age 70 (or there is a 10% tax penalty).
- IRA balances are taxed as regular income on withdrawal.

#### **Individual Retirement Account (IRA)**

A tax-favored retirement savings vehicle primarily for low- and middle-income tax-payers, who make pre-tax contributions and are then taxed on future withdrawals.

For higher income households, however, IRAs were restricted by the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (TRA 86). Higher-income households now only have access to *nondeductible* IRAs, IRAs for which the annual contributions are part of taxable income, but for which the interest earned accumulates tax-free.

The tax subsidization of saving through an IRA was expanded in 2001 through the introduction of the “saver’s tax credit.” This program matches the contributions to IRA accounts by low-income families. For example, for married couples jointly filing taxes with incomes below \$37,000, the saver’s credit equals 50% of their IRA contribution up to \$4,000 so that the after-tax cost of contributing \$2,000 to an IRA is only \$1,000. The match rate then falls, and for joint filers with incomes between \$40,001 and \$62,000, the credit rate is only 10%. The saver’s credit also can apply to 401(k) contributions as well, under a somewhat more complicated formula.

### **Simplified Employee Pension IRAs**

The final large form of tax-subsidized retirement savings is the **Simplified Employee Pension IRA (SEP IRA)**, which is a retirement savings option specifically for the self-employed. Individuals with SEP-IRA accounts can save up to \$55,000 per year from their self-employment earnings tax-free, for withdrawal (and taxation) upon retirement. Thus, SEP-IRA accounts function in the same way as do 401(k) accounts (without matching), except that they are not run through employers.

#### **Simplified Employee Pension IRA (SEP-IRA) accounts**

Retirement savings accounts specifically for the self-employed, under which up to \$55,000 per year can be saved on a tax-free basis.

## **Why Do Tax Subsidies Raise the Return to Savings?**

All of the tax subsidies just described have a similar structure: individuals are shielded from taxation on their savings, as well as on any interest earnings on those savings. In addition,

individuals are taxed on their retirement savings as regular income when they withdraw the funds from their retirement savings accounts.

If retirement savings are taxed anyway when individuals are retired, how is this a tax subsidy? This is a subsidy because instead of paying the taxes on the savings up front, you defer the payment of taxes (on both the initial contribution and on any interest earned) until you withdraw those retirement savings. Recall from our discussion of present discounted value (PDV) in [Chapter 4](#) that money received today is worth more than money that will be received in the future because you can earn interest on the money if you have it today. By the same token, taxes paid in the future are less costly than taxes paid today because you can earn interest on the tax payments that you avoid today.

In other words, with savings that are not tax-preferred, you pay taxes as you earn the money. In turn, the government can take these tax payments, deposit them, and earn interest on them. With tax-preferred retirement savings, you get to hold on to any taxes you would have paid on both your initial contribution and any interest earnings, and *you get to earn the interest on the money that would have otherwise been paid in taxes*. The difference between paying the taxes up front (and letting the government earn the interest on them) and paying the taxes at withdrawal (so that you earn the interest on them) can be quite large.

Suppose that Ted is a 70-year-old who has earned \$100 at his job that he wants to save for one year in a bank account and then withdraw. His tax rate is 25%, and the interest rate that he can earn on the bank account is 10%. He is trying to decide whether to label his bank account an IRA; the implications of his decision are shown in [Table 22-2](#). If he doesn't label the account as an IRA, he has to pay taxes on his earnings. In that case, he keeps \$75 of earnings after tax, puts it in the bank, earns \$7.50 in interest, but then pays \$1.88 in taxes on that interest. When he withdraws his money after one year, he has \$80.62. If he labels his account as an IRA, however, he gets to invest the entire \$100 of earnings (because IRA contributions are tax deductible). He earns \$10 of interest on this investment. Then, when he withdraws the money after one year, the government collects 25% of his \$110, or \$27.50. He ends up with \$82.50, \$1.88 more than the amount withdrawn from the non-IRA account.

**TABLE 22-2 The Tax Advantage of IRA Savings**

Account Type	Earnings	Tax on Earnings (tax rate = 25%)	Initial Deposit	Interest Earned (interest rate = 10%)	Taxes Paid upon Withdrawal	Total Amount Withdrawn
Regular	\$100	\$25	\$75	\$7.50	$0.25 \times (\$7.50) = \$1.88$	$\$75 + 7.50 - \$1.88 = \$80.62$
IRA	\$100	0	\$100	\$10	$0.25 \times (\$110) = \$27.50$	$\$100 + 10 - \$27.50 = \$82.50$

If Ted deposits his \$100 earnings in a regular bank account, those earnings are taxed before deposit at a rate of 25%, and the interest earned on the remaining \$75 is also taxed at 25%. He ends up with more money if he deposits his earnings in an IRA because those earnings are untaxed before the deposit, so he can gain interest on all \$100 of his earnings (rather than just 75% of them).

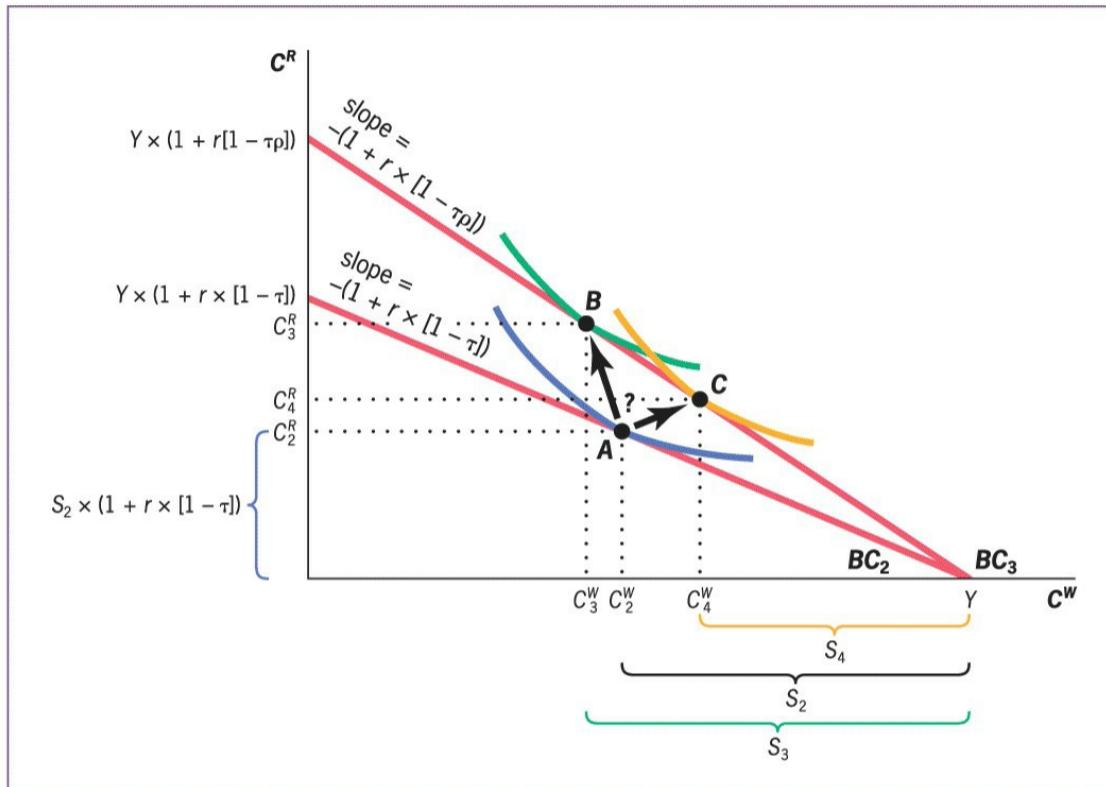
Moreover, the IRA's advantage of deferring tax payments increases the longer one holds the asset. For example, if you hold an asset for 30 years at an interest rate of 10% and a tax rate of 25%, an IRA would leave you with *twice* as much money as a non-IRA account.<sup>12</sup> Another advantage is that many taxpayers will find themselves in a lower tax bracket when they retire because their income is lower than when they were working. As a result, deferring taxes to retirement lowers the amount of taxes paid.

This same logic applies to all forms of tax-subsidized retirement savings. Thus, these types

of tax incentives can dramatically increase the after-tax rate of return to retirement savings.

## Theoretical Effects of Tax-Subsidized Retirement Savings

Theoretically, tax subsidies to retirement savings act in the opposite way that the tax on interest income worked in [Figure 22-1](#). The effects are illustrated in [Figure 22-3](#), which once again shows the intertemporal consumption trade-off. We start with the after-tax budget constraint,  $BC_2$ , from that figure, with a slope  $-(1 + r \times [1 - \tau])$ ; remember that the slope is after-tax interest rate, the price of first-period (working-life) consumption,  $C^W$ .



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 22-3

Tax Subsidies and the Intertemporal Consumption Trade-Off • Individuals initially face a budget constraint  $BC_2$  with a slope  $-(1 + r \times [1 - \tau])$ . When retirement savings is tax-subsidized, the budget constraint moves to  $BC_3$ , with a higher slope  $-(1 + r \times [1 - \tau \times r])$ . This leads to a substitution effect toward more savings and an income effect toward less savings. If the substitution effect is larger, then first-period consumption will fall from  $C^W_2$  to  $C^W_3$ , and savings will rise from  $S_2$  to  $S_3$ . If the income effect is larger, then first-period consumption will rise from  $C^W_2$  to  $C^W_4$ , and savings will fall from  $S_2$  to  $S_4$ .

When retirement savings is in a tax-subsidized form, however, savings are taxed much more lightly because taxes are not paid until retirement (lowering the PDV of tax payments). This delay in tax payments reduces the tax burden on savings from  $\tau$  to  $\tau \times \rho$ , where  $\rho$  is the share of the tax burden that remains after accounting for the delay in tax payments. Suppose, for example, that  $\tau = 0.3$  and  $\rho$  equals 0.33; this would imply that individuals saving through tax-subsidized retirement plans have an effective tax rate on savings of  $0.3 \times 0.33 = 0.1$  when subsidies are accounted for. In this case, the availability of

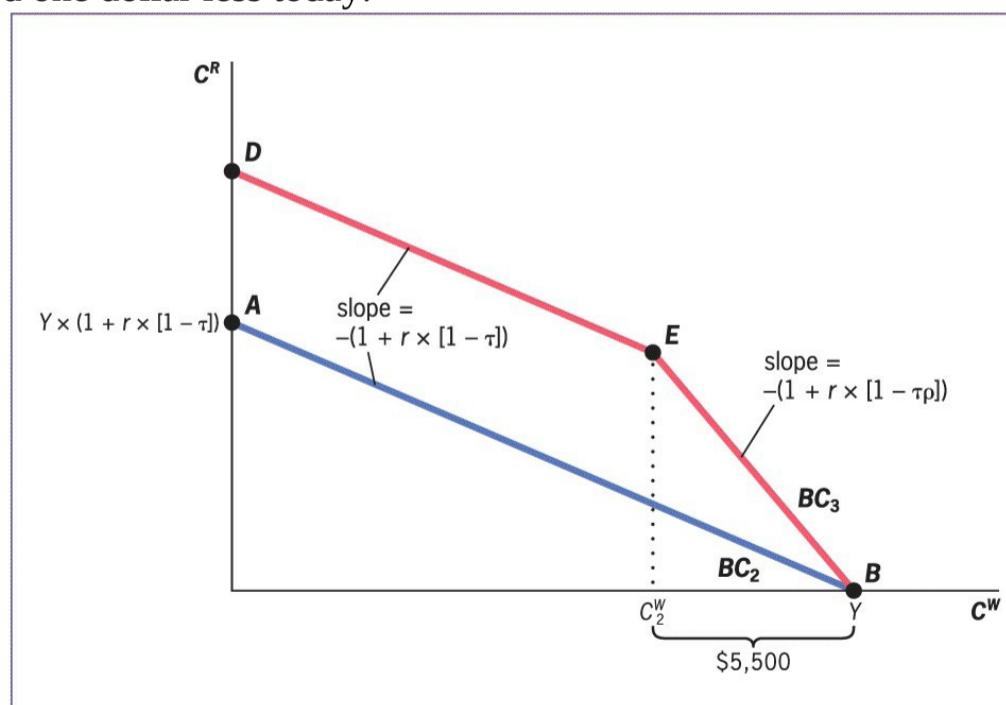
tax-subsidized savings raises the slope of the budget constraint to  $-(1 + r \times [1 - \tau \times \rho])$  so that the budget constraint moves from  $BC_2$  to  $BC_3$ , raising the price of first-period consumption. (With a higher interest rate, there is a higher opportunity cost to consuming rather than saving.) This leads to a substitution effect toward more savings and an income effect toward less savings. Individuals will save more because the price of current consumption (the after-tax interest rate) has risen (the substitution effect); but they will save less because now they can reach their retirement savings goals more easily (the income effect).

As discussed earlier, the effect of this change in the after-tax interest rate is ambiguous. [Figure 22-3](#) shows two possible outcomes of savings subsidies. If the substitution effect is larger than the income effect, then such subsidies will raise savings (from  $S_2$  to  $S_3$ ), with first-period consumption falling from  $C_2^W$  to  $C_3^W$  (moving from point A to point B). If the income effect is larger than the substitution effect, then such subsidies will lower savings (from  $S_2$  to  $S_4$ ), with first-period consumption rising from  $C_2^W$  to  $C_4^W$  (moving from point A to point C).

### Limitations on Tax-Subsidized Retirement Savings

Most of the vehicles for tax-subsidized retirement savings that we reviewed earlier feature a limit on annual contributions, such as the \$5,500 limit for IRAs. These limits complicate the theoretical analysis. Suppose that Andrea is making savings decisions in a world with and without an IRA available. [Figure 22-4](#) shows the impact of the IRA on her budget constraint.

Her original after-tax budget constraint,  $BC_2$ , between consumption in period one and period two is the line AB, with a slope of  $-(1 + r \times [1 - \tau])$ , where  $r$  is the interest rate earned on her savings and  $\tau$  is the tax rate paid on interest earnings. Without the IRA, the price of first-period consumption, in terms of forgone second-period consumption, is  $1 + r \times (1 - \tau)$  because that is how much second-period consumption she could have if she consumed one dollar less today.



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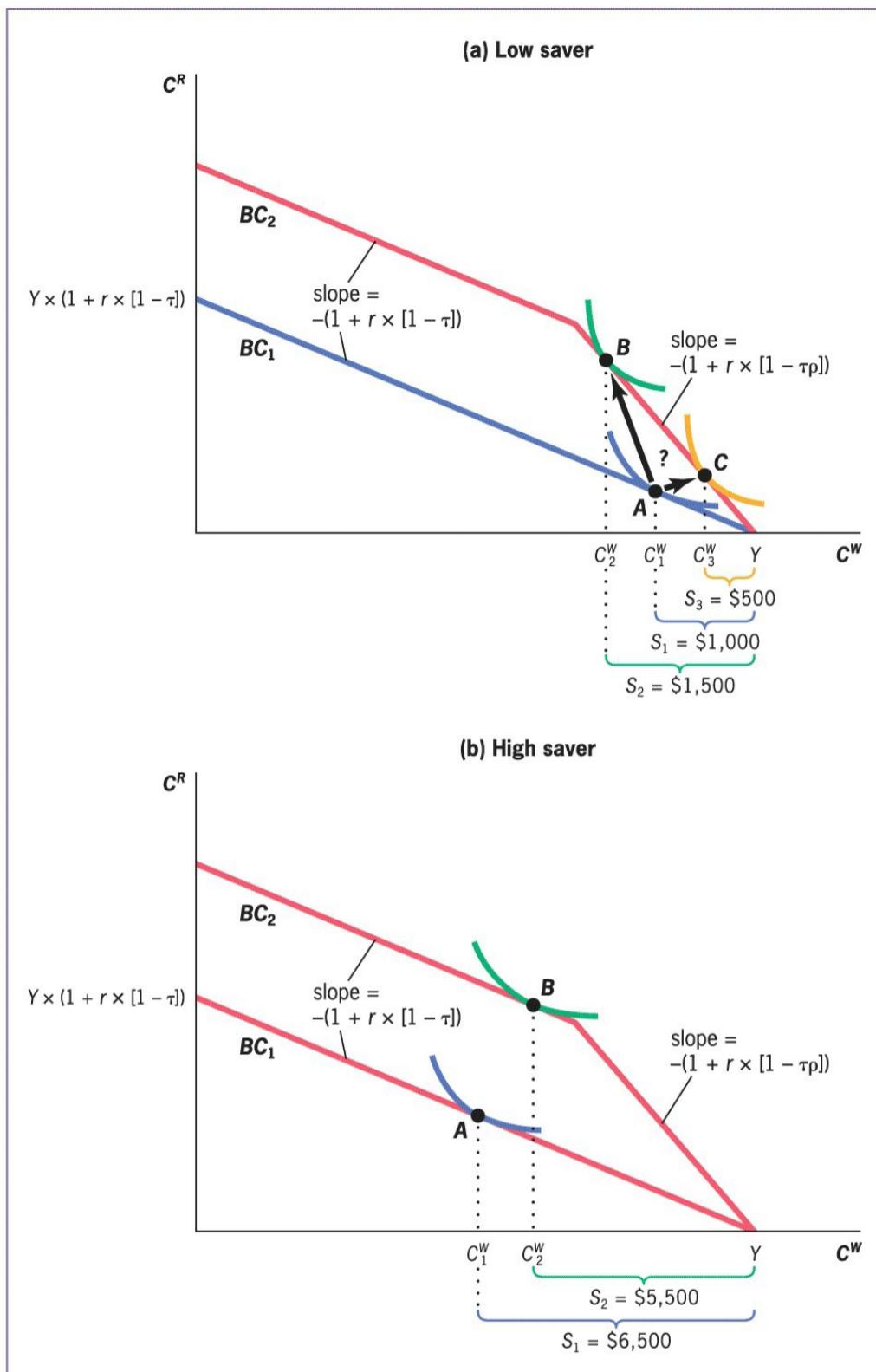
■ FIGURE 22-4

IRAs and the Intertemporal Consumption Decision • The availability of IRAs raises the return to saving less than \$5,500 from  $-(1 + r \times ([1 - \tau]))_{\text{to}} - (1 + r \times ([1 - \tau \times r]))$ , where  $r$  is the net tax

preference from using an IRA. Once savings is above \$5,500 (period-one consumption less than  $C_2^W$ ), the IRA simply increases period-two income, and the return to each dollar of savings returns to  $-(1 + r \times ([1 - \tau]))$ .

If Andrea decides to put money in an IRA, the after-tax rate of return to savings changes. The slope of the new budget constraint,  $BC_3$ , for the first \$5,500 of savings (which corresponds to period-one consumption of  $C_2^W$ ) rises to  $-(1 + r \times [1 - \tau \times \rho])$ , where  $\tau \times \rho$  is once again the effective tax rate on tax-subsidized savings. This change is reflected in a new, steeper budget constraint between points  $E$  and  $B$ . Above \$5,500 of savings (with period-one consumption of less than  $C_2^W$ ), there is no change in the rate of return to savings, due to the cap on IRA contributions. Above \$5,500 of savings, then, the slope of the budget constraint returns to its original value.

What effect does the IRA have on savings? Consider two types of individuals, shown in [Figure 22-5](#). In panel (a), Mr. Grasshopper saves little before the IRA is introduced (point  $A$ ), consuming and saving only  $S_1 = \$1,000$ . For Mr. Grasshopper, the effect of the IRA on savings is ambiguous due to offsetting substitution effects (which tend to increase savings as the after-tax interest rate rises) and income effects (which tend to reduce savings as after-tax income rises). If substitution effects dominate, Mr. Grasshopper will move from point  $A$  to point  $B$ , reduce period-one consumption to  $C_2^W$ , and raise savings to  $S_2 = \$1,500$ . If income effects dominate, Mr. Grasshopper will move from point  $A$  to point  $C$ , increase period-one consumption to  $C_3^W$ , and lower savings to  $S_3 = \$500$ .



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FIGURE 22-5

**Low Savers Versus High Savers** • In panel (a), Mr. Grasshopper saves little before the IRA is introduced (point  $A$ ), consuming and saving only \$1,000. For Mr. Grasshopper, the effect of the IRA on savings is ambiguous: if substitution effects dominate, he will move from point  $A$  to point  $B$  (with savings rising); if income effects dominate, he will move from point  $A$  to point  $C$  (with savings falling). In panel (b), Ms. Ant was a high saver before the IRA was introduced, consuming and saving \$6,500 (point  $A$ ). For Ms. Ant, the introduction of the IRA does not change the price of first-period consumption,

but it does have an income effect, causing her period-one consumption to  $C_2^W$  rise to and her savings to fall to  **$S_2, \$5,500$** .

Panel (b) shows the analysis for Ms. Ant, who was a high saver before the IRA was introduced, consuming  $C_1^W$  and saving \$6,500 (point  $A$ ). For Ms. Ant, the introduction of the IRA does not change the price of first-period consumption, which remains a

$1 + r \times (1 - \tau)$ , so that the budget constraints without  $(BC_1)$  and with  $(BC_2)$  IRAs have the same slope for her. The introduction of IRAs does have an income effect, however, because she is now richer from having a tax subsidy to her first \$5,500 of savings: with the higher return, she doesn't need to save as much (\$6,500) to achieve the same level of period-two consumption. Therefore, she will use her increased income to purchase more consumption in period one: first-period consumption rises from  $C_1^W$  to  $C_2^W$  as she moves from point A to point B. Her savings fall from  $S_1$  to  $S_2 = \$5,500$ .

The income effect for high savers such as Ms. Ant arises as they “reshuffle” their existing assets into IRAs; they take \$5,500 of the savings that they were already putting aside and relabel it as tax-preferred IRA savings. For high savers, therefore, the IRA is a subsidy to existing savings: the government gives them a higher rate of return on savings that they had already planned to make. If such reshuffling is likely, then it is possible that IRAs could actually *lower* overall private savings through this income effect.

This analysis used IRAs as an example, but it applies to other forms of retirement savings as well. The difference with these other forms is that the limits are much higher, so there are likely to be more individuals like Mr. Grasshopper than like Ms. Ant; for example, relatively few self-employed individuals would have saved above the \$53,000 SEP-IRA account limit for their retirement without a SEP-IRA account.



#### APPLICATION

## The Roth IRA

In 1997, Congress enacted legislation that established a major new tax-preferred retirement savings vehicle, the [Roth IRA](#). This account has many similarities to a regular IRA but has two key differences. First, unlike traditional IRAs, where contributions are made pre-tax and taxed upon withdrawal, individuals contribute *after-tax* dollars to a Roth IRA, and when withdrawals are eventually made, the withdrawals are not taxed. Second, individuals are never required to make withdrawals from their Roth IRAs (whereas withdrawals must start from a traditional IRA by age 70) so that earnings on assets can build up tax-free indefinitely.

### Roth IRA

A variation on normal IRAs to which taxpayers make after-tax contributions but may then make tax-free withdrawals later in life.

Why did policy makers introduce this new option? If policy makers wanted to expand IRAs, why didn't they just do so (e.g., by raising contribution limits or income eligibility) rather than introduce this “reversed” structure? One clear reason was budget politics.

Over the near term on which budgetary forecasts are based, expanding traditional IRAs is very costly: under the regular IRA plan, the government loses the taxes on contributions today and doesn't collect tax revenue on withdrawals until far in the future. Over this same near term, however, Roth IRAs look much better: the government collects tax revenues today and loses them in the future (because we don't tax interest earnings on the account or withdrawals from it). The Roth IRA plan thus allows politicians to enact a tax break while delaying the budgetary pain of paying for it.

The Joint Tax Committee (the congressional counterpart of the Congressional Budget Office for estimating the revenue implications of tax changes) estimated that instituting the

Roth IRAs, along with a simultaneously proposed expanded availability of traditional IRAs, would cost the government only \$1.8 billion over the 1997–2002 window (with the Roth IRA actually saving money, while the traditional IRA expansion cost money). This low price tag was one reason that Congress was able to include Roth IRAs in the 1997 legislation. Yet over the 2003–2007 window, when these tax-free payments began to be made to holders of Roth IRAs, the payments were estimated to cost the government \$18.4 billion, ten times more—and costs will rise even further into the future.<sup>13</sup> This is a good example of the problems of short-term thinking about the budget.

The budget politics of the Roth IRA have been exploited even further to pass a tax reconciliation bill that extended the capital gains and dividend tax cuts slated to expire in 2008 (and discussed in more detail in [Chapters 23](#) and [24](#)). In its original form, this extension would cost \$51 billion in lost revenues over ten years, with \$31 billion in losses occurring in 2011–2015. According to current Senate rules, any reconciliation bill that increases deficits in years after the reconciliation period (after 2010, in this case) is barred (unless 60 votes can be gathered to support passage, which is not possible given the current partisan split of the Senate). To meet this test, it seems the Senate would have to raise taxes elsewhere in the system, an unpopular option. Ironically, however, the Senate proposed to help meet this test by *cutting taxes further*, in the form of an expansion of the Roth IRA.

In the past, only individuals with income under \$100,000 were allowed to “roll over” savings from their traditional IRAs into Roth IRAs. That is, these individuals could close their IRAs, pay taxes on the proceeds, and then put those proceeds into a Roth IRA. To pay for the tax cuts, the Senate eliminated the \$100,000 income limit as of 2010 so that anyone could convert his or her regular IRA into a Roth IRA.

Higher-income households would find the removal of this limit attractive for a number of reasons, as summarized in [Burman \(2006\)](#). For example, unlike traditional IRAs, Roth IRAs have no withdrawal requirements so that high-income individuals can now leave their money in a tax-preferred savings account for more years, raising their total tax savings. Moreover, these conversions essentially amount to a timing shift in when an individual pays taxes: funds converted from a traditional IRA are taxed immediately but then are allowed to accumulate tax-free under the Roth IRA plan even when withdrawn in retirement. Thus, individuals who expect that their tax rate will be higher in retirement (such as those with large payouts from pension plans), or who are just worried that the fiscal imbalance of the government will lead to higher future tax rates, can lower their lifetime taxes by paying them now rather than later. In both cases, these gains to higher-income individuals in terms of lower future tax payments imply a corresponding future federal revenue loss.

Finally, and most significantly, allowing this conversion essentially amounts to removing the income limit on Roth IRAs. This is because, while higher-income individuals are barred from contributing to regular IRAs, they are currently allowed to contribute to a *non-deductible IRA*, for which they cannot deduct their initial contributions but can benefit from the non-taxation of interest earnings. Under the 2010 law, this non-deductible IRA can then be turned around and converted into a Roth IRA. Thus, higher-income individuals can contribute to a Roth IRA in two simple steps: start a non-deductible traditional IRA, and then convert it to a Roth IRA.<sup>14</sup>

For these reasons, many higher-income individuals convert their traditional IRAs to Roth IRAs. This action implies that removing the conversion limit leads to a short-term increase in tax revenues (as households pay taxes on the funds transferred into their Roth IRAs) and a

long-term net reduction in tax revenues (because tax-sheltered savings opportunities are extended to higher-income groups). Indeed, the Joint Committee on Taxation concluded that while lifting the Roth IRA income limits would raise nearly \$6.4 billion in the first decade that it was in effect, the proposal would then lose almost \$17 billion (2015 dollars) in tax revenue between 2014 and 2042.<sup>[15](#)</sup>

This outcome was fine for the Senate's purposes because senators conveniently set 2010 as the date at which IRAs could be converted. Thus, the money raised by the conversion would apply to the 2011–2015 period for which financing was needed, while the long-run higher costs would not be included in the revenue costs of the bill. Thus, the trick of financing a tax cut with a tax cut, Roth IRA style!<sup>[16](#)</sup> In May 2006, the bill was signed into law by President George W. Bush.<sup>[17](#)</sup>

In 2010 alone, 869,400 Roth conversions were made, more than nine times the conversions made in 2009. The rise in uptake has, in part, been credited to the anticipation of wealthy individuals whose tax rates are at a low point and are destined to rise due to both high deficits and rising opposition to wealth inequality. More than 10% of millionaires converted their IRAs, accounting for 22% of all money invested in Roth IRAs.<sup>[18](#)</sup>

## Implications of Alternative Models

As noted, there is strong evidence to suggest that savings decisions are determined by both precautionary and self-control considerations. Both of these alternatives suggest that retirement tax incentives may have stronger positive effects on savings than implied by the traditional theory.

### Precautionary Savings

This asset reshuffling just discussed will be likely if two conditions are met: (1) if a large share of IRA contributors would have saved \$5,500 anyway in the absence of the IRA and (2) if IRA savings and non-IRA savings are viewed as highly substitutable. Consider someone who was going to save \$5,500 for retirement even without an IRA. Such an individual would not feel constrained by the fact that she couldn't withdraw the money before retirement, so that IRA and non-IRA savings would be substitutes for each other, and reshuffling would be likely (so that there is no net new savings).

On the other hand, consider people who had more than \$5,500 in savings but were using their savings for precaution against job loss. Because it cannot be accessed if they lose their job before age 59½, the savings in an IRA would not be viewed as very substitutable for them, so they would not just reshuffle \$5,500 of their (precautionary) savings to the IRA. The analyses in [Figures 22-3, 22-4](#), and [22-5](#) refer to retirement savings only: those with precautionary savings over \$5,500 do not reshuffle, but those with *retirement* savings over \$5,500 do. The fact that many contributors to tax-subsidized retirement savings accounts have high savings doesn't necessarily imply that they will be reshuffling those savings into the tax-subsidized account, if the savings are for precautionary reasons instead of for retirement. Thus, there may be more new savings due to retirement incentives than are suggested by the traditional model discussed earlier.

### Self-Control Models

The hallmark of self-control models of savings is the search for commitment devices to provide self-control. Retirement accounts such as pension and 401(k) accounts provide excellent commitment devices because the contributions are *taken directly out of the paycheck* and individuals can't access their money until retirement. Thus, the money in these

accounts can't be accessed to satisfy short-term impatience, allowing the individual to commit to long-term patience. Retirement savings accounts may, therefore, increase savings by more than is suggested by the previous analysis. In addition to the demand for these accounts because of tax incentives, there will also be a demand that arises because individuals can effectively commit to save.

## Private Versus National Savings

The discussion of savings incentive effects thus far has focused on the impacts on private savings. What matters ultimately for the determination of investment (and potentially growth) is *national* savings, the sum of private and government savings. Recall from [Chapter 4](#) that increasing the government deficit can lower investment by reducing the pool of available capital. While retirement tax incentives may increase private savings, they have an offsetting negative effect on national savings because they are financed by a tax break. The reduced tax revenue lowers national savings and offsets any increase in private savings.

Suppose that we found that 401(k)s raised private savings by 30¢ per dollar of contribution: of each dollar saved in 401(k)s, 70¢ is retirement saving that would have been saved even absent the 401(k) (but which is now saved through the 401(k) for tax reasons), and 30¢ is new saving that is induced by the 401(k). Suppose also that the typical tax rate of contributors was 43%. Under these assumptions, the cost of each dollar of IRA contribution in terms of forgone tax revenue on existing savings reshuffled into 401(k)s would be 30¢ (**0.43 × 70** of existing savings). Thus, there would be no national savings impact of 401(k)s: the increase in *private* savings due to the 401(k) would be completely offset by the reduction in *national* savings due to the tax break on savings that would have occurred even without the 401(k) (and would have been taxed in that case).

The comparison of private to national savings comes back to the notion of *marginal impacts* of tax incentives (new behavior encouraged) versus *inframarginal impacts* of tax incentives (old behavior rewarded) that we introduced in [Chapter 18](#). In the example here, there is some marginal response: each dollar of contribution raises private savings by 30¢. But there is also a large inframarginal response: 70¢ on each dollar of 401(k) savings was going to happen even if 401(k)s never existed. This large inframarginal response significantly lowers tax revenues, offsetting any national savings gain from 401(k) incentives. Thus, unless there is a large marginal increase in savings from the availability of retirement savings plans, these plans will lower overall national savings.

The size of the marginal and inframarginal response to tax incentives for savings will depend on two factors. The first is the size of the income and substitution effects for retirement savers below the savings limit (e.g., for those with less than \$5,500 of retirement savings). The second is the share of retirement savers who are above the savings limit, for whom there is only an inframarginal response: there is no new savings encouraged for this population since there is no substitution effect.

## Evidence on Tax Incentives and Savings

There are a number of studies of the impacts of employer-provided pensions, IRAs, and 401(k)s on savings behavior.

As discussed in the Empirical Evidence box, identifying a causal estimate of the impact of these incentives on savings has proved to be surprisingly difficult. But evidence from an important recent study indicated that tax price incentives to increase savings don't have much

effect on total private savings (while lowering national savings). At the same time, this study and others have suggested that it is not tax savings but other factors in program design that have the most impact on the effect of retirement incentives.

For example, [Madrian and Shea \(2001\)](#) followed 401(k) participation in a firm that changed from a system in which workers had to actively sign up for a 401(k) plan if they wanted to participate, to a system in which workers were placed by default in the 401(k) and had to opt out if they *didn't* want to participate. Under standard economic theory, these two systems should have identical effects because individuals have a choice about whether to participate or not in each case. In practice, however, changing the default from one in which individuals are not enrolled automatically (and have to enroll actively) to one in which individuals are enrolled (and have to disenroll actively) had enormous effects, raising participation rates in company 401(k) plans among new hires from about 50% to almost 90%. These effects were particularly large for disadvantaged groups: for those with incomes under \$20,000 per year, participation in 401(k) plans rose from 13% to 80% from this simple change!

These types of findings motivated President Obama to extend further the approach that was discussed in the introduction. A subsequent proposal from the Obama administration proposed to mandate that firms that do not have retirement plans be required to set up and automatically enroll employees in IRA-type accounts. Employees would have 3% of their salary directly deposited into a retirement account unless they opted out. The president also proposed to expand the saver's credit to help lower-income families contribute toward these new retirement accounts. However, the president's proposal was not passed by Congress and consequently, states are making their own laws regarding mandatory retirement accounts.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Estimating the Impact of Tax Incentives for Savings on Savings Behavior*

The difficulties in assessing the impact of savings incentives on savings are illustrated by studies on the effect of IRAs on savings. Researchers began explicitly testing the reshuffling hypothesis by asking whether individuals who contribute to IRA accounts withdrew funds from other assets to finance that contribution. In fact, this does not seem to be true: when IRA contributions increased, other savings actually rose, rather than falling as the reshuffling hypothesis would predict.

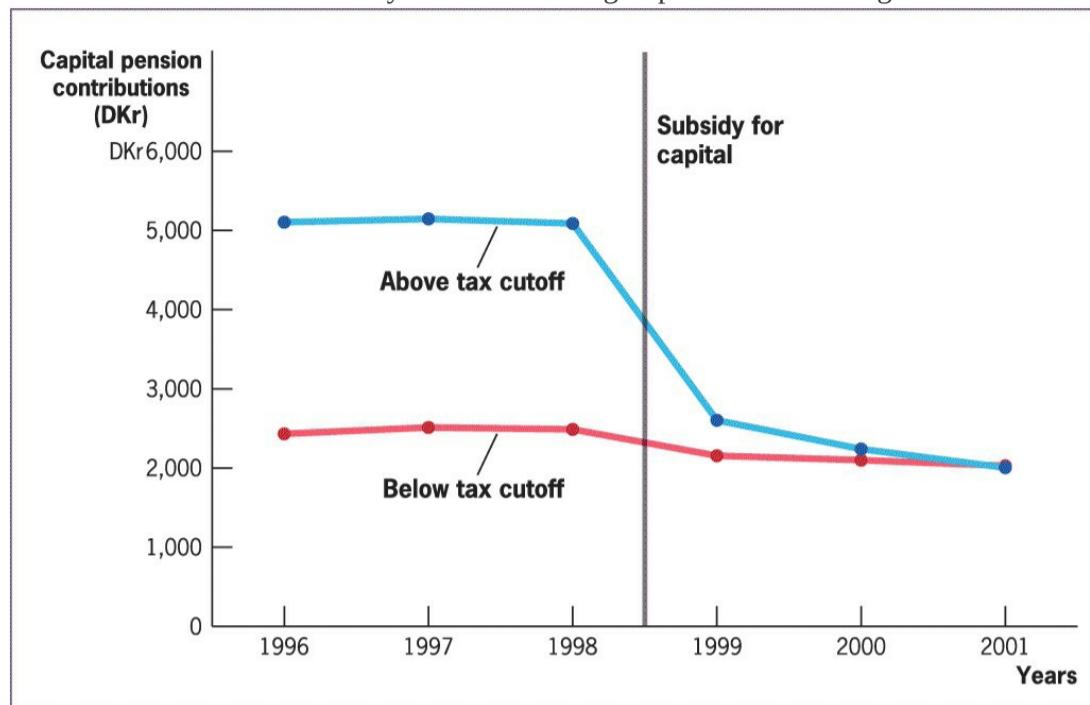
These studies are unconvincing, however, because they have not surmounted the problem of bias in comparing contributors (the treatment group) to noncontributors (the control group). Those who contribute to IRAs may be "savers," who save more in *every form* than the "nonsavers" who don't contribute to IRAs. Thus, even in the absence of the IRA, these individuals would have saved \$5,500 more anyway, in some other form. In contrast, the noncontributors may be nonsavers, who would not have saved at all. In that case, noncontributors are not a good control group: there is a bias in comparing them to the savers because that treatment group would have saved more even in the absence of IRAs. More sophisticated tests designed to surmount this bias have reached mixed conclusions, but no one has yet designed a very convincing test of the impact of IRAs on savings behavior.

The literature on 401(k)s has taken a different approach, with researchers comparing the amount of savings put aside by workers in firms with 401(k)s (the treatments) with the savings put aside by workers in firms that do not offer 401(k)s (the controls). The problem with this approach is that the treatments and controls may not be comparable because workers in firms that offer 401(k)s may have different tastes for savings than those in firms that do not offer 401(k)s. If people who work in firms that offer 401(k) save more in general than people in other firms, there is a clear bias in comparing these two groups: the fact that having access to a 401(k) is associated with higher levels of savings doesn't prove a causal effect of 401(k)s on savings.

This concern is heightened by the observable sharp differences across employees in firms that do and do not offer 401(k)s. For example, in 1991, those eligible for a 401(k) had average incomes of \$39,000, while those not eligible for a 401(k) had average incomes of \$27,000; 69% of eligibles were married, while only 58% of noneligibles were married.<sup>19</sup> If these groups are so different among factors that determine savings, such as income and marital status, it is hard to imagine that they are identical in their underlying tastes for savings. And if they are different in their tastes for savings, then they are not comparable treatments and controls.

A study by [Chetty et al. \(2014\)](#) overcame these difficulties by studying a retirement savings program in Denmark. Their novel study incorporated a number of interesting changes in the Danish retirement system. First, there was a sizeable reduction in the tax subsidy to savings for those taxpayers in the top bracket but not for those below that level. This sets up a

natural differences-in-differences comparison between the change in savings for those just above the top bracket (who saw a sizable reduction in their savings incentives) and those just below the top bracket (who have similar income but who saw no reduction in their savings incentives). The results of this comparison are shown in [Figure 22-6](#). The top line shows the contributions to retirement savings by those near but above the cutoff for the top bracket; the bottom line is for those near but below that cutoff. Contributions were much higher before 1998 for the richer taxpayers, who had a higher tax subsidy. Importantly, the trends in contributions were very similar for both groups before the change.



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#### FIGURE 22-6

Individual Contributions Above and Below Top Tax Cutoff by Year • This figure shows the average individual capital pension contribution each year by two income groups: those above the tax cutoff and those below it. After the subsidy was reduced, contributions declined sharply in the top-income group from 5,089 Danish kroner (DKr) in 1998 to 2,604 DKr in 1999. In the lower-income group, pension contributions hardly declined, falling from 2,488 DKr to 2,156 DKr.

Data from: [Chetty et al. \(2014\)](#).

But once the change was put in place in 1999, contributions fall dramatically for the higher-income taxpayers, while not changing much at all for those with somewhat lower incomes. This strongly suggests that the decline in contributions for the highest income group was due to reduced savings incentives.

The key question for policy purposes, however, is not what happens to pension contributions—it is what happens to total (private and national) savings. In fact, Chetty et al. found that there was *no effect* on private savings. The reduction in contributions for the highest income group that is shown in [Figure 22-6](#) is *completely offset* by an increase in contributions to other types of savings. That is, this tax incentive had no impact on total savings—it simply caused individuals to reshuffle savings from one source to another. Given that there is a tax cost associated with the retirement incentive, this finding implies that national savings fall when tax incentives are introduced.

What is particularly striking about the Chetty et al. analysis is that they were able to compare these results of the ineffectiveness of tax subsidies to very effective results for a different change: mandating savings contributions to a pension plan. This policy change—which mandated that all Danes contribute 1% of their earnings to a retirement savings account—led to a rise in savings of roughly 1%. That is, there was minimal reshuffling in this case. How is this consistent with the previous findings? The reason, as proposed by the authors, is that most savers are *passive*: they don't make active decisions about savings, but just do what is mandated. A much smaller share (they estimate 15%) are *active* savers who reallocate their savings in response to financial incentives. For those passive savers, there is no offset to the government mandate, and there is also no response to the tax incentive. For those active savers, there is a strong response to financial incentives for pension savings—but there is a complete offset in other forms of savings, rather than a net rise in savings.

In other words, the authors argued, retirement savers either don't respond to price incentives and just save what they are told to, or they respond to price incentives aggressively by shifting savings from taxed sources to tax-free sources. Either way, tax incentives for savings are not increasing savings. But alternative policies that move the “defaults” of these passive savers can increase savings.

## 22.4 Conclusion

One of the most important decisions made by taxpayers in the United States is how much to save, and it seems likely that taxes factor into that decision. Unfortunately, neither theory nor existing empirical evidence offers a clear lesson for the magnitude (or even the direction) of the effect of taxes on savings. Despite this lack of evidence, tax incentives for savings continue to grow in importance. In 1975, the tax expenditure on incentives for savings was less than \$20 billion; in 2018, it had grown to \$141 billion.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, policy makers believe that tax incentives can make a difference in the savings decisions of individuals. Future research is needed to assess the validity of that belief.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Taxes lower the rate of return to savings, which causes a substitution effect away from savings but an income effect toward savings, with ambiguous overall effects.
- There is little evidence on the impact of taxes on the decision to save, but there is strong evidence that deciding to save is at least partially determined by the desire to take precautions against income uncertainty and by the desire for self-control.
- By deferring tax payments, tax subsidies for retirement savings [such as IRA and 401(k) plans] significantly increase the return to retirement savings.
- Retirement tax subsidies have ambiguous effects on savings. A key factor in determining their effects is the substitutability between subsidized retirement savings and other savings.
- Despite the availability of a variety of mechanisms for tax-subsidized retirement savings, there is little consensus on their effects on savings decisions. The best available evidence, from Canada, suggests that these effects can be large if savings subsidies are very generous.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Suppose that a person lives for two periods, earning \$30,000 in income in period 1, during which she consumes or saves for period 2. What is saved earns interest of 10% per year.
  1. Draw that person's intertemporal budget constraint.
  2. Draw that person's intertemporal budget constraint if the government taxes interest at the rate of 30%.
2. Suppose that the government increases its tax rate on interest earned. Afterward, savings increase. Which effect dominates, the income effect or the substitution effect? Explain.
3. Malovia has two tax brackets. The first \$20,000 in income is taxed at a 10% marginal rate, and income above \$20,000 is taxed at a 30% marginal rate. All income—earned income and nominal interest, dividend, and capital-gains income—is treated the same. The threshold for the 30% rate is currently indexed for inflation, and the real interest rate is 5%.
  1. How does inflation affect the returns to saving in Malovia? Compare the likely savings rate when expected inflation is 10% with the likely savings rate when expected inflation is zero.
  2. How would your answer change if the threshold for the 30% rate were not indexed for inflation?
4. The government of Maupertania introduces a new insurance program that pays for 100% of unexpected catastrophic medical costs for all its citizens. Before this time, only low-income households had this benefit.
  1. Describe an empirical test of the effects of this policy change on the savings of high-income households in Maupertania.
  2. What do you expect to happen to the overall rate of savings in Maupertania?
5. Shiz University has introduced a new plan that allows employees to deduct after-tax money automatically from their paychecks to be deposited in a pension plan. Why might people participate in this plan when there are no financial incentives to do so?
6. The government introduces a tax incentive program in which the first \$5,000 of savings can be tax-deferred. Draw the resulting budget constraint that illustrates the trade-off between current and future consumption.
7. [Gale and Scholz \(1994\)](#) estimate that increasing the contribution limits for IRAs would have little effect on the overall rates of savings. Why do you think this might be the case?
8. Discuss whether IRAs have increased savings in the United States in the past 20 years, paying attention to the fact that people vary along many dimensions and that there are numerous definitions of savings. What can we learn by comparing the non-IRA assets of people who do and don't have IRAs? Can you suggest alternative means of estimating the impact of IRAs on savings?
9. Two countries with comparable levels of income per capita each propose raising the amount of savings that can be tax-deferred by \$2,000. In Wenti, the current maximum amount of savings that can be tax-deferred is \$2,000, while in Schale, the current limit is \$5,000. In which country are savings likely to rise by more? In which country is the inframarginal response likely to be greatest? Which savings incentive will likely cost its government the most? Explain.
10. Madison is a 48-year-old consultant who earns \$480,000 per year. Hector is a 19-year-old college student who has just finished a summer job that paid him \$5,000. Both are planning on putting some of their earnings into IRA accounts. Who should be more likely to use a Roth IRA instead of a traditional IRA? Explain.
11. Lena is an executive who earns a substantial salary and every year contributes the maximum to her 401(k), which she invests in bonds and CDs earning around 3% interest. When she retires, she will have large retirement account balances as well as a pension. Her brother argues that because she will likely be in the same high tax bracket in retirement as she is currently, she should not bother contributing to the 401(k), and instead should just save that

money in an after-tax savings account. Is her brother correct?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

12. The CEO of a major company, disappointed by low retirement savings rates among his employees, is considering implementing one of two possible new savings initiatives. Initiative A would provide employees the option to commit to a personal savings plan, where all future raises would be automatically directed to contributions to the employee's 401(k) account. Initiative B would encourage employees to sign up to contribute 2% of their income to the 401(k) starting right now, and incentivize participation by introducing a new employer match component: if an employee contributes 2% of his or her income, the employer will contribute 2%.

Suppose the average employee at this company makes \$50,000 per year, will receive a raise of 2% per year, and will earn returns of 8% each year in a 401(k). Over a 5-year period, would Initiative A or Initiative B produce better results for the employees who opt in? Considering the chapters' discussion of individual behavior in the decision to save for retirement, which initiative do you think will result in the highest employee earnings? Which initiative would you recommend the CEO implement?

13. Generational accounting techniques (recall [Chapter 4](#)) suggest that future income tax rates will be higher than current tax rates. How should this information affect the savings rate? How should it affect the relative appeal of Roth versus traditional tax-deferred IRAs?
14. In some cultures, when a member of the community who is ineligible for government-provided social insurance faces some adverse circumstances, the rest of the community lends that member money until his condition improves. In these cultures, would you expect more or less buffer-stock savings than occurs in the United States? Explain.
15. Consider a model in which individuals live for two periods and have utility functions of the form  $U = \ln(C_1) + \ln(C_2)$ . They earn income of \$100 in the first period and save  $S$  to finance consumption in the second period. The interest rate,  $r$ , is 10%.

1. Set up the individual's lifetime utility maximization problem. Solve for the optimal  $C_1, C_2$ , and  $S$ . (Hint: Rewrite  $C_2$  in terms of income,  $C_1$ , and  $r$ .) Draw a graph showing the opportunity set.

2. The government imposes a 20% tax on labor income. Solve for the new optimal levels of  $C_1, C_2$ , and  $S$ . Explain any differences between the new level of savings and the level in part (a), paying attention to any income and substitution effects.
3. Instead of the labor income tax, the government imposes a 20% tax on interest income. Solve for the new optimal levels of  $C_1, C_2$ , and  $S$ . (Hint: What is the new after-tax interest rate?) Explain any differences between the new level of savings and the level in part (a), paying attention to any income and substitution effects.

16. Congresswoman Chang and Congresswoman Diaz have competing proposals to increase savings rates in the United States. Congresswoman Chang proposes to allow families to place up to \$20,000 in special savings accounts. Interest earned on savings in these accounts will not be subject to taxation, and families will be able to withdraw money from these accounts at any time. Congresswoman Diaz's proposal has two prongs. First, it requires that all employers set up 401(k)-type retirement accounts for their employees. Second, it proposes requiring that employees deposit 3% of each paycheck into this account by default unless and until they fill out a one-page form to opt out of this deposit. Based on research described in this chapter, which proposal is likely to have larger effect on national savings? Explain.

# Chapter 23 Taxes on Risk Taking and Wealth



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- [23.1 Taxation and Risk Taking](#)
- [23.2 Capital Gains Taxation](#)
- [23.3 Transfer Taxation](#)
- [23.4 Property Taxation](#)
- [23.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How do taxes affect risk-taking behavior?
- How do capital gains taxes work, and how do they affect risk taking?
- How do estate taxes work, and how do they affect risk taking?

In June 2006, Warren Buffett, the world's second-richest man, made the shocking announcement that he was giving 85% of his shares in Berkshire Hathaway, Inc., to five foundations. Five-sixths of the shares will be donated in installments to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a philanthropic organization headed by Microsoft Corporation Chairman Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda. The Gates Foundation is dedicated to addressing social issues, such as child mortality, disease control, and education. Buffett's gift, valued in the tens of billions of dollars, will help the Gates Foundation effect significant changes worldwide; in comparison, the United Nations and its related agencies spend only about \$5.4 billion per year.<sup>1</sup>

The decision to donate the vast majority of his wealth to charity rather than bequeath it to his own children was seen by many as a culmination of Buffett's long-standing advocacy against the transfer of large estates from generation to generation. In keeping with this position, Buffett, along with other wealthy Americans such as William Gates, Sr., and George Soros, has long been an outspoken critic of moves to repeal the *estate tax*, a tax levied on large estates upon the death of their owners.

Buffett has argued that allowing children to inherit all of their parents' riches causes them to be spoiled and sapped of all motivation and keeping the tax in force helps to preserve America's meritocracy. Allowing savings to pass untaxed from one generation to the next is, Buffett claims, akin to "choosing the 2020 Olympic team by picking the eldest sons of the gold-medal winners in the 2000 Olympics."<sup>2</sup> He has also said that he "would hate to see the estate tax gutted. . . . It's a very equitable tax. It's in keeping with the idea of equality of opportunity in this country, not giving incredible head starts to certain people. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Many others have also defended the estate tax for its progressivity: they note that because of the high exemption levels, the tax affects only a very small portion of the wealthiest citizens upon death. Tom Daschle, then the Democratic Senate Minority Leader, opposed repeal of the estate tax in 2003 because "helping billionaires ought not to be our business."<sup>4</sup> Larry Summers, who was the deputy secretary of the Treasury in 1997 (he later became the secretary), declared that, "When it comes to [cutting] the estate tax, there is no case other than selfishness. In terms of substance, this estate tax argument is about as bad as it gets."<sup>5</sup>

Opponents of the estate tax, however, have well-reasoned and strong views on the topic as well. They point out that much of the income taxed by the estate tax was already taxed when estate holders were alive, so it amounts to a double taxation of their income. This double taxation may lead the wealthy to earn and save less. Opponents of the estate tax also view it as a "death tax" that imposes a government penalty for the act of dying itself, an insult added to the ultimate injury. As Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, said, "The rich have paid every damn tax that was ever devised. Why should they get taxed just because they pass away?"<sup>6</sup> The arguments made by opponents appear to be carrying the day in recent years: the 2001 tax bill (discussed in the [Application on pp. 109–110 of Chapter 4](#))

substantially increased the thresholds at which estates are subject to tax, with the minimum asset threshold increased to assets of \$5.43 million in 2015, while the 2017 tax cuts doubled the exemption to \$11 million per person or \$22 million per couple.<sup>7</sup>

In [Chapter 22](#), we discussed government policies that affect individual decisions on how much to save by directly altering the rate of return to savings. In this chapter, we focus on two other aspects of taxation that might affect the savings decisions of taxpayers. The first is the taxation of *risk taking*. Individuals not only decide how much to save but also what form their savings will take. Should you save in the form of government bonds, for example, which are very safe but yield a low return on average, or in the form of corporate stock, which is much riskier but yields a higher return on average? Just as taxes might influence how much individuals save, they can also influence the form that savings take. A particular tax policy that might affect risk taking is the taxation of *capital gains*, the earnings realized on the sale of capital assets.

Individuals can also be taxed not only on the return from their savings in each period but also on the amount of *wealth* they have accumulated through past savings. In the United States, such taxation occurs in two forms. The first form of wealth tax consists of *transfer taxes*, a set of taxes on gifts from one party to another, including the contentious estate tax we discussed. The second type of wealth tax is the *property tax*, which (you may recall from [Chapter 10](#)) is the largest source of revenue for localities in the United States. Because the major source of savings for most Americans is their homes, property taxation can significantly affect the level of savings as well.

## 23.1 Taxation and Risk Taking

As discussed in [Chapter 12](#), we face risk and uncertainty in many dimensions of life. Some are risks of purely adverse outcomes (car accidents, major illness, or injury), and we attempt to insure against these. Other risks are more balanced, with some chance of a positive outcome and some chance of a negative outcome. One example of a more balanced risk is the risk that comes with financial investments: Will a business succeed or fail? Will a stock portfolio go up or down? The decision about whether to make risky investments can be affected by taxation. In this section, we discuss the impact of taxation on risk taking.

### Basic Financial Investment Model

The basic model of taxation and risk taking was developed by [Domar and Musgrave in 1944](#) in the context of financial investment risk. In their model, individuals have a choice between investing in a safe asset that yields no real return and investing in a risky asset that yields some positive rate of return. The government taxes any positive return on the risky asset but allows a deduction against taxable income for the full amount of any negative return. In this situation, Domar and Musgrave pointed out that *taxing the returns from the risky asset would increase risk taking* because any tax on the returns could be completely undone by taking more risk.

This point is best illustrated through an example, shown in [Table 23-1](#). Suppose that Betsey has invested \$100 in a small business venture that has a 50% chance of rising in value to \$120 (so that she makes \$20) and a 50% chance of falling in value to \$80 (so that she loses \$20). This investment has an [expected return](#) of \$0: the return to a successful investment times the probability of success plus the return to an unsuccessful investment times the probability of failure is  $\$0 ([\$20 \times 0.5] + [-\$20 \times 0.5] = \$0)$ . There is no tax initially, so these pre-tax returns are also her after-tax returns, as shown in the first row of [Table 23-1](#).

[expected return](#)

The return to a successful investment times the odds of success, plus the return to an unsuccessful investment times the odds of failure.

TABLE 23-1 Taxation and Risk Taking by Betsey

Policy	Investment	Payoff if Win	Payoff if Lose	Tax Rate if Win	Tax Deduction if Lose	After-Tax Winnings	After-Tax Loss
(1) No tax	\$100	\$20	-\$20	0	0	\$20	-\$20
(2) Tax	\$100	\$20	-\$20	50%	50%	\$10	-\$10
(3) Loss offset	\$200	\$40	-\$40	50%	50%	\$20	-\$20
(4) No loss offset	\$200	\$40	-\$40	50%	0	\$20	-\$40
(5) Progressive tax	\$200	\$40	-\$40	75%	50%	\$15	-\$20

In row 1, Betsey makes a \$100 investment that yields \$20 if the investment is successful and -\$20 if the investment fails. In row 2, the government imposes a 50% tax on her investment, so that Betsey now earns only \$10 if successful and loses \$10 if the investment fails. Betsey can undo the government's actions, as in row 3, by doubling her investment to \$200, leaving her with the same returns as in row 1, so that taxation has increased risk taking. If, however, there is no loss offset, as in row 4, or progressive taxation, as in row 5, Betsey will be unable to undo the government's action, so her risk taking won't necessarily increase under taxation.

The government then announces that it is introducing a tax of 50% on investment income, with a deduction against taxable income for any losses. Any positive return from this investment is taxed, so Betsey keeps half of her payoffs and pays the other half in taxes. Because any loss from the investment is deducted against taxable income, Betsey only bears half of the loss; losses are subtracted from taxable income so that reduced taxes offset by half the loss amount. (Because the government gets 50% of each dollar of taxable income, allowing a deduction against taxable income means that the government also gets 50% of each dollar of loss.) Under this policy, as shown in the second row, Betsey will net only \$10 if the investment goes well because she has to pay \$10 in additional tax. She will lose only \$10 if the investment goes poorly because she can deduct the \$20 loss from taxable income so that her taxes are reduced by \$10. This new outcome has the same expected return, \$0, but it leaves Betsey with less risk than she would like—as revealed by her initial investment decision, she wanted a risk of winning \$20 or losing \$20, not a risk of winning \$10 or losing \$10 (which she could have had initially by investing only \$50, but which she chose not to do).

Betsey can, however, completely undo the effects of this tax policy on her portfolio by investing more money in the risky investment. Suppose that she doubles her risky investment to \$200, as in the third row of [Table 23-1](#). After tax, there is once again a 50% chance of earning \$20 if things go well (because Betsey earns \$40 before tax, then pays half of it in taxes) and a 50% chance of losing \$20 if things go poorly (because Betsey loses \$40 before tax and deducts half of the loss from her taxes). By investing more in this risky asset, Betsey has completely undone the government tax scheme and arrived back at the after-tax winnings and losses from the first row, where there were no taxes to be paid or losses to be deducted. This outcome is an example of the lesson we learned in [Chapter 7](#): if an economic agent can undo government interventions to return to their original equilibrium, they will do so.

The government is essentially a “silent partner” in this investment. Because the government bears some of the risk of success or failure, an individual will want to increase his or her risky investment. Taxation of risky investments, in this case, actually increases risk taking.

## Real-World Complications

Under the simplified Domar–Musgrave model just presented, investment-income taxation will actually increase risk taking. In reality, this may not be true, due to two important complications that the model does not take into account.

### Less-Than-Full Tax Offset

In the model, individuals can deduct the full losses from their taxable income when computing taxes. When Betsey loses her gamble, she can deduct the full losses from her taxable income, just as when she wins the gamble, her full gains are added to her taxable income. In reality, most tax systems allow individuals to deduct only a portion of their losses from taxable income when computing taxes. The amount of a loss that can be deducted is called a [tax loss offset](#).

#### tax loss offset

The extent to which taxpayers can deduct net losses on investments from their taxable income.

In the United States, individuals are allowed to deduct only \$3,000 of investment losses in any tax year from their other taxable income.<sup>8</sup> These rules are in place to keep people from generating tax losses by undertaking clearly losing investments to wipe out some of their taxable income (a problem discussed in [Chapter 25](#)). The rules have the additional

implication, however, that a taxpayer cannot simply undo government taxation by making increasingly risky investments because the losses from these investments will not be fully deductible from taxation.

Continuing the example from [Table 23-1](#), suppose that the government did not allow individuals to deduct any investment losses under its 50% tax system. In that case, Betsey could not simply undo government tax policy by investing more, as she did in the third row. In the fourth row of [Table 23-1](#), if Betsey raises her investment to \$200 in the small business, there is a 50% chance that she will earn \$40, which is \$20 after tax, and a 50% chance she will lose \$40, which cannot be deducted against taxable income, and so remains a loss of \$40 after taxes. Thus, with no deductibility of losses, Betsey cannot simply offset the tax policy by raising her investment because that will put her in a losing position of a 50% chance of earning \$20 after taxes and a 50% chance of losing \$40 after taxes, an expected after-tax return of  $(\$20 \times 0.5) + (-\$40 \times 0.5) = -\$10$ .

Because Betsey cannot simply undo government policy by taking more risk, she will not necessarily increase her risk taking in response to taxation. It is impossible to predict for sure what effect limits on loss offsets will have on risk taking, but less-than-full tax offsets definitely limit the applicability of the simple Domar–Musgrave model.

## Redistributive Taxation

The idealized model of risk taking also assumes a constant rate of tax on investment income. In reality, tax systems are typically progressive, with higher marginal tax rates as income rises. Under such a system, if investors win a large gamble, they can move themselves into a higher tax bracket (higher marginal tax rate). If they lose a large gamble, they can move themselves into a lower tax bracket. Thus, winning gambles may be taxed at a higher rate than the rate at which losing gambles are deducted. As with the limited loss offset, this can lead investors to reduce their risk taking.

Suppose that, instead of a flat 50% tax rate, the government imposes a tax rate of 50% on income up to \$20 and 75% on income above \$20. Assume that there is a full loss offset so that any losses can be deducted from taxable income at the 50% rate. In this case, Betsey once again cannot undo the effects of the tax on her “winnings,” as shown by the final row of [Table 23-1](#). If she raises her investment to \$200 and the investment outcome is a good one, she takes home only \$15 after tax: 50% of the first \$20 in earnings and 25% of the next \$20. If the investment outcome is a bad one, however, she loses \$20 after tax, just as shown. Once again, Betsey will not simply offset the tax policy by raising her investment because that will put her in a losing position with a 50% chance of earning \$15 after tax and a 50% chance of losing \$20 after tax (an expected return of  $[\$15 \times 0.5] + [-\$20 \times 0.5] = -\$2.50$ ).

## Evidence on Taxation and Risk Taking

Due to these complications, as well as others, there is no clear prediction about how taxation will affect risk taking in the real world. Ultimately, what the effect of taxes is on risk taking is an empirical question. Unfortunately, however, there is very little evidence about the effect of capital income taxation on risk taking, making this yet another of the important mysteries in the economics of taxation.<sup>9</sup>

## Labor Investment Applications

Financial investments are not the only risky investments individuals make—they can also

invest in *human capital* through education or other job training (as discussed in more detail in [Chapter 11](#)). Investing in human capital is risky because individuals are making an up-front sacrifice in return for some expectation of higher earnings in the future. The extent to which this investment in human capital will lead to higher earnings is, however, uncertain.

Consider the decision to attend a year of college. Attendance has two costs: the cost of the year of college (tuition, books, and so on), and the forgone earnings that the individual passes up by going to college for a year instead of working. The benefit is the prospect of higher earnings from being more educated. On average, there is about a 7% rise in earnings for each year of education. This is only an average estimate, however, and for any given individual the return on more education could be lower or higher.

How do income taxes affect the decision to accumulate human capital? The analysis is similar to that for financial investments. The net return to the investment in human capital is the rise in wages minus the direct costs of education and the indirect opportunity cost of forgone earnings. Suppose initially that there is a flat single-rate income tax and that the financial costs of obtaining human capital (such as tuition) are fully deductible against taxable income. Because income taxes are only levied on income earned, the opportunity cost of education is also fully deductible because obtaining education means *not* earning wages, thereby lowering taxes. In this case, as with financial investment, higher taxation would simply increase investment in human capital so that individuals could preserve the desired amount of net (of taxes) expected investment return.

Once again, however, real-world features of taxation complicate the picture. In reality, the costs of primary and secondary education are not deductible from taxation, and the cost of higher education is only partially deductible from taxation, through the tax subsidies to higher education discussed in [Chapter 11](#). Moreover, the progressive tax system in place in most nations implies that the gains from successfully increasing human capital will be taxed at a higher rate than would the wages earned if work were chosen instead of education. If you don't go to college and instead work in the fast-food sector, you lose the chance to earn a high wage, but at least you pay low taxes; if you sacrifice the fast-food earnings to go to college, the returns to that education are taxed at a high rate. This makes investments in human capital less attractive. Thus, as with financial investments, the net impact of income taxation on human capital investments is ambiguous.

## 23.2 Capital Gains Taxation

The discussions in the previous two chapters have focused on the taxation of *earned income*, income generated either by labor earnings or interest earnings. Many assets, however, yield a return to investors that is not in terms of annual interest earnings, but rather in the form of a **capital gain**, the difference between an asset's purchase price and its sale price. This is the form of return for investments in art and housing, as well as the primary source of return for many investments in businesses or stocks. The question of how to tax these returns has been one of the most contentious tax policy issues of the past several decades.

### capital gain

The difference between an asset's purchase price and its sale price.

## Current Tax Treatment of Capital Gains

Assets (such as bank accounts or government bonds) that earn interest are **taxed on accrual**; taxes are paid each period on the interest earned in that period. Capital gains, in contrast, are **taxed on realization**: taxes are only paid when the asset is sold, and the tax payment is based on the difference between the sale price of the asset and its purchase price. Taxation upon realization, rather than upon accrual, generally leads to a reduction in tax obligations for the asset holder. The intuition for this claim is the same as what we used in our discussion of tax-subsidized retirement savings accounts. By paying taxes upon sale of the asset rather than as value is accrued, you can earn the interest on what would have been your tax obligation.

### taxation on accrual

Taxes paid each period on the return earned by an asset in that period.

### taxation on realization

Taxes paid on an asset's return only when that asset is sold.

Suppose, for example, that you buy a painting for \$100, and it increases in value by 10% per year, so that after seven years, you sell the painting for \$195. At that point, you pay tax on the \$95 difference between the sale and the purchase price. If the capital gains tax rate is 20%, you will pay \$19 in capital gains tax and pocket a net gain of \$76. If, instead, you had invested that \$100 in a bank account earning 10% per year, with a 20% tax rate on interest earnings, at the end of seven years you would have only \$71 in interest earnings. You earn less when you pay taxes on accrual because the government collects its revenues earlier and, therefore, earns the interest on those revenues instead of you doing so. This is a tax preference for savings in the form of capital gains-producing assets.

The tax preference for capital gains is hard to eliminate for many capital goods for two reasons. First, it may not be possible to measure accrual for many assets. For stocks, it is feasible that the government could tax on yearly accrual by using the year-to-year change in the value of the stock. This might work for stocks, but how do we estimate the year-to-year accrual in the value of a house or a painting? In principle, we could get an expert valuation of each capital asset at the end of each year, but the virtue of the realization system is that it relies on market valuations, not expert opinion, which is both imperfect and subject to manipulation.

The second problem is that even if the government could appropriately measure accrual, individuals may not have the ability to finance the required tax payment. Suppose that a very volatile stock has just doubled in value. The resulting gain to a person's wealth may be so large that there is no way he could pay the annual tax bill without actually selling a large share of the stock. It could be inefficient to force individuals to divest themselves of productive assets simply to make tax payments.

In addition to the preference for capital gains through taxation on realization, there are two additional preferences for capital gains in the U.S. tax code: step-up to the value of an asset at time of death and an exclusion for capital gains on housing.

## “Step-up” of Basis at Death

For assets that an individual purchases and then sells before he or she dies, the capital gains tax burden is based on the sale price minus the purchase price. That purchase price is called the **basis** for capital gains taxation. For assets that are passed on to heirs, this basis is “stepped up” to the value at the time of death. The capital gains tax burden on an asset sold after the purchaser dies is based on the sales price minus the price of the asset at the time of death, not the purchase price. Thus, a family will owe no capital gains taxes on an asset that has greatly increased in price if it is sold the day after the purchaser dies.

**basis**

The purchase price of an asset for purposes of determining capital gains.

Suppose that Amanda buys a painting for \$100 when she is 20, and by the time of her death at 75 it is worth \$10,000. If she sells this painting the day before her death, she would pay capital gains taxes on the \$9,900 capital gain on the painting. Instead, if she leaves this painting to her children, and they sell it the day after her death, they would pay no capital gains tax because the painting is worth \$10,000 and its new basis is also \$10,000.

## Exclusion for Capital Gains on Housing

The tax code in the United States has also traditionally featured an exclusion for capital gains on houses. For many years, the exclusion allowed individuals not to pay capital gains on home sales if they put those gains into a new house purchase. There was also a one-time exemption from gains up to \$125,000 for those over age 55. In 1997, this exclusion was changed to a flat \$500,000 exemption from capital gains for sales of a principal residence.

## Capital Gains Tax Rates Through the Years

Even with this long list of tax preferences for capital gains, this form of income has traditionally borne lower tax rates than other forms of income:

1. From 1978 through 1986, individuals were taxed on only 40% of their capital gains on assets held for more than six months.
2. The Tax Reform Act of 1986 ended this difference and treated capital gains like other forms of income for tax purposes, with a top tax rate of 28%.
3. The Tax Reform Act of 1993 raised top tax rates on other forms of income to 39% but kept the tax rate on capital gains at 28%.
4. The Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997 reduced the top rate on long-term capital gains to 20% (though certain items, such as collectible art and coins, are still taxed at 28%).
5. The 2003 Jobs and Growth Act reduced the top rate further, to 15%, for gains realized after May 5, 2003 (collectibles are still taxed at 28%).

The proper tax rate on capital gains continues to be a contentious topic of policy debate. During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-candidate Barack Obama proposed to allow the capital gains tax rate to increase when the Bush tax cuts ended in 2010, while opposing candidate John McCain proposed to keep the lower tax rate in place and even to cut it in half for two years as an incentive to “raise asset values, help companies, and shore up the pension plans for workers.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the 2012 tax reform kept the Bush capital gains rates in place. Applying different tax rates to different types of capital income is not unique to the

United States; most other OECD nations also tax favor capital gains.

## What Are the Arguments for Tax Preferences for Capital Gains?

Although it may not seem fair to tax capital gains at a rate that is much lower than rates on other forms of income, three major arguments are commonly made for these lower tax rates: to protect asset owners against the effects of inflation; to improve the efficiency of capital markets; and to promote entrepreneurship. We evaluate each of these arguments in turn.

### Protection Against Inflation

Because of inflation, current tax policy overstates the value of capital gains. Consider the example of the painting that rises in value by 95% over seven years, but now imagine that the price level has also risen by 95% over those seven years. In this case, the painting is no more valuable in real terms, and so the owner is not wealthier in real terms. Her tax bill, however, is based on nominal, and not real, gains. So even though she has seen no real capital gain and is no richer, she will have to pay \$19 in capital gains taxes, making her worse off. This argues for lower capital gains tax rates to offset the inflation disadvantage of capital gains realizations.

Although this is a valid point, the capital gains inflation problem is no worse than it is for other kinds of savings. As we pointed out in [Chapter 22](#), inflation leads to the excessive taxation of interest earnings as well. Thus, inflation protection is not a reason to have tax policies that favor capital gains over other types of capital income. Moreover, for both capital gains and other forms of capital, the appropriate reaction to the inflation problem is not to lower the capital gains tax rate but to index the tax system (as the government has done for noncapital income).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, President Trump recently floated a proposal to index capital gains income in the United States, but it was quickly opposed as a \$100 billion tax cut that would benefit only the wealthy.<sup>12</sup>

### Improved Efficiency of Capital Transactions

A second major argument in favor of lower capital gains tax rates is that individuals will delay selling their capital assets to lower the present discounted value of their tax burdens. The value from having a capital asset that is taxed on realization, compared to another investment (like a bank account) that is taxed on accrual, is that tax payments can be delayed until sale. The longer this delay is, the lower the present discounted value of tax payments is (because money paid in the future is worth less than money paid today). Indeed, a person could reduce his family's capital gains taxes to zero by holding on to an asset until he dies and passing it to his children. This plan can lead to a **lock-in effect**, whereby individuals delay selling their capital assets to minimize the present discounted value of capital gains tax payments.

#### lock-in effect

To minimize the present discounted value of capital gains tax payments, individuals delay selling their capital assets, locking in their assets.

Lock-in effects are costly because much of the success of capital markets rests on their fluidity, which allows investors to deploy their assets to the assets' most productive use. Suppose you have a great idea for a new product, but you must sell your vintage car collection to finance the new product's development, triggering capital gains taxes on your car sales. If you don't sell the car collection to finance this new product, the car collection will pass on to your children, avoiding capital gains taxation altogether. Therefore, you might not sell your vintage cars to minimize capital gains taxes, and, as a result, you may never start

that new company. This may be an efficiency cost to society if social efficiency would be higher because you started the company instead of hanging on to your car collection. This is an argument for lowering capital gains taxes to reduce the lock-in effect.

## Encouraging Entrepreneurial Activity

When you graduate from college and start your own company, the major return that you expect is not the income you will earn each year, but rather the increase in the value of the underlying company. *Entrepreneurs*, individuals who start their own businesses, obtain most of their wealth not from accrued income early on in the life of the business but from increases in the value of the underlying business asset over time. The relevant tax rate for entrepreneurs is therefore not the income tax rate—because the returns entrepreneurs receive aren’t taxed as accrued income—but rather the capital gains tax rate—because their main return will be in selling their assets when they become valuable. Thus, a higher capital gains tax rate may deter entrepreneurship. The capital gains tax is fundamentally a tax on risk taking, but risk taking is an engine of growth for the economy. Therefore, encouraging entrepreneurship is one reason to have a lower capital gains rate.

There are three countervailing arguments to this point, however. First, as discussed earlier, it is not clear if taxing risk taking will encourage or discourage risk taking. There is no good evidence to date on whether capital gains taxes raise or lower risk taking. Second, only a very small fraction of capital gains go to entrepreneurs. For example, by one estimate only 10% of venture capital investments were affected by capital gains taxes because most venture funding comes not from individuals but from other entities such as pension funds.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, while capital gains rate reductions today may increase entrepreneurial activity now and in the future, they also yield enormous benefits to those who have made capital investments in the past. The lower capital gains tax is not only an incentive for investors to take entrepreneurial risks; it is a reward for having taken risks in the past. As a result, much of the revenue lost through lower capital gains taxes is not encouraging risk taking but rather just rewarding past risks.

This last point adds a nuance to the discussions in [Chapters 18](#) and [22](#) of the *marginal* and *inframarginal* effects of tax incentives. In the previous cases we considered, IRAs and charitable giving, the marginal effect was the new behavior encouraged (new savings or charitable gifts) and the inframarginal effect was the behavior that would have taken place anyway but was now tax-preferred (previously planned savings or charitable gifts). Both of these effects are present with capital gains taxes: the government is subsidizing investments that would have happened anyway, as well as encouraging new investment today. With capital gains, however, there is another inframarginal effect: the government not only subsidizes investments that would be made anyway today, it also subsidizes the returns on investments that were *made in the past*. This is an additional revenue cost that must be traded off against the marginal gains in terms of encouraging entrepreneurial risk taking.

In other words, cutting the capital gains tax rate is a very blunt instrument for encouraging entrepreneurship. It may raise the returns to entrepreneurship in the future, but at the large revenue cost of also rewarding investments in the past. To see this, contrast a capital gains tax reduction to a [\*\*prospective capital gains tax reduction\*\*](#), where the capital gains tax rate is reduced only on sales of investments made from this day forward, not on any sales of investments made in the past. Both an overall capital gains tax cut and a prospective capital gains tax cut would have identical impacts on entrepreneurial activity in the future because any investments made starting today reap the benefits of a lower capital gains tax rate. Yet

the prospective reduction would be much less expensive because it does not also deliver a tax break to investments made in the past.

#### prospective capital gains tax reduction

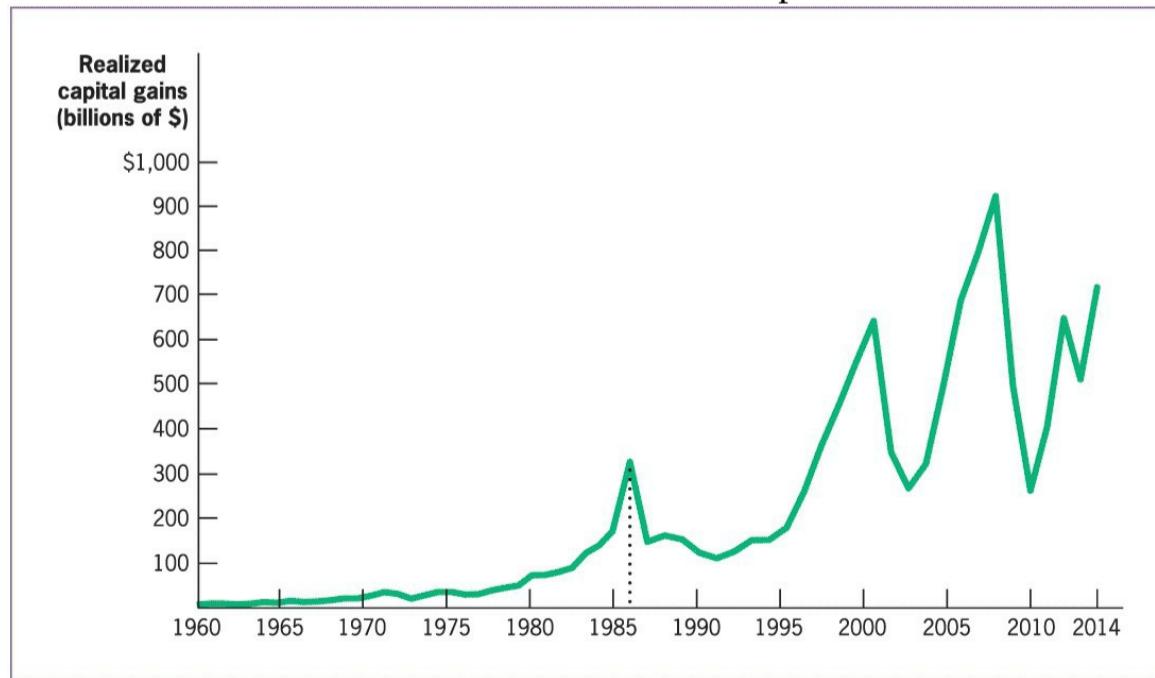
Capital gains tax cuts that apply only to investments made from this day forward.

## Evidence on Taxation and Capital Gains

To summarize this discussion, there are two main arguments for lowering the capital gains tax rate below that on other forms of capital income: unlocking past gains and encouraging entrepreneurship. Cutting the rate on all capital gains, including those on past investments, is a very costly way to encourage entrepreneurship, relative to simply cutting the rate only on investments made from today forward. The main argument for an overall capital gains tax reduction that includes previously earned capital gains, then, is that a lower capital gains tax rate will lead to more capital gains realizations (asset sales). This has two advantages: it unlocks assets for their most productive use, and it increases tax collections on those gains.

If there is a large “unlocking” effect—that is, if a lower capital gains tax encourages people to sell assets now instead of waiting or not selling them at all—it is possible that a reduction in the capital gains rate could actually raise revenues: we would be applying a smaller tax rate to a much larger base of capital gains. That is, the government may be on the wrong side of the Laffer curve ([p. 639](#)) with respect to capital gains taxes. If, however, reductions in capital gains do not affect asset sales, or if they only affect the timing of sales in one year versus the next, then reductions in the capital gains tax rate will simply lower tax revenues and provide a transfer to those holders of capital gains who were going to realize them anyway.

[Figure 23-1](#), which shows capital gains realizations over time, suggests that taxes play a powerful role in determining capital gains realizations. There was an enormous spike in realizations in 1986: realizations were \$172 billion in 1985, \$328 billion in 1986, and \$148 billion in 1987. This spike was driven by the large relative increase in capital gains taxation that was scheduled to go into effect in 1987 but was announced in 1986; as noted earlier, in 1987 capital gains realizations moved from being taxed much less than other forms of income to being taxed in the same way as other income. Individuals anticipated this relative increase in the tax and sold their assets before the tax increase took place.



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

#### FIGURE 23-1

Capital Gains Tax Rates and Capital Gains Realizations over Time • There is a clear effect of tax changes on capital gains realizations. Realizations peaked in 1986 in anticipation of the increase in capital gains tax rates scheduled for 1987.

Realizations peaked again during the stock market run-up of the past decade.

Data from: [U.S. Department of the Treasury \(2014\)](#).

The fact that capital gains realizations returned to their original level in 1987, however, suggests that the response to the capital gains tax increase was only a temporary one. Indeed, [Burman and Randolph \(1994\)](#) estimated that virtually *all* the response of capital gains realizations to taxation is transitory, or short-term, and that there is little long-term increase in the rate of capital gains realizations when tax rates are lower. When capital gains taxes are cut, individuals simply speed up the sales of assets they were going to sell anyway. Revenues may rise in the short run as these assets are sold, but they fall in the long run because the remaining base of gains is smaller, and a lower tax rate is applied to that base. Burman and Randolph estimate that the long-run elasticity of capital gains with respect to the tax rate is only  $-0.18$ ; at this elasticity, lowering the capital gains tax rate by 1% would reduce revenues by roughly 0.82% (because there would be such a small offsetting increase in realizations). Thus, we are clearly on the correct side of the Laffer curve with capital gains taxes. Furthermore, there does not appear to be much long-run misallocation of assets that is resolved by lowering the capital gains tax rate; rather, changes in the capital gains rate appear to largely effect only the short-run retiming of asset sales.

This view is supported by behavior at the end of 2012. As discussed in the introduction to [Chapter 18](#), tax rates were increased for the highest income tax payers in the United States at the start of 2013. As the 2012 calendar year wound to a close, there was an enormous flurry of activity organized around realizing income in 2012 rather than at higher rates in 2013. At the end of 2012, the *New York Times* reported that for the wealthy “the overriding goal is to record as much of their future income this year as they can.” As Kenneth Bezozzo, a partner in a New York law firm that handles such transactions, said at the end of 2012: “In my 30 years in practice, I’ve never seen such a flood of desire and action to transfer a business and cash out.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, some of the revenue raised by lower capital gains tax rates comes at the expense of other sources of tax revenue. For example, many highly compensated workers have the choice, to some extent, over whether to be compensated in the form of cash wages or stock that yields capital gains—taxable stock returns. When capital gains taxes are lowered relative to wage taxes, individuals will choose the latter route, receiving less in (high-tax) wages and more in (low-tax) stock. This shift will lead to a rise in capital gains taxes when those stocks are sold, but the increase in tax revenue comes at the expense of lower tax revenue on the smaller base of wages.

## What Are the Arguments Against Tax Preferences for Capital Gains?

There are two arguments against the existing favoritism shown to capital gains income in most nations. First, capital gains taxes are very progressive. Capital gains income accrues primarily to the richest taxpayers in the United States. In 2012, capital gains accounted for about half the income of the top 0.1% of tax filers (those with incomes greater than \$10 million), while for those making less than \$500,000, capital gains made up less than 10% of income on average. The rich disproportionately accumulate capital gains: half of capital gains taxes are paid by the top 0.1% of Americans, and 29% are paid by the rest of the top 1%; the remaining 99% of taxpayers in the United States paid only 21% of all capital gains.<sup>15</sup> Thus, any reductions in those taxes primarily benefit the highest income taxpayers.

Second, lower tax rates on capital gains violate the Haig–Simons principle for tax systems. The goal of taxation should be to provide a level playing field across economic choices, not to favor one choice over another, unless there is some equity or efficiency argument for doing so (such as a positive externality that justifies a tax preference). Having a capital gains tax rate that is lower than that on other income introduces a *tax wedge* that provides incentives for individuals to engage in inefficient choices to access the lower tax rate. As noted earlier, for example, when capital gains taxes are lowered relative to wage taxes, individuals will choose to receive less in wages and more in stock. As we discuss in the next chapter, such a shift in compensation may not be efficient, in that it encourages excessive risk taking and perhaps even cheating by executives. Yet this shift is encouraged by a tax wedge between capital gains taxation and taxation of other forms of income, such as wages.

Similarly, taxing capital gains at a lower rate than interest earned can lead individuals to tilt their investments toward riskier assets that yield capital gains (such as stocks) rather than toward assets that yield interest earnings (such as bonds). Efficiency in investment is maximized when investments are chosen based on their underlying value to the individual, not based on a tax wedge. When individuals choose “too risky” a portfolio because of a tax preference for capital gains, the overall efficiency of investment falls.



## APPLICATION

### Capital Gains Taxation of “Carried Interest”

The arguments for and against tax favoring capital gains came to a head during the 2012 presidential election. In January 2012, the Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney released his 2010 and 2011 income tax statements. The former private equity executive had earned \$42 million over the previous two years but paid just \$6.2 million in taxes, at an average tax rate of 14%. This was actually lower than the 15.9% average tax rate paid by the middle 20% of American families.<sup>16</sup> Many question why someone so wealthy would pay a lower tax rate than middle-class taxpayers.

While Mr. Romney’s income would place him in the highest bracket of a 35% tax rate had it been in payment for employment, the rate he paid was much lower because the majority of his income was categorized as capital gains.<sup>17</sup> In 2011, Mr. Romney earned \$21.7 million from his work at Bain Capital.<sup>18</sup> This income was in the form of “carried interest” on the performance of assets that they manage. Many private equity firms pay managers with a two-and-twenty structure, in which they receive 2% of their total assets managed and 20% of the profits made. Because these profits depend on the risks of the stock market and the returns of market investments, these payments qualify for the 15% capital gains tax rate, even though they are paid in exchange for services rendered by the fund manager. The revenue loss due to this tax break for carried interest is estimated at \$17.7 billion over the next decade.<sup>19</sup>

Many argue that carried interest should not receive special tax treatment and should be treated as other earned income and that a tax code is most efficient when it establishes uniformity. Advocates for equalizing tax treatment come from both sides of the political aisle. The former chair of the Council of Economic Advisors under George W. Bush, N. Gregory Mankiw, wrote that “from an economic perspective, carried interest should be taxed the same as other compensation for services.” Similarly, Peter Orszag, the former director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Barack Obama, said that “[The tax treatment of

carried interest is] important [because] . . . anytime you have similar activities taxed in different ways, you create distortion,” and he asserted that the unequal treatment of different parties in finance is creating these distortions.<sup>20</sup> Others continue to defend the tax preference to carried interest as necessary to promote risk taking. Gerry Langeler of OVP Venture Partners wrote that “[investors’ capital is] locked up for prolonged periods of time, often five to ten years before . . . any return. There is a real, material risk of loss of capital. In fact, many venture funds [lose money], including partners’ capital. The lower capital gains tax rate accounts for the high risks that investors take.”<sup>21</sup> Despite the bipartisan interest in this area, the recent Trump tax reform did not change the tax treatment of carried interest. ■

## 23.3 Transfer Taxation

Another important tax on capital in the United States is the [transfer tax](#) levied on assets passed from one individual to another (most commonly from parents to children). Transfer taxes come in two primary forms. You pay a [gift tax](#) when you give to any individual a gift worth more than \$15,000 in a single year. Any amount above \$15,000 per recipient must be recorded in your taxes for that year, and those amounts are added up over your lifetime. Then, when you die, remaining assets that are passed on to your heirs are subject to the [estate tax](#). The gift and estate taxes are unified under the same tax schedule so that your total estate consists of any assets you leave behind plus the total amount of gifts given over your lifetime (above the \$15,000 annual exemption).

### transfer tax

A tax levied on the transfer of assets from one individual to another.

### gift tax

A tax levied on assets that one individual gives to another in the form of a gift.

### estate tax

A tax levied on the assets of the deceased that are bequeathed to others.

Note that this structure implies that wealthy individuals who will most certainly be subject to the estate tax should be giving away \$15,000 per year to each of their heirs. Given \$15,000 each year, rather than hanging on to the entire estate until death, would result in the same amount of money going to heirs, but would reduce taxes by the amount given away before death. Yet Poterba (2001) and [McGarry \(2013\)](#) report very little use of this gift mechanism, even among the wealthiest decedents. Most of these very wealthy families give away much less than the gift tax limit. This may be because wealthy individuals want to keep their assets in their possession as a way of ensuring that their children behave properly toward them, lest the children lose their inheritance!

The estate tax currently exempts the first \$11 million of your gifts and estate from taxation and imposes rates ranging from 18 to 40% on values above that. The exemption has been modified four times in the past decade, rising from \$1.5 million in 2004 to \$11 million in 2017. Importantly, funeral expenses, transfers to spouses, and charitable contributions are all completely deductible from estate taxes. Roughly speaking, the estate tax applies mostly to parents passing large amounts of assets to their children.<sup>22</sup>

The United States is not alone in having transfer taxes, as shown for a sample of nations in [Table 23-2](#). Twenty-seven of 30 OECD nations had some form of transfer taxation in 2012. The United States raises a relatively large share of its revenues from transfer taxes: transfer taxes amount to only 0.4% of revenues raised in the OECD on average, but account for 0.6% of revenues raised in the United States. Thirteen OECD nations, however, also levy a *wealth tax* each year on the value of their citizens' holdings of assets. This tax does not exist in the United States. The average OECD nation raises 0.9% of its revenues from wealth and transfer taxes, somewhat higher than the 0.6% share in the United States.

TABLE 23-2 Transfer and Wealth Taxes (% of Government Revenue)

	Transfer Taxes	Wealth Taxes	Transfer and Wealth Taxes
Australia	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Canada	0.0	0.1	0.1
Finland	0.7	0.0	0.7

France	1.1	0.5	1.6
Germany	0.5	0.1	0.6
Japan	1.1	0.0	1.1
Norway	0.2	1.4	1.6
Spain	0.7	0.4	1.1
Switzerland	0.5	4.2	4.7
United Kingdom	0.6	0.0	0.6
United States	0.6	0.0	0.6
OECD average	0.4	0.5	0.9

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018c\)](#).

The use of transfer taxes and wealth taxes varies widely around the world. On average, the United States has higher transfer taxes than the typical developed nation but lower taxes on wealth.

## Why Tax Wealth? Arguments for the Estate Tax

In discussing the estate tax, we must first ask: Why should governments tax the stock of wealth (either annually or at death) rather than tax only the annual flow of income (or consumption, as we discuss in [Chapter 25](#))? There are at least three arguments for taxing wealth. The first is that this is an extremely progressive means of raising revenue. The portion of estates paying the tax has always been fairly limited and, in 2016, it is estimated that only the wealthiest 0.2% of all estates (or around 5,200 estates) will pay the estate tax. Nonetheless, in 2016, the estate tax raised 0.7% of total government revenue—more than what the government will spend on the Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Environmental Protection Agency combined.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, among those estates paying the tax, the average effective tax rate was 16.8%.<sup>24</sup> [Gale and Slemrod \(2001a\)](#) also noted that heirs to estates tend to have income and asset characteristics similar to those of their parents, so the progressive nature of the estate tax does not depend on whether the burden is calculated on the decedent or the recipient.

The second argument is that wealth taxes are necessary to avoid the excessive concentration of wealth and power in society in the hands of a few wealthy dynasties. Many have argued that the existence of a wealth tax is vital in helping to maintain a society's *meritocracy* by ensuring that individuals are rewarded for their talents and not just for the position they were born into. In very strong terms, Frank Keating, president of the American Council of Life Insurers, criticized moves to repeal the tax by stating, "I am institutionally and intestinally against huge blocks of inherited wealth. I don't think we need the Viscount of Enron or the Duke of Microsoft."<sup>25</sup> [Piketty and Saez \(2006\)](#) discussed the evolution of the share of incomes flowing to the very top of the income distribution (e.g., the top 0.1% of incomes) across a broad sample of nations during the twentieth century. They found that in nations with progressive tax systems for both capital income and wealth, there was an enormous reduction in the share of incomes controlled by the very top income earners. This supports the view that wealth and capital taxation deter the long-run concentration of wealth.<sup>26</sup>

A third issue that has often been raised by supporters of the estate tax is the claim that allowing children of wealthy families to inherit all their parents' wealth saps them of all motivation to work hard and achieve their own success, a belief held by Warren Buffett, as noted in our introduction to this chapter. As Andrew Carnegie stated in 1891: "The parent who leaves his son enormous wealth generally deadens the talents and energies of his son, and tempts him to lead a less useful and less worthy life than he otherwise would" ([Holtz-Eakin et al., 1993](#)). Indeed, Holtz-Eakin et al. found that the larger an individual's inheritance is, the more likely she is to leave the labor force.

## Arguments Against the Estate Tax

While the estate tax has many supporters, there are many who think it should be abolished. There are four major arguments made against the estate tax as it is levied in the United States.

### A "Death Tax" Is Cruel

The first argument is that it is morally inappropriate to tax individuals upon their death; as [Gale and Slemrod \(2001b\)](#) wrote, "Compounding the grief of the family of the deceased with a tax, of all things, seems a bit heartless, to be sure." Yet, as they pointed out, death is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to trigger transfer taxes in the United States: transfers between living persons can trigger gift taxes, and 98% of those who die pay no estate tax. Moreover, death is a natural time to levy taxes because it is when we can most straightforwardly compare the lifetime resources of different individuals. As Gale and Slemrod wrote, "While contemplation of death is not pleasurable, that does not make taxing at death inappropriate. . . . Much of the griping about taxation at death . . . is simply a smokescreen designed to hide opposition to a progressive tax."

### The Estate Tax Amounts to Double Taxation

The second argument is that the estate tax represents *double taxation*: you are taxed on income when you earn it, either in the labor market or in taxable interest payments, and then your children are taxed on it again when you die. This outcome is criticized on two grounds. The first is horizontal equity: Why should those paying estate taxes be taxed an extra time on their income? The second is efficiency: the fact that you will be taxed so heavily on your estate may reduce your incentive to save for your children and thus distort your savings decisions. If you are going to lose up to 48% of what you have saved when you die, you may decide to go on a cruise rather than save the money for your children.

There are three problems with this argument, however. First, double taxation is a pervasive feature of the tax system in the United States and around the world. When you use your after-tax income to buy candy at the corner store and pay a sales tax on that purchase, you are being double taxed. Why should one particular form of double taxation be removed or reduced while others are not?

Second, double taxation does not necessarily reduce savings because there are both income and substitution effects. On the one hand, the rewards for working and saving are reduced through double taxation, so you may earn less (substitution effect). On the other hand, if you value the inheritance you intend to leave for your children, higher taxation could lead you to work or save *more* to maintain the after-tax value of that inheritance (income effect).

Finally, the double taxation argument is complicated by the interaction with the step-up in capital gains basis at death. Labor income is indeed taxed twice for those who pay estate tax, once when earned and then again at death. Similarly, interest and other taxable accrued capital income are taxed twice, once when the returns are paid and again at death. Capital gains income, however, may be taxed only once, at death. If individuals leave their capital

assets to their children, there is no tax on the accrued capital gains because the asset's basis is increased (stepped up) when it is transferred. As a result, without an estate tax, income from capital gains passed across generations might escape taxation altogether.

Evidence for the impact of the estate tax on behavior is reviewed by [Kopczuk \(2009\)](#). He concluded that the size of estates is modestly responsive to estate taxation, with each 10% rise in estate tax rate leading to 1 to 2% smaller estates. This may reflect both real reduction in the size of estates, as well as efforts to shift assets out of estate-taxable forms. Therefore, while higher estate taxes may affect savings and labor supply, the impacts are likely small.

## Administrative Difficulties

Another problem with the estate tax is similar to one raised earlier with taxing capital gains on accrual: to afford the tax, you may be forced to sell the asset. This could be quite a problem with family farms, for example, where the children may want to continue farming when their parents die, but the only way they can afford the estate tax bill is to sell the farm.

Although this is a compelling problem in theory, it is not clear that it is a major issue in practice. In 2013, with an exemption of \$5.49 million in place, only 80 farms and small businesses paid the estate tax, and the American Farm Bureau Federation could not provide a single example of a family forced to sell a farm to pay the estate tax.<sup>[27](#)</sup> This is perhaps because current law allows some family farms to take up to 14 years to pay their estate taxes.

## Compliance and Fairness

The final argument made against the estate tax is on grounds of compliance and fairness. There are a number of ways that sophisticated taxpayers can avoid paying the estate tax. One popular method is for parents to set up *trusts* for their children. A trust is a legal arrangement whereby an individual gives a third party (the *trustee*) control of certain assets on the condition that those assets be used to benefit specific people, like his or her children.

Suppose that Kanga made \$5 million from her investments and would like to pass that wealth on to her son, Roo. If she gives the wealth to Roo while she's living, she incurs a gift tax, and if she waits until her death, she incurs an estate tax. Kanga is, however, legally permitted to put the \$5 million into a trust controlled by Tigger, who is the trustee. As long as Kanga specifies that Tigger must spend the money only on Roo, the funds in this trust are never taxed, but Roo nonetheless receives its full benefits (assuming Tigger is actually trustworthy). Parents can also set up *insurance trusts*, whereby their life insurance policies are placed into trusts so that their children receive the insurance proceeds tax-free.

Another popular (and legal) method of avoiding transfer taxes is to grant one's heirs shares of stock in a new family business. If Bill Gates III had been a parent in 1986 when Microsoft went public, he could have given each of his children 1% of Microsoft's shares without incurring a large gift tax (because the shares weren't very valuable at the company's inception). Had he done so, his children would now be quite wealthy and would have avoided large transfer taxes associated with such wealth (though they would have had to pay a capital gains tax if they sold the stock during their lifetimes). Trusts and stock transfers are thus two ways that individuals well versed in the legal system can legally avoid paying transfer taxes.

Moreover, estate and gift taxes are levied on one type of transfer, cash and property, but not on another type of transfer, services. If you spend \$20,000 to pay for a family trip, this is not treated as a gift to your children for the purposes of the gift and estate tax, but if you give that same \$20,000 to your children, it is considered a gift and lowers your estate tax exemption.

Of course, these types of loopholes could be addressed through regulation. But doing so adds complication to the tax code and raises political opposition. For example, the Obama administration proposed to end a particularly pernicious loophole in the estate tax that allowed estates that were marked as “family businesses” to be reduced in value for tax purposes; taxpayers were placing stock, bonds, and other securities into what they called “family businesses” to reduce their tax bills. But the Trump administration rejected these rules, saying that they were overly burdensome.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of these alternatives, some refer to the estate tax as a “voluntary tax”: only those too unsophisticated to avoid the tax end up paying it. This is an unfair outcome that violates horizontal equity. Some claim that if a tax cannot be applied fairly, it should not be applied at all. Once again, the costs of such horizontal inequities must be weighed against the benefits of the revenue raised by this tax: Is the unfairness so large that it justifies removing almost \$20 billion in revenues a year?

A related point is that removing the estate tax may reduce charitable giving in the United States. This is because donations to charity from one’s estate are deductible from the estate tax. Almost 10% of charitable giving in the United States comes in the form of donations from estates. If the estate tax were removed, it is possible that this charitable giving could fall because the price of charitable giving has risen: there would no longer be an estate tax against which charitable giving can be deducted. The prediction for charitable giving is unclear, however; removing the estate tax would also make individuals wealthier, and this would have an income effect, leading to increased charitable giving.<sup>29</sup>

## 23.4 Property Taxation

As discussed in [Chapter 10](#), the major source of financing for local governments in the United States is the **property tax**, a tax on the market value of privately owned property, which may include land, structures, and machinery as well as other real property such as cars, boats, business inventory, and so on. The types of property subject to taxation vary widely across localities. Land and structures are subject to taxation in all states, but all states exempt government property, and most exempt religious property, charitable properties, cemeteries, and hospitals. In many states, personal property and motor vehicles are also exempt from taxation.<sup>30</sup> Because most property tax revenues are raised from taxing land and homes, we focus on this aspect of property taxation in the discussion that follows.

### property tax

A tax levied on the value of real estate, including the value of the land and any structures built on the land.

Property taxes are levied at a locally determined rate on the *assessed value* of residential and commercial property, which is the value assigned by the jurisdiction, usually the town or city. Localities attempt to match assessed values to market property values in most cases, but this is difficult when a piece of property has not been recently sold. As a result, the effective property tax rate (the ratio of property tax payments to market property values) can deviate significantly from the statutory rate. Effective rates are calculated by multiplying the nominal tax rate by the *assessment ratio*, the percentage of the property's value that is subject to taxation. For example, a nominal tax rate of 2% and an assessment ratio of 50% would yield an effective tax rate of 1%.

The assessment ratio used varies widely across different localities: in 2015, the assessment ratio in Columbia, South Carolina, was only 4%, while in Providence, Rhode Island, it was 100%. Nationwide, properties in 2013 had an average assessment ratio of 57%.<sup>31</sup> There are similarly wide variations in the effective tax rate across jurisdictions in the United States: in 2014, effective rates ranged from a low of 0.12% in Boston, Massachusetts, to a high of 4.1% in Bridgeport, Connecticut.<sup>32</sup>

While property taxes constitute a fairly limited share of state revenues, they are the single largest source of revenue at the local level and account for more than three-quarters of total revenues.<sup>33</sup> In 2017, state and local governments collected \$573 billion in property taxes, with approximately 97% of that being accounted for by local government units, including counties, cities, and school districts.<sup>34</sup>

There are a number of interesting economic issues raised by property taxation. Some of these issues were covered in [Chapter 10](#), such as the capitalization of property taxes into home prices (with the example of Proposition 13 in California) and the role of property taxes in financing schools. In this chapter, we consider other important issues in property tax policy, such as the incidence of the property tax and different types of property taxation.

## Who Bears the Property Tax?

The property tax is a source of much debate at the state and local levels, with a number of states imposing limits on the ability of localities to raise their property taxes. This debate reflects the view that property taxes are costly burdens on average-income homeowners. Yet, as we learned in [Chapter 19](#), the incidence of a tax is not determined by who pays the tax bill. So who actually bears the property tax?

The incidence of the property tax has been a source of long-standing debate among public

finance economists, as summarized in [Zodrow \(2001\)](#). There are three schools of thought on the incidence of the property tax. The “traditional view” is a partial equilibrium analysis of the property tax. This view highlights that the tax is levied on two factors: land, which is inelastically supplied, and structures (e.g., houses), which are much more elastically supplied. The part of the tax that is levied on land is borne by landowners, as is always the case when a factor is inelastically supplied. But the part of the tax that is levied on structures is more complicated, and the incidence of this structure tax depends on the relative elasticity of supply of structures and of the individuals who want to use those structures. In the long run, if the supply of structures is perfectly elastic, but individual demand for a community is not, this tax will be borne to some extent by residents of the community, renters and owners alike.

The “capital tax” view of property tax incidence (sometimes referred to as the “new view”) recognizes the general equilibrium nature of tax incidence. When towns levy property taxes, in the long run they chase capital out of town to other jurisdictions. As capital supply increases in other jurisdictions, for a given level of capital demand, the rate of return to capital falls around the nation (or even around the world). Thus, the average burden of the property tax is borne by capital owners, a fairly well-off group. It remains true under this view, however, that locality-specific deviations from the national average are borne by that locality’s land and homeowners. Thus, as [Zodrow \(2001\)](#) emphasized, the “capital tax view” essentially encompasses the traditional view but moves from a partial to a general equilibrium perspective.

Finally, the “benefits tax” view mirrors our discussion of the Tiebout model in [Chapter 10](#). Property taxes are typically used to finance local government spending that is valued by most homeowners. As a result, property taxes are to some extent a user fee that supports the Tiebout model: property taxes are the price set by each town to finance the optimal local level of public goods. If, for example, a town is in a perfect Tiebout equilibrium at which all residents of the town value public goods at their tax cost, then there is no burden associated with property taxation; it is simply a price residents pay voluntarily for local public goods.

Thus, the incidence of the property tax depends very much on which is the appropriate model for analyzing the tax. Under the traditional model, the property tax is borne fully by local residents in proportion to their expenditures on housing, and is therefore proportional or somewhat regressive. Under the capital tax view, the common part of the property tax is borne in large part by capital owners, so it is much more progressive. Under the benefits tax view, there is no incidence, since the property tax is simply a price paid for a service received. Existing evidence cannot distinguish among these models, but economic theory suggests that the “capital tax view” has considerable merit, so that the tax may be more progressive than it is typically perceived (Zodrow, 2001).

## Types of Property Taxation

Property taxes need not apply equally to all types of property. In particular, two important distinctions can be drawn in levying property taxes.

### Residential Homes Versus Businesses

The first distinction in designing property taxes is that between taxing residential homes and businesses. Some argue that to encourage economic development, property taxes on businesses should be lower than those imposed on residential homes. It is uncertain, however, whether such tax breaks for businesses deliver enough benefits to local communities to justify the lost tax revenue.



## APPLICATION

# Property Tax Breaks to Businesses<sup>35</sup>

Tax breaks for business have become a common economic development tool for states and cities. Measuring the size of these tax breaks is complicated, but a recent comprehensive effort by researchers at the nonpartisan Upjohn Institute (one of the nation’s leading think tanks studying local economies) shows that they add up to more than \$45 billion annually. This is 1.42% of the profits of businesses in the United States, or 30% of the average amount that states and localities actually collect in business taxes.

The dataset [goodjobsfirst.com](http://goodjobsfirst.com) tracks these data and reports on costs to states, particularly the costs of large tax breaks. These include an \$8.7 billion deal for Boeing to stay in the state of Washington in 2013 (after a \$3.2 billion deal in 2003) and a \$5.6 billion deal for Alcoa to remain in New York in 2007. There have been 27 deals costing states more than \$1 billion since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the pace is quickening—19 of those deals were in 2010 or later.

The most high-profile recent example is the arrangement for Foxconn to move to the state of Wisconsin. The Taiwanese manufacturer had put out word that it was considering a major new U.S. plant in January 2017, and its founder had said that “incentives would be needed to make it happen.” Wisconsin reportedly beat out six other states—Indiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York—going after the Foxconn plant. In July 2017, Foxconn agreed to set up a \$10 billion plant to manufacture consumer electronics in Wisconsin. The reward was a rich bounty, including \$3 billion in state tax breaks, another \$753 million in tax incentives from the city and county where the plant was to be built (including buying the land and giving it to Foxconn for free), \$400 million in road improvements, and an upgrade to local electricity systems that will cost \$140 million. According to Wisconsin’s own estimates, it will take until at least 2043 for the state to recoup its lost revenue.

Are these tax breaks a good deal for the citizens of states like Wisconsin? That depends on the answer to two questions. First, to what extent are the tax breaks inframarginal, since companies would have come to the locality anyway? Second, to the extent that tax breaks attract businesses to a locality, does it actually cause a significant increase in economic development?

On the one hand, the evidence on the first of these questions suggests that businesses are not very sensitive to such tax breaks, at least compared to all the other factors that determine business location decisions. For example, a recent study of tax breaks in Texas found that about 85–90% of projects that collected a major state tax break were going to locate in the state anyway.

On the other hand, when businesses settle in an area, they do seem to offer a powerful economic benefit. One particularly interesting study compared cities that won competitions to attract new manufacturing plants to other comparable cities that were finalists in these competitions. Researchers found that the cities that won had much faster growth—including productivity gains to existing firms from winning the competition. That is, having new businesses around made existing businesses more productive. This is compelling evidence for

the agglomeration effects we discussed: having more productive activities in an area makes everyone else around them more productive.

So states face a trade-off. The jobs and higher productivity brought in by new businesses will raise the state tax base, so that the state can collect the same revenues even with lower taxes. But if the tax break is too large, it will exceed any gains from the new business. Whether states end up on the right or wrong side of this trade-off is a matter of debate with no clear answer.

But what is clear is that while these tax breaks may or may not be a good deal from the perspective of specific areas, they are a terrible deal from the perspective of the United States as a whole. That is because almost every plant over which states are competing are going to locate in the United States in any case. So the country as a whole gains no jobs when a plant chooses one city over another. These jobs would be in here in the United States anyway. Foxconn was going to build a U.S. plant, it just had to choose where to do it.

Moreover, such property tax breaks can lead to a “race to the bottom,” whereby the actions of one local government to reduce its property tax (to attract businesses) cause other local governments to do the same. This process can lead to a cycle of self-defeating tax cuts that do not have much effect on business location but do substantially lower property tax revenues.



## Land Versus Improvements

The second distinction that can be drawn in designing property taxes is that between taxing land and taxing the improvements to that land, such as a house, an office building, or a shopping center. This distinction was highlighted by Henry George, a nineteenth-century thinker who believed that the returns earned by labor and capital reflected the productive activity of these factors but that the returns accruing to landowners did not. The landowner is paid solely because he owns the land and not because of any effort put into production. George therefore made a radical proposal: eliminate taxes on labor and capital and replace them with a single tax on the value of land. George did *not* propose to tax improvements on the land because this approach would undermine his basic premise that ownership, not effort, should be taxed.

George’s reasoning is illustrated by Mark Lubold, city councilor of Holyoke, Massachusetts, an old industrial city suffering from a shrinking tax base because of underutilized buildings and vacant lots. Recently, Lubold pointed out that the current property tax system “punishes those who keep up or improve their property with higher taxes while those who let their property go are rewarded with tax decreases.” Lubold has been pushing Holyoke to adopt a form of George’s ideas by lowering tax rates on buildings but raising them on land. This system, he believes, “would encourage owners of vacant buildings to fix them up, collect rents, and conduct business to pay the higher taxes or sell the buildings or land to someone who will.” Lubold points to 700 cities around the world that have adopted some form of a land-value tax, including Sydney, Australia, and Cape Town, South Africa. In Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the number of vacant buildings dropped from 4,000 to 500 after the adoption of a land-value tax.<sup>36</sup>

In another example, Pittsburgh suffered in 1913 from high land prices that discouraged businesses from establishing themselves. To combat this problem, Pittsburgh instituted a system that lowered taxes on buildings and taxed land at six times that rate. Some credit the two-tiered tax system with fueling Pittsburgh’s building boom in the 1940s and 1950s. In

2001, however, the land-value system was replaced by one that equalized tax rates on buildings and land. The reason? Assessors had probably been compensating for the high land tax by undervaluing the land itself. When an outside assessor was brought in and declared land values to be double what they had been the year before, taxpayers revolted, and politicians scrapped the system.

The fundamental problem with tax systems that try to distinguish the value of land from the value of the assets on that land is that market values cannot be used for taxation: the market values only the total package of land plus assets, not each separately. Administrative mechanisms, such as assessment, must be used to separately value land, and these mechanisms are subject to error and manipulation. This makes the land tax unreliable as a dominant form of revenue raising.<sup>37</sup>

## 23.5 Conclusion

The impact of the tax code on decisions about how much to save, and in what form to save it, will always be central to debates over tax reform. In this chapter, we have reviewed some of the major aspects of the tax code that affect risk taking and wealth accumulation in the United States. We first highlighted that taxation doesn't necessarily reduce, and under certain assumptions definitely increases, risk taking.

This theoretical point has important implications for the debate over capital gains taxation. The strongest arguments for the preferential tax treatment of capital gains are that (1) lower capital gains tax rates will "unlock" productive assets, and (2) lower capital gains taxes will encourage entrepreneurship. The existing evidence on the former suggests that such unlocking is not large in the long run. The theoretical discussion suggests that the predictions for entrepreneurship are unclear. Moreover, even if lower capital gains taxation promotes risk taking and entrepreneurship, it does so at the very high cost of providing large subsidies to previous investments.

We also looked at the estate tax, which is a very progressive tax but one that raises difficult issues of horizontal equity and enforcement. Finally, we discussed the uncertain incidence of the property tax and the important issues of taxation of businesses versus residential homes and land versus improvements to that land.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Taxation has an uncertain effect on risk taking. Proportional taxation with a full loss offset would likely increase risk taking, but factors such as limited loss offsets and progressive tax structures can reduce risk taking.
- In addition to wages and interest earned on savings, people earn income in the form of capital gains, which are the returns earned when assets are sold for more than their purchase price. Capital gains are heavily subsidized by realization on accrual and stepped up in basis at death, and also traditionally have faced a lower marginal tax rate.
- Lowering capital gains tax rates can offset the impact of inflation on asset values, reduce asset lock-in, and encourage entrepreneurship, but at the cost of giving large tax breaks to past investments. Existing evidence suggests that there is little long-run reduction in the lock-in effect from lower capital gains taxes.
- The estate tax is levied on a small number of the richest estates in the United States and is therefore highly progressive.
- There are several arguments against estate taxation, but each has weaknesses. For example, the estate tax double-taxes labor and interest earnings, but in its favor is the fact that it is the only tax on capital gains for those who pass assets on to their heirs.
- The property tax is the main revenue source for local governments. The economic incidence of the property tax is unclear, but the economic tax incidence is likely to be more progressive than the statutory incidence because at least part of the tax falls on the owners of land and owners of capital.
- Lowering property taxes on businesses is a popular way for local governments to attract business, but it is inefficient for the nation as a whole.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. The tax system has a 50% tax rate on gains from risky investments and also allows a deduction at a 50% rate of any losses from risky investments. Which tax policy would increase risk taking more: (a) allowing the deduction on any losses, or (b) limiting the deduction only to losses that offset other gains (no loss offset)?
2. Suppose a new law is passed to substantially raise capital gains tax rates next January. How do you expect this law to affect capital gains realizations and capital gains tax revenue in the remainder of this year and in next year?
3. President Berry suggests changing the capital gains tax law so that taxes are assessed when the gains are accrued rather than when they are realized. What are the potential objections to this policy change?
4. Prior to 1997, many university professors who moved from expensive places like Boston or San Francisco to low-cost cities like Madison, Wisconsin, or Gainesville, Florida, tended to purchase extremely large houses upon their moves. This tendency was dramatically curtailed after 1997. What feature of the U.S. tax code encouraged this behavior?
5. What is the empirical evidence on whether capital gains tax cuts lead to a permanent increase in capital gains realizations? What does this evidence imply for the prospects of lowering capital gains taxes as a long-term revenue-generation tool?
6. When you spend money on your children's consumption, this transfer is not taxed, but if you make a large direct gift to your children, it is taxed. Why does this represent a horizontal inequity inherent in transfer taxes? Can you think of any policy modifications that could reduce this inequity?
7. Senator Crawford, arguing in favor of capital gains tax cuts, says that reducing capital gains tax rates will stimulate entrepreneurial activity. Senator Long, arguing against these tax cuts, suggests that they will encourage people to engage in riskier behavior and inefficient investment. Evaluate both senators' arguments.
8. When Mary died in 2018, she left her child \$500,000 in cash (generated from labor earnings), \$5 million in stock that she had purchased (with labor earnings) for \$700,000 in 1995, and a \$6-million home she had purchased (with labor earnings) for \$800,000 in 1990. Evaluate the argument that the estate tax represents double taxation of Mary's income.
9. Why does the property tax, as implemented in the United States, provide a disincentive for property owners to improve their property? How would a land tax alter these incentives?
10.  The government of Lupostan introduced a policy in which all investments in college education and training are tax deductible. Describe an empirical test of the effects of this policy on the level of human capital accumulation. What effects would you expect to find from such a policy?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

11. Arin, Barbara, and Cori are 30-year-old single friends who work at the same company, and each will earn \$60,000 in 2018. They each have \$5,500 in pre-tax dollars to invest, and are discussing their plans for saving this money. Arin plans to save \$5,500 in a traditional IRA, and invest the money in a stock market index fund. Barbara plans to pay taxes on the \$5,500, then save the remaining amount in a Roth IRA, also investing the money in the same stock market index fund as Arin. Finally, Cori will also pay taxes on the \$5,500, and then invest this money directly in the stock market index fund, outside of any retirement account. The expected return of the fund in all three cases is 8% per year. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy.
12. Estoluania is considering replacing its progressive tax system with a flat tax that would raise equal revenue. How could this change encourage risk-taking behavior? How could it *discourage* risk-taking behavior?
13. A researcher found that when the capital gains tax rate declined, the average bequest size fell as well. How does the tax treatment of capital gains in the United States explain this relationship?
14.  Pamplovia raised its estate tax rate from 30% to 50%. However, it “grandfathered” in families whose householders were over 80 years old, allowing these families to be assessed the original 30% estate tax. How could you go about estimating the effects of estate tax rates in Pamplovia on the magnitude of bequests?
15. In some states, a local government that reduces its tax base receives additional aid for local public good provision from the state government. Why will cities be more likely to offer tax breaks in this circumstance? Why are tax breaks in this case particularly bad for overall welfare?
16. Some city-level officials argue that targeted tax breaks will be good for their city. Other officials argue that there should be a state law that *bans* the use of targeted state-level tax breaks. Explain why both arguments are reasonable. Would it be reasonable for the same city-level official to make—or at least to believe in—both arguments simultaneously?

The  indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# Chapter 24 Taxation of Business Income



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [24.1 What Are Corporations, and Why Do We Tax Them?](#)
- [24.2 The Structure of the Corporate Tax](#)
- [24.3 The Incidence of the Corporate Tax](#)
- [24.4 The Consequences of the Corporate Tax for Investment](#)
- [24.5 Treatment of International Corporate Income](#)
- [24.6 The Consequences of the Corporate Tax for Financing](#)
- [24.7 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- How does the corporate tax work in the United States?
- How does the corporate tax affect incentives for investment and business location?
- How does the corporate tax affect a firm's financial decisions such as debt levels and dividend payments?

On December 22, 2017, Donald Trump signed into law the largest overhaul of the U.S. corporate tax system of the past thirty years. The motivation for this change echoed widely throughout the business community: the U.S. corporate tax system was crippling our international competitiveness. The corporate tax rate of 35% was higher than the unweighted global average of 24%, and the United States has the highest statutory corporate tax rates among OECD nations. Some European countries have cut corporate taxes to as low as 9% as part of a worldwide tax slashing trend.<sup>1</sup>

In the view of many, the relatively high U.S. corporate tax rate significantly hamstrung U.S. businesses. Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) spoke as an advocate for businesses in a 2012 statement: “Every industrialized country around the globe understands that tax rates can determine whether or not businesses succeed or fail. And America’s job creators know that to remain competitive abroad and create jobs here at home, we’ll have to radically reform our nation’s tax code.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the existing “worldwide” tax system used in the United States meant that multinational companies were taxed on their earnings abroad as well as at home in the states—but only when those earnings were brought back into the country. This led companies to hold enormous stockpiles of cash outside the United States—cash that many argued could be brought back into the country to create jobs. Estimates place the amount of corporate cash in foreign banks at around \$2.6 trillion. In 2017, Apple alone had \$252.3 billion in unrepatriated profits.<sup>3</sup> Gary Cohn, President Trump’s chief economic advisor from 2017–2018 explained that under the old system companies “often [had] to pay extra taxes for bringing profits back to the US, which is why they [kept] the money offshore rather than reinvesting it back here.” Cohn reasoned that changing the corporate tax structure would allow those companies to bring their foreign cash back to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Others disagreed with this assessment. To start, they pointed out that while the U.S. *statutory* tax rate on corporations was 35%, the *effective* tax rate on corporations’ profits from new investments was much lower—averaging about 24%, compared to 21% among other G-7 nations. In fact, U.S. companies paid less of their worldwide profits in taxes than other G-7 nations (28% in the United States compared with 29% in other nations).<sup>5</sup> That is, due to various loopholes that were larger in the United States than in other nations, our corporations didn’t actually face a much heavier tax burden. Moreover, they highlighted that it was unlikely foreign cash would lead to more jobs in the United States. “There is still a lot of thinking on the right that if big corporations are happy, they’re going to take the money they’re saving and reinvest it in American workers,” said Republican Senator Marco Rubio. “In fact they bought back shares, a few gave out bonuses; there’s no evidence whatsoever that the money’s been massively poured back into the American worker.”<sup>6</sup>

In, the end, the first set of arguments prevailed, and the Trump tax changes radically reduced corporate taxation along a number of dimensions. First, the corporate tax rate was

reduced from 34 to 21%. Second, the U.S. joined much of the rest of the world in moving to a territorial tax system, whereby firms are taxed only on profits earned in the United States. As part of the transition, there is a one time, mandatory, repatriation tax for U.S. companies with foreign subsidiaries. The tax is 15.5% for cash and 8% for other assets, placed on not already taxed earnings and profits from 1989 through the present. The tax may be paid over an eight-year period.<sup>7</sup> Third, those who work in unincorporated businesses who pay taxes under the individual tax system, rather than the corporate system, were given large tax breaks to partially match those received by their corporate counterparts. A variety of other changes, like increased deductibility of business investments and a limit on the deductibility of debt financing, were included as well.

The end result was a bill that reduced projected corporate tax revenues by \$644.1 billion over the next decade. Corporate taxes, which in 1960 accounted for almost 25% of federal revenues, are projected to average 9% of federal revenues until 2028.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, we evaluate these arguments over the corporate tax and these recent major changes. We begin by discussing the nature of corporations and the arguments for having a corporate tax. We introduce the structure of the corporate tax in the United States and consider the difficulties in defining corporate expenses. We also discuss how to apply the principles of [Chapter 19](#) to assess the ultimate incidence of corporate taxation. We will model the complicated impacts of corporate taxation on a firm's investment decisions. Then, we turn to the difficult issues raised by taxing corporations that earn their income in many different nations. Finally, we discuss combined impact of corporate and individual taxation on a firm's decisions about how to finance its business ventures.

## 24.1 What Are Corporations, and Why Do We Tax Them?

In analyzing corporate taxation, it is important to note that not all goods and services are produced by the corporate sector in the United States. There is also a large and robust noncorporate sector consisting of self-employed individuals, partnerships, and other organizational forms that do not seek the protections of incorporation. The noncorporate sector accounts for the vast majority of firms, but only about one-quarter of sales, in the United States.

Within the corporate sector, most of the production is by firms owned by a large number of **shareholders**, individuals who have purchased ownership stakes in a company. The major advantage of incorporation is that it offers the guarantee of *limited liability*, which means that the owners of a firm cannot be held personally responsible for the obligations of the firm. If a corporation fails, the shareholders are not required by law to use their personal assets (such as their homes and jewelry) to pay the debts of the failed company. The most that shareholders can lose is the amount they have invested in the corporation.

**shareholders**

Individuals who have purchased ownership stakes in a company.

There are two classifications of corporations: S-corporations and C-corporations (the letters refer to the tax schedule used to file tax returns). The major difference between these classifications is the tax system that applies to the firm. Income from an S-corporation is treated as personal income as it is earned and is subject to the individual income tax; income from C-corporations is subject to the corporate income tax as it is earned and may be subject to the individual income tax again as it is distributed to a corporation's shareholders. Our discussion of corporate taxation will focus on C-corporations, which account for most of the production of the corporate sector.

### Ownership Versus Control

Most corporations separate *ownership* of the firm from *control* (or management) of the firm. Some corporations are publicly traded on a stock exchange, so any investor can purchase or sell ownership shares in the company. Other corporations are privately held, so only select individuals are able to have an ownership stake.

In either case, shareholders typically do not make the day-to-day decisions on how to run the corporation. Those decisions are made by *managers*, who are hired by the shareholders to run the company. This separation of ownership from control is certainly necessary for large corporations; the thousands of owners of a large company could never get together to make all the decisions needed to run that company on a day-to-day basis. This separation of ownership from control has the disadvantage, however, of giving rise to what economists call an **agency problem**: a misalignment of the interests of the owners and the managers.

**agency problem**

A misalignment of the interests of the owners and the managers of a firm.

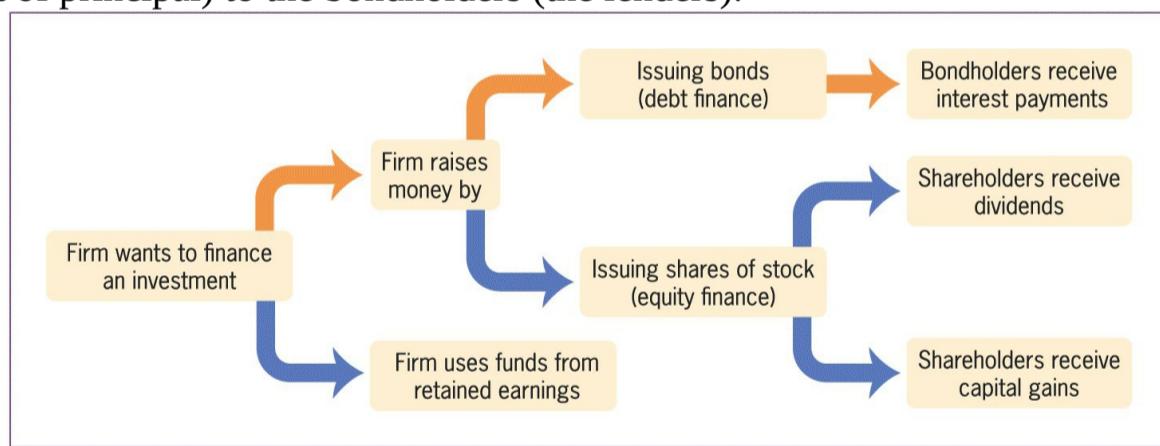
Consider, for example, the decision of a corporate manager to buy a jet for her corporate travel. Suppose that the manager knows it would be much less expensive to take commercial flights for all of her travel than for the company to own its own jet. Thus, it is in the shareholders' interests for the manager to use commercial flights because that would best serve the profitability of the firm. Yet the manager may prefer the jet for comfort, convenience, and speed, reasons that have nothing to do with the profitability of the

company. Moreover, if the manager has control of the accounting process, she can undoubtedly produce calculations to show the firm's owners that a jet is less costly than commercial flights (perhaps by using the most expensive commercial airline prices for comparison rather than the lower prices she would be likely to pay). Thus, the manager may convince the owners to let her buy a jet, even though it is not in their best interest.

This type of agency problem may be the reason for the enormous compensation of corporate executives that has gained public attention in recent years. For example, in 2010, Amgen CEO Kevin Sharer earned \$21.1 million, making him one of the highest-paid executives of firms on the S&P Index, despite the fact that shareholders lost 3% that year, and a total of 7% over the preceding five years. As Steve Silverman, one of Amgen's largest individual investors, stated "he's basically done nothing for the company, and he still gets raises." In 2008, Michael Jeffries, the CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch, was given a total of \$71.8 million in compensation, despite the fact that the company's stock dropped more than 71% in 2007. Perhaps most striking is the case of Leo Apotheker, who was terminated in 2011 as CEO of Hewlett-Packard, after an 11-month tenure that was "by nearly all accounts a disaster." Nonetheless, Apotheker received more than \$13 million in termination benefits.<sup>9</sup>

## Firm Financing

Firms grow by making investments and reaping the rewards of those investments. To make investments in capital such as new machinery, however, a firm must *finance*, or raise the funds for, the investment. There are three possible channels of corporate financing, as shown in [Figure 24-1](#). The firm can borrow from lenders such as banks; this type of financing is called **debt finance**. This borrowing is often done by selling corporate **bonds**, which are promises by the corporation to make periodic interest payments (along with an ultimate repayment of principal) to the bondholders (the lenders).



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■ FIGURE 24-1

**Sources of Corporate Finance** • If a firm wants to finance an investment, it can either use its own retained earnings or raise new funds from the capital market in one of two ways. The first is to issue bonds that pay bondholders periodic interest payments (debt finance). The other is to issue ownership (equity) shares that pay shareholders either through dividends or through capital gains earned on increases in the value of the firm (equity finance).

### debt finance

The raising of funds by borrowing from lenders such as banks or by selling bonds.

### bonds

Promises by a corporation to make periodic interest payments, as well as ultimate repayment of principal, to the bondholders (the lenders).

The second source of investment financing is to sell a *share* (a small piece) of ownership in the company for money that can be used to make investments; this type of financing is called **equity finance**. Investors who buy shares in a company can be rewarded in two different

ways. One is by receiving a **dividend**, a periodic payment from the company per share owned. The other is by earning a **capital gain** on the shares held as the price rises above the purchase price of the stock.

**equity finance**

The raising of funds by sale of ownership shares in a firm.

**dividend**

The periodic payment that investors receive from the company, per share owned.

**capital gain**

The increase in the price of a share since its purchase.

Finally, firms can finance their investment out of their own **retained earnings**, which are any net profits that are kept by the company rather than paid out to debt or equity holders. Indeed, in recent years there is increasing evidence that a large share, perhaps a majority, of new investment is financed from retained earnings.<sup>10</sup>

**retained earnings**

Any net profits that are kept by the company rather than paid out to debt or equity holders.

## Why Do We Have a Corporate Tax?

Why do we have a corporate income tax? After all, as we emphasized in [Chapter 19](#), firms are not entities but combinations of factors. So when we tax “firms,” we ultimately tax the factors of production that make up those firms. Wouldn’t it be more straightforward to tax the factors (labor and capital) directly, rather than get revenue from them through the convoluted (and uncertain) mechanism of corporate taxation? There are at least two reasons we might want a separate corporate tax.

### Pure Profits Taxation

To the extent that corporations have market power, they will earn *pure profits*, returns that exceed payouts to their factors of production (labor and capital). As established by the important analysis of [Diamond and Mirrlees \(1971\)](#), a pure profits tax is a much better way to raise revenues than is a tax on factors of production. This is because a pure profits tax does not distort the decision making of a producer, while taxes on labor or capital have distortionary effects of the types discussed in [Chapters 21, 22](#), and [23](#) (such as lowering labor supply, savings, or risk taking).

A firm chooses prices and production levels to maximize profits. If the government were to announce tomorrow that it was taking some part of those profits, the optimal choice of price and quantity for the firm would not change; the decision that maximizes pre-tax profits also maximizes after-tax profits:  $(1 - \text{tax}) \times \text{profits}$ . Pure profits taxes therefore collect revenue without distorting behavior. In addition to being distortion-free, a pure profits tax is very progressive because those receiving the profits from production are likely to be well-off.

While the pure profits tax seems like a good idea, it is not the way the corporate tax works, for two reasons. First, as we see later in the chapter, corporate taxes are not pure profits taxes: firms can minimize their corporate tax burdens by changing their use of inputs. Because corporate taxes cause firms to substitute away from their optimal production pattern, there is a distortion that causes inefficiency.

Second, a pure profits tax should be levied on **economic profits**, the difference between firm revenues and economic costs. It would involve using the type of cost calculations discussed in [Chapter 8](#), appropriately valuing resources at their *opportunity cost* (their use in the next best alternative activity). Yet firms pay taxes on **accounting profits**, the difference between revenues and reported costs. Reported costs can differ from economic costs both because they use prices rather than opportunity costs and because firms can manipulate their

accounting practices to vary the amount they report as costs.

**economic profits**

The difference between a firm's revenues and its economic opportunity costs of production.

**accounting profits**

The difference between a firm's revenues and its reported costs of production.

## Retained Earnings

Another rationale for corporate taxation is similar to the arguments we discussed for capital gains: if corporations were not taxed on their earnings, then individuals who owned shares in corporations could simply avoid taxes by having the corporations never pay out their earnings. These earnings would accumulate tax-free inside the corporation, leading to a large tax subsidy to corporate earnings relative to other forms of savings (or other economic activity in general). If corporations paid out those earnings many years later, the present discounted value of the tax burden would be quite low.

## 24.2 The Structure of the Corporate Tax

In this section, we review the basic structure of the corporate tax. This is a very complicated tax, so we present a simplified version of the structure.

The taxes of any corporation are:

$$\text{taxes} = ([\text{revenues} - \text{expenses}] \times \tau) - \text{tax credits}$$

We define each element of this expression in turn.

### Revenues

These are the revenues the firm earns by selling goods and services to the market.

### Expenses

A firm's expenses consist primarily of three components. The first is the *cash-flow costs of doing business*. These costs comprise any expenditures for services or goods over the past year. Examples include compensation paid to employees, purchases of intermediate inputs to production such as steel or energy, the costs of advertising, rent on buildings, and so on. The second component is *interest payments*, the payments made to those who lend the firm money. Both cash-flow costs and interest payments are deductible from corporate earnings in the period during which they are incurred; the amount spent each year in these categories is subtracted from that year's earnings in computing the firm's tax burden.

The final expense component is **depreciation** on capital investments, the rate at which capital investments lose their value over time. When a company hires a worker for a year at a given salary, it pays the salary for services rendered during the year and can fully deduct those salary payments from taxation. When the company buys equipment or a new building, however, it is investing in a good that will deliver services for many years. Thus, the tax code does not permit the full costs of the machine to be deducted in the period of purchase. Instead, the tax code allows the corporation to deduct from its taxes **depreciation allowances**, which are tax allowances that are designed to approximate the rate at which the capital investment loses its value. Corporations take the depreciation allowances each year for a number of years, thus spreading the cost of the asset over a number of years. The appropriate determination of depreciation allowances is very important for corporate tax policy. How should such longer-lived purchases be treated for tax purposes?

**depreciation**

The rate at which capital investments lose their value over time.

**depreciation allowances**

The amount of money that firms can deduct from their taxes to account for capital investment depreciation.

### Economic Depreciation

In principle, the tax code should allow firms to deduct **economic depreciation**, the deterioration in the value of the machine each period, as their expense. Consider a firm that is buying a machine this year for \$100,000. The machine will wear down gradually over time, so each year the machine will be worth \$10,000 less. After ten years, the machine will be worthless, and the firm will have to replace it.

**economic depreciation**

The true deterioration in the value of capital in each period of time.

The cost to the firm of using this machine for one year is the purchase price (\$100,000) minus its value after one year (\$90,000). Using the machine for one year essentially costs the firm \$10,000 because that is the reduced value of the asset. This amount is the firm's cost of

using the machine for the year, so it is the appropriate expense to deduct from earnings. Just as using a year of labor costs that year's wages, using a year of a machine costs the reduction in the value of the machine over that year.

## Depreciation in Practice

The problem with implementing economic depreciation in practice is that the true rate of economic depreciation is typically unobserved and varies widely across assets. The economic depreciation of an office building may be quite low because wear and tear on the building is gradual. The economic depreciation of an industrial machine, however, could be much greater because of the wear and tear of the production process.

As a result of these uncertainties, the tax code has adopted a series of [depreciation schedules](#) for different classes of assets. One approach to depreciation is to take the typical life of an asset—ten years in our example—and divide the amount of depreciation equally into each year of the asset's life. This method is known as *straight-line* depreciation. In our example, this approach would appropriately measure economic depreciation.

**depreciation schedules**

The timetable by which an asset may be depreciated.

In other cases, depreciation may be more rapid. For those cases, the government may offer *accelerated* depreciation schedules. The government could decide to allow firms to depreciate the cost of the machine over a shorter period of time—say, five years in our example instead of ten. Alternatively, within a given time frame, the government could allow more front-loaded depreciation, with larger depreciation deductions earlier in the life cycle of the asset. In the extreme case, the government can allow corporations to [expense investments](#) in physical capital and deduct the entire cost of the asset in the year the investment is made.

**expensing investments**

Deducting the entire cost of the investment from taxes in the year in which the purchase was made.

The key point for modeling the impact of the tax code on investment decisions is that *the value of depreciation deductions rises with the speed with which they are allowed*. This is because the present discounted value (PDV) of any tax break is higher the sooner you get the break.

Imagine that the firm in our example can borrow at a 10% interest rate, so the firm uses 10% as its discount rate for doing PDV calculations. Consider first economic depreciation (which is the same as straight-line depreciation in this case). The PDV of the set of depreciation allowances is:

$$10,000 + \frac{10,000}{1.1} + \frac{10,000}{(1.1)^2} + \dots + \frac{10,000}{(1.1)^9} = 67,590$$

Now, imagine instead that the firm is allowed accelerated straight-line depreciation, where it can depreciate \$20,000 each year for five years. The PDV of that set of depreciation allowances is:

$$20,000 + \frac{20,000}{1.1} + \frac{20,000}{(1.1)^2} + \frac{20,000}{(1.1)^3} + \frac{20,000}{(1.1)^4} = 83,397$$

By speeding up the rate at which the firm can depreciate its machine, the government has allowed the firm to deduct over \$15,000 more from its taxable income in present value. At the

extreme, with expensing, the PDV of the depreciation deduction is \$100,000 because the deduction is all taken in the first period.



#### APPLICATION

## What Is Economic Depreciation? The Case of Personal Computers

Personal computers are an excellent example of the difficulties in defining economic depreciation. [Doms et al. \(2004\)](#) gathered data on the market value of personal computers and modeled it as a function of the age of the PC. They found that the depreciation period for a PC is very rapid, on the order of only five years. Moreover, the depreciation during this period is *exponential*, not linear. They estimate that each period the value of the PC declines by 50% of its value at the start of the period. So after one year, the typical PC is worth only half its purchase value. After two years, it is worth only 25%; after three years, only 12.5%; and it is essentially worthless by the fifth year. This finding suggests that the depreciation schedules for PCs should be not only short but accelerated even within that brief time frame.

The researchers arrived at another important conclusion: most of the depreciation of PC value is not due to actual wear and tear on the machine but to the *revaluation of the product* as microprocessors improve. A computer doesn't actually function 50% less well after one year in most cases, but it is worth only half as much because new models, at similar prices, are so much better.

Moreover, even the remaining depreciation caused by factors other than revaluation is also not from physical wear and tear. Instead, it is caused by software advances that are beyond the capability of older machines. This part of the depreciation becomes rapid after just a couple of years of PC life. Thus, economic depreciation is a subtle concept that goes far beyond physical depreciation of the actual machine. Tax policy makers face a daunting task in setting depreciation schedules appropriately across the wide variety of physical assets employed by firms in the United States. ■

## Corporate Tax Rate

Corporations are taxed on their net earnings (earnings minus expenses) at a flat rate of 21% (the previous corporate tax system had a progressive rate for the smallest firms, but most paid the 35% top rate).

## Tax Credits

The final component for computing corporate tax burdens is tax credits that offset the corporate tax burden. The most famous of these is the [investment tax credit \(ITC\)](#). The ITC allows firms to deduct a percentage of their annual qualified investment expenditures from the amount they owe in taxes. The ITC had been a periodic feature of the U.S. corporate tax code but has not been in effect since 1986 (when firms could receive a credit amounting to 6 to 10% of their investment expenditures, depending on asset life). But other tax credits remain prominent in the tax code; as [Kocieniewski \(2011\)](#) reports, the video game manufacturer Electronic Arts was able to take sufficient advantage of existing tax credits (and other tax loopholes) to pay almost no taxes on its \$1.2 billion of profits.

### investment tax credit (ITC)

A credit that allows firms to deduct a percentage of their annual qualified investment expenditures from the taxes they owe.

## 24.3 The Incidence of the Corporate Tax

The tools of general equilibrium tax incidence from [Chapter 19](#) can be employed to assess the incidence of the corporate tax. Consider first the effect of the corporate tax on the goods market. A tax on producers will be shifted to consumers if demand for a good is at all inelastic. In turn, elasticity of demand for a good is determined by how easy it is for consumers to reduce their purchases or shift them to goods produced by the noncorporate sector or by foreign producers. Because the corporate sector produces the majority of goods and services in the economy, demand is not likely to be perfectly elastic. Thus, at least some of the corporate tax is reflected in higher prices for consumers. In the long run, as consumers are more able to adjust their purchases, demand will become more elastic and consumers will bear less of the tax.

To the extent that corporations bear some of this tax, we must then assess how the tax is distributed across labor and capital. Because the corporate sector employs such a large share of workers in the United States, it seems likely that the supply of labor to that sector is not perfectly elastic. Therefore, when corporations pay taxes, at least some of the costs may be shifted to workers in the form of lower wages.

In the short run, the capital supply to the corporate sector is fairly inelastic, and capital therefore bears much of the incidence of corporate taxation. In the long run, however, capital is more mobile because investors can turn to the noncorporate sector or to opportunities in other countries' economies. Indeed, capital is more mobile than labor in the long run because workers are unlikely to move abroad in response to lower wages.

Corporate income taxation also has important general equilibrium effects on the noncorporate sector as well, through spillovers. As capital moves from the corporate to the noncorporate sector in the long run, it raises the supply of noncorporate capital, lowering the rate of return in the noncorporate sector until the after-tax return in the corporate sector equals the return in the noncorporate sector. Capital in the noncorporate sector therefore bears some of the incidence of a tax on corporate capital in the form of lower returns.

Thus, the burden of the corporate tax is shared by consumers, workers, corporate investors, and noncorporate investors in some proportion. A series of recent papers, reviewed in the Empirical Evidence box, suggests that there is a large effect of corporate taxation on wages.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *Corporate Taxation and Wages*

A central question for tax policy is who bears the ultimate incidence of corporate taxation. This is hard to assess directly from looking at corporate tax payments and wages, with biases in either direction. On the one hand, firms that are doing quite well will pay high taxes—and may share the benefits of their success with workers through higher wages. On the other hand, firms may increase profits, and therefore corporate taxes, by cutting wages. So to carefully assess the impact of corporate taxes on wages we need to turn to the type of quasi-experimental approach described in [Chapter 3](#).

This has been a challenging problem to address from the U.S. perspective. U.S. corporate taxes vary at the state level, but in a highly complicated way that depends on the distribution of firm activity across states. As a result, it is challenging to simply take quasi-experimental methods to the data. Existing work has addressed this problem by imposing more "structural" assumptions on the data that allow corporate tax incidence to be indirectly derived from state tax changes. Using this approach, [Suarez Serrato and Zidar \(2016\)](#) estimate that 35% of corporate taxes are shifted to wages, 25% is shifted to land owners (through general equilibrium effects), and 40% is borne by corporate owners.

There is much more variation in international corporate taxation that allows researchers to assess its incidence. A recent paper by [Fuest et al. \(2018\)](#) illustrates this for Germany, a setting with three important empirical advantages. First, the overall structure of the corporate tax system is set at the national level, but the tax rate is set at the local level, making it possible to assess the impact of the rate alone and not be confounded by other changes to corporate taxes that might be correlated with rate changes. Second, there are a large number of municipalities that are frequently changing tax rates (they

studied more than 3,500 municipalities that had almost 7,000 tax changes). The reliability of any quasi-experimental estimate generally rises with the number of experiments that can be incorporated into the analysis, since it reduces the odds that there is an omitted factor that is correlated with the policy change in a systematic way across all of the locations. Finally, Germany has very rich administrative data on wages from an employer–employee matched data set that allowed the researchers to carefully study how wages respond at firms as the local corporate tax rate changes.

The authors set up a careful difference-in-difference framework to evaluate these local tax changes. In addition, they carefully addressed potential concerns about “policy endogeneity.” That is, even with many localities, a natural concern is that localities raise or lower taxes in response to local economic conditions, which could lead to noncomparability between areas that do and do not change taxes. For example, areas that are raising taxes may have lower wages anyway because taxes are increased in down economies. The authors addressed this concern in two ways. First, they showed that there were no “preexisting trends”: that is, before the actual tax change, wages were moving in very similar ways in places that eventually did and did not change their taxes. Second, they showed that these changes were not associated with broader changes in economic conditions. Under the policy endogeneity story of changes responding to local economies, we should see wages systematically falling or rising in places about to change taxes, and we should see those changes in taxes associated with changing economic conditions. The fact that neither was true lends confidence to the notion that these tax changes were not being driven by local economic conditions.

The authors used this large set of tax changes to precisely estimate that about 50% of the incidence of corporate tax changes were on wages, somewhat higher (but in a similar range to) the U.S. estimate. Moreover, they estimated that the wages most affected were those of low-skilled and young workers. Taken together, these results suggest that the corporate tax may not be nearly as progressive as assumed by CBO and others.

## 24.4 The Consequences of the Corporate Tax for Investment

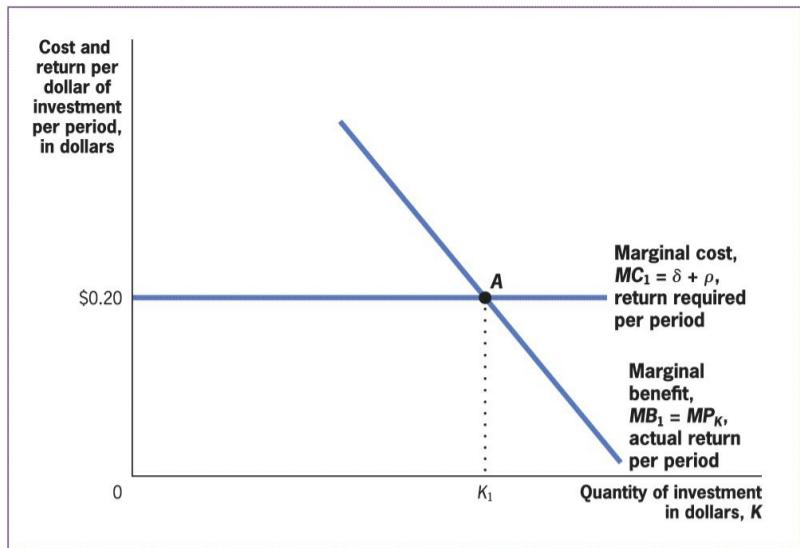
We now turn to discussing the efficiency consequences of the corporate tax. In particular, there is significant concern that the corporate tax may reduce the amount of investment undertaken by firms.

### Theoretical Analysis of Corporate Tax and Investment Decisions

To understand the effect of corporate taxation on investment decisions, we begin by modeling the investment decision in a world of no corporate taxes. The investment decision is determined by firms setting the marginal benefits and costs of investment equal on a per-period basis; the firm estimates the return it will get from its investment in each period (the benefit), compares that to the cost of the investment in each period, and invests only if the benefits are larger than the costs.

Suppose that each dollar of investment in a machine produces  $MP_K$  cents of additional output in each period (the marginal product of the machine), which is the benefit of investment. In each period, the machine depreciates in value by a linear amount per dollar (such as \$0.10 for each dollar of machinery investment). This depreciation is not, however, the total cost of the machine to the firm in one period; the firm also has to finance the machine's purchase. As we discussed earlier, a firm can finance its investments in several ways. Suppose this firm finances its investment by selling equity shares in the firm. In return, it has to make dividend payments each period of  $\rho$  per dollar borrowed. In this case, the total cost of the machine in each period is **depreciation + dividend =  $\delta + \rho$** . If the depreciation rate is 10%, and the firm pays out 10% of the value of the investment in dividends (the dividend yield) each period, then the per-period cost of investing \$1 in a machine is  **$\delta + \rho = \$0.10 + \$0.10 = \$0.20$** .

We can analyze the implications of corporate taxation for firm investment decisions graphically. [Figure 24-2](#) shows how the marginal cost and marginal benefit curves for investment determine the amount of investment made ( $K$ ). The marginal benefit curve measures the *actual* return to each dollar of investment in each period,  $MP_K$ . Marginal benefit falls as investment increases, due to the assumption of diminishing marginal product; there is a lower return to each additional dollar of investment because there is a lower marginal product of each additional dollar of capital. The marginal cost curve measures the *required* return to each additional dollar of investment each period, or how much the investment must yield in each period to cover its costs (of depreciation and financing). The marginal cost is constant at  **$\delta + \rho = \$0.20$** , as shown by the  $MC_1$  curve.



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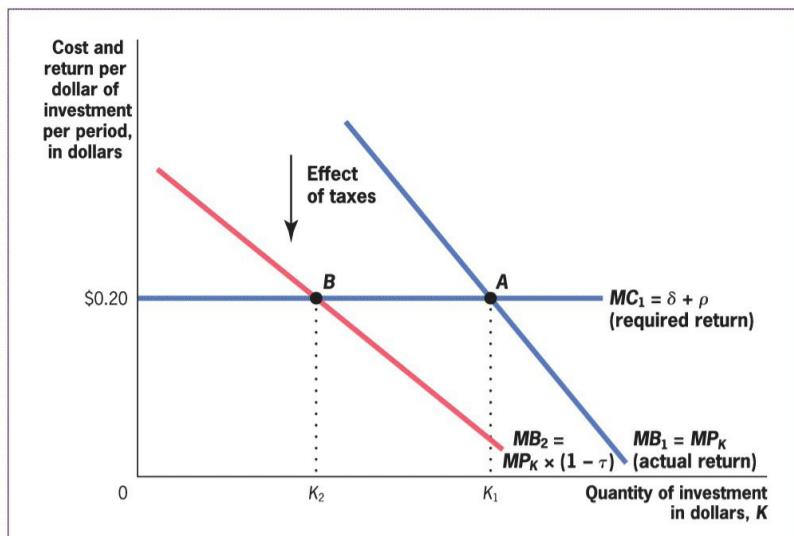
■ FIGURE 24-2

Investment Decisions with No Corporate Tax • With no corporate tax, the firm chooses its investment level by equating the marginal benefit of an additional dollar of investment with its marginal cost. The marginal benefit ( $MB_1$ ) is equal to the actual return per dollar of investment, the marginal product of capital ( $MP_K$ ). The marginal cost is equal to the required return per dollar of investment, the sum of depreciation ( $d$ ) and financing costs ( $r$ ). This equality initially occurs at point  $A$ , with investment level  $K_1$ .

Firms invest until the marginal dollar of investment results in equal costs and benefits, which occurs at point  $A$ , with a level of investment  $K_1$ . Firms invest until the next dollar of investment yields just enough return (\$0.20) to cover their costs in each period. If a firm invests less than this amount (to the left of  $K_1$ ), the marginal return from an additional dollar of investment is above its marginal cost of \$0.20, so the firm should invest more; if the firm invests more than this amount (to the right of  $K_1$ ), the marginal return from that dollar of investment is below its marginal cost of \$0.20, so the investment should not be undertaken.

### The Effects of a Corporate Tax on Corporate Investment

What happens if we introduce taxes into this story? Imagine first that the corporate tax is simply a tax at a rate  $\tau$  on cash earnings minus labor costs (there are no tax deductions of any type for investment spending). The cash earnings per dollar spent on the machine per period is  $MP_K$ , so once this tax is imposed, the earnings per dollar spent on the machine drop to  $MP_K \times (1 - \tau)$  (because the new tax must be paid on each dollar of earnings). This reduction in actual return causes the marginal benefit curve to shift down to  $MB_2$ , as shown in Figure 24-3: the taxation of corporate earnings has reduced the marginal benefit of investing. The costs per dollar of investment remain at  $\delta + \rho$ , so the marginal cost curve remains at its initial level. The new optimal investment choice is at point  $B$ , and investment falls to  $K_2$ .



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FIGURE 24-3

Investment Decision with a Tax on Corporate Income • Taxing corporate profits lowers the benefits of investment to  $MP_K \times (1 - \tau)$ , so that the marginal benefit curve shifts to  $MB_2$ . The firm lowers its investment, moving to point *B*, and a lower level of investment,  $K_2$ .

A firm invests less when the government takes some of its return through corporate taxation. This is because the firm's after-tax actual rate of return on the investment must be large enough to meet the required rate of return  $\delta + \rho$ . As a result, the pre-tax rate of return must be higher than it is without taxation, and that only occurs if the firm is investing less. For example, with a tax rate of 50%, the firm must earn \$0.40 of return on a dollar of investment to pay back its \$0.20 of cost in depreciation and financing. Thus, the firm must invest less: it should stop investing at the point where the marginal dollar of investment has a \$0.40 return rather than continuing to invest until that marginal dollar of investment has a \$0.20 return. In this scenario, corporate taxation leads to less investment.

### The Effects of Depreciation Allowances and the Investment Tax Credit on Corporate Investment

This description of the effect of taxes on corporate investment does not include the influence of tax deductions for investment, such as depreciation allowances or investment tax credits. These tax deductions act as discounts off the price of investments, lowering the marginal cost by offsetting some of the costs of financing and depreciation.

Recall that depreciation allowances are typically spread out over the purchase year and future years and that to value such streams of benefits we need to consider their present discounted value (PDV). The value of any given depreciation allowance schedule,  $z$ , is the PDV of the stream of depreciation allowances associated with a new machine purchase, as a fraction of the purchase price of the machine. If the firm could expense the machine (deduct its full value in the year of purchase),  $z$  would be 1.0 because the deduction allowance is 100% of the purchase price. As depreciation allowances are spread out over future years,  $z$  falls because the PDV of the depreciation allowances falls as the allowances become more distant.

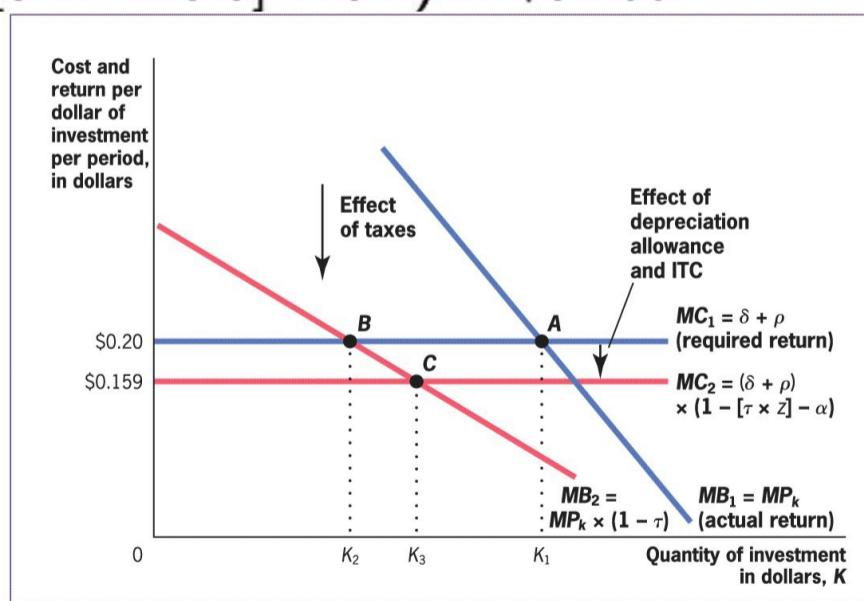
Depreciation is subtracted from firm earnings in computing the base of corporate taxable income. Each dollar of depreciation allowances therefore saves the firm  $$t$  in corporate tax payments because it lowers the tax base by \$1. If the depreciation allowances for a firm have

a PDV of  $z$ , they are worth  $\$ (\tau \times z)$  to the firm. If a firm could expense its investment—for example, ( $z = 1$ )—and the firm's corporate tax rate was 21%, the depreciation allowance associated with each \$1 of the machine's purchase price would be worth \$0.21 to the firm in reduced tax payments.

In addition, in the past (but not since 1986), the tax system has allowed corporations to take advantage of an investment tax credit (ITC). The ITC provides the firm with a credit of  $\alpha$  cents for each dollar of investment in the year that it makes the investment.

The availability of depreciation allowances and the ITC act as a rebate against the cost of investing. In essence, the cost of each dollar of machine in each period, previously  $\delta + \rho$ , has fallen to  $(\delta + \rho) \times (1 - [\tau \times z] - \alpha)$  because the firm can offset these rebates against its costs of investing.

[Figure 24-4](#) illustrates the effect of depreciation allowances and the ITC on a firm's investment decisions. As in [Figure 24-3](#), the relevant marginal benefit curve for the firm is the after-tax  $MB_2$ . The reduction in the required return from depreciation allowances and the ITC lower the  $MC$  curve from  $MC_1$  to  $MC_2$ , which now has a value of  $(\delta + \rho) \times (1 - [\tau \times z] - \alpha)$ . To see these changes numerically, return to the example used earlier: with a 10% depreciation rate per period ( $\delta$ ) and a 10% dividend yield ( $\rho r$ ), the pre-tax marginal cost curve was at \$0.20. Suppose that the depreciation schedule for this investment is such that the PDV of the depreciation allowances is equal to one-half of the purchase price of the machine ( $z = 0.5$ ), that there is a 21% corporate tax rate, and that there is an ITC of 10%. In this case, the cost of each dollar of machine in each period (the return required by the investor on that dollar of investment) has fallen to  $0.20 \times (1 - [0.21 \times 0.5] - 0.1) = \$0.159$ .



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■ FIGURE 24-4

Investment Decisions with Depreciation and the ITC • ITC deduction of depreciation allowances and the existence of an investment tax credit (ITC) lowers the costs of investment from  $(\delta + \rho)$  to  $(\delta + \rho) \times (1 - [\tau \times Z] - \alpha)$ , shifting the  $MC$  curve down to  $MC_2$ . The firm moves to point C,

with investment  $K_3$ , which is higher than before depreciation and the ITC but lower than in the no-tax world.

The new equilibrium is at point  $C$ , with a level of investment of  $K_3$ . This is the point at which after-tax marginal costs and after-tax marginal benefits for each dollar of machinery investment in each period are equal; that is, where actual returns ( $MB_2$  curve) equal required returns ( $MC_2$  curve) for the marginal dollar of investment. The level of investment is higher than before depreciation allowances and the ITC ( $K_2$ ) but remains lower than before taxation ( $K_1$ ) (although, as we discuss later, it may in some cases be even higher than before taxation). The reduction in marginal benefits from earning after-tax returns exceeds the reduction in marginal costs from having depreciation allowances and the ITC, so investment still falls overall because of corporate taxation.

## Effective Corporate Tax Rate

Now that we understand how taxes affect a firm's investment decisions, we can summarize mathematically the net impact of the tax system on investment decisions. The effect of taxes is summarized by the **effective corporate tax rate**, the percentage increase in the rate of pre-tax return to capital that is necessitated by taxation. As shown in [Figures 24-2, 24-3, and 24-4](#), when taxes are imposed, the rate of return earned by the firm on its investments must rise to finance the tax payments. How much it must rise is a function of the tax rate, the treatment of depreciation, and the presence of the ITC. These factors therefore come together to determine the overall effect of taxation on investment decisions.

**effective corporate tax rate**

The percentage increase in the rate of pre-tax return to capital that is necessitated by taxation.

Consider first the simple corporate tax system of [Figure 24-3](#), with a tax at 21% on corporate earnings and no depreciation allowance or ITC. Before taxation, the firm's actual rate of return must be at least the required rate of return of 20%. After this 21% corporate tax, the firm's actual rate of return must be at least  $0.2 / (1 - 0.21) = 0.253 = 25.3\%$  to meet the required return of 20%. The firm must earn a rate of return that is 21% higher on its investments to pay its taxes and to meet the required return to pay its depreciation and financing obligations. As a result, the effective corporate tax rate is the statutory corporate tax rate, 21%.

More generally, the effective corporate tax rate (ETR) is measured as the following:

$$ETR = \frac{MP_K \text{ (after tax)} - MP_K \text{ (before tax)}}{MP_K \text{ (after tax)}}$$

Because of corporate taxes, the marginal product of each dollar of investment  $MP_K$  must be higher to pay its taxes and meet the required rate of return. With no depreciation allowance or ITC,  $MP_K$  must be 21% higher due to taxation.

Now consider the more realistic corporate tax system in [Figure 24-4](#), with a corporate tax rate of 21%, as well as a depreciation allowance and ITC. In this case, the firm must have a higher rate of return to pay taxes on its earnings, but it can have a lower rate of return because the cost of the machine is subsidized by depreciation and ITC. With depreciation and the ITC, the effective tax rate is

$$ETR = \frac{(\tau - \tau z - \alpha)}{(1 - \tau z - \alpha)}$$

For example, if  $z$  and  $\alpha$  are both zero (the case with no depreciation allowances or ITC), the effective tax rate is  $\tau$ , the statutory rate. In our example, with  $z = 0.5$  and no ITC, the effective tax rate is

$$ETR = \left\{ \frac{(0.21 - 0.21 \times 0.5)}{(1 - 0.21 \times 0.5)} = \frac{0.105}{0.895} = 11.7\% \right\}$$

Because of the value of the depreciation deductions and the ITC, the effective tax rate is now only 10.3%, despite the 35% statutory rate. That is, the firm must earn a pre-tax rate of return that is only 10.3% higher than the rate it earned before taxation to meet its required rate of return of 20%. This is lower than the statutory rate because the ITC and depreciation allowance offset some of the effect of taxation.

## Negative Effective Tax Rates

With a large enough  $z$  and ITC  $\alpha$ , the effective corporate tax rate could be negative. If the firm in our example could expense its machine and deduct the full cost of the machine in the period of purchase, so that  $z = 1$ , and it also got a 10% investment tax credit, then the effective tax rate would be

$$ETR = \left\{ \frac{(0.21 - 0.21 \times 1 - 0.1)}{(1 - 0.21 \times 1 - 0.1)} = \frac{-0.1}{0.69} = -14.4\% \right\}$$

A negative effective tax rate would mean that the  $MC$  curve falls so much in [Figure 24-4](#) that point  $C$  is to the right of point  $A$ , and the firm invests more with taxes ( $K_3$ ) than it did without them ( $K_1$ ).<sup>11</sup>

## Policy Implications of the Impact of the Corporate Tax on Investment

The mathematics of the previous section show the varied impacts that corporate tax structures can have on firm investment decisions. For any given corporate tax rate, the tax system can be designed to offer very different incentives for investment. A tax system that simply taxed corporate income, with no deductions for depreciation or investment tax credit, would clearly reduce investment levels by lowering the marginal benefit (after-tax return) of each dollar of investment. Allowing depreciation, particularly if it is accelerated, investment tax credits can mitigate or even reverse the negative effect of taxes on investment by lowering the required return to an investment. When a company buys a machine, it receives the embedded tax advantages of having purchased that machine. The faster depreciation is and the larger the investment tax credit is, the larger those tax advantages are. As a result, the effective marginal tax rate for corporations has varied widely during the recent past, from a high of 51% in 1980 to a low of 12.5% between 2010 and 2013.<sup>12</sup>

The 2017 tax reform further changes the effective tax rate in important ways. First is the

reduction in the corporate tax rate from 35 to 21%. At the same time, the law expands expensing of certain investments (such as tangible equipment), which will increase the present discounted value of tax breaks for some investment, and removes expensing for other investments (such as research and development), which will lower the value of tax breaks for other investments. The law also made significant changes to the deductibility of corporate interest (discussed below) and the deduction of net operating losses (where the amount that can be deducted is limited, but it can be deducted for more years). The net effect on the effective corporate tax rate is uncertain at this time and will become clear as corporate tax returns are filed in 2019.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *Accelerated Depreciation and Investment*

One of the most important questions in all of tax policy is the extent to which corporate taxes impact corporate investment decisions. Investment by corporations is a backbone of economic growth. And the model just described shows the complicated and potentially significant ways that tax policy can drive those investment decisions.

There is a large literature investigating the impact of corporate taxes on corporate investment decisions. The conclusion of recent studies is that the investment decision is fairly sensitive to tax incentives, with an elasticity of investment with respect to the effective tax rate on the order of **-0.5:** as taxes lower the cost of investment by 10%, there is 5% more investment. But a recent study by [Zwick and Mahon \(2017\)](#) suggests that certain types of corporate tax incentives can have a much larger effect.

Their paper focuses on the response of firm investment decisions to two episodes of “bonus depreciation.” This was a policy put in place to encourage investment during recessions by accelerating the rate at which firms could depreciate their investments. As noted above, faster depreciation (a higher value of  $\alpha$ ) lowers the cost of investing and should therefore increase investment activity. This bonus depreciation was imposed nationally, however, and was clearly related to economic conditions, raising the challenge of how to separate its impacts from other factors that might drive investment behavior.

To address this challenge, the authors compared firms that were in the same industry—but whose investments were in different categories. Some firms mostly invested in capital equipment with a short life, so that further acceleration of their depreciation deductions didn’t much lower the cost of investing; other firms that invested in longer-lasting capital equipment saw a much larger reduction in their investment costs. As a result, firms in the same industry had much larger changes in investment costs depending on their ex-ante mix of investments. They found that firms that had their investment costs lowered the most were the ones most likely to raise investment in the wake of the bonus depreciation.

The authors confirmed their empirical strategy in two ways. First, they showed that these pairs of firms had very similar investment patterns before the tax change, and that the differences between treatment and control firms only emerged after the policy changed. Second, they confirmed their findings by looking at the response of investment to “kinks” in the tax depreciation schedule that occurred even in non-tax reform years. These kinks emerged because of a provision of the tax code that allows small firms to fully expense their investment up to some limit; they found that investment spiked exactly at this investment limit.

A particularly innovative aspect of this study is that the authors moved beyond the average effects of the tax incentive to consider heterogeneity across firm types. Doing so yielded two key findings. First, the effect of tax incentives were much larger on smaller and more “cash constrained” firms, for whom the tax break may have been providing valuable needed cash flow toward investing. Second, the effects of tax incentives only showed up for firms that could use the tax breaks in the tax year—as opposed to firms already paying no tax, who had to “carry forward” the tax breaks to be used in a future year.

Putting this all together, the study found an elasticity of investment with respect to the tax price of **-1.7**, which is much larger than indicated in the existing literature. The authors speculated that their findings resulted from including a much larger sample of small firms than previous studies did, and from focusing on a mechanism that yielded immediate rather than delayed tax benefits. This suggests that not all tax changes are created equally, but that well-targeted tax changes can have large effects on investment.

## 24.5 Treatment of International Corporate Income

Corporations around the world are functioning in an increasingly integrated world product market. As a result, there may be a number of reasons firms in the United States would want to produce in other nations, such as lower labor costs, lower transportation costs when selling the product in those nations, or a better ability to customize products to local tastes. Firms that operate in multiple countries are called **multinational firms**, and the production arms of the corporation in other nations are called the firm's **subsidiaries**.

**multinational firms**

Firms that operate in multiple countries.

**subsidiaries**

The production arms of a corporation that are located in other nations.

Production costs or sales advantages are not the only reason firms produce goods abroad. The corporate tax structure in the United States and in other nations may also play a role by encouraging international production as a means of avoiding U.S. taxation. Some of the largest U.S. companies see their tax burdens dramatically reduced through international diversification. General Electric, for example, earned worldwide profits of \$14.2 billion in 2010, of which \$5.1 billion came from the United States. But when tax time came, rather than paying taxes, GM claimed a tax refund of \$3.2 billion!<sup>13</sup> In this section, we discuss the treatment of international income in the U.S. corporate tax structure.<sup>14</sup>

### How to Tax International Income

There are two basic approaches to taxing corporations that earn income abroad.<sup>15</sup> The first is a **territorial system**, whereby corporations earning income abroad pay tax only to the government of the country in which the income is earned. The second is a **global system**, whereby corporations are taxed by their home countries on their income regardless of where it is earned. Under the recent tax reform, America joined most of the world in moving from a global to a territorial system.

**territorial tax system**

A tax system in which corporations earning income abroad pay tax only to the government of the country in which the income is earned.

**global tax system**

A tax system in which corporations are taxed by their home countries on their income regardless of where it is earned.

### The Transfer-Pricing Problem

The fundamental problem facing tax authorities in taxing foreign income is that when a good is produced using inputs from many nations, it is difficult to appropriately attribute the profits earned on that good to any particular nation. In particular, companies will have an incentive to report profits as being earned in nations with low corporate tax rates, and report expenses as being incurred to offset earnings in nations with high corporate tax rates. A company can accomplish this goal by manipulating its **transfer prices**, the amount that any of the company's subsidiaries reimburse any other of the same company's subsidiaries for goods transferred between the two.

**transfer prices**

The amount that one subsidiary of a corporation reimburses another subsidiary of the same corporation for goods transferred between the two.

Imagine that France levies a 40% tax on corporate profits, compared to the 21% corporate tax rate in the United States. An American computer company has a French subsidiary that manufactures microchips at a cost of \$100 each. The American company transfers those microchips to the United States, where it spends another \$500 on the rest of the computer, then sells the whole package for \$1,000. So the total profit on the transaction is \$400. How does the company decide to allocate that \$400 in profit between the American parent and the

French subsidiary?

The American company could say that the entire \$400 profit is due to the microchip and could transfer \$500 to its French subsidiary in exchange for each chip (the cost of \$100 plus profits of \$400). On paper, the French subsidiary would make a \$400 profit (the \$500 transfer from the United States minus the \$100 cost of producing the chip) and would pay \$160 in taxes ( $0.40 \times \$400$ ) to the French government. The American company records no profit because it sells the computer for \$1,000 and records costs of \$500 to its French subsidiary for the chip and \$500 to its U.S. plant for producing the computer.

At the other extreme, the American company could say that none of the \$400 profit is due to the microchip and transfer only \$100 to its French subsidiary in exchange for each chip. In that case, the French subsidiary makes no profit, while the American company makes \$400 in profit on each computer ( $\$1,000 - \$500 - \$100$ ). The company thus pays only \$84 in taxes ( $0.21 \times 400$ ), this time to the U.S. government.

The American company can thus lower its taxes by \$76 per computer by transferring only \$100 to the French subsidiary. The transfer-pricing problem arising from this practice is that companies will have the incentive to make profits appear as if they were earned in the low-tax country.

The United States and other OECD countries are aware of this problem, and tax authorities in those nations require that in transactions between a firm and its foreign subsidiaries, transfer prices be recorded as if the exchange had occurred at “arm’s length,” as if two separate, unrelated firms had negotiated the price. In practice, this rule is extremely difficult to enforce and, in many cases, to interpret. There is substantial evidence that corporations manipulate prices and profits across subsidiaries to reduce tax burdens. For example, [Collins et al. \(1998\)](#) found that U.S. multinationals report greater foreign profitability if they face foreign tax rates below those of the United States.

One major example of such a scheme involved GlaxoSmithKline, a drug company based in the United Kingdom that sells the ulcer drug Zantac through subsidiaries in many other nations.<sup>16</sup> Glaxo has a subsidiary in the United States, which is, in this case, the higher-tax country, so it could reduce its taxes by shifting expenses to the United States and profits back to the United Kingdom. According to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, Glaxo did exactly that by overpaying royalties on Zantac to its British parent company, which did the research and development of the drug. These large royalties led to higher tax payments in Britain and lower tax payments in the United States because the U.S. subsidiary could deduct the royalties as a cost of doing business. As a result, in January 2004, the IRS demanded payment of \$5.2 billion from the company—\$2.7 billion in back taxes owed from 1989 to 1996 and \$2.5 billion in interest. The argument over Glaxo’s taxes dragged out in U.S. tax court and was scheduled to go to trial in 2007. However, in September 2006, Glaxo agreed to resolve the dispute with the U.S. government with a settlement of \$3.1 billion covering the years 1989 through 2005.<sup>17</sup>



#### APPLICATION

The A(pple) B(urger King) C(aterpillar)s of Avoiding Corporate

## Taxes on International Income

The past few years have seen a dramatic increase in the attention paid to attempts by corporations to avoid taxes on their earnings abroad. In this Application, we discuss three of the most notable examples.

On May 21, 2013, the Senate held a hearing on offshore profit shifting and the U.S. tax code regarding Apple Inc. and its attempts to evade taxes. In 2011, Apple made 70% of its total \$34.2 billion pre-tax profits abroad, but the committee estimated that the company only paid a 2.2% tax rate on that profit.<sup>18</sup> Investigators argued that Apple had avoided reporting at least \$74 billion in profits to IRS between 2009 and 2012.<sup>19</sup>

How did Apple accomplish this tax avoidance? It relied on low corporate taxation in Ireland and a creative organizational structure. Apple used the types of transaction pricing approaches we've discussed to shift much of its profits to Ireland, a country where Apple has received a special corporate tax rate in the single digits for many years. Here's how it worked: Apple made \$34 billion in 2011 and reported that its Japanese subsidiaries made only \$150 million, about 0.44%, even though Japan is one of Apple's largest foreign markets. Profits were removed from Japan and sent to Ireland, where Apple reported \$22 billion in income for that year.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, Apple has been able to take its Irish connection even further. Apple Operations International (AOI) is a holding company that owns most of Apple's offshore entities. Yet AOI has no physical presence and has no employees other than two Apple, Inc., employees from Cupertino, California, and one Irish employee of a different Irish subsidiary that AOI owns.<sup>21</sup> Because AOI is not managed or controlled in Ireland, Ireland does not recognize its tax residency. And because AOI is not incorporated in the United States, the United States does not recognize its tax residency. Using these loopholes, AOI has not paid any corporate income tax for the last five years,<sup>22</sup> despite making up 30% of Apple's total net profits during the same time frame.<sup>23</sup> In 2016, the European Commission concluded that Ireland had illegally gave special tax rates to Apple's three Irish subsidiaries in exchange for 5,500 new jobs in Cork, Ireland.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, attention has been focused on the topic of *corporate inversions*. A corporate inversion in the United States is when a U.S.-based company merges with a foreign one, forming a new merged company that is technically located in a foreign country. The U.S. firm becomes a subsidiary of the merged company, although in reality, the foreign firm is usually controlled by the U.S. firm.<sup>25</sup> Essentially, the initial American company loses its U.S. corporate status and, therefore, is no longer under the U.S. Tax Code, but instead pays taxes according to the laws of the foreign country it now legally resides in. This way, the initially American company avoids paying significant amounts in tax dollars to the U.S. government. The relocation of the merged company has little to no additional purpose for the American company other than decreasing taxes.<sup>26</sup>

This approach received attention when one of the America's largest fast-food chains, Burger King, undertook a corporate inversion with a Canadian firm. Burger King bought out Canadian restaurant chain Tim Hortons for \$11 billion, despite the Canadian company's larger total annual revenue (\$2.5 billion versus Burger King's \$1.1 billion).<sup>27</sup> It is estimated that Burger King will avoid anywhere between \$400 million and \$1.2 billion in U.S. taxes over the next four years.

Finally, perhaps the simplest approach to tax avoidance of all was taken by the Caterpillar corporation. In 1999, Caterpillar decided that it could sharply reduce the American tax on profits from the sale of parts sent from the United States to customers around the world by simply taking its name off of the invoices and replacing it with the name of a Swiss subsidiary. As [Norris \(2014\)](#) wrote, “So even though the parts might have never come within a thousand miles of Switzerland, the profits accrued to the Swiss subsidiary. And Caterpillar negotiated a deal to tax those profits well below Switzerland’s norms,” with rates in the range of 4 to 6%. The tax savings? \$300 million per year.

These are not just isolated examples. Jason Furman, former chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, noted that the profits reported by American-controlled corporations in some tax haven nations far exceeded the total economic output of the countries in which those corporations were situated. For example, American-controlled corporate profits in the British Virgin Islands amounted to 1,009% of the island’s GDP, while in the Cayman Islands the figure was 1,430%. In Luxembourg, American profits were 103% of GDP, and in Ireland, they were 38%. As Furman said, “I feel safe in saying that the fact that in 2010 U.S.-controlled foreign corporation profits represent 1,578% of Bermuda’s GDP, probably does not simply reflect business decisions made for purely business reasons.”<sup>28</sup> ■

## Global Versus Territorial Taxation

Given the problem of transfer pricing, how should we think about the trade-offs between the global and territorial approaches to taxing international income? It is useful to view this through the lens of the growing U.S. dissatisfaction with global taxation that motivated the recent tax reforms.

Under the global system, U.S. firms paid their U.S. corporate tax obligation wherever their plants or factories were located. Firms could, however, claim any tax payments to foreign governments as a credit against their U.S. taxes. Because of this [foreign tax credit](#), firms should have, in principle, paid the same tax rate (the U.S. corporate tax rate) regardless of where they locate their subsidiaries. In practice, however, this was not the case.

### foreign tax credit

U.S.-based multinational corporations may claim a credit against their U.S. taxes for any tax payments made to foreign governments when funds are repatriated to the parent.

This is because firms were taxed only on their international income when the income is returned, or [repatriated](#), from the foreign subsidiary to the U.S. parent company. As a result, U.S. firms never faced U.S. taxes as long as they retained their foreign earnings at their foreign subsidiaries. For a subsidiary in a nation with low corporate tax rates, relative to the United States, this tax structure provided a strong incentive to defer repatriation of earnings. For example, if the foreign nation had a corporate income tax rate of only 10%, while the rate was 35% in the United States, the firm could defer taxation in the amount of 25% of earnings by not repatriating those earnings from the foreign subsidiary back home to the United States. This deferral was a tax advantage because those remaining U.S. taxes (the 25%) were paid in the future when earnings were eventually repatriated, so the present value of tax payments on foreign income was lower than if taxes were paid when the income was earned. If the money was *never* repatriated, the corporation avoided paying any U.S. tax on its foreign earnings altogether.<sup>29</sup> This is very similar to the tax advantage of taxation of capital gains on realization rather than on accrual: the effective rate is lowered because taxes are paid in the future.

### repatriation

The return of income from a foreign country to a corporation’s home country.

As a result of this system, even under the global system, firms could avoid much of the U.S. taxation of their foreign profits. Consider the \$74 billion in profits that Apple avoided reporting through their transfer pricing. If this \$74 billion were to return to the United States, it would have been taxed. Not surprisingly, Apple kept its profits overseas. In fact, to avoid bringing this money back to the United States (and having to pay taxes on it), Apple went into debt by borrowing money even though it had these billions in overseas cash.<sup>[30](#)</sup>

Given this avoidance behavior, many argued that our global system was already effectively a territorial system, in that profits earned abroad were largely avoided through holding cash abroad. Indeed, some argued, this was worse than a territorial system since it induced companies to hold profits abroad, rather than moving them to where they were most productive. Under a territorial system, those profits might return to the United States and create economic activity here.

This logic motivated a “tax holiday” as part of the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004. As indicated by its name, the bill was intended to rejuvenate the economy and create jobs. One of its most important provisions was a one-year reduction of the tax rate on repatriated profits from 35 to 5.25%. The hope was that multinational firms would take advantage of the one-year window by repatriating billions of dollars in profits currently held overseas.

By summer of 2008, U.S. companies had repatriated roughly \$312 billion. However, it was clear that the expected surge in hiring and job creation did not materialize. A 2009 report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service looked at 12 participating companies and found that at least 8 had cut jobs by 2006. In one particularly perverse example, Pfizer repatriated \$37 billion—more than double the amount returned by any other company—but cut 10,000 jobs in 2005. According to the report, “Empirical analyses of the stimulative effects of the repatriation provisions . . . suggest a limited stimulative impact from the provisions. They conclude that much of the repatriated earnings were used for cash-flow purposes and little evidence exists that new investment was spurred.” Discouragingly, the nonpartisan Joint Committee on Taxation estimates that while the tax holiday produced an initial flood of cash in 2005, some of that money would have been returned to the United States anyway at a much higher tax rate, costing the government \$3.3 billion in lost revenue by 2014. By 2009, the idea of a repatriation holiday was once again debated in Congress, with the estimated cost of a tax holiday coming in at \$30 billion over the next decade.<sup>[31](#)</sup>

The experience of the tax holiday raises the difficult tension in choosing between a global and territorial system. The global system raises more revenues to the extent that at least some profits are repatriated, but it distorts firms to reduce their repatriation rates in order to avoid tax. The experience of the tax holiday suggests that more repatriation won’t, however, have much an impact on economic growth. For this reason, others have suggested a revised global system, where companies are taxed on their income whether or not it is repatriated.<sup>[32](#)</sup> Foreign tax credits would still apply, as under the previous global system, but now the difference in U.S. tax burden would be levied regardless of where money is held. As the Application shows, the recent tax reform went in a somewhat different direction.



## APPLICATION

### The 2017 Tax Reform and Corporate Tax Wedges

At the heart of the public finance approach to optimal taxes is the notion of minimizing tax

wedges that cause distortions. The corporate tax system imposes a host of such wedges throughout the economy, but two of the most important are the wedge between domestic and foreign economic activity, and the wedge between corporate and noncorporate form.

As discussed in the introduction, many viewed the U.S. corporate tax as discouraging domestic economic activity through our much higher tax rate, and encouraging hoarding of corporate assets abroad through our global tax system. For this reason the 2017 tax reform both lowered the corporate tax rate and moved to a territorial tax system. But a straight move to a territorial tax system would both lower revenues to the extent that firms did already repatriate earnings, and would reward those companies who had reduced U.S. taxes by avoiding repatriation. In addition, a territorial tax system would further provide incentives to use transfer pricing to shift profits abroad, since once shifted they would never be taxed (as opposed to being taxed upon repatriation).

The 2017 tax reform tried to address these concerns in two ways. The first is a minimum tax on certain foreign income. In particular, companies will be charged a tax on foreign income that exceeds 10% of the firms' tangible assets (such as factories) in foreign countries. But this new provision is itself problematic in a number of ways, as emphasized by the [Marr et al. \(2018\)](#). First, since the exemption is a function of a firm's foreign tangible assets, it provides an incentive to shift such assets—and the jobs that go with them—abroad. Second, this minimum tax is levied only at 10%, so that foreign income still is substantially tax preferred. Finally, the minimum tax is based on the total global taxes and income, and not levied on a country by country basis; corporations can therefore continue to significantly evade taxes in tax havens, as long as they have tangible assets elsewhere outside the United States.

To complicate things further, the tax law tries to address the incentives to shift tangible assets abroad by taxing income from exports at a lower rate than income from domestic profits. But this offers further opportunities for gaming. A U.S. company, rather than sell a product in the United States and pay a 21% tax on the profits, may be able to “export” the product by selling it to a foreign distributor, which can then sell the product back in the United States. The profits from this “export” would then be taxed at a 13.125% rate, even though a U.S. company created the product and U.S. consumers purchased it.

The second is a one-time tax on the total stock of nonrepatriated foreign dividends, called “deemed repatriation.” This existing stock will be taxed at 15.5% for cash assets, and 8% for noncash assets. Corporations are given the choice of actually repatriating those earnings or paying this tax, over a period of eight years. This provision raises substantial revenues and avoids the “giveaway” that would be implied by a straight shift to a territorial system. But whether it is preferable to a global system depends on whether these earnings would have eventually been repatriated at a higher tax rate.

The second wedge that concerned tax reformers was between corporate and noncorporate forms of business. As noted earlier, while most sales in the United States come from corporate entities, the vast majority of entities are noncorporate. This raises the possibility that tax differences between the corporate and the noncorporate form could distort firms to choose one or the other. This was one reason for the pre-reform corporate tax rate of 35%—it was comparable to the top individual marginal tax rate, which is paid by most successful noncorporate businesses.<sup>33</sup>

By lowering the corporate tax rate to 21%, however, the 2017 tax reform opened up a

significant wedge between these organizational forms. In order to address this potential problem, the tax reform added a new tax break for “pass through” organizational forms such as partnerships, sole proprietorships, and S-corporations: such organizations get a 20% deduction for their nonwage income. In this way, the gap between organizational forms is reduced—albeit at an enormous revenue cost (\$415 billion over a decade).

But (you guessed it) this change introduced a whole set of new distortions into the system. This is because the line between wage and nonwage income for self-employed individuals is very vague. As a result, by offering this large deduction for nonwage income, but not wage income, the tax reform created a new wedge. As described in [Marr et al. \(2018\)](#), “A group of 13 leading tax experts have highlighted potential tactics of ‘cracking’ and ‘packing’—that is, splitting apart different aspects of a business, or combining different businesses together, in ways that maximize the new tax break. For example, a group of doctors could form a REIT [an investment vehicle for real estate] and purchase their medical practice’s building. The REIT would “charge” the medical practice “rent” to use the building, and the rental income that the doctors essentially paid themselves would become eligible for the pass-through deduction (REIT income is eligible for the deduction). Moreover, the highly paid doctors would have an incentive for their REIT to overcharge the medical practice for rent, effectively shifting income from a form that isn’t eligible for the deduction (their medical practice income) to one that is eligible (their REIT income).”

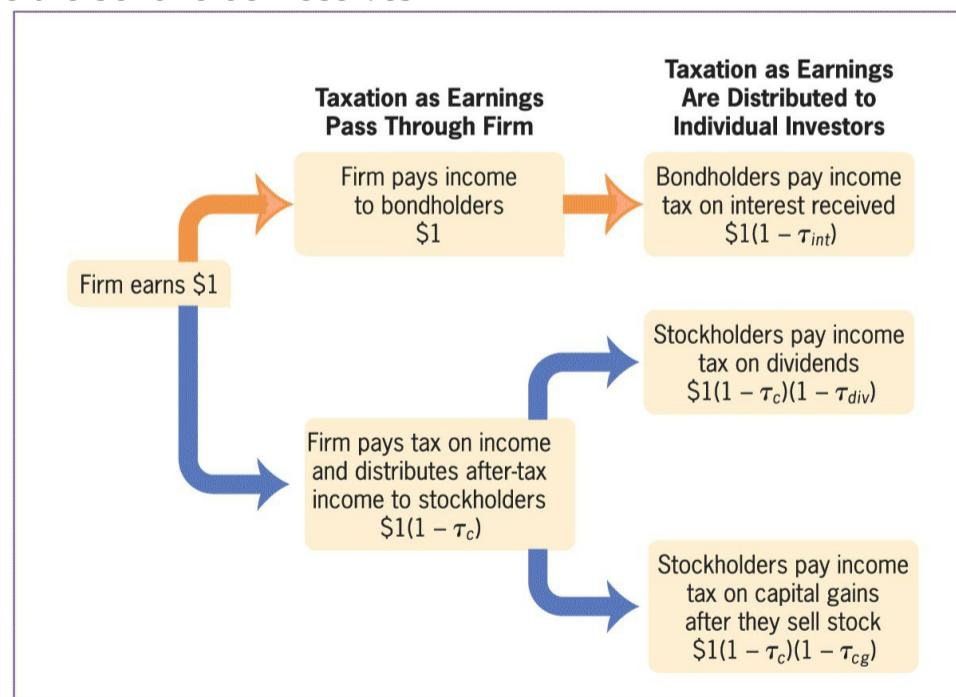
The problem of chasing tax wedges becomes apparent here. In order to compete internationally, the United States lowers its corporate tax rate. Then, in order to ensure equality among business forms within the United States, the United States lowers the tax rate on noncorporate businesses. In a broad sense, the reform has reset a system with lower rates and equality across nations and corporate forms. But in practice the reform introduced a new set of tax distortions—while lowering corporate tax revenues to a new low. Whether this on net results in improved economic performance in the United States remains to be seen. ■

## 24.6 The Consequences of the Corporate Tax for Financing

The corporate tax has efficiency implications beyond the decisions of firms on how much to invest. Another potentially important decision that may be influenced by corporate taxation is how to *finance* that investment. As noted previously, firms have three primary choices for financing investment: they can use retained earnings, they can increase their debt by borrowing, or they can issue equity (ownership shares). Moreover, if a firm chooses the equity route, it has two choices on how to return earnings to investors: it can issue dividends, or it can reinvest the funds and try to increase the value of the stock, leading to capital gains. For now, let's leave aside the less interesting case of financing investment through retained earnings and focus on the impact of taxes on financing investment from new capital.

### The Impact of Taxes on Financing

Suppose that a firm needs \$10 for an investment that will yield \$1 in corporate income each year. The firm wants to finance this investment through debt or equity, and in either case return that \$1 to the investor. [Figure 24-5](#) illustrates the impact of taxes on the firm's decision about how to finance that investment (once again ignoring the option, for now, of financing from retained earnings). At the first node, the firm decides to either take on debt or issue equity to finance the \$10 investment. If the firm finances with debt (the top branch), it will pay the \$1 in interest to bondholders. In this case, the firm will pay no taxes on the \$1 in corporate income because interest payments are deductible from firm income for the corporate tax: the \$1 in corporate income is offset by \$1 in interest payments when computing taxes. The bondholder who has loaned money to the firm therefore receives the full \$1 but then has to pay personal taxes on that \$1 at the personal income tax rate on interest,  $\tau_{int}$ , so the bondholder receives  $\$1 \times (1 - \tau_{int})$ .



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 24-5

**The Firm's Financing Decision** • When the firm wants to finance investment, it can do so either by issuing equity (stocks) or taking on debt (issuing bonds). If the firm takes on debt, then when it earns \$1, it pays that \$1 to bondholders, but it also subtracts the dollar from its taxable income, so that bondholders get the full \$1, on which they pay interest taxes. If the firm issues equity, then when it earns \$1, it pays that \$1 to equity holders in the form of either dividends or capital gains. In either case, the firm has to pay corporate taxes on the dollar, and individuals then pay either dividend or capital gains taxes when they receive the dollar.

Alternatively, the firm can issue equity to finance the investment. In this case, when the firm earns the \$1 from the investment, it will not have the interest payment to provide an offsetting deduction for corporate taxation, so it will have to pay corporate taxes on the \$1.

Thus, only  $\$1 \times (1 - \tau_c)$ , where  $\tau_c$  is the corporate tax rate, will get passed to shareholders.

If the firm uses equity finance, it has an additional decision: How should it get the money to the shareholders? With debt, there is no choice—the dollar is simply paid as interest. With equity, the firm has the choice of paying a dividend or retaining the earnings and reinvesting them. If it pays the dollar out as a dividend, then the stockholder has to pay dividend taxes on the dollar. Thus, the stockholder ultimately receives  $\$1 \times (1 - \tau_c) \times (1 - \tau_{div})$ , where  $\tau_{div}$  is the personal tax rate on dividend income. This feature is often referred to as the *double taxation of dividends*, with dividends taxed by both the corporate and personal tax systems.

If, instead, the firm reinvests the \$1, the stockholder will possibly reap a capital gain when she sells the stock share. Let's assume that each \$1 of reinvestment increases the stock price by \$1. In this case, the stockholder receives  $\$1 \times (1 - \tau_c) \times (1 - \tau_{cg})$ , where  $\tau_{cg}$  is the *effective* capital gains tax rate. The effective capital gains tax rate is lower than the statutory capital gains tax rate for most investors due to the host of benefits to capital gains that we discussed in [Chapter 23](#), including taxation upon realization rather than accrual and step-up of basis at death. The effective capital gains tax rate has also traditionally been far below the dividend tax rate. As of 2004, the statutory rates on capital gains and dividends are equal, at 15%, but the effective capital gains tax rate remains below the dividend tax rate.

As should be clear from [Figure 24-5](#), the corporate tax structure can play a critical role in a firm's decisions on how to finance its investments. Financing through debt saves corporate taxation of earnings but does not allow individuals to take advantage of low capital gains tax rates. Financing by equity, and paying dividends, seems the least tax-efficient route of all. This figure therefore raises two questions about corporate financing.

## Why Not All Debt?

A company has two means of financing an investment. If it adds debt, the interest it pays to finance its investment is exempt from corporate taxation. If it adds equity, it pays the corporate tax. So why don't companies simply finance all their investment with debt and thereby avoid corporate taxation?

There are a number of specific answers provided to this question, but they all come down to the key distinction between debt and equity: debt requires fixed payments but equity does not. A firm can choose whether to pay dividends on equity, but it can't choose whether to make its interest payments: it must make them. If the firm doesn't make its interest payments, it defaults on its debts and can be forced into *bankruptcy*. In bankruptcy, all individuals who have invested in a firm can make claims on its remaining assets. Bondholders are the primary claimants; they are first in line to claim whatever assets may remain. Equity holders, in contrast, are only entitled to the resources left over after the bondholders have received their claims.

Imagine that you could choose the grading scheme for this course, and you had two

choices. Under one choice, you do a problem set each week, and if you ever fail one problem set, you fail the course. Under another choice, you do a problem set each week, and it is the average grade across all of your problem sets that determines your final grade. Most of us would choose the latter grading scheme because of its greater flexibility.

Likewise, the extra flexibility of equity can raise its value enough to offset its tax disadvantage. Equity finance can provide a “buffer zone” against the risk of bankruptcy; with equity, if times are bad the firm can simply not pay a dividend rather than being forced into bankruptcy. Managers in particular, who often care more about reducing the day-to-day risk of losing their job than about maximizing the return to the distant owners of a company, might prefer equity to debt.

This preference for equity, despite its tax disadvantages, is strengthened by a particular kind of agency problem within the firm: the conflict of interest between debt holders and equity holders. Debt holders are parties who get a fixed return (interest payment) regardless of how well the firm does, as long as the firm doesn’t go bankrupt. Equity holders, in contrast, receive a return that is tied to firm performance: the share of earnings that is reinvested in the company grows in value as the company grows in value. In [Figure 24-5](#), we assumed that each dollar reinvested in the firm yielded only a dollar in value. In reality, each dollar of investment earns an uncertain amount. Equity holders suffer when a corporate investment does poorly but benefit when it does well.

For equity holders, however, there is a lower limit to how badly they can lose when the company does poorly: all they can lose is their initial investment if the firm goes bankrupt. On the other hand, there is no upper limit to how well they can do when the company does well. Thus, when equity holders own only a small share of a company, they will want to take excessive risks because they get a higher return but bear relatively little risk; since they own a small part of the company, they don’t have that much money to lose. The possibility of excessive risk taking is a problem because equity holders make the decisions about whom to hire and, potentially, which projects to choose.

Consider a firm that currently has equity of \$1 million and debt of \$5 million, as shown in the top panel of [Table 24-1](#), for a total firm value of \$6 million. The firm’s interest payment on the debt each period is \$500,000. The firm currently has earnings of \$600,000 per year, so that each year, it can pay the interest it owes its debt holders and pay the remaining \$100,000 of earnings as a dividend to its equity holders.

**TABLE 24-1 The Debt Versus Equity Conflict**

	Share of Financing	Possible Gain from Investment	Possible Loss from Investment	Expected Return from Investment	Should the Firm Take the Risk?
Equity holders	\$1 million	\$3 million	\$2 million	\$0.5 million	Yes
Debt holders	\$5 million	0	\$10 million	-\$5 million	No
Equity holders	\$5 million	\$3 million	\$10 million	-\$3.5 million	No
Debt holders	\$1 million	0	\$2 million	-\$1 million	No

In the top panel, equity holders control only \$1 million of the firm’s finances, and debt holders control \$5 million. The investment under consideration has, from the equity holders’ perspective, a potential gain of \$3 million and a potential loss of only \$2 million, so that the expected return is positive, and the investment will be made. However, this is a mistake from the debt holders’ perspective because they have no gain and an expected \$5 million loss. When equity holders control \$5 million of the firm’s assets, as in the bottom panel, the equity holders will not want to undertake the risky investment.

Suppose that, in addition to this steady flow of earnings, the firm is offered a project that has a 50% chance of yielding \$3 million and a 50% chance of losing \$6 million. If the investment fails, the firm would go bankrupt because it would have to sell its \$6 million in assets (\$5 million of debt and \$1 million of equity) to pay the \$6 million debt from losing. From an overall firm perspective, this is not a good risk to take. The *expected return* on this investment, the odds of winning times the value if the firm wins, plus the odds of losing times the value if the firm loses, is  **$(0.5 \times \$3 \text{ million}) + (0.5 \times -\$6 \text{ million}) = -\$1.5 \text{ million}$** , so the firm is better off not taking the investment because it loses money on average.

Now think about the project from the equity holders' perspective. If this investment hits, they get the entire \$3 million because they gain all the benefits from better firm performance. If the investment misses, and the firm goes bankrupt, they lose the \$1 million they have invested, plus their dividend payment of \$100,000 for each period in the future. At an interest rate of 10%, the present discounted value of this stream of dividend payments is \$1 million, so equity holders lose a total of \$2 million if the firm goes bankrupt.<sup>34</sup> From the equity holders' perspective, there is a 50% chance they will lose \$2 million and a 50% chance they will gain \$3 million, for an expected value to the equity holders of  **$\$500,000 ([0.5 \times -\$2 \text{ million}] + [0.5 \times \$3 \text{ million}] = \$500,000)$** . So they will vote to take on this project.

What about the debt holders? They get nothing if this gamble hits because the firm already earns enough to pay back its interest payments. But if the gamble misses and the firm goes bankrupt, they not only lose their \$500,000 per year in interest payments, but also their initial \$5 million investment. So from their perspective, this is a gamble with a 50% chance of winning zero (if it hits, they still just get their \$500,000 interest payment) and a 50% chance of losing \$5 million in assets and \$5 million PDV of future interest payments. For bondholders, the expected value of this investment is **-\$5 million**.

In this case, there is a clear conflict of interest between equity holders and debt holders. The equity holders, who own the company and have control over the decision makers if not the decisions, would support taking on this project, while the debt holders would not. This is a problem because the equity share is so small. If the equity share were \$5 million and the debt share were \$1 million, equity holders wouldn't support this project. This is illustrated in the bottom panel of [Table 24-1](#) (assuming that the firm now pays \$500,000 in dividends to equity holders and \$100,000 in interest payments to bondholders). In this situation, the equity holders don't want to risk the new investment because they have too much to lose: the expected return on the investment for them is now **-\$3.5 million**. As before, the debt holders also don't want to make this risky investment because their expected value remains negative. In this case, the interests of the debt and equity holders are now aligned (they both lose money), and the project is not undertaken.

The key insight here is that *as the fraction of firm financing that is debt rises, the potential for this conflict of interest grows*. This potential grows because as the debt share rises, the debt holders bear a larger and larger share of projects that go bankrupt, while equity holders have a smaller and smaller risk from taking a gamble.

Now, imagine you work for a bank that is looking to lend its money to a small firm. Would you prefer to lend to a firm with 50% equity and 50% debt or one with 10% equity and 90% debt? By the logic of the example we've just explored, you would prefer to lend to the firm

with 50% equity because more of the owners' capital is at risk, so they will make more sensible decisions. You worry that if you lend to the firm with only 10% equity, it will take crazy risks that have negative expected value for you as the debt holder.

As a result of this agency problem, banks (and other lenders) will charge *higher interest rates on loans to firms as their share of debt financing rises*. These higher interest rates offset the tax advantage of debt, so that firms now face a trade-off: more debt means more tax advantage but potentially higher financing costs because banks fear loans to debt-heavy firms.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

### *How Do Corporate Taxes Affect a Firm's Financial Structure?*

The preceding discussion suggests that the impact of corporate taxation on firm financial structure—and, in particular, the reliance on debt—is unclear. Of course, this question cannot be addressed by simply comparing whether firms facing higher corporate tax burdens have higher debt levels. Corporate taxes are themselves a function of a variety of firm decisions—including financial structure! A firm with more debt will have lower tax payments, so a regression of debt levels on corporate tax payments will yield a biased estimate.

[Heider and Ljungqvist \(2015\)](#) addressed this problem by using multiple changes in state corporate taxes in the United States. Over the 1990–2011 period, they found 38 instances of states changing their corporate tax rates. They compared the effect of these tax rate changes on firms in those states to the effect on other firms in the same industry in nearby states. In this way, they could use comparable firms to identify how tax changes affect firm financial structure.

It is possible, however, that these state corporate tax changes themselves are responding to the factors that determine firm leverage. For example, a negative economic shock in a state may lead firms to raise corporate tax rates to offset falling corporate profits; at the same time, in recessionary periods, firms may need to borrow more, raising their debt ratios. The authors presented a clever approach to address this concern: they examined firms that are right near the border of states that do and do not change taxes. Such firms face similar economic conditions, but the tax cuts only affect some of the firms and not others.

Using this empirical approach, the authors found that there is a very sizeable effect of state corporate tax rate changes on how firms are financed. Tax increases led to more use of debt: the average state corporate tax increase in their sample of 13% led to a 4.5% increase in debt as a share of firm financing. At the same time, they found that this effect was asymmetric: cuts in corporate taxation didn't lead to reductions in firm leverage. This surprising asymmetry suggests that more is at work than the simple firm optimization of financial structure with respect to taxation.

## The Dividend Paradox

The second major mystery of corporation finance is why firms pay dividends. Having chosen the equity route for financing, if a firm earns \$1, it can pay the dollar out as a dividend, triggering dividend income taxes, or it can reinvest the dollar, raising the value of the stock and allowing the recipient to take advantage of preferential capital gains tax rates when she sells her shares. The fact that effective capital gains tax rates are traditionally so much lower than dividend tax rates suggests that firms should reinvest rather than pay dividends, as long as they can find productive reinvestments for the firm. Yet about one-fifth of publicly traded firms pay dividends, though the number has been declining in the past couple of decades. Thus, we have another puzzle—why do firms pay dividends when capital gains are taxed so much less?

Empirical evidence supports two different views about why firms pay dividends, as reviewed by [Gordon and Dietz \(2008\)](#). The first is an agency theory: investors are willing to live with the tax inefficiency of dividends to get the money out of the hands of managers who suffer from the agency problem. A study found that if 25 of the largest, long-standing dividend payers in 2002 had never paid those dividends, their cash holdings, currently \$160 billion, would be \$1.8 trillion! The authors suggest that such large cash stockpiles might be a recipe for disaster because of opportunistic managers, leading to inefficient investment or even outright corruption. Equity owners in that situation may therefore be willing to pay the price of dividend inefficiency to reduce the manager's control over firm assets.<sup>35</sup>

The second is a signaling theory: investors have imperfect information about how well a company is doing, so the managers of the firm pay dividends to signal to investors that the company is doing well. That is, the very fact that managers are willing to “burn money” by paying tax-inefficient dividends must prove that the company has cash to burn! By paying dividends, managers can prove to ill-informed investors that their investment is performing nicely.<sup>36</sup>

## How Should Dividends Be Taxed?

An important ongoing debate in tax policy concerns the appropriate tax treatment of dividend income. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the individual tax rate on dividends is typically higher than the effective tax rate on capital gains. According to the logic of [Figure 24-5](#), a high-dividend tax rate can have three effects on firm financing decisions. First, it can reduce the use of dividends to repay equity holders. As reviewed in the upcoming Application, there is clear evidence that the 2003 reduction in dividend taxation led to an increase in dividend payouts.

Second, high-dividend taxes could push firms to choose debt rather than equity financing. Existing evidence suggests that higher-dividend tax rates cause firms to rely more heavily on debt.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, higher-dividend taxes could reduce investment. For those investors who receive their return in the form of dividends, the effective tax rate on investment will rise as the tax rate on dividends rises. This increase will lead those investors to require a higher pre-tax rate of return on investments, shifting up the marginal cost curve in [Figures 24-2](#), [24-3](#), and [24-4](#), and lowering investment (because, with diminishing marginal product, firms must lower investment to get a higher actual rate of return on the next dollar of investment). This outcome has caused many to argue that the double taxation of dividends lowers the rate of corporate investment in the United States. Thus, reducing the dividend tax could, in principle, be a strong tool for increasing the nation’s level of corporate investment.

This prediction, however, is derived from a model that can’t predict why firms would pay dividends in the first place! In fact, both the agency and signaling models predict that higher tax rates on dividends will lead to *more* investment, not less. This is because in both models, dividends are wasteful, and taxing them more highly reduces their use; regardless of whether dividends solve agency problems or act as a signal, as their cost goes up (through higher taxation), they will be used less for that purpose. When firms pay fewer dividends, they have more retained earnings. Literature in corporate finance has suggested that the availability of retained earnings is an important, and perhaps the most important, determinant of investment financing.<sup>38</sup> Thus, taxing these inefficient dividend payouts will lead to more investment, not less. The best evidence to date, reviewed later, suggests that there is overall little impact of dividend taxes on investment.



### APPLICATION

#### The 2003 Dividend Tax Cut

One of the measures President Bush signed into law on May 28, 2003, under the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act, was a reduction in the rate at which dividends are taxed. Previously, dividends were taxed at 38.6%, well above the 20% capital gains rate. The 2003 law, however, reduced both the dividend and capital gains rates to 15%, making

dividends significantly more attractive for investors.

Proponents of the dividend tax cut believed it would both stimulate the economy and end what they perceived as the unfair practice of taxing corporate income and then taxing it again when that income was paid out in the form of dividends. Bush himself wanted the complete elimination of dividend taxes, arguing that, “ending the double taxation of dividends [along with his other proposed tax cuts] . . . is the best way to make sure this economy grows.”<sup>39</sup> In this view, the tax cut would spur companies to offer more dividends and make investing more attractive to investors by placing more money directly in their hands.

Opponents of the dividend tax cut argued, however, that dividends are primarily received by higher income households and that such a tax cut would both worsen the country’s fiscal balance and make the tax burden less progressive. Billionaire Warren Buffett noted that under one Senate proposal to eliminate dividend taxes entirely, he could have used his shares of the company Berkshire Hathaway to “receive \$310 million in additional income, owe not another dime in federal tax, and see my tax rate plunge to 3%.”<sup>40</sup> Although the elimination of dividend taxes did not ultimately pass, the rate reduction did, and it was predicted that this reduction would cost the government roughly \$80 billion over the next decade.

Several papers have studied the effects of the 2003 tax reduction. There has been a clear rise in dividend payouts, as would be predicted by both the standard model and the two alternative explanations discussed earlier. [Chetty and Saez \(2006\)](#) found that dividend payouts, which had been flat for four years before the policy change, rose by about one-quarter in the wake of this policy change. Moreover, they found that this increase was concentrated in firms whose stockholders benefited most from the lower dividend taxes, as opposed to firms whose primary shareholders are nontaxable institutions (such as pension funds).

[Yagan \(2015\)](#) presented some new evidence on the effects of the 2003 cuts on investment. He noted that the dividend tax cut applied only to one type of firm, the C-corporation that has been the focus of the discussion thus far, and not to another type, the S-corporation, which is smaller but actually more numerous in the United States. Therefore, if the dividend tax cut increased investment, the period after 2003 should have been marked with a rise in investment in C-corporations relative to S-corporations. In fact, the patterns of investment in these two types of firms were identical, which suggests that lowering dividend taxes does not appreciably raise investment. ■

## Corporate Tax Integration

While legislation has reduced the tax rate on dividends, a larger question remains: Why should the tax system treat corporate income differently depending on how it is returned to shareholders? An alternative approach to corporate tax policy would be [corporate tax integration](#), removing the corporate tax and taxing corporate income at the individual level. A typical approach to corporate integration would be to attribute the earnings of the corporation each year to its shareholders, regardless of whether those earnings are paid out as dividends. An individual who owned 5% of a company would be assigned income equal to 5% of the company’s earnings at tax time, and the company itself would owe no taxes.

### **corporate tax integration**

The removal of the corporate tax to tax corporate income at the individual (shareholder) level.

Such an approach would remove any tax favoritism in paying out corporate earnings to shareholders in one manner versus another because earnings would be taxed at the

shareholder level, regardless of how those funds were returned to shareholders. Moreover, this approach would tax corporations just like noncorporate entities, such as partnerships, are taxed. It would remove any bias that the corporate tax may cause in the decision to move between corporate and noncorporate status. Some research suggests that firms choose to move out of the corporate sector as the tax burden on corporations (relative to noncorporate entities) rises.<sup>41</sup> This high elasticity suggests that there may be substantial deadweight loss from firms being in the wrong state of incorporation solely due to tax incentives. Corporate integration would, therefore, further lower the deadweight loss from corporate taxation.

Such a reform, however, would reduce federal government revenues because all corporate income would be taxed once, not twice, as occurs for equity investment. The tax savings from integration would accrue primarily to the high-income investors who hold the most shares in corporations. Thus, as with many reforms to the corporate income tax, the efficiency gains of integration must be offset against the reductions in the vertical equity of the tax system.

## 24.7 Conclusion

Despite the declining importance of the corporate tax as a source of revenue in the United States, it remains an important determinant of the behavior of corporations in the United States. The complicated incentives and disincentives that the corporate tax creates for investment appear to be significant determinants of a firm's investment decisions. And both corporate and personal capital taxation substantially although not completely drive a firm's decisions about how to finance its investments.

The United States faces a difficult set of decisions about how to reform its corporate tax system. Despite repeated calls for ending "abusive corporate tax shelters," there has been little movement to end the types of corporate tax loopholes that cause such activity.<sup>42</sup> Given the political economy discussion of [Chapter 9](#), this lack of interest should not be surprising: corporate tax breaks have highly concentrated and powerful supporters, with only the diffuse taxpaying public to oppose them.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Corporations are entities that typically feature separation of ownership from control over daily operations.
- The existence of the corporate tax can be motivated either as a pure profits tax or as the only means of ensuring that corporate earnings do not escape taxation.
- The corporate tax is levied on the difference between earnings and expenses. Defining the depreciation expenses associated with investment is a particularly difficult issue.
- The incidence of the corporate tax is unclear, but recent evidence suggests that 35–50% falls on workers.
- The corporate tax system has complicated effects on investment incentives. The effective tax rate depends not only on the statutory corporate rate but also on the treatment of depreciation, the investment tax credit, and the nature of investment financing.
- Existing evidence suggests that corporate investment is fairly responsive to effective tax rates on investment earnings.
- The recent shift from a global to a territorial international tax system has enormous consequences for the treatment of multinationals, lowering the tax burden of international operations but reducing the incentive to hoard assets abroad.
- Despite a strong tax subsidy to debt, through the ability of firms to deduct interest payments from their corporate taxable income, firms are far from fully debt financed, perhaps due to agency problems. And, despite a strong tax disincentive for firms to pay dividends, they continue to pay them, perhaps as a means of removing money from opportunistic managers.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Gill Bates is the CEO of a large company. His compensation is based on current profitability. He's considering undertaking one of two investments available to the company: (a) one that yields profits of \$500 million in each of the next 5 years and none thereafter, and (b) one that yields annual profits of \$300 million over 20 years. He selects the first investment. How could this example illustrate the agency problem?
2. You are a manager of a company that just spent \$80,000 to purchase a piece of equipment that is expected to function for five years. If you can borrow money at 5%, what is the PDV of the depreciation allowance under the following circumstances?
  1. You can expense the investment.
  2. You depreciate using straight-line depreciation methods.
  3. You depreciate over four years using accelerated straight-line depreciation methods.
  4. You depreciate using an augmented accelerated method in which half of the asset value is depreciated immediately and the other half is straight-line depreciated over the remaining three years.
3. Suppose that new machines cost \$504, and the marginal benefit from new machines is  **$MB = 246 - 6K$** , where  $K$  is the number of machines purchased. The depreciation rate is 15%, and the dividend yield is 10%.
  1. What amount of capital will you purchase? Why?
  2. What amount of capital would you purchase if there were a 25% tax rate on cash earnings minus labor costs?
4. Suppose that dividend yield is 6%, depreciation is 12%, and the corporate tax rate is 35%. What would be the marginal cost of each dollar of machinery investment in the following situations?
  1. Firms are allowed to expense the machine.
  2. There is an investment tax credit of 8%.
5. Why has the effective capital gains tax rate tended to be substantially lower than the dividend tax rate in the United States? Given that this disparity exists, why do so many firms pay dividends?
6. Why are equity holders more likely than debt holders to want firms to engage in risky investments?
7.  You conducted a research study and found that corporations that finance their investments with a larger ratio of debt to equity tend to pay higher rates of interest to lenders. Why do you think this practice occurs?
8. The government of Kapitalia changes its tax code to allow for more accelerated depreciation of assets. Would you expect firms to substitute production methods away from capital and toward labor, away from labor and toward capital, or neither? Explain.
9. Consider the psychological effects of dividend signaling. Which would seem a stronger signal of corporate health (or its lack): when a long-standing dividend payer stops paying dividends or when a firm that had not previously paid them begins to do so? Explain.
10. Suppose that all industrialized countries agree to a compact specifying that the corporate income of multinational firms must be paid to the country where the parent firm is incorporated. What do you expect would happen to the number of multinational firms? Explain your reasoning.
11. Suppose that the corporate income tax rate is 30%, the personal income tax rate on dividend income and the interest tax rate are both 35%, and the capital gains tax rate is 20%. Compare the after-tax returns on each dollar of corporate earnings under three investment financing strategies: (a) the corporation finances by using debt; (b) the corporation

finances by issuing equity but does not pay dividends; and (c) the corporation finances by equity and pays all of its income in dividends.

12.  Different states have different corporate tax rates. How could you use this to study the elasticity of corporate investment with respect to corporate tax rates? What would be the problems with this approach?
13. Suppose MedPraxCo Pharmaceutical, a large U.S.-based pharmaceutical company, merged in 2015 with Covlinco, a small medical device company, which is headquartered in Ireland. In 2019, the resulting Ireland-based conglomerate, CovPrax, purchased a small U.S.-based biotech company called Medico, and relocated CovPrax headquarters to South Dakota, where Medico is based. Throughout this 2015–2019 period, 98% of the conglomerate's workforce has remained based in Wyoming. Explain the logic for this series of mergers and acquisitions by MedPraxCo.

## ADVANCED PROBLEMS

14. Megacola faces demand of  $Q = 2,200 - 20P$ . Its costs are constant at \$5 per unit.
1. Show that Megacola will not change its behavior if the government introduces a 20% tax on its profits.
  2. Does the existence of firms such as Megacola strengthen or weaken the case for a corporate income tax? Explain.
15. Suppose that the corporate tax rate is 25%, there is an investment tax credit of 10%, the depreciation rate is 5%, and dividend yield is 10%. The official depreciation schedule is such that the PDV of depreciation allowances is 40% of the purchase price of a machine.
1. Calculate the per-period marginal cost of each dollar that the firm spends on the machine.
  2. If the marginal benefit per period is  $MB = 40 - 0.6K$ , where  $K$  is the number of dollars spent on the machine, what is the optimal amount of machinery purchased?
  3. How would your answer change if the ITC increased to 20%?
16. The legislature in Tuneria has just passed a new law that will provide a large investment tax credit next year. What pattern of investment would you expect to see over the next two years? What implications would this have for estimates of the elasticity of investment with respect to investment tax credits?
17. Reducing corporate tax rates is often considered as a policy tool to enhance investment. How could the presence of tax loopholes diminish the relationship between corporate tax rates and corporate investment?
18. Facing a shortfall in funding for Social Security and Medicare, Senator Sands argues that the United States should raise the top marginal corporate tax rate back to 35%. Senator Mehta argues that it would be better to raise the revenue by increasing the tax rate on the top individual tax bracket. Which proposal do you think will increase the overall progressivity of the tax system?



The icon indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# Chapter 25 Fundamental Tax Reform and Consumption Taxation



NIGEL ATHERTON/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

- [25.1 Why Fundamental Tax Reform?](#)
- [25.2 The Politics and Economics of Tax Reform](#)
- [25.3 Consumption Taxation](#)
- [25.4 The Flat Tax](#)
- [25.5 Conclusion](#)

## Questions to keep in mind

- Why is fundamental tax reform desirable?
- What are the economic and political difficulties with fundamental tax reform?
- What are the pros and cons of moving to a consumption tax base?

Vying to become the Republican candidate for president in 2012, Herman Cain, the former CEO of Godfather's Pizza, brought federal tax reform to the forefront of political discourse by proposing what he coined the "9-9-9 Plan." The plan would eliminate payroll, estate, and all other federal taxes and replace them with a 9% corporate tax, a 9% personal income tax, and a new 9% national sales tax. Cain's plan would also eliminate all current tax deductions, including that for mortgage interest, and permit only "charitable" tax deductions. Cain's senior economic advisor, Rich Lowrie, said, "This is an attempt to shift the tax burden away from production and toward consumption, to balance the load," and that this proposal "taxes everything once but nothing twice." In September 2011, this plan catapulted Cain to the top of the GOP straw poll in Florida, with thousands of Republican constituents supporting the 9-9-9 slogan. Support for the plan was grounded in Mr. Lowrie's claims that removing the tax burdens on production would make American products more competitive in the global market, thus increasing exports and creating 6 million new American jobs. "We will be exporting goods without the taxes built into them and hitting imports with the sales tax. It will level the playing field."

While popular with the public, Cain's plan was met with opposition on both the right and left of the political spectrum. Conservatives worried that granting the federal government the right to levy a broad sales tax, which currently is only found at state and local levels, would enable future presidential administrations to enact crippling tax policy. Liberals objected to the inequitable redistribution of the tax burden that would result from this proposal. Lower-income individuals consume a much higher share of their income than do richer individuals, and the current progressive tax structure would be replaced with flat tax rates on all. As a result, effective tax rates would rise from 12.8 to 17% for those making \$20,000 per year, while they would fall from 28 to 16.3% for those making \$300,000 per year. Michael Graetz of Columbia University commented, "It's a huge tax reduction on the very top and a huge tax increase for moderate and low income people."<sup>1</sup>

Although Herman Cain suspended his campaign on December 3, 2011, the support for his tax policy illustrated the people's dissatisfaction with the fundamental structure of the U.S. income tax. There is no shortage of criticism of the existing income tax: there are many claims that the tax system is unfair to the poor, or to the rich; that it is unfair to single people, or to married couples; that it is too easy to evade, or that the government spends too much time harassing honest taxpayers; that it doesn't do enough to promote savings, or provides too many loopholes for savings; and so on. As a result, fundamental reform of the income tax has become a centerpiece of public debate in recent decades.

In some cases, this debate has led to action. The most notable case was the Tax Reform Act of 1986 (TRA 86). In 1986, the U.S. individual tax code featured 15 tax brackets, ranging from rates of 11 to 50%. In addition, as noted in earlier chapters, there was accelerated depreciation, an investment tax credit, special tax treatment of capital gains, deductions for contributions to IRAs, and a variety of other avenues for avoiding taxes through *tax shelters*,

which are activities with no economic value other than as a means for reducing tax payments. TRA 86 radically modified this system. The number of tax brackets was reduced to three, with rates of 15, 28, and 33%.<sup>2</sup> Realized capital gains were treated as regular income, IRA deductions were limited (as described in [Chapter 22](#)), and tax shelter opportunities were greatly reduced. In short, the tax system was reformed in the direction long advocated by tax analysts: lower rates on a broader base of income.

Many of the features of this reform, however, have been reversed in the subsequent two decades. Sizeable changes to the tax code in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2012, and 2017, as well as other minor changes along the way, have reintroduced both more brackets (we now have seven tax brackets) and greater opportunity for tax avoidance and evasion. Thus, the time is ripe for once again rethinking the fundamental structure of the individual income tax and, in particular, considering a move back to a low-rate, broad-based tax system.

In this chapter, we discuss fundamental tax reform in four steps. First, we discuss the three major arguments for moving to a low-rate, broad-based tax system: tax compliance, tax simplicity, and tax efficiency. Second, we discuss the difficult political and economic barriers to fundamental reform of the tax system. Third, we turn to a specific fundamental reform of the tax system that has long been of interest to public finance economists: moving from an income base to a consumption base for taxation. We discuss the pros and cons of such a switch and look at different alternatives for implementing consumption taxes in practice. Finally, we return to the example that motivated this introduction—the flat tax—and discuss its promises and pitfalls.<sup>3</sup>

## 25.1 Why Fundamental Tax Reform?

There are three major arguments for fundamental tax reform: to increase tax compliance, to make the tax code simpler, and to improve tax efficiency. In this section, we review each of these goals.

### Improving Tax Compliance

**Tax compliance** is the willingness of individuals or corporations to obey the tax laws. To improve tax compliance, the government must reduce the amount of **tax evasion**, which is illegal nonpayment of taxation that takes place under a tax system. It is important to distinguish tax *evasion* from tax *avoidance*, which is a legal activity undertaken by individuals to shift income from taxable to nontaxable forms. When you buy more health insurance instead of earning wages, or spend your money on a business lunch rather than on a family lunch, you may be engaging in tax *avoidance*, taking action to reduce your tax burden, but fully within the limits of the law. If you simply do not pay the taxes you owe or fail to report income or claim a tax deduction that is not within the limits of the law, then you are *evading taxes*.

**tax compliance**

Efforts to reduce the evasion of taxes.

**tax evasion**

Illegal nonpayment of taxation.



#### APPLICATION

### Tax Evasion

The distinction between tax *avoidance* and tax *evasion* is a fine one, and there is a large community of tax lawyers and judges who struggle daily with this distinction. Nevertheless, clear instances of outright tax evasion do exist. For example:

1. In November 2008, Manhattan financier Stanley S. Tollman pleaded guilty to one count of tax evasion via video conference between London and a Manhattan federal courtroom. Tollman, who once controlled the Days Inn hotel chain and a number of luxury hotels across the world, was indicted in April 2002 for hiding \$100 million in profits from the sale of the Days Inn company. After years as a fugitive in England, Tollman agreed to pay back more than \$60 million in interest, fraud penalties, and back taxes, along with \$44.7 million to settle a civil forfeiture suit.<sup>4</sup>
2. The rich are not the only ones who evade taxes. For years, taxpayers wanting to claim tax exemptions for dependents were required only to fill in the names of their dependents on tax forms, leading to concern that some were making up names and claiming exemptions for dependents who did not exist. Indeed, when the 1986 Tax Reform Act required filers to list as well the Social Security numbers of dependents over the age of five, 6 million dependents suddenly disappeared from the tax rolls! More than 11,000 families lost seven or more dependents between 1986 and 1987. Two years later, when the tax law required that the Social Security numbers of child care providers be listed for workers to claim their child care tax credits, 2.6 million child care providers disappeared!<sup>5</sup>
3. Sometimes individuals have help in evading taxes. In 2015, a Texas couple, owners of a

tax preparation business, were sentenced to over 15 years in prison for fraudulent filing of their clients' tax refunds. By reporting fake business losses, the couple was able to increase their clients' tax refunds and charge high fees for their services. Their strategy amassed them a large clientele and earnings of over \$2 million, though they were later ordered to pay \$18 million in restitution once an IRS investigation discovered their scheme.<sup>6</sup>

4. Greek property taxes are based on self-reported house values, and this leads to widespread underreporting of home values. A typical indicator of home value in Greece is a private pool, but in a recent year in the wealthy suburb of Kifissia, only 324 residents reported having a pool—while the true figure is believed to be 16,974. Former Greek president George Papandreu used extreme means, such as helicopter surveillance and scrutiny of Google Earth pictures, to show who had a swimming pool in the suburbs.<sup>7</sup> But homeowners are working to evade these measures. After these policies were announced, there was a boom in the sales of tarpaulins to cover pools and make them invisible to aerial tax inspectors. ■



*"It's funny how two intelligent people can have such opposite interpretations of the tax code!"*

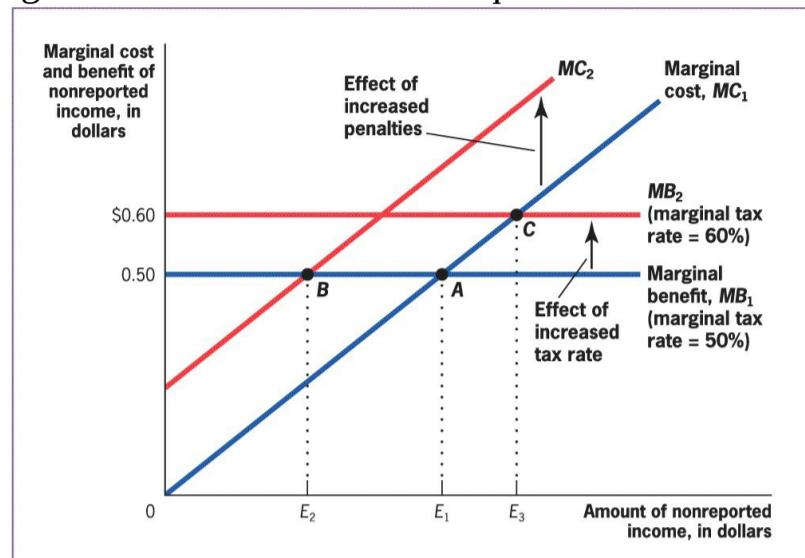
Mike Twohy/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

## Theory of Tax Evasion

Economists assume that individuals make their decisions to evade taxes in the same rational way that they make other decisions: by trading off the costs and benefits. The benefits of evading taxes are the avoided tax payments. The costs are the risk of getting caught and the penalty to be paid if caught.

This trade-off is illustrated in [Figure 25-1](#), which graphs the marginal benefit and marginal cost per dollar of nonreported income on the vertical axis and the amount of nonreported income (evasion) on the horizontal axis. The marginal benefit per dollar of evasion is the marginal tax rate faced by the evader because underreporting by \$1 saves tax payments of  $\hat{\tau} \Delta$ . The marginal benefit curve is, therefore, a horizontal line at  $\hat{\tau}$ . In [Figure 25-1](#), the marginal tax rate is 50%, so the marginal benefit per dollar of evasion,  $\hat{\tau} \Delta$ , is a flat curve,  $MB_1$ , at \$0.50. The marginal cost of evasion is the marginal penalty paid per dollar of evasion times the probability of getting caught. Both the penalty and the probability of getting

caught are likely to rise with the amount of evasion so that the marginal cost of evasion rises with the amount of evasion. The optimal amount of evasion,  $E_1$ , is found at point A, the point at which the marginal benefits and costs are equal.



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■ FIGURE 25-1

**Optimal Tax Evasion** • The marginal benefit of evading taxes is the tax payment saved per dollar of evasion, which is the marginal tax rate (initially 50% in this example). The marginal cost of evading is the rising odds of being caught and the larger penalties associated with higher levels of evasion. Optimal evasion occurs when these costs and benefits are equal at  $E_1$ . If penalties or odds of getting caught rise, the marginal cost curve shifts in from  $MC_1$  to  $MC_2$ , and evasion falls to  $E_2$ . If the tax rate goes up, the marginal benefit curve shifts up from  $MB_1$  to  $MB_2$ , and evasion rises to  $E_3$ .

This is an oversimplified model of cheating; some individuals, for example, would never cheat on their taxes regardless of the incentives to do so. The predictions of such a model are nevertheless in accord with common sense. If the penalties for the next dollar of cheating or the probability of getting caught rise, the marginal cost curve shifts up from  $MC_1$  to  $MC_2$  and the optimal amount of evasion is identified by point B. Individuals cheat less, evading an amount  $E_2$ . Alternatively, if the marginal tax rate rises to 60% (holding penalties, and thus marginal cost, constant at  $MC_1$ ), the marginal benefit curve shifts up from  $MB_1$  to  $MB_2$ . The optimal amount of evasion at the new marginal tax rate (at point C) rises to  $E_3$  because individuals find it more worthwhile to cheat.<sup>8</sup>

### Evidence on Tax Evasion

Tax evasion is pervasive in the United States and around the world. In the United States, the most recent estimates placed the “tax gap” between taxes owed and taxes paid at \$450 billion, or 10.5% of tax revenue in 2014 (2.5% of GDP).<sup>9</sup> Other developed nations exhibit similar tax gaps; for example, in 2008, Sweden estimated its own gap at about 10% of tax revenue and 5% of GDP. Developing nations fare even worse. Pakistan has a tax gap of no less than 69%; in Moldova (formerly part of the Soviet Union), the evasion rate jumped from 5% of revenues in 1994 to 35% in 1998 as Moldova began the transition to a free-market economy; and a recent study in Afghanistan found that it is losing about 60% of its tax revenue.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps most striking is the case of Greece, as reviewed by [Karnitschnig and Stamouli \(2015\)](#). As they wrote, “During the country’s centuries long occupation by the Ottomans,

avoiding taxes was a sign of patriotism. Today, that distrust is focused on the government, which many Greeks see as corrupt, inefficient and unreliable. ‘Greeks consider taxes as theft,’ said Aristides Hatzis, an associate professor of law and economics at the University of Athens.” As the earlier swimming pool example illustrated, Greeks go to great lengths to avoid taxation, such as the saleswoman who pays her employees in coupons they can cash in supermarkets, rather than wages, so that their income isn’t taxed. As a result of these types of efforts, Greece has perhaps the largest tax gap in the developed world, with only about 10% of taxes owed being collected by the government.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

#### *What Determines Tax Compliance?*

The theoretical model suggests a number of factors that might be correlated with tax compliance. A series of empirical studies have explored the relevance of this model and other models for tax compliance. These studies confront the fundamental empirical problem that those who cheat on taxes may be different in other ways. For example, do higher tax rates cause individuals to cheat more—or are the higher income individuals facing those rates just more likely to cheat? And how can one assess the effect of punishment on tax evasion when it is the evaders who get punished?

[Kleven et al. \(2011\)](#) is a particularly comprehensive paper in this area. These authors ran a massive experiment using 40,000 taxpayers in Denmark, half of whom were randomly selected to be audited while the remainder were not. The next year, a new randomization was done among the entire group of 40,000 taxpayers, this time randomizing receipt of a letter threatening an audit. Their study is powerful because they partnered with tax authorities to send out the letters and to gather the data to study how tax-filing behavior changed as a result of the interventions.

They have three main empirical findings. First, evasion of income reported by third party sources was quite low and not responsive to either tax rates or audits. On the other hand, there was substantial evasion of self-reported income—and this evasion responded strongly to being audited and to being threatened with an audit. Finally, kinks in the Danish tax schedule were used to show that higher tax rates led to more evasion—but that the effect was fairly modest compared to other effects such as legal tax avoidance.

In a related study, [Slemrod et al. \(2001\)](#) conducted an experiment in which they randomly sent letters to Minnesotans before tax returns were due, some of them threatening an audit (a thorough review of tax records to catch cheating) and others appealing to people’s consciences to be honest on their returns. The appeals to conscience had no effect, while the audit threats increased reported income for lower- and middle-class families. Interestingly, the audit threat served to *lower* reported income for upper-class families: the authors suggested that richer families may have seen the letter as the opening round in a negotiation, leading them to bid low (report low income) at first!

While this evidence is consistent with the simplified model just presented, other studies document additional factors that impact compliance. For example, [Boning et al. \(2018\)](#) studied the impact of randomized audits on firms. They found that auditing firms caused them to report more income, which is consistent with a higher perceived risk of punishment increasing reporting. But they also found an important spillover: other firms who were served by the same tax preparer *also* reported higher income. This suggests that there are “network” effects of government enforcement that can spread the impacts of enforcement more broadly.

[Cullen et al. \(2018\)](#) took a different empirical approach to looking at how attitudes toward government impacted tax compliance. They studied what happened to tax compliance in a county when the county’s population was no longer in alignment with the party of the president. They used the fact that counties move into and out of compliance based on a factor outside their control: the behavior of voters in swing-states that determines who wins the election. Doing so, they found that moving out of alignment with the current administration significantly reduced tax compliance. Their study provided clear evidence that a positive outlook on government lowers tax evasion. Governments appear to recognize this. Some even offer official certificates to acknowledge that taxes have been paid!



#### APPLICATION

#### **The 1997 IRS Hearings and Their Fallout for Tax Collection<sup>11</sup>**

In September 1997, the Senate Finance Committee held a week of hearings to investigate abuses of taxpayers by the Internal Revenue Service, which collects the nation’s taxes. Committee chairman William Roth expected to see “a picture of a troubled agency, one that is losing the confidence of the American people, and one that all too frequently acts as if it were above the law.” Indeed, over that week, the committee heard all sorts of damning

testimony. A New York priest spoke of being hounded by the IRS to pay taxes he didn't owe on a trust set up by his recently deceased mother to help the poor. Investigators found one case of a man who committed suicide after a protracted battle with IRS agents over back taxes. Agents were accused of choosing audit targets based on political or personal considerations.

As a result of these hearings, political pressure for IRS reform grew rapidly. A new IRS commissioner, Charles O. Rossotti, was appointed with the aim of making the agency more taxpayer friendly, and in 1998 President Clinton signed the Taxpayer Bill of Rights, which protected taxpayers and created a congressional watchdog agency, the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration, which would function as an independent overseer of the IRS.

Two facts have become clear in the years since the original hearings. First, the testimony that made the IRS seem abusive and out of control actually painted a skewed and perhaps deliberately dishonest picture of the agency's operations. The star witness of the hearings, who had detailed his humiliation at the hands of IRS agents, was most likely involved in serious tax-evasion schemes and ultimately paid \$23 million in back taxes. A 2000 General Accounting Office report on the alleged abuses found no corroborating evidence for *any* of the witnesses' testimony of systematic abuse. By that same year, the new watchdog agency set up in 1998 had investigated 830 complaints of harassment by IRS agents and had found many of them to be without merit or even bogus, intended by tax evaders to derail possible audits. Not one reached the legal standard of harassment.

Second, constrained by a lack of financial resources and new obligations under the Taxpayer Bill of Rights, the IRS's enforcement capacities have been severely impaired. From 1997 to 2000, the number of field examiners dropped by two-thirds, the number of collection cases closed fell by one-half, and the number of tax evasion cases pursued (other than for illegal activities such as drugs and terrorism) fell by two-thirds. Whereas, in 1977, 8% of corporations faced an annual audit, around 1% do now. Between 1995 and 2001, audit rates of self-employed individuals (a particularly noncompliant group) fell from 4 to 2%. Perhaps most frustrating is the IRS's identification of \$30 billion in underpayments, which it would cost only \$2 billion to collect if Congress would provide the funding (the IRS knows exactly who owes the money but can't afford to pursue them). In 2013, the IRS was forced to give up investigations on 40% of all delinquent taxpayers.<sup>12</sup>

Though the Senate hearings fueled popular resentment of the IRS and the subsequent moves to restrain its powers, the pendulum of public opinion may be swinging back in the opposite direction. Evidence of corporate tax evasion in particular has Americans calling once again for fairness in the tax system, rather than mere protection. In response, the IRS commissioner vowed to make enforcement a priority. Unfortunately, that view has not filtered to Congress, which continues to cut the IRS budget over time; the 3% cut in the IRS budget is estimated to cost six times as much in lost revenue from tax underpayment as it will gain in savings from a lower IRS budget.<sup>13</sup> ■

## Why Should We Care About Tax Evasion?

It is clear that individuals evade taxes, but why should we care? Why not just raise taxes enough to cover the evasion? In principle, the same amount of revenue could be collected in a system with evasion and high rates as in one with no evasion and lower rates.

There are three reasons we care about tax evasion and should want to reduce it. The first is *efficiency*. As we have highlighted repeatedly, efficiency is increased by broadening the tax

base and lowering the tax rate (unless there is some positive externality to the excluded activity). Tax evasion clearly has no positive externalities, so efficiency will fall if we have to raise the tax rate to cover revenue losses due to cheating. Moreover, because cheating rises as the tax rate rises, raising the tax rate to offset the revenue loss from cheating is partially self-defeating.

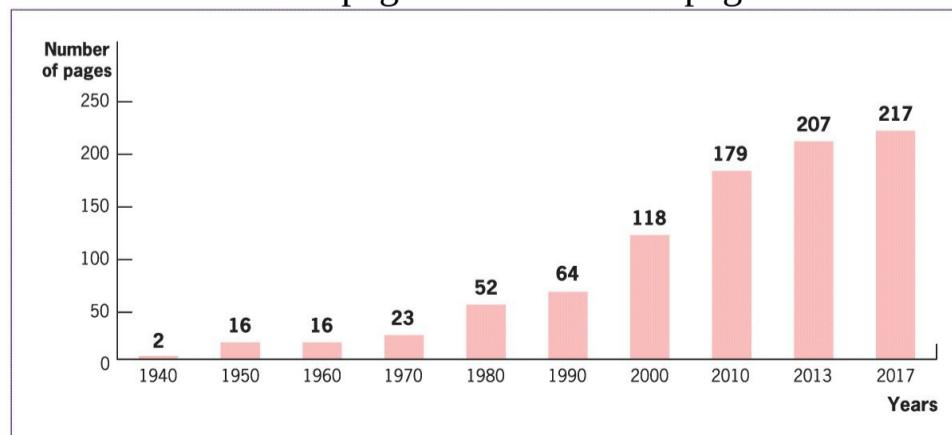
The second reason we care about tax evasion is *vertical equity*. The wealthy have a much greater scope for tax evasion than do lower-income groups because much of the income earned by the wealthy is in forms that are not directly reported to the IRS, while most income taxes owed by lower-income groups are directly withheld from their wages. Consequently, cheating as a share of income is likely to be higher among the wealthy, so that a system with cheating will be less vertically equitable than one without. It is difficult to offset this inequity with higher rates on the rich because this will just increase their cheating. Recent compelling evidence for this phenomenon was provided by the release of leaked data from offshore financial institutions used to shelter tax income, matched to tax returns for Norway by [Alstadsaeter et al. \(2017\)](#). They found that tax evasion rose sharply with wealth—evasion was only 3% on average, but rose to 30% in the top 0.01% of the wealth distribution.

Finally, tax evasion is one of the *clearest violations of horizontal equity* that we have discussed in this book. Two individuals in very similar circumstances will be treated differently by the tax code if one is honest and the other is not. This is a clear violation of horizontal equity principles.

## Making the Tax Code Simpler

At the end of 2014, the IRS sent taxpaying individuals a packet with instructions for completing their Form 1040 (the individual tax form). In the packet, the IRS estimated that it would take about 16 hours to complete the tax forms, assuming that most income came in the form of wages and that there were no complicated investment activities and no deductions to itemize. Filing a 1040 is also accompanied by a financial burden, estimated at an average of \$260 per taxpayer. This burden includes of out-of-pocket costs such as tax preparation software, accountants, and postage stamps. Business taxpayers could expect to spend a full 24 hours filing their taxes, costing them on average \$410.<sup>14</sup> This is a significant commitment of time and energy for many taxpayers. One study estimated that, in 2000, taxpayers spent 3.2 billion hours and \$18.8 billion filling out tax forms, an average of 26.4 hours and \$209 per filer.<sup>15</sup> As [Slemrod and Bakija \(2000\)](#) pointed out, this is the equivalent of “one and a half million hidden, unpaid IRS employees!”

The complexity of the U.S. tax code is only increasing, as illustrated in [Figure 25-2](#). This figure shows the number of pages of instructions that come with the basic individual tax form, the 1040. This has risen from 2 pages in 1940 to 217 pages in 2017!



## FIGURE 25-2

Number of Pages in Individual Tax Return Documents, 1940–2017 • Back in 1940, the i-1040 form only had two pages. By 2017, that number had skyrocketed to 217!

Data from: [eFile.com \(2018\)](#).

Given these facts, a common rallying cry for tax reform is to increase tax simplicity by eliminating or limiting the complex administrative difficulties associated with paying taxes. Presidential candidate Steve Forbes (in 1996 and 2000) wanted taxpayers to mail only a postcard to the IRS. General Wesley Clark, attempting to become the Democratic nominee in 2004, trumpeted a plan that would “simplify the tax process, eliminating dozens of pages of forms and boiling hundreds of pages of the tax code down to one easy-to-use form. With this new system, you can figure out whether or not you need to pay taxes just by filling out three lines. The first line is your income. The second line is your marital status. The third line is the number of children you have. . . . [In fact,] under my plan, more than half of America’s taxpayers won’t need to file any tax forms at all.”<sup>16</sup>

Simplicity of the tax code is clearly an admirable goal in theory. In many cases, tax simplicity is also consistent with other equity and efficiency goals. But in other cases, achieving other worthwhile goals may be incompatible with simplification. In those cases, the government must trade off the benefits of simplification against the costs in impeding other policy goals.

Consider, for example, the inclusion of employer-provided health insurance in the individual tax base. This inclusion might be suggested by a Haig-Simons definition because these are contributions to an individual’s ability to pay taxes. Including employer-provided health insurance would increase tax fairness, as discussed in [Chapter 18](#), as measured by either horizontal or vertical equity. It would most likely increase tax efficiency as well, by broadening the base of income subject to taxation and allowing a lower tax rate (unless there are strong externality or market failure arguments for subsidizing health insurance in this way).

Yet including employer health insurance spending in the tax base would substantially increase the complexity of the tax code. Employers would have to report each year to the government—and to individuals—the amount that they contributed to health insurance on their employees’ behalf, which would require extra record keeping and reporting. Individuals would have yet another item to report on their individual income tax. The complications would multiply if, as discussed in [Chapter 15](#), this tax exclusion was not removed but rather capped. Then employers and individuals would have to figure out how to pay taxes on just employer spending above that capped level.

As another example, consider the case of the EITC. As highlighted in [Chapter 21](#), the EITC is a powerful tool for redistributing income to low-income families without using a “leaky bucket.” But at the same time, some taxpayers illegally inflate their EITC amounts by misreporting their income and family structure. To reduce this compliance problem, a recent Senate proposal would significantly increase the length of the form that recipients would have to fill out from one to four pages. While this might improve compliance, it would clearly reduce simplicity, as well as deterring needy families from receiving the tax benefit.<sup>17</sup> Thus, achieving tax simplicity may come at the cost of sacrificing other goals of tax reform.

## Improving Tax Efficiency

In the optimal income tax model of [Chapter 20](#), the cost of raising tax rates was the potential reduction in labor supply. More generally, what matters for the efficiency cost of taxation is the entire array of behavioral responses to taxation. The motivation for many fundamental reforms, such as the flat tax advocated by Steve Forbes, is to reduce the marginal tax rates that potentially distort decisions on how hard to work, how much to save, or how much risk to take. Moreover, changes in tax rates affect not only decisions on labor supply, savings, and risk taking, but also many other decisions, such as how much child care to use and how much to give to charity.

As we contemplate tax reform, we can summarize this array of behavioral responses to taxation by asking a simple question: How does changing the tax *rate* change tax *revenues*? The overall efficiency of the tax code is a function of the *elasticity of tax revenues with respect to the tax rate*.<sup>18</sup> As this elasticity rises, the deadweight loss from taxation rises, highlighting the equity—efficiency trade-off that underlies the optimal income tax discussion of [Chapter 20](#).

Changing the tax rate changes tax revenues through five channels:

1. **Direct effect**: A higher tax rate raises revenues on a fixed base of taxation.
2. **Indirect effects:**
  1. *Gross income effect*: A higher tax rate may reduce gross income generated by lowering the amount of labor supplied, the savings undertaken, or risk taking. (This was the subject of the research literature discussed in [Chapters 21–23](#).)
  2. *Reporting effect*: For a given level of gross income, a higher tax rate will cause individuals to reclassify income in ways that are not subject to a tax. Suppose that your employer offers you the choice between a raise of \$5,000 and an additional health insurance benefit that will be paid by the employer (and shielded from tax) worth \$3,000. If your tax rate is 25%, you will choose the raise and pay \$1,250 in tax. If your tax rate is 50%, however, you will choose the new health insurance benefits so that you pay nothing in tax. Thus, by raising the tax rate, we have lost \$1,250 in revenues that we would have raised at a tax rate of 25%.
  3. *Income exclusion effect*: For a given reported income, a higher tax rate will cause individuals to take advantage of the deductions and exclusions from gross income that are used in defining taxable income: people may give more to charity, choose a bigger mortgage, or contribute more to a tax-preferred retirement savings account to avoid taxes as tax rates rise.
  4. *Compliance effect*: Finally, higher tax rates may reduce revenues through increased tax evasion.

#### **direct effect of tax changes**

A higher tax rate that raises revenues on a fixed base of taxation.

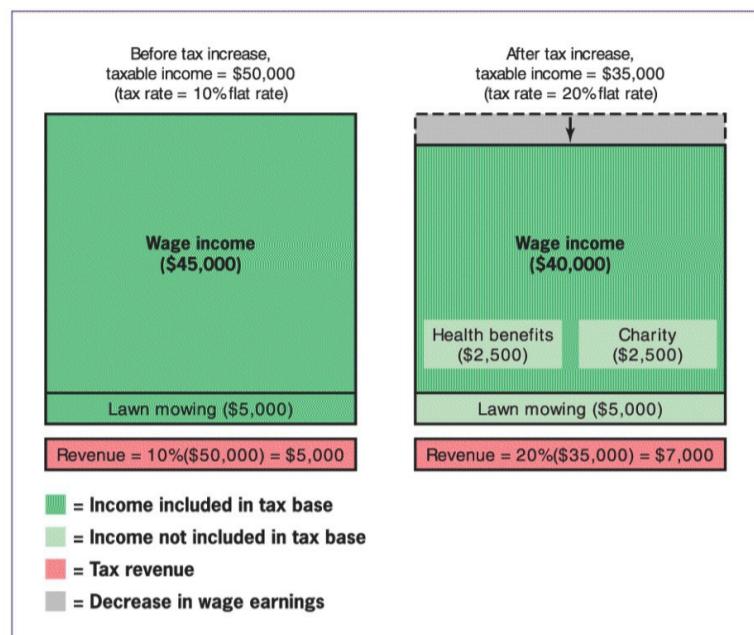
#### **indirect effects of tax changes**

A higher tax rate that lowers the size of the revenue base on which taxes are levied.

Thus, the direct effect is offset by the indirect effects in determining the ultimate response of the tax base to a rise in tax rates.

An example of these effects is presented in [Figure 25-3](#). Suppose that Nala earns \$45,000 per year in wages and \$5,000 per year in cash from mowing her neighbors' lawns, yielding a total tax base of \$50,000. Initially, there is a flat 10% tax on income so that Nala pays \$5,000 a year in taxes. Suppose now that the government tries to double its revenue by raising taxes

to 20%. The direct effect of such a tax rate increase would be to raise revenues to \$10,000, but Nala offsets this with four indirect responses that erode the tax base: (1) she reduces her work hours so that her wage income drops by \$5,000 to \$40,000, (2) she negotiates with her employer to shift \$2,500 of her salary into health benefits, (3) she contributes \$2,500 more to charity, and (4) she stops reporting her \$5,000 in lawn-mowing income. These indirect responses lower the tax base from \$50,000 to \$35,000. The government now takes 20% of only \$35,000, or \$7,000. The doubling of tax rates has increased revenue by only 40% due to these indirect offsets that have shrunk the tax base.



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■ FIGURE 25-3

Changes in the Tax Base as Tax Rates Rise • Nala initially earns \$50,000 and has a tax rate of 10%, paying \$5,000 in taxes. When the tax rate rises to 20%, Nala reduces her wage earnings to \$40,000, gives \$2,500 more to charity, substitutes \$2,500 in health insurance for wages, and stops reporting \$5,000 in lawnmowing income so that her taxable income has fallen to \$35,000. The government raises only 40% more in revenues (\$2,000) despite doubling the tax rate.

## Evidence on the Revenue Consequences of Higher Tax Rates

While there is a long tradition of research on estimating the effect of taxes on the individual components of tax revenue, it wasn't until the late 1980s that economists began to assess the overall impact of taxes on revenues. Since that time, a large number of studies have modeled the impact of changes in individual tax rates on the tax revenues collected from those individuals.<sup>19</sup>

These studies have provided several clear messages about how tax revenues respond to tax rates. First, the indirect effects we listed do offset the direct effect of raising tax rates to a significant degree. While estimates vary, a central estimate is that there is roughly a 4% decline in the base of taxable income for each 10% rise in tax rates. This response implies a significant deadweight loss from income taxation.

Second, most of this response comes from the indirect effects of reporting, income exclusion, and compliance and not from the indirect effect of gross income earning. Changes in tax rates appear to have relatively modest effects on total gross income; the total amount of income actually generated through work or savings does not respond in a sizeable way to taxation. Rather, most of the estimated effect on taxable income results from the use of tax exclusions, income shifting, and evasion. These findings suggest that it is not only high tax rates but also the lack of a Haig-Simons base (and high compliance) that causes tax inefficiency. If taxes were based on a Haig-Simons base of total income, the tax base would

respond much less to changes in tax rates.<sup>20</sup> That is, there are really two reasons a narrower tax base leads to more deadweight loss of taxation: it induces *both* higher tax rates (and the DWL rises with the square of the tax rate) and more elastic responses to tax rates (and the DWL rises with the elasticity of tax responsiveness).

Third, most—if not all—of this response comes from the rich. This should not be surprising because lower- and middle-class taxpayers have relatively little scope to take advantage of the income reporting, exclusion, and compliance effects. In terms of the income reporting effect, lower- and middle-income families have relatively little control over the form of their compensation, so they can't shift toward tax-favored forms of compensation. In terms of the income exclusion effect, given the income required for expenses of daily living, there is only a limited scope for lower- and middle-income families to shift expenditures toward charity or higher mortgage payments. In terms of the compliance effect, the taxes of middle-income taxpayers are largely collected by withholding the taxes from wage income as it is paid by employers, so that relatively little scope for evasion exists.

## Summary: The Benefits of Fundamental Tax Reform

Fundamental tax reform such as a flat tax, or even the system put in place by the Tax Reform Act of 1986, helps address all three of the tax reform goals (increasing tax compliance, simplifying the tax code, and improving tax efficiency). By expanding the tax base and lowering tax rates, fundamental tax reform improves tax compliance and tax efficiency.<sup>21</sup> By ending large numbers of detailed exemptions and deductions from taxation, and taxing different forms of income at the same rate, fundamental tax reform also makes tax filing simpler. So why is it so hard to achieve fundamental tax reform? The next section addresses the political and economic constraints tax reformers encounter.

## 25.2 The Politics and Economics of Tax Reform

The Tax Reform Act of 1986 moved the United States toward the type of broad-based, low-tax-rate system that has long been advocated by economists. But this “victory” was short-lived. In 1993, Congress and the Clinton administration increased tax rates on top income earners from 31 to 39.6% and expanded the number of brackets from three to five. In 1997, the Taxpayer Relief Act provided new tax credits for having children, for various educational expenses, and for business research. The capital gains tax rate was also reduced to 20%, though the reduced rate applied only to assets held for at least 18 months (short-term assets would be taxed as earned income), and a \$500,000 exclusion of gains on home sales replaced an earlier, less generous provision. Tax reforms in 2001, 2003, 2012, and 2017 continued to complicate the tax code, which now includes the following: seven income tax brackets, varying phaseouts for numerous tax breaks and savings incentives, a refundable child tax credit on top of the usual exemptions, a capital gains law calibrated by seven different tax rates, difficult to enforce distinctions between earned and unearned income, wage and nonwage income, and, finally, tax schedules that change each year and, in some cases, expire only to return the following year.

Why is it so hard to maintain a simple, broad-based tax code? Why do we have so much pressure for particular provisions that deviate from the Haig-Simons standard? There are two explanations: one political and one economic.

### Political Pressures for a Complicated Tax Code

As we discussed in [Chapter 9](#), political pressures for policy changes are strongest when the winners from these changes are concentrated, well organized, and have much to gain, and the losers are diffuse and don’t lose much per person. Any given deviation from the broad Haig-Simons base may not have dramatic implications for efficiency or equity that are noticeable to the broad set of taxpayers. Yet even a small deviation can deliver large benefits to a concentrated set of taxpayers. The continuation of Bush tax cuts for those with income in excess of \$250,000 would have saved fewer than 3% of Americans a combined \$810 billion over the next ten years.<sup>22</sup>

A particularly strong pressure for tax code complication is the perception of politicians that naïve voters are opposed to new government spending programs but support the same goal when financed by a tax expenditure, despite identical budget implications. President Clinton, for example, came into office in 1992 promising to shift federal spending toward investments such as education and job training, but he ended up achieving his goals in this area through “targeted tax cuts” (such as for spending on college education) rather than new spending. As one of his advisers noted, “We discovered very quickly that, even with a Democratically controlled Congress, it was almost impossible to get the spending and investment agenda approved. But the minute we proposed any kind of tax cut, everybody started salivating.”<sup>23</sup> Apparently, relabeling a spending program as a tax cut, despite its cost in terms of tax efficiency, has enormous political appeal.

### Economic Pressures Against Broadening the Tax Base

While there are clear political pressures in favor of a tax code with many special provisions, economic considerations also can get in the way of removing such provisions and broadening the tax base. As highlighted in these tax chapters, the economy does not take changes to the

tax system lying down. Any tax change affects the prices and quantities determined in a variety of goods and factor markets, and these price and quantity changes in turn can lead to equity effects that must be considered as part of tax reform. This is clearly illustrated by the case of **tax shelters**, activities whose sole reason for existence is tax minimization.

#### tax shelters

Activities whose sole reason for existence is tax minimization.

## Background: Tax Shelters

By the mid-1980s, the tax code had created a number of ways in which savvy investors could legally turn a profit by shielding their money from the IRS. Most of these schemes centered on an asset that for some reason received favorable tax treatment. Investors in real estate could, for example, deduct depreciation expenses rapidly and treat profits as capital gains, 60% of which were tax-exempt. Equipment leasing for moviemaking, scientific research, and other industries qualified for an investment tax credit that could equal up to 10% of the cost of the equipment. Drilling for oil and gas would often yield even better tax treatment because 60 to 80% of the initial investment could be written off as a tax deduction.

Many of these measures had been intended by Congress to encourage investment in real estate and the oil industry, but the distortion of incentives created by these tax shelters caused serious overinvestment in these sectors. The real estate tax breaks could yield \$2 of write-offs for every \$1 of investment, while equipment-leasing tax breaks yielded \$5 for each \$1. By the mid-1980s, more than \$10 billion a year was being invested in such shelters, with more than half of that in real estate alone. Despite excess building construction and vacancy rates close to 30%, real estate tax shelters remained profitable for investors. One industry insider estimated that more than 75% of investment in independent oil and gas company ventures came through such shelters.<sup>24</sup>

Particularly galling were tax shelters that recorded “paper losses” while actually turning a profit for their investors. For a simple example, imagine that in 1983 Liam had an income of \$250,000, placing him well within the 50% tax bracket (which started at \$109,400). Let’s say Liam decided to invest \$100,000 of that income in an oil-drilling venture that yielded no income and was sold for \$90,000 one year later. This would seem like a very bad investment, losing \$10,000 in one year, but not so in the world of tax shelters, as illustrated in [Table 25-1](#).

TABLE 25-1 Tax Shelters

Action	Result
Invest \$100,000 in oil venture	
Sell oil venture for \$90,000	Lose \$10,000 in value
Deduct \$60,000 from this year’s income	Save \$30,000 on taxes
Deduct \$10,000 loss from next year’s income	Save \$5,000 on taxes
Net effect	Make \$25,000

Even though the investment in a tax shelter loses \$10,000 in real value, it generates \$35,000 in tax savings, so that on net there is a \$25,000 gain from the investment.

The deduction for oil investments allowed Liam to deduct 60% of the initial investment (\$60,000) from his 1983 taxes so that he got a \$30,000 tax savings at his 50% marginal tax rate. He could then offset the \$10,000 loss against other income one year later, saving him the tax on that other income at a 50% rate, for an additional tax savings of \$5,000. Thus, after one

year Liam turned his \$100,000 into \$90,000 plus \$35,000 of tax savings, or \$125,000. A 25% annual rate of return on an investment that is losing money—a real example of American ingenuity!

Tax shelters became so prevalent that many creative individuals started to pursue truly strange schemes. One oyster farmer, for instance, recruited buyers of young oysters by claiming they could deduct the cost of the oysters up front, pay taxes on the income only two years later when the oysters matured, and treat that income as capital gains. The IRS later ruled that the growth of an oyster did not count as a capital gain!<sup>25</sup>

## Transitional Inequities

The existence of tax shelters clearly runs in opposition to the three benefits of fundamental tax reform described earlier: tax shelters make tax evasion easier, they make the tax code more complicated, and they make the tax code less efficient. At the same time, taking on tax shelters raises a difficult economic issue because of the type of **tax capitalization** discussed in [Chapter 10](#). Recall that tax capitalization is the change in asset prices that occurs due to a change in the tax levied on the stream of returns from that asset. The fact that tax shelter benefits are capitalized into the value of assets means that ending such shelters can severely punish their owners and cause large horizontal inequities.

### **tax capitalization**

The change in asset prices that occurs due to a change in the tax levied on the stream of returns from that asset.

Suppose that two apartment buildings are for sale in a city, one in a low-income neighborhood and one in a more affluent neighborhood. The building in the low-income neighborhood is worth only \$100,000 because its owners cannot charge enough rent to cover its costs; the building in the more affluent neighborhood is worth \$200,000. Suppose also that a special tax provision is introduced that allows individuals who invest in apartment buildings in low-income neighborhoods to take large tax deductions of the type discussed earlier (such as accelerated depreciation or an investment tax credit). Because of these tax benefits, the market value of the building rises to \$200,000: the \$100,000 of pre-tax value plus a stream of tax benefits valued at \$100,000. Angela is a taxpayer who values these tax breaks, so she buys the low-income apartment building for \$200,000. At the same time, her friend Tinley buys the apartment building in the more affluent neighborhood, which we assume comes with no associated stream of tax benefits, for \$200,000.

One year later, the government announces that it is closing this tax shelter for apartment buildings in low-income neighborhoods. The value of Angela's apartment building immediately falls back to \$100,000 because there is no longer any associated stream of tax benefits. This is an enormous reduction in Angela's net worth. Moreover, this reduction in net worth does not reduce Angela's tax burden because the tax code only allows her to deduct up to \$3,000 of capital losses from other income each year.

Angela's sizeable loss is an example of the way that market responses to tax changes can cause **transitional inequities from tax reform**: changes in the treatment of similar individuals who have made different decisions in the past and are therefore differentially treated by tax reform (particularly tax reforms that affect capital asset values). Angela and Tinley both invested \$200,000 in apartment buildings at the same time, yet, due to this tax reform, Angela lost \$100,000 and Tinley lost nothing. This is a large horizontal inequity.

### **transitional inequities from tax reform**

Changes in the treatment of similar individuals who have made different decisions in the past and are therefore differentially treated by tax reform.

These transitional inequities are an issue in taxation and any other form of government

regulation. Suppose that the government announces that a public beach is no longer fit for swimming due to water contamination. This announcement would immediately lower the value of all homes on the beach, whose high prices reflected their previous access to swimming.

Such transitional inequities are a natural feature of any tax reform, which by definition will create winners and losers (unless there is a large overall tax cut that makes everyone better off). This reality led [Feldstein \(1976\)](#) to suggest that tax reforms be infrequent and slowly phased in to minimize the horizontal inequities that arise from frequent and sudden asset price changes.

Concerns about transitional inequity have also led to various forms of compensation through the political process, such as *grandfathering*, whereby those who made decisions under the old tax rules are allowed to continue to benefit from those rules, while the rules are changed for all future decisions (in the previous example, under a grandfathered change, Angela would be allowed to keep his her breaks worth \$100,000, but new investors in apartments would not be able to take advantage of those tax breaks). Such compensation is often both inequitable (well-off individuals are usually the ones who benefit from special tax rules) and inefficient (bad features of the tax code are retained to benefit some parties). But compensation may be the necessary grease for the wheel of tax reform. The costs of this compensation must be weighed against the long-run benefits to society of reforming taxes.



#### APPLICATION

### Grandfathering in Virginia

Near the end of 2003, the state of Virginia began the political process of transforming its tax system in an effort to put its shaky financial house back in order. One particularly costly feature of the system was the automatic \$12,000 annual deduction that every Virginian 65 or older received on his or her state income taxes, regardless of wealth or income. Widely derided as a giveaway to seniors, the automatic deduction clearly had the backing of a determined minority of elderly citizens, who benefited from it directly. Thus, when Democratic governor Mark Warner proposed eliminating that deduction, he made sure to include in his plan a clause that allowed seniors currently over 65 to keep the deduction, a true “grandfather” (and grandmother) clause. Even his Republican opponents made sure that their plans included such a clause as well. Virginia’s politicians agreed at the time that the so-called senior subtraction was largely untouchable, even though immediate repeal would bring nearly \$300 million annually into the state’s coffers. As one leader of a retirees’ organization ominously stated, “It’s on the books, and they’d be in a really bad position if they repealed it.”<sup>26</sup> The tax reform eventually passed, with the grandfather clause intact, in April 2004. ■

### The Conundrum

As we have just seen, political and economic pressures are significant barriers to moving to a broad-based system of the type suggested by the Haig-Simons criteria. Political forces are constantly pushing for the use of the tax code to deliver benefits to particular groups, at the cost of potentially inefficient and inequitable holes in the tax base. Moreover, after these tax breaks are in place, it is very hard to remove them because they create horizontal inequities for those who made decisions based on the existence of these tax breaks.

Nevertheless, we have seen fundamental tax reform in the not-too-distant past in the Tax

Reform Act of 1986. If these barriers can be overcome and more fundamental reform is possible, what directions should it take? In the next sections, we consider the fundamental reform options most discussed by economists.



## APPLICATION

### TRA 86 and Tax Shelters

The treatment of tax shelters in the Tax Reform Act of 1986 presents an interesting case study of the types of compromises required by fundamental tax reform. TRA 86 closed many of the egregious tax shelters that had emerged in the wake of the 1981 tax reform. A straightforward means of doing so would have been to eliminate the tax shelters directly, by stopping the special treatment of oil and gas investments, for example. This reform would have increased equity and efficiency, and would have made the tax code simpler.

Congress, however, found it politically difficult to directly attack these tax shelters, which would have meant angering some of their most important constituents who were taking advantage of these shelters. Instead, Congress addressed the shelter problem indirectly, by dividing income into three categories: ordinary (earned) income, investment income, and passive income. *Passive income* was defined as income in which the individual did not take an active role, such as tax shelters or real estate income. Congress then stipulated that losses from one category of income could not offset income from a second category of income. In this way, individuals could not use tax shelters to completely wipe out their taxable income from other sources. In addition, the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) computed income without many of the tax shelter rules available under the ordinary income tax, ensuring that the wealthy paid at least some minimum rate of tax on their income.



*"I still have my loophole, but I can't drive a truck through it."*

Dana Fradon/The New Yorker © Conde Nast

These changes were largely effective at ending the most egregious use of tax shelters, but they came at a cost: they made the tax code more complicated. Income now had to be categorized in ways that were not necessary before, and tax burdens now had to be computed twice, once under the ordinary income tax and once under the AMT.

Were these changes in TRA 86 good or not? The answer may be found by comparing the costs of increased complexity with the benefits of a fairer and more efficient tax system that

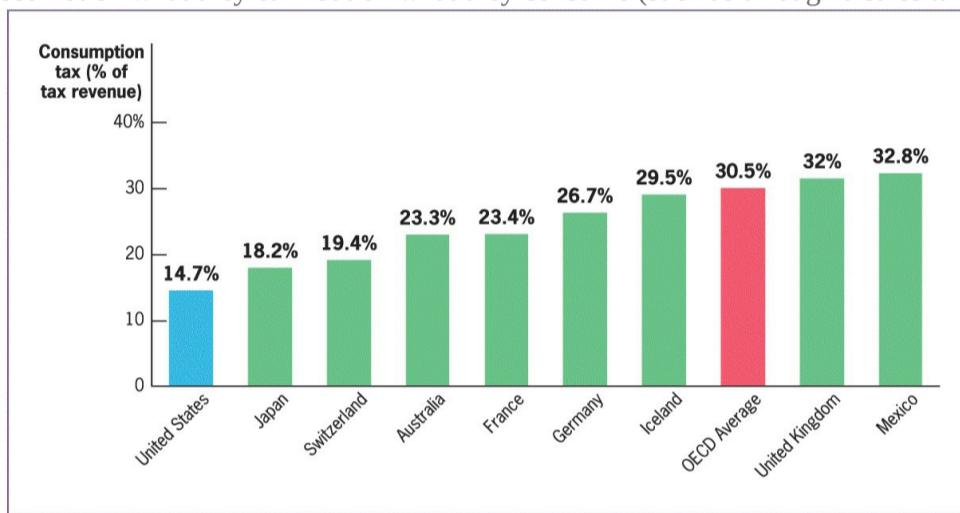
has fewer tax shelter opportunities. One clear lesson is that both goals can be served if politicians take more direct routes to improving the tax code, such as simply removing tax shelters, rather than indirect routes, such as those pursued by TRA 86. ■

## 25.3 Consumption Taxation

A radical reform of the current U.S. tax system that is often favored by economists would be to change from taxing income to [taxing consumption](#), taxing individuals based not on what they earn but on what they consume. The notion of taxing consumption rather than income can be traced back at least as far as the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who wrote in his famous treatise *Leviathan*, “It is fairer to tax people on what they extract from the economy, as roughly measured by their consumption, than to tax them on what they produce for the economy, as roughly measured by their income.” In the United States, consumption is taxed to some extent through state and local sales and excise taxes as well as some federal excise taxes, but consumption taxation plays a much larger role in the rest of the world than in the United States: national and subnational governments in the United States receive a lower percentage of tax revenue from consumption taxation than in any other OECD nation, as shown in [Figure 25-4](#).

### taxing consumption

Taxing individuals based not on what they earn but on what they consume (such as through a sales tax).



Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy*, 6e, © 2019 Worth Publishers

■ FIGURE 25-4

Consumption Taxation in OECD Nations • Of this set of comparable industrialized nations, the United States raises the smallest share of total national tax revenue from consumption taxation.

Data from: [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2016b\)](#), Table 1.A1.2.

## Why Might Consumption Make a Better Tax Base?

The sections that follow describe the many forms of consumption taxation. For the purposes of our initial discussion, however, let's assume that we are referring to a retail sales tax of the kind now levied in most U.S. states, but at a higher level: for example, a federal tax of 35% on all purchases. There are three potential advantages to moving to a consumption tax base.

### Improved Capital Allocation

A single-rate sales tax could reduce many of the inefficiencies associated with the current tax system. As highlighted in the first section of this chapter, most of the elasticity of the tax base with respect to tax revenues arises because of “holes” in our tax system, such as the nontaxation of income paid in the form of fringe benefits. Such opportunities for tax avoidance would, in principle, disappear with a national sales tax that included expenditures such as employer-provided health insurance.

A particular source of inefficiency in our current tax system is the lack of a “level playing

field” across investment choices. The current tax system penalizes particular forms of savings and favors others. Saving in the form of real estate, for example, is favored through the tax exemption of imputed rents on owner-occupied housing and capital-gains exemption on housing; saving in the form of equity in a corporation is penalized if it is paid out as dividends. These differences in tax burdens can distort savings decisions in the same way that tax wedges always cause individuals to make inefficient decisions. People will save too much in housing and not enough in dividend-paying corporations, relative to the efficiency-maximizing level because of these tax bonuses and penalties.

A consumption tax would end these types of arbitrary decisions by taxing goods only when consumed. If individuals defer consumption to save, the form of savings does not determine their tax burden because savings would not be taxed no matter what form it takes.

## Fairer Treatment of Savers and Less Distortion to Savings Decision

A major complaint against the current tax system is that it penalizes those who save relative to those who spend, the implicit motivation for the earlier Hobbes quote. The reduced savings that may result could lead to lower productivity for the U.S. economy, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). This “pro-consumption” bias would end under a consumption tax system.

Consider two individuals, Homer and Marge, who are identical except for their preferences for saving. Both live for two periods, earning \$100 in the first period and nothing in the second period. Homer is impatient: he wants to consume his entire income in the first period and nothing in the second period. Marge is more patient; she wants to consume in both periods. Initially, they are both subject to an income tax, which taxes all labor earnings and interest income at 50%. The interest rate earned on savings is 10%.

[Table 25-2](#) compares the tax burdens on these two individuals under an income tax regime and a consumption tax regime. Under the income tax regime in the top panel, both have an income tax bill of \$50 on their \$100 of earnings in period 1. Homer spends his entire after-tax income (\$50). Marge, in contrast, chooses to set her consumption in both periods at \$25.61, which she accomplishes by saving \$24.39 of her first-period after-tax earnings. In the second period, Homer has no income, so he pays no tax. Marge has interest earnings of \$2.44, so she pays \$1.22 in tax on that interest. In present discounted value (PDV) terms, Homer pays only \$50 in taxes across both periods, but Marge pays \$51.11. Thus, savers such as Marge are penalized in an income tax regime. This tax treatment of savings is both horizontally inequitable (because Marge is taxed more simply for making a different choice) and inefficient because it may reduce the incentive to save (because savings leads to higher tax payments).

TABLE 25-2 Income Versus Consumption Taxation and the Treatment of Savers

	Homer	Marge
<b>Income Tax</b>		
Income in period 1	\$100	\$100
Taxes in period 1	50	50
Consumption in period 1	50	25.61
Savings in period 1	0	24.39

Savings in period 1		27.55
Interest earnings in period 2	0	2.44
Taxes in period 2	0	1.22
Consumption in period 2	0	25.61
PDV of taxes	50	51.11
<b>Consumption Tax</b>		
Income in period 1	\$100	\$100
Consumption in period 1	50	26.19
Taxes in period 1	50	26.19
Savings in period 1	0	47.62
Interest earnings in period 2	0	4.76
Consumption in period 2	0	26.19
Taxes in period 2	0	26.19
PDV of taxes	50	50

The top panel of the table shows the impact of an income tax on Homer, who consumes all of his income when he earns it, and Marge, who saves some of her income. Marge has a higher present discounted value (PDV) of taxes than Homer under the income tax because Marge is taxed on both her labor and interest income. When the government moves to a consumption tax in the second panel of the table, both Marge and Homer have the same PDV of taxes.

The second panel of [Table 25-2](#) shows the tax outcomes under a consumption tax system, with a tax rate of 100%; for each \$1 of consumption you pay \$1 in tax. Such a system has no effect on Homer. He continues to consume \$50 in the first period, pays his \$50 in consumption tax, and then is done. The higher rate of return on savings, however, will lead Marge to save more *in this example*. (Remember from [Chapter 23](#) that whether lower taxation of savings actually leads to more savings is an open question.) She will only consume \$26.19 in the first period and will pay only \$26.19 in consumption taxation. She will save the remaining \$47.62, earning \$4.76 in interest. Her second period consumption will therefore be \$26.19, and she will pay \$26.19 in consumption taxes. The PDV of her tax payments is now \$50, the same as Homer's. The switch to consumption taxation has removed the pro-consumption bias in income taxation and the horizontally inequitable treatment of those who choose to save their income rather than to consume it. Removing this pro-consumption bias may also lead to higher savings levels (if taxation does actually lower savings, which most economists assume is the case) and a more productive economy.

This argument against taxing capital income is even stronger when moved beyond two periods, as highlighted by the work of [Chamley \(1986\)](#) and [Judd \(1985\)](#). Consider a consumer who earns \$100 and would like to consume \$50 today and save the remainder for 10 years at an interest rate of 10%. If there is no capital income taxation, then in 10 years the consumer has  $\$50 \times (1.1)^{10}$  to consume, or \$130. If there is a 50% capital income tax, then in 10 years the consumer has only  $\$50 \times (1.05)^{10}$  to consume, or \$81. Extending the example to 50 years, in the no-tax world, the consumer has *ten times* as much to consume as

in the capital income tax world. Thus, Chamley and Judd pointed out that capital income taxes amount to ever-increasing consumption taxes, causing potentially enormous distortions to consumption and savings decisions.

## Simplicity

Another advantage of the consumption tax is simplicity. In principle, it is much more straightforward to simply tax individuals on their purchases than on a complicated definition of income. In practice, however, even consumption tax regimes have struggled with different definitional issues such as the treatment of services and consumer durables (e.g., should you be taxed on the entire purchase price of your home or only on the stream of housing services as you consume them over time?).

# Why Might Consumption Be a Worse Tax Base?

The efficiency, horizontal equity, and simplicity advantages of consumption taxation are offset by five disadvantages.

## Vertical Equity

The primary concern with consumption taxation is a reduction of vertical equity. In a simple model (such as that used to analyze Homer's and Marge's situations) individuals consume their entire income at some point during their lives, with no desire to leave inheritances to their children, so income and consumption taxes would have the same burden on rich and poor; they both pay the same share of their lifetime income in taxes.

Clearly, however, this is not the right explanation for consumption behavior in the real world. A central fact about consumption is that the share of income devoted to consumption falls with income: the rich save much more than the poor throughout their lives. [Dynan et al. \(2004\)](#) found that those in the lowest income quintile (the bottom fifth of the income distribution) save 3% of their lifetime income, while those in the highest income quintile save 25% of their lifetime income. The top 1% of the income distribution saves almost half of its lifetime income. As a result, consumption taxes are *regressive*: because the poor consume more of their income, they bear more of the tax burden (relative to their incomes).

If the rich save more over their lives, they must be leaving larger bequests when they die. Thus, it would be simple to resolve the regressivity of consumption taxes by taxing bequests as consumption. If bequests were taxed as consumption, all individuals would end up being taxed on their lifetime resources.

As the debate over the estate tax shows, however, large taxes at death are not politically popular. Taxing bequests as consumption would amount to an enormous extension of the estate tax and would clearly raise opposition, particularly because taxing bequests would likely undo much of the long-run savings incentives arising from taxing consumption (because it would be more costly to save for one's children). As a result, no developed nations that have consumption taxes include bequests in the measure of consumption, and consumption taxes are regressive in practice relative to income taxes.

There are some alternatives for addressing the regressivity of the consumption tax. One would be to move to a progressive *expenditure tax*; as discussed later, such an approach has not been successfully applied in the past. The regressivity of the consumption tax could also potentially be addressed by applying different tax rates to goods based on the income profile of their likely consumers. Staple foods such as bread or milk could be taxed less highly, and luxury goods consumed by the rich could be taxed more highly. The problem with this approach is that it provides the *opposite* policy prescription to that recommended by the

Ramsey model of [Chapter 20](#): we would now be exempting the most inelastically demanded goods (staples) and taxing more heavily the most elastically demanded goods (luxuries). Another problem is that this approach adds a new opportunity for vote-maximizing politicians to distort economic choices: politicians from textile states would, for example, lobby hard for clothes to be included in the tax-preferred category. This approach would also present a hornet's nest of difficult decisions about which goods go in which categories: If we have a lower tax rate on bread, which is a necessity good, how do we treat bagels from an expensive bakery, which are a luxury good?

## Differences Between Savers and Non-Savers

The preceding argument implied that it would be optimal to never tax savings, but that argument ignores important differences between savers and non-savers in reality. For example, as discussed in [Chapter 17](#), the government ideally wants to redistribute from high-ability individuals to low-ability individuals, but it has only imperfect measures of ability, such as earnings. By taxing earnings rather than underlying ability, the government induces the moral hazard effect of causing individuals to work less hard. As [Saez \(2002\)](#) observed, however, the highest-ability individuals are also likely to be the ones who save the most. Thus, savings can be used as a *targeting device* for redistributing from high-ability individuals to low-ability individuals. Saez proved that in such a case, the government should tax capital income to some extent to take advantage of this targeting device and efficiently redistribute from high-skill to low-skill individuals.<sup>27</sup> [Diamond and Spinnewijn \(2011\)](#) showed that a similar result can be derived in a model in which individuals have different tastes for savings. Including this type of heterogeneity into a simulation model, [Conesa et al. \(2009\)](#) showed that the optimal capital tax is even higher than the labor income tax rate. Thus, introducing these differences across individuals can undo, at least partly, the strong presumption against capital taxation in the dynamic model.

## Transition Issues

Another major problem with consumption taxes involves transition issues. If we switched today from an income to a consumption tax, people your age (i.e., college age) should be roughly indifferent. Your lifetime earnings and consumption are largely ahead of you, so you would pay the same tax either way. Future generations would benefit because more savings would lead to a larger capital stock, a higher marginal product of labor, and a higher standard of living. The current middle-aged and especially the current elderly would be major losers, however. Those individuals have paid their income taxes, saving some of the after-tax income to finance later consumption. If that consumption is then taxed at a high-consumption tax rate, they are taxed twice, once on the income as they earn it and once on the savings as they spend it. This is much worse than the tax treatment of savings under the income tax because the consumption tax would tax them on their *entire* savings (because it is used to finance consumption), not just the interest earnings.

In a two-period example, suppose individuals work in the first period, earning \$200. They consume \$100 and save \$100 at a 10% interest rate. In the second period, when they are retired, they consume \$110. With income taxes at a rate of 50%, they would pay labor taxes on the \$200 of labor earnings (\$100 of taxes in the first period) and interest taxes on the \$10 interest earnings (\$5 of taxes in the second period). If a consumption tax were introduced in the second period when they are retired, however, they would still pay the taxes on the \$200 of earnings (\$100 of taxes in the first period), but would now pay consumption taxes on the entire \$110 of consumption they do in the second period (\$55 of taxes in the second period). So their total tax payments would rise from \$105 to \$155 because of the transition to a consumption tax.

It is highly unlikely that politicians would be willing to undertake a policy change that is so detrimental to seniors. As a result, a switch to a consumption tax would likely include some provision to compensate individuals for this double taxation. Such a provision would be costly, however. By some estimates, the *entire efficiency gain* from a consumption tax over the first several generations would be used up if extra taxes had to be raised to make transition payments to existing generations. Moreover, those who are hurt by the transition are the highest-income asset holders in society. So the compensation that undoes these transition costs would actually involve compensating the richest members of society.

## Compliance

Suppose that we simply replaced the existing income tax with an expansion of the kinds of sales taxes levied in most states today. According to [Gale \(1999\)](#), this reform would require a sales tax rate on the order of 35%. A major problem with such a large sales tax is compliance. With a high sales tax rate, there would be a strong incentive to conspire with retailers to avoid the tax (e.g., by paying a retailer a small side payment to not ring up the sale for tax purposes) or to purchase items through channels that do not bear sales taxes (the “black market”). It is much harder to track consumption expenditures than it is to track income earned, where withholding from paychecks can solve compliance problems for the vast majority of the population.

Sales taxes on very expensive items may pose a particular difficulty under a consumption tax. This has been illustrated recently by the difficulty of some states in taxing the value of art purchased in another state. Out-of-state purchases are supposed to be subject to a state “use” tax when those purchases are shipped back home. But if a piece of art is first loaned to a museum located in a state without a use tax, then it is viewed as “used” in that third state and can come home tax-free. Millions of dollars of state use tax collections have been avoided using this method.<sup>28</sup>

## Cascading

A final problem with a national sales tax is the problem of “cascading” taxation of business inputs. In principle, a sales tax is paid only on retail sales, not on sales of business inputs. In practice, however, many businesses buy their inputs at the retail level. An individual starting a business, for example, might buy a scanner at an office supply store and have to pay the consumption tax on it. As [Slemrod and Bakija \(2008\)](#) pointed out, businesses often pay sales taxes on their inputs and then again when they sell their outputs so that a cascading problem develops. Goods that require more intermediate steps of production and distribution are taxed more heavily if those steps involve retail purchases (such as someone running a home business that puts together gift baskets of retail goods for hospital patients). This cascade leads both to distortions away from modes of production that involve multiple stages and to a deadweight loss from inefficient production choices; if it would be more efficient to produce using retail purchases, firms might nevertheless choose not to do so because of the tax disadvantage.

In levying their current retail sales taxes, some states in the United States try to avoid this problem by giving businesses a registration number to present when purchasing goods from other firms. This number exempts them from the retail sales tax. This procedure works poorly in practice, however, so that a high percentage of retail sales revenues come from business purchases that should be exempt from retail sales tax.<sup>29</sup>

# Designing a Consumption Tax

Different forms of consumption taxation can address the concerns raised with the sales tax

approach just discussed.

## Value-Added Tax

The compliance and cascading problems associated with a large retail sales tax have led most nations with large consumption taxes to adopt instead a **value-added tax (VAT)**, also known as a “cascading” consumption tax. The idea of the VAT is to tax goods at each stage of production on the value added to the good at that production stage, rather than only at the point of sale on the final retail value of the good.

**value-added tax (VAT)**

A consumption tax levied on each stage of a good’s production on the increase in value of the good at that stage of production.

[Table 25-3](#) presents an example of how a VAT works for a kitchen table that has a retail sales value of \$100 and a VAT rate of 20%. If this were a pure sales tax, a buyer would pay \$20 tax on the \$100 table, which might offer a strong incentive for the retailer and the buyer to conspire to avoid the tax. The VAT proceeds by defining the value added at each stage of production—the difference between the value of what is produced and the price paid for the inputs from other firms—and taxing just the value added.

TABLE 25-3 Value-Added Tax in Practice

Agent	Purchase Price	Sale Price	Value Added	Tax Paid (VAT = 20%)
Logger	\$0	\$25	\$25	\$5
Manufacturer	25	75	50	10
Retailer	75	100	25	5
				Total tax paid: \$20

When the logger adds \$25 in value to a table through producing the wood, she pays \$5 in VAT (VAT rate = 20%). The manufacturer then adds \$50 in value and pays a VAT of \$10. Finally, the retailer pays \$5 in VAT on her \$25 in value added.

In this example, the first stage of production is the logger, who cuts down the trees and turns them into lumber that she sells for \$25 to a manufacturer. The logger’s value added is \$25, so she pays a VAT of \$5. The manufacturer then turns the wood into a table and sells it to the retailer for \$75. The manufacturer’s value added is \$50, so he pays a VAT of \$10. Finally, the retailer sells the table to me for \$100. The value added at the retail stage is \$25, so the VAT paid by the retailer is \$5.<sup>30</sup>

In theory, the VAT addresses both the compliance and cascading problems. The total VAT payments are \$20, the same as the 20% retail sales tax on the table. But there is an important difference: the tax is now *self-policing*, with each participant in the production chain having a strong incentive to make sure that the other participants report correctly. Any attempt to reduce value added by claiming that a producer either paid more for inputs than he really did or sold the product for less than he really did raises the tax bills of other participants in the production chain. So the participants themselves will ensure that the tax reporting is accurate.<sup>31</sup>

Suppose that the manufacturer tried to cheat by claiming he paid \$30 for the wood and sold the table for \$60 so that his value added was only \$30 (and his tax bill was only \$6, rather than the \$10 he would pay if he were honest). Then both the logger and the retailer would protest because this would mean that they would each pay higher value-added taxes. The logger’s value added would now appear to be \$30 (because she would appear to have a sales price to the manufacturer of \$30), and the retailer’s value added would now appear to be \$40 (because he would appear to have paid only \$60 for the table and sold it for \$100). This self-

policing system ensures that the manufacturer is honest. The only participant who is not policed is the retailer, but now only \$5 (one-quarter of the VAT revenues) is paid at the “unpoliced” consumer purchase stage (in contrast to all \$20 in the sales tax example).

The VAT also explicitly accounts for the cascading problem by taxing firms only on the value they add, allowing them to deduct from taxation the price they pay for inputs. So firms that use retail inputs are not penalized under a VAT in the way that they might be under a retail sales tax.

While the VAT sounds quite simple in principle, in practice the VAT levied in most developed nations has become the kind of complicated tax system that drives critics of the income tax to distraction. VATs typically have multiple rates and various complicated exemptions, and, as a result, VAT systems generally cost no less to administer than income tax systems. In Britain, for example, the standard VAT rate is 17.5%, but it is reduced to 5% for home fuel and power. Certain “necessities” have no VAT; these include groceries, children’s clothing, books, education, and medical services (with the exception of osteopaths). And, if you expect your business to do less than \$80,000 in commerce, you need not even register for VAT with the government. VATs may also have compliance problems that can approach or exceed those involving the income tax in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

## Expenditure Tax

The common feature of retail sales and value-added taxes is that the taxes are paid at the level of the purchase, with no differentiation according to who is making that purchase. Poor and rich pay the same VAT for the same purchase. Thus, it is hard to meet society’s demand for progressivity using a sales tax or a VAT. This concern over progressivity has led to consideration of an **expenditure tax**, a tax levied on yearly consumption, not yearly income. In essence, an expenditure tax operates in the same way as an income tax, but it replaces the base of taxation with expenditure rather than income.

**expenditure tax**

A consumption tax levied on yearly consumption rather than on specific sales.

Such a tax could be designed to be as progressive as the current income tax system while having the benefits of using consumption as a tax base. On the other hand, both the compliance problems and the complex information requirements associated with this sort of tax would be enormous. It would be very difficult to track the expenditures that each family makes during the year, and, if families tried to track them, the paper trail could get horrible. This is why attempts to implement an expenditure tax in Sri Lanka and India failed completely. In both countries, the tax administrations lacked the resources to enforce compliance with the tax so that taxpayers were able to manipulate their personal figures for spending and saving. Those experiments ended quickly; even Sweden, which has a very efficient tax administration, eventually concluded that, though an expenditure tax is fairer in principle, it is impossible to enforce.<sup>33</sup>

## Backing into Consumption Taxation: Cash-Flow Taxation

The previous discussion raised two difficulties: taxing consumption at the point of production leads to progressivity concerns, but taxing expenditure at the individual level has proved administratively infeasible. An alternative approach is to recognize that consumption is equal to income minus savings. Thus, allowing individuals to deduct all savings from their income in computing their tax burden will yield the same outcome as if we had taxed their

expenditure. This is the idea behind the [cash-flow tax](#), which taxes individuals on the difference between cash income and savings.

**cash-flow tax**

A tax on the difference between cash income and savings.

The advantage of this approach is that it would require the least change to our current system of taxation. The only major difficulty would be in verifying people's claims about how much they saved during the year. This amount could be verified by recognizing for tax purposes only savings done through officially recorded channels, such as bank accounts, stock purchases, and so on.

Indeed, our current tax system has many features of a cash-flow tax. All retirement savings by our employer and much of the retirement savings on our own [through IRA and 401(k) accounts] are exempt from taxation. Savings through our homes are also exempt from capital gains taxes up to \$500,000. In addition, self-employed individuals can set up Keogh accounts through which they can shield up to 20% of their self-employment income from taxation by saving it for retirement. Retirement savings and housing investments represent the majority of savings for most Americans, so for them this approximates a cash-flow tax.

A major change needed for moving to a true cash-flow tax, however, would be to allow high-income taxpayers who save in other forms (such as their businesses) to deduct that savings from taxable income. The urge for such a change motivates the desire for the type of large new savings incentives discussed in the introduction of [Chapter 22](#). As described in that chapter, however, these savings incentives would have large revenue costs and would deliver the majority of their benefits to high-income individuals. Thus, there is significant opposition to moving to a pure cash-flow tax.

## 25.4 The Flat Tax

Finally, we consider the tax described in the example that opened this chapter, the flat tax, which was first popularized by economists Robert Hall and Alvin Rabushka in 1981.<sup>34</sup> Their plan has several features:

1. Corporations pay a flat-rate VAT on their sales but *also* get to deduct wage payments to workers from their VAT tax base. There is no corporate income tax.
2. Individuals pay a tax on labor income only, not capital income, at that same flat rate.
3. All tax expenditures would be eliminated (health insurance expenditures would be treated like wage payments, charitable contributions and home mortgage interest would no longer be deductible, etc.) and would be replaced by a single family-level exemption.

The first thing to note about such a plan is that it is closely related to a VAT: the first element is a VAT that exempts wage payments, but the second element involves taxing wage payments at that same VAT rate. Why not just use a VAT? The real insight of this plan was that by taxing the wage income at the individual level, we could introduce progressivity into the tax structure, as the expenditure tax tries to do, but we can do so without actually taxing expenditure. In their plan, Hall and Rabushka proposed a flat tax rate of 19% and an exemption level of \$25,000. This allows the plan to exempt the lowest-income earners in society (those with incomes below \$25,000) from taxation, allowing for more vertical equity than a VAT or sales tax.

### Advantages of a Flat Tax

There are several major advantages of a flat tax. The most important are the efficiency gains from having one flat rate on a broad income definition. This change expands the set of tax sources (such as employer spending on health insurance) and removes many of the avenues that individuals can use to reduce their tax base as tax rates rise (such as raising their home mortgage interest payments), allowing the marginal tax rate to stay low and reducing the inefficiency of taxation. Efficiency also rises for the reason highlighted in [Chapter 20](#) and this chapter: the elasticity of taxable revenues is largest for the highest income groups. High-income taxpayers are the ones who will reduce their taxable income the most when tax rates rise. So a rising marginal-rate tax system not only raises deadweight loss by setting a high rate on a narrow base of rich individuals, it also raises deadweight loss by taxing most highly the group with the most elastic supply of taxable income.

Efficiency may rise even further with a flat tax. Savings are excluded from taxation, which may lead to more capital accumulation, although once again we do not know how sensitive savings are to the after-tax interest rate. The flat-tax approach would also remove the corporate income tax, and all of its associated inefficiencies, thus raising corporate investment and making corporate financing more efficient.

Finally, the flat tax would have enormous benefits in terms of simplicity, as illustrated earlier. Compliance would also likely improve because the simpler tax system would make it harder to find ways to evade taxes; for almost all taxpayers, their entire tax bill could be collected through withholding from earnings.

### Problems with the Flat Tax

The problems with the flat tax are similar to those raised with consumption taxation. First,

while a flat tax can be made fairly progressive for low- and middle-income earners, it will be much less progressive for high-income earners than our current system. [Table 25-4](#) shows the average tax rate on a married couple with two children under our current tax system and under the Hall-Rabushka flat-tax proposal. If this family earns \$25,000, it pays no tax under the flat tax; it has an average tax rate of 0.6% under the current income tax. For families earning \$50,000 or \$100,000, however, the tax burden is higher under the flat tax. The real tax saving accrues to groups with incomes above \$100,000. Under the flat-tax proposal just discussed, the average tax rate on a family earning \$300,000 is 17.4%, while the average tax rate on a family earning \$1 million is not much higher (18.5%). In contrast, under our current income tax system, the average tax rate on those earning \$300,000 is 18.3%, and the average tax rate on a family earning \$1 million is much larger (30.1%).<sup>35</sup>

**TABLE 25-4 Distributional Implications of the Flat Tax**

	<b>Household Income (Married Couple with Two Children)</b>				
	<b>\$25,000</b>	<b>\$50,000</b>	<b>\$100,000</b>	<b>\$300,000</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>
Current tax code	0.4%	5.5%	8.7%	18.3%	30.1%
Hall-Rabushka flat tax	0%	9.5%	14.3%	17.4%	18.5%

This table shows the average tax rate on families under the current tax code and the Hall-Rabushka flat tax. For families earning \$25,000, the tax burden falls under a flat tax relative to today's tax system. For most other families earning under \$100,000, however, tax burdens rise, while for most families with incomes over \$100,000, tax burdens fall.

This sizeable reduction in vertical equity may be problematic for many voters. A 1996 U.S. Treasury Department study of a flat tax proposed by Representative Dick Armey and Senator Richard Shelby concluded that the total federal tax bill for people with incomes below \$200,000 would increase by an average of 11.8%, while the tax bill for those with incomes above \$200,000 would fall by 28.3%.<sup>36</sup>

Second, there are difficult transition issues raised by the flat tax. Removing the current set of tax preferences would cause enormous horizontal inequities that would be costly to undo. For example, the removal of the mortgage interest deduction, which is a large subsidy to housing, could lead to a dramatic drop in the value of owning a house, as reflected in house prices. Individuals who suddenly saw a large drop in the value of their most valuable asset would understandably be upset by this change. Similarly, some estimates suggest that there would be enormous disruption to the health insurance market from removing the tax preference to employer-provided health insurance: as many as 20 million persons could lose their health insurance—a group more than half as large as the existing number of uninsured.<sup>37</sup> These transitional inequities are an inevitable consequence of radical reform, and they should not be the sole reason for opposing reform, but they must be addressed in any politically realistic reform effort.

## 25.5 Conclusion

Complaints about the taxation of income in the United States abound. The complications, economic distortions, and redistribution inherent in the U.S. system of income taxation leave many unhappy with the income tax as the nation's primary source of revenue raising. As this chapter has highlighted, however, fundamental reform of the income tax is not easy. Moving to fundamental reform, such as replacing income taxation with consumption taxation or a flat tax, raises difficult issues about the appropriate trade-off between efficiency and equity in our tax code.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- A major problem with the current tax system is compliance, with evasion leading to a large reduction in revenues, tax inefficiency, and horizontal and vertical inequities. Higher tax rates appear to make tax evasion worse.
- Tax simplicity is an admirable goal, but it may conflict with other goals, such as tax efficiency.
- Higher tax rates appear to lower the tax base, offsetting the revenue gains from higher rates. Most of this reduction in the tax base occurs not through lower gross income, but through lower reported income, more tax avoidance, and more tax evasion, and these effects are largely concentrated at the top of the income distribution.
- Reforming taxes can lead to large violations of horizontal equity and can create substantial losers.
- A radical revision of our current income tax system favored by many economists is a move to consumption taxation, which would lead to a smaller distortion to savings decisions but would also be less vertically equitable because the poor consume a higher share of their income.
- Consumption taxation can be implemented with a sales tax, a value-added tax (VAT), or a cash-flow tax.
- Another fundamental reform favored by many economists is a move to a flat tax, with an exemption and single marginal tax rate. Such a system would improve efficiency, simplicity, and compliance, but it would significantly worsen vertical equity and would have very high transitional costs.

## QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Tai lives in a country with two tax brackets: the first \$30,000 of earnings is taxed at 20%, and any additional income above \$30,000 is taxed at 40%. Hiba lives in a country with a single tax bracket: all income is taxed at a flat 40% rate. Both Tai and Hiba currently earn \$35,000, and both are presented with the opportunity to evade taxes by “hiding” \$10,000 of their income so that their reported, taxable income will be only \$25,000. Who would benefit by taking advantage of this evasion opportunity?
2. Describe the advantages of using a value-added tax instead of a sales tax.
3. Compare the two tax systems illustrated in [Table 25-4](#). Describe a taxpayer who would be better off with the existing system than with the flat-tax proposal. Describe a taxpayer who would be better off under the flat-tax system.
4. How would fundamental tax reform likely increase tax efficiency in the United States?
5. Imagine that a \$30,000 investment in a good is expected to return you \$25,000, and your marginal tax rate is 30%. The government is considering an investment tax credit that reduces the price of the investment. How large would the percentage reduction in the price of the investment have to be for you to make this investment?
6. Tax evasion is particularly common for workers in professions such as waiting tables and bartending, where tips make up a substantial fraction of compensation. Use economic theory to explain why this is the case.
7. Describe the equity–efficiency trade-off associated with the Hall-Rabushka flat-tax proposal. How would this trade-off be affected by increasing the exemption level and the flat-tax rate?
8. The government of Tortunia increased its income tax rates by 20% in all tax brackets. The effect of this tax rate increase on total tax revenues works through several pathways. Describe whether you expect the higher tax rate to raise or lower tax revenue through each of the following pathways:
  1. The direct effect of the tax rate increase
  2. The effects of the tax rate increase on personal income
  3. The effects of the tax rate increase on tax evasion or tax avoidance
9. Why would an equitable transition from an income tax to a consumption tax undo some, if not all, of the efficiency gains associated with the introduction of a consumption tax?

## ADVANCED QUESTIONS

10. Suppose that the world is populated by people who are identical in every dimension except for their savings behavior. People live for two periods, earning \$500 in the first period and nothing in the second period. The income tax on labor earnings and interest income is 40% and the interest rate earned on savings is 8%. There are two types of people. “Hand-to-Mouth” consumers consume everything in the first period, and “Smoothers” split their consumption exactly equally between the two periods.
1. How much tax would Hand-to-Mouth consumers pay in each of the two periods? How much tax would Smoothers pay in each of the two periods?
  2. Suppose the income tax is replaced by an 80% consumption tax. In this system, for every \$1 in consumption, the person is charged \$0.80 in tax. How much tax will each type of consumer pay in each period now?
  3. Compare the present value of the taxes paid by the two types of consumers under the two types of tax system. Which tax system is more equitable?
11. What is the difference between tax evasion and tax avoidance? How would you empirically distinguish the two phenomena?
12. [Chapter 10](#) explored the Tiebout model, which states that optimal public good provision can be achieved if people self-sort into small geographic areas according to their tastes in expenditures on public goods. How might a move away from federal expenditures on public goods and toward Tiebout-style governance over public spending also reduce tax evasion?
13.  Suppose that the tax rate is 30% and that the probability of getting caught evading taxes is 10% plus an additional 2.5% for every \$1,000 in tax evasion. Hence,  $P = 0.1 + 0.025X$ , where  $X$  is the number of dollars (in thousands) of evasion. Individuals who are caught evading taxes will be forced to pay the taxes they owe in addition to a \$10,000 penalty. How much evasion will a risk-neutral taxpayer engage in? How would your answer change for a risk-averse taxpayer?
14. Proponents of tax simplification argue that a flat tax would be fairer. In what ways is this true? In what ways would a flat tax be less fair?
15. Istalia currently provides a tax credit for families who send their children to college. Faced with dire financial straits, Istalia has decided to eliminate this tax credit but to continue to extend (or “grandfather”) it to families currently taking advantage of it. Given that such grandfathering will lead to inequities between families of current and future college students, and that the grandfathering will be costly for the government relative to the full elimination of the tax credit, why would Istalia choose to grandfather?
16. Consider two consumption tax systems: (a) one in which all goods are taxed at the same rate, and (b) one in which the “necessities” are not taxed and “luxuries” are taxed at a higher rate. Compare the equity and efficiency of these two systems.
17. When traveling on vacation in a country with a large consumption tax, you are presented with a deal: pay cash and get a 10% discount. Given that credit card transactions cost the merchant less than 2%, why did the merchant make this offer? Would the merchant be more or less likely to make the offer if the country had a value-added tax instead? Explain.

 The  indicates a question that requires students to apply the empirical economics principles discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and the Empirical Evidence boxes.

# Notes

# Chapter 1

- <sup>1</sup> [Gruber \(2010\)](#) and [CBO \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Pelosi quotes available at <http://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/2010/04/releases-April10-hos.shtml> (2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Obama remarks from [White House \(2009a\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Boehner comments from [Eaton \(2011\)](#) and <http://healthcarereform.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=001526>.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul comments available at <http://2012election.procon.org/view.answers.election.php?questionID=1706>.
- <sup>6</sup> [Kliff and Klein \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Employee Benefit Research Institute \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Discussion of 1989–1992 epidemic comes from [Wood and Brunell \(1995\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Belluz \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [Ellis \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Lallanilla \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Raja and Mooney \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Belluz \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Atwell \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Martinez and Watts \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Oster and Kocks \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Belluz \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2006\)](#), Table 3.1.
- <sup>20</sup> Information on the CBO comes from its website: <http://www.cbo.gov/aboutcbo/>.
- <sup>21</sup> The Clinton administration had claimed that its health care reform plan would save the nation \$60 billion over the 1995–2000 period, but the [CBO \(1994\)](#) reported that, in fact, it would cost the nation \$70 billion over that period.
- <sup>22</sup> [Irwin \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>23</sup> [Kliff \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> Note that the size of government as a share of GDP is larger in Figure 1-2 than in Figure 1-1; this is because Figure 1-2 includes all levels of government, while Figure 1-1 is for federal government only.
- <sup>25</sup> The recent spike in Greece's spending is due to the collapse of its economy, which has raised government spending relative to GDP.
- <sup>26</sup> The fact that Sweden has survived the recent economic downturn much more successfully than Greece, despite similar-sized government sectors, suggests that something other than the size of government is driving these nations'

relative performances.

- <sup>27</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2019\)](#), Table 8.7.
- <sup>28</sup> Information on these regulatory agencies can be found at their respective websites: <http://www.fda.gov>, <http://www.osha.gov>, <http://www.fcc.gov>, <http://www.epa.gov>, and <http://www.uspto.gov>.
- <sup>29</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#).

# Chapter 2

- <sup>1</sup> [Goolsbee et al. \(2016\)](#) provide an accessible, engaging, and interesting presentation of microeconomic topics.
- <sup>2</sup> In theory, demand for goods can go up or down as income increases. Most goods are **normal goods**, for which demand increases as income rises, but some goods are **inferior goods**, for which demand falls as income rises. Inferior goods are those with better substitutes that might be demanded as income rises. For example, potatoes might be heavily consumed by the poor, but as income rises, fewer potatoes will be consumed as people substitute other goods, such as meat, which they can now afford.

**normal goods**  
Goods for which demand increases as income rises.  
**inferior goods**  
Goods for which demand falls as income rises.
- <sup>3</sup> They have canceling effects on the demand for cakes, however, which is why demand for cakes doesn't change in Figure 2-7. Note also that if goods are inferior, the income effect would offset the substitution effect, rather than reinforce it.
- <sup>4</sup> Data on TANF benefits from the Green Book ([U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 2014](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> A good way to see this intuition is to consider digging a hole with one shovel. One worker can make good progress. Adding a second worker probably increases the progress because the workers can relieve each other in shifts, but it is unlikely that progress doubles. Adding a third worker raises progress even less. By the time there are four or five workers, there is very little marginal productivity to adding additional workers, given the fixed capital (one shovel).
- <sup>6</sup> See [Rawls \(1971\)](#), pp. 152–157, for arguments about why this should be society's goal.
- <sup>7</sup> [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2014\)](#), Table 4.

# Chapter 3

- <sup>1</sup> This example is reproduced from [Fisher \(1976\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [McCoy \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [New York Times \(1988\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Marquis et al. \(1998\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> For an overview of ERT issues, see [Kolata \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Results of the study are reported in [Writing Group for the Women's Health Initiative Investigators \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> For a description of the study, see [Banerjee et al. \(2014\)](#). For a discussion of policy impacts, see [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Pollack \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> See [Deaton and Cartwright \(2018\)](#) for a sophisticated discussion of the potential limitations in carrying out and interpreting results of randomized trials.
- <sup>11</sup> The leading hypothesis for this sharp drop in prices on “Marlboro Friday” (April 2, 1993) is that the major cigarette manufacturers were lowering prices to fight off sizeable market share gains by “generic” lower-priced cigarettes.
- <sup>12</sup> We discuss here only *linear* approaches to regression analysis; nonlinear regression analysis, where you fit not only lines but other shapes to the data, is a popular alternative.
- <sup>13</sup> Technically, this line minimizes the sum of squared distances of each point from the line. As a result, one major concern with linear regression analysis is *outliers*. An outlier, which is a point that is very far from the others, exerts a strong influence on this line because we are minimizing the sum of *squared* distances, so a large distance has an exponentially large effect. For this reason, analysts often use other approaches that are less sensitive to such outlying observations.
- <sup>14</sup> [Appleton et al. \(1996\)](#).

# Chapter 4

- <sup>1</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2008\)](#), Table 8.1.
- <sup>2</sup> [Stolberg and Andrews \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Budget \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Riggell \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Burwell \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Lu \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [Greenhaw \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [Statistica \(2018\)](#) and [USinflation.org \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> The [Treasury \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [HM Treasury \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> For more information about the CBO's use of dynamic scoring, see [Congressional Budget Office \(2003b\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Krugman \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Wikipedia \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> Dollars in the 14th year of the contract are worth  $1/(1.047)^{14}$  each, while dollars received in the 7th year of the contract are worth  $1/(1.047)^7$  each.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, suppose that the interest rate is 5% and is projected to remain there for the foreseeable future, that you are 20 years old, and that you will claim Social Security at age 70. Then this deal would entail reducing your payroll tax by 8.7¢ today, which has the same present value as \$1 in Social Security benefits in 50 years (because the present value of \$1 in 50 years at a 5% discount rate is  **$\$1 / (1.05)^{50} = 0.087$** ).
- <sup>20</sup> This work built on pioneering work by Auerbach, Gokhale, and Kotlikoff in the early 1990s on generational accounting measures; see [Gokhale and Smetters \(2003\)](#) for a discussion.
- <sup>21</sup> [Gokhale \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Gokhale \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>23</sup> These CBO projections are corrected for the effects of subsequent legislation that were not included in the projection (e.g., laws passed after the 1981 projection that affected the 1986 budget deficit) and for changes in the interest burden of the government due to those laws and changes in the interest rate.
- <sup>24</sup> [Greenspan \(2001\)](#).

- <sup>25</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2015a\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> See [Friedman et al. \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [CNN Wire Staff \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> For more information about the American Taxpayer Relief Act, visit <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/8/text>.
- <sup>29</sup> [Jacobson \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>30</sup> [Seguerra \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> See, for example, [Mankiw \(2015\)](#), Chapters 10–14. Recent research has used novel empirical techniques of the type we discussed in Chapter 3 to investigate the question of the “fiscal multiplier” and how well government policy can function to reduce the impact of recessions. See, for example, [Chodorow-Reich et al. \(2010\)](#), [Nakamura and Steinsson \(2011\)](#), [Serrato and Wingender \(2010\)](#), [Shoag \(2010\)](#), and [Wilson \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> This simplified discussion presumes the substitution effects of higher interest rates (which lead to higher savings) dominate the income effects (which lead to lower savings). In fact, there is little evidence on this proposition. Chapter 22 has a more detailed discussion of these issues.
- <sup>33</sup> See the discussion of these issues in a speech by Jason Furman, the former head of President Obama’s Council of Economic Advisors ([Furman, 2016](#)).
- <sup>34</sup> What makes that comparison difficult, however, is that the size of the debt may determine future standards of living through the growth mechanism just discussed. Thus, a large deficit, by crowding out private savings, may actually reduce the standard of living of the future generation to which the debt is being passed.
- <sup>35</sup> If you are interested in learning more about how policy changes can affect the size of the deficit, you should take advantage of the excellent *New York Times* Interactive Deficit Graphic, available at <https://static01.nyt.com/packages/pdf/weekinreview/20101114-deficit-graphic.pdf>.
- <sup>36</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2018\)](#), Table 9.9.

# Chapter 5

- <sup>1</sup> [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(2007\)](#). Global warming is produced not just by carbon dioxide but by other gases, such as methane, as well, but carbon dioxide is the main cause, and for ease we use carbon dioxide as shorthand for the full set of “greenhouse gases.”
- <sup>2</sup> [Mirza et al. \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Romm \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Levy \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Estimates from [U.S. Office of Personnel Management \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> This example assumes that the damage from each unit of steel production is constant, but in reality, the damage can rise or fall as production changes. Whether the damage changes or remains the same affects the shape of the social marginal cost curve, relative to the private marginal cost curve. The height of the triangle is the difference between the marginal social cost and the marginal social benefit, the marginal damage.
- <sup>8</sup> All data in this application are from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the National Income and Product Accounts, and [www.carsite.co.uk](#).
- <sup>9</sup> The presence of positive production externalities is of long-standing interest to economists. Recently, [Greenstone et al. \(2010\)](#) suggested that there may be “agglomeration economies,” whereby large new plants raise the productivity of surrounding plants through creating richer labor markets, lowering transportation costs between buyer and seller, or fomenting conditions for easy knowledge transfer. They compare counties that “win” contests for major new plans to those that “lose” and find that the winners have much faster productivity growth for existing plants in the area.
- <sup>10</sup> For the original paper, see [Coase \(1960\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Visit [www.epa.gov](#) for more information.
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, [Pigou \(1947\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Shaver \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Badstuber \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Royal Economic Society \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Badstuber \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Simeonova et al. \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [San Francisco County Transportation Authority \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Badstuber \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Goldwyn \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> See [Lipton and Krauss \(2011\)](#) for a discussion of the pitfalls of real-world subsidies to alternative energy sources.
- <sup>22</sup> The discussion in this section focuses entirely on the efficiency consequences of tax versus regulatory approaches to addressing externalities. There may be important equity considerations as well, however, that affect the government's decision about policy instruments. We discuss the equity properties of taxation in Chapter 19.

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- <sup>23</sup> [Lyubich et al. \(2018\)](#) document real-world evidence on the heterogeneity across firms in energy and productivity.

# Chapter 6

- <sup>1</sup> [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2012b\)](#). See [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2014\)](#) to find out more about the Clean Power Plan.
- <sup>2</sup> For an overview of the proposed regulations, see [Eilperin and Mufson \(2014a\)](#) and [Plumer \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Eilperin and Mufson \(2014b\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Prokop \(2014a\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Popovich et al. \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Eilperin & Dennis \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [Roberts \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [The Economist \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [Union of Concerned Scientists \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Acid rain information comes from [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2015a\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Holgate \(1999\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> For example, let's say Brian runs a power plant that in 1987 burned 10 billion Btus (British thermal units, a measure of energy) worth of coal and emitted 15 tons of SO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. This works out to an emissions rate of 3 pounds of SO<sub>2</sub> per million Btus, which means Brian runs a very dirty plant. Starting in 2000, the EPA would grant Brian only enough emission allowances each year to let him pollute as if his emissions rate in 1987 had been a much lower 1.2 pounds of SO<sub>2</sub> per million Btus. In this case, he would be given only six allowances, one for each ton he is now allowed to emit. Brian would thus have to reduce his emissions drastically (by 60%, from 15 to 6) or buy allowances from another power plant.
- <sup>15</sup> [Perciasepe \(1999\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [McCarthy \(1990\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Ellerman et al. \(2000\)](#), Table 10.5.
- <sup>18</sup> [Ellerman et al. \(2000\)](#), p. 296.
- <sup>19</sup> For an excellent, more recent overview of the CAA 1990 Amendments, see [Chan et al. \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> Although the life-years lost are lower than might be expected since it is the sickest elderly (who would die soonest even absent pollution) who live in areas most affected by pollution.
- <sup>21</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2003a\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Climate Central \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>23</sup> [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> [Nordhaus and Boyer \(2000\)](#), Figure 4.4. The damage to India and Africa will come through the impact of climate change on human health because a number of tropical diseases will be able to spread beyond their current boundaries.

India's agricultural output will also likely suffer significant harm, as increased monsoon activity reduces output. Western Europe's agriculture and quality of life will likely suffer from drastic cooling that will occur because of changing ocean currents due to climate change.

- <sup>25</sup> [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(2007\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> [Rothman \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [Smithsonian \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> [Irfan and Resnick \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Revkin \(2003\)](#). For an interactive illustration of the impacts of climate change around the world, see <http://gain.globalai.org/>.
- <sup>30</sup> [Howard \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> [Irfan and Zarracina \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> These studies are summarized in [Plumer \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> [U.S. Energy Information Administration \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> [Global Carbon Atlas \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> [United Nations Environment Programme \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> [United Nations Environment Programme \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>37</sup> [National Aeronautics and Space Administration \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>38</sup> [Plumer \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>39</sup> This is an average that reflects a compromise among that set of nations; the United States, for example, agreed to reduce its emissions to 7% below 1990 levels. Also, the deadline was not *exactly* 2010: emissions were to be reduced to that level on average over the 2008 to 2012 period.
- <sup>40</sup> [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency \(2012a\)](#). Emissions for 2010 were 6,821.8 Tg CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent, and for 1990, they were 6,175.2 Tg CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent.
- <sup>41</sup> [Nordhaus and Boyer \(2000\)](#), Table 8.5.
- <sup>42</sup> For an overview of the successes of cap and trade regimes in the United States and around the world, see [Schmalensee and Stavins \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>43</sup> [Nordhaus and Boyer \(2000\)](#), Figure 7.7.
- <sup>44</sup> [Nordhaus and Boyer \(2000\)](#), Table 8.5.
- <sup>45</sup> [Washington Examiner \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>46</sup> The reasons that there is not a zero economy-wide cost are that some of the emissions reduction is met by purchasing offsets from other nations and that there is a resource cost associated with reducing emissions.
- <sup>47</sup> [Walsh \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>48</sup> [Walsh \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>49</sup> [World Resource Institute \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>50</sup> [New York Times \(2015\)](#).

- <sup>51</sup> [United Nations Climate Change NDC Registry \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>52</sup> [Xu and Mason \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>53</sup> [Greenstone \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>54</sup> [Myers \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>55</sup> A recent report from the CBO discusses in detail the revenue and economic implications of carbon taxation ([Congressional Budget Office, 2013](#)).
- <sup>56</sup> The Global Calculator is available at <http://tool.globalcalculator.org>.
- <sup>57</sup> [Aghion et al. \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>58</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>59</sup> [World Health Organization \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>60</sup> See, for example, the discussion of Walmart's policy in [Abelson \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>61</sup> See [Manning et al. \(1991\)](#), Table 4-11, for absenteeism statistics and p. 139 for a literature review on cost estimates.
- <sup>62</sup> [Hall \(2013\)](#), [Leistikow et al. \(2000\)](#).
- <sup>63</sup> [Gruber \(2001a\)](#), updated to 2015 dollars.
- <sup>64</sup> [Viscusi \(1995\)](#), Table 11, updated to 2015 dollars.
- <sup>65</sup> [Simon \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>66</sup> See [Lundberg et al. \(1997\)](#) for striking evidence against family utility maximization. This article shows that, in contrast to the family utility maximization model (where everyone cares equally about all the family members), shifting the control of household financial resources from husbands to wives significantly increases the expenditures made on behalf of children. More recent evidence is presented in [Wang \(2013\)](#), who finds that transferring property ownership in China to men versus women significantly affected the consumption of male-favored goods.
- <sup>67</sup> In this section on internalities, all smoking facts come from [Gruber \(2001a\)](#) unless otherwise noted. For a broader analysis of the economics of risky behavior among youth, see [Gruber \(2001b\)](#).
- <sup>68</sup> [Ainslie and Haslam \(1992\)](#).
- <sup>69</sup> [DellaVigna and Malmendier \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>70</sup> My child's school recognized the ineffectiveness of warning youths about the very-long-run risks of smoking. His antismoking bookmark had ten reasons not to smoke: only one was long-term health risks; the other nine were short-term costs, such as higher likelihood of acne or worse sports performance. These are clearly less important than early death from a long-run perspective, but the bookmark serves the purpose of making youths realize that there are short-run costs that offset the short-run benefits of smoking.
- <sup>71</sup> [Bai et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>72</sup> Indeed, [Hersch \(2005\)](#) finds that smokers who plan to quit smoking are much more supportive of regulations on smoking than are other smokers.
- <sup>73</sup> [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>74</sup> [Sacks et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>75</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2018b\)](#).

- <sup>76</sup> [Lopez \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>77</sup> [National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>78</sup> See, for example, [Markowitz and Grossman \(1999\)](#); [Markowitz \(2000a, b\)](#); and [Markowitz et al. \(2005\)](#).
- <sup>79</sup> [Luca et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>80</sup> [Humphreys \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>81</sup> [Yakovlev \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>82</sup> [Cook and Durrance \(2013\)](#) find that doubling the federal excise tax on alcohol in 1991 reduced accident fatalities by 4.7%, or almost 7,000 in one year.
- <sup>83</sup> A recent study by [Lindo et al. \(2014\)](#), however, finds no effect of changes in drinking age on traffic accidents in a region of Australia with particularly stringent drunk-driving laws, suggesting the potential for substitution across types of drinking regulations.
- <sup>84</sup> [Friedman \(1972\)](#).
- <sup>85</sup> [Ingraham \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>86</sup> [Lopez \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>87</sup> [Wallace \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>88</sup> Data from [National Conference of State Legislatures \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>89</sup> For an excellent overview of the issues around drug legalization, see [Donohue et al. \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>90</sup> [McCardell \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>91</sup> [Nilsson \(2008\)](#) used data from an expansion in access to alcohol in Sweden to show that such reductions in infant health may have negative effects on outcomes such as educational attainment and earnings.
- <sup>92</sup> To eliminate any celebration-related effects, the analysis included control variables for the day of the 21st birthday itself and the day after.
- <sup>93</sup> [Sifferlin \(2017\)](#), [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>94</sup> [World Health Organization \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>95</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>96</sup> [Cawley and Meyerhoefer \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>97</sup> [Olshansky \(2005\)](#).
- <sup>98</sup> See [Kliff \(2014\)](#), Handbury et al. (2015), and [Handbury et al. \(2016\)](#). For a more detailed essay of the difficulty of changing eating habits in low-income communities through new grocery options, see [McMillan \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>99</sup> Kliff (2012a).
- <sup>100</sup> [MarketWatch \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>101</sup> [Sanger-Katz \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>102</sup> [Dewey \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>103</sup> [Lueck and Severson \(2006\)](#).

- <sup>104</sup> [Kliff \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>105</sup> [Food and Drug Administration \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>106</sup> Loewenstein et al. (2016).
- <sup>107</sup> [Bollinger et al. \(2011\)](#), [Cantor et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>108</sup> [Schwartz et al. \(2012\)](#), [Anzman-Franca et al. \(2015\)](#), [Bedard and Kuhn \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>109</sup> [Adamy \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>110</sup> [Onishi \(2008\)](#).

# Chapter 7

- <sup>1</sup> [Francis \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Human Rights Watch \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Victorian fire services financing example from [Carter \(2013\)](#). Public radio data comes from [Hesseldahl \(2001\)](#). The source of the Gnutella study is [Hughes et al. \(2005\)](#). Updated data on Maze is from [Mao et al. \(2005\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Cep \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Freeman \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Wikipedia \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Wikimedia Foundation \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> These quotations come from [Coase \(1974\)](#), described next.
- <sup>9</sup> According to [Coase \(1974\)](#), the reason put forth by the government was that government ownership would actually lower prices by preventing private owners from inflating prices. Coase then argued that the government takeover did not, in fact, lower prices.
- <sup>10</sup> For more on the Times Square BID, see [McDonald \(2001\)](#), p. 66, or [www.timessquarenyc.org](http://www.timessquarenyc.org).
- <sup>11</sup> [Massachusetts Legislature \(2015\)](#) and [Barry \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> See [Steinberg \(1991\)](#) or [Manzoor and Straub \(2005\)](#) for reviews; Manzoor and Straub even find that the small Kingma crowd-out is not statistically significant when using an updated and larger sample.
- <sup>13</sup> Andreoni's subjects did behave very much like free riders, unlike the altruistic cases discussed earlier, perhaps because they were economics students who were given time to study the structure of the game. In one public goods experiment, [Marwell and Ames \(1981\)](#) showed that graduate students in economics free ride much more than the general population, contributing only 20% of their tokens compared to 49% for the other subjects.
- <sup>14</sup> Commonwealth Care premiums and plan satisfaction data provided by the Massachusetts Connector; employer sponsored premiums in Massachusetts are from 2007 through 2014 and are available in [State Library of Massachusetts \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Lopez \(2016\)](#), [Stern \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Goodman \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Weinberger \(2011a\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Wald \(2004a, b\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Weinberger \(2011b\)](#).

# Chapter 8

- <sup>1</sup> [Sanders \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> All details here from [California High-Speed Rail Authority \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Vartabedian \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Although your experience driving crowded toll roads may suggest that they are both rival and excludable, let's assume for the purposes of this example that the road in question is non-rival and non-excludable, so that the citizens of the state can't be assumed to spend the money to fix obvious problems with this road. Thus, the state government has to decide if these improvements are worthwhile.
- <sup>5</sup> More than 140 "living wage" ordinances have been passed since 1994, when the modern living wage movement began ([Luce, 2011](#)).
- <sup>6</sup> Alternatively, one could consider the spending on public projects as being financed by increased government debt. In this case, the opportunity cost of the public funds is the interest rate paid by the government on its debt.
- <sup>7</sup> Guidelines for the choice of discount rate were issued by the [Office of Management and Budget \(1992\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Diamond and Hausman \(1994\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> Statistics come from [City-Data.com \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Consumers saved \$0.51 per gallon, and purchased 10.5 gallons on average, so they saved on average \$5.32 by waiting 15 minutes, which implies a valuation of 1 hour of about \$21.50.
- <sup>12</sup> [Brown and Swoboda \(1994\); Jowit \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Resnick \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Viscusi \(1993\)](#), Table 2, updated to 2015 dollars.
- <sup>15</sup> [Viscusi and Aldy \(2003\)](#), p. 26, updated to 2015 dollars.
- <sup>16</sup> For a general review of the implications of behavioral economics for cost-benefit analysis, see [Robinson et al. \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Rohlf et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Merrill \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [National Safety Council \(2018\)](#).

# Chapter 9

<sup>1</sup> [Egan \(2004\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Stories in the News \(2005\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Mallaby \(2004\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Rosenbaum \(2005\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> [Taxpayers for Common Sense \(2005\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> [Marsh \(2005\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Brehmer \(2014\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> Information on direct democracy comes largely from the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California and can be accessed at <http://www.iandrinstitute.org>. [Matsusaka \(2005\)](#) provides an excellent review of the issues surrounding direct democracy.

<sup>9</sup> [Haskell \(2018\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> Data from [Ballotpedia \(2019\)](#) and Initiative and Referendum Institute Historical Database, <http://www.iandrinstitute.org/data.cfm>.

<sup>11</sup> Data from [Ballotpedia \(2019\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> See [Arrow \(1951\)](#) for more details.

<sup>13</sup> Technically, what matters for efficiency is the mean of valuations of a public good. If there is equal intensity of preferences on both sides of the median (if the distribution of preferences is *symmetric*), then the mean and median will be the same, and the median voter outcome will be efficient. If, however, one side is more intense than the other, then the mean will differ from the median, and the median voter outcome will be inefficient.

<sup>14</sup> [DeSilver \(2014\)](#).

<sup>15</sup> Statistics from [Center for Responsive Politics \(2019\)](#).

<sup>16</sup> [Campaign Finance Institute \(2016\)](#).

<sup>17</sup> Increasing participation in the political process does not seem to solve this problem for voters. [Lopez de Leon and Rizzi \(2014\)](#) also show that mandating voting does not lead to a more informed electorate, while [Hodler et al. \(2015\)](#) find that when voting costs fall, the marginal voter is less politically educated.

<sup>18</sup> [McDonald \(1998\)](#).

<sup>19</sup> This term became popular after special interest groups discovered that President Ulysses Grant spent his afternoons drinking in the lobby of the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., and was thus easier to extract concessions from later in the day!

<sup>20</sup> [World Bank \(2018\)](#).

<sup>21</sup> [McFadden and Hoppe \(2017\)](#).

<sup>22</sup> [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2018\)](#).

<sup>23</sup> [Phillips \(2012\)](#), updated to 2015 dollars.

<sup>24</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2017b\)](#).

<sup>25</sup> [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2017\); U.S. Department of Agriculture \(2014\)](#).

<sup>26</sup> [Allen \(2002\)](#).

<sup>27</sup> [Environmental Working Group \(2017\)](#).

<sup>28</sup> [Environmental Working Group \(2018\)](#).

<sup>29</sup> [Allen \(2002\)](#).

<sup>30</sup> [Livingston et al. \(2018\)](#).

<sup>31</sup> [OECD \(2018a\)](#). Tariffs are taxes levied only on imported goods; [Lakshmanan \(2012\)](#).

<sup>32</sup> [OECD \(2014a\)](#).

<sup>33</sup> This discussion summarizes the [Sayre \(2003\)](#) report.

<sup>34</sup> [MacGillis \(2015\)](#).

<sup>35</sup> [Stratmann \(2000\)](#).

<sup>36</sup> [Andrews and Pear \(2007\)](#).

<sup>37</sup> [Goulka \(2013\)](#).

<sup>38</sup> [Ferris \(2018\)](#).

<sup>39</sup> [Lewis \(2018\)](#).

<sup>40</sup> [Prokop \(2014b\)](#).

<sup>41</sup> [Ingraham \(2015a\)](#).

<sup>42</sup> [Stephanopoulos \(2017\)](#).

<sup>43</sup> [Burden and Cannon \(2018\)](#).

<sup>44</sup> [Nwanevu \(2018\)](#).

<sup>45</sup> Hersch (2015).

<sup>46</sup> For an early text on public choice theory, see [Buchanan and Tullock \(1962\)](#).

<sup>47</sup> A similar outcome can arise from well intentioned but overly zealous bureaucrats who are focused on their own goals and not those of the larger government. A number of subsequent studies have criticized Niskanen's model as unrealistically assuming an uninformed and perhaps even unintelligent legislature. [Miller and Moe \(1983\)](#), for example, argued that large bureaucracies would arise only through failings of legislative oversight.

<sup>48</sup> [U.S. Department of Justice \(2008\)](#).

<sup>49</sup> [Long and Pearson \(2009\)](#).

<sup>50</sup> [Davey \(2011\)](#).

<sup>51</sup> [Latiff \(2018\)](#).

<sup>52</sup> [Paddock \(2017\)](#).

<sup>53</sup> [Acemoglu et al. \(2015\)](#).

<sup>54</sup> These figures have been updated to 2014.

# Chapter 10

<sup>1</sup> [New York Times \(2005\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Klein \(2015\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Dillon \(2005\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2018\)](#), Table 3.20.

<sup>5</sup> [Bureau of Economic Analysis \(2018\)](#), Table 3.21.

<sup>6</sup> Some implicit equalization still exists through the joint federal and state financing of social insurance and welfare programs because the federal share of those costs rises as state income falls.

<sup>7</sup> [Joumard and Kongsrud \(2003\)](#), Table 4.

<sup>8</sup> For the original paper, see [Tiebout \(1956\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Barron \(1983\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> [Gonzalez \(2014\)](#).

<sup>11</sup> See Problem 15 at the end of the chapter for how this might play out in practice.

<sup>12</sup> See [Dowding et al. \(1994\)](#) for a review of the evidence on Tiebout and [Teske et al. \(1993\)](#), and see [Dowding et al. \(1995\)](#) for evidence on knowledge of public services and taxes among movers.

<sup>13</sup> Property taxes are levied on the assessed value of a house, which can differ substantially from the house's market value, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 23.

<sup>14</sup> [Sears and Citrin \(1982\)](#).

<sup>15</sup> [Washington Post \(1983\)](#).

<sup>16</sup> Data from the [U.S. Department of Education \(2015a\)](#).

<sup>17</sup> Data from [Boston Globe \(2013\)](#).

<sup>18</sup> [New York State Education Department \(2014\)](#).

<sup>19</sup> For a sophisticated discussion of the implications of one set of "place-based" local policies, economic development, see [Kline and Moretti \(2014\)](#).

<sup>20</sup> This discussion is largely lifted from [Gruber and Johnson \(2019\)](#).

<sup>21</sup> [Hsieh and Moretti \(2015\)](#).

<sup>22</sup> [Chang \(2018\)](#).

<sup>23</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2014\)](#), Table 12.1.

<sup>24</sup> [U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Budget \(2012\)](#).

<sup>25</sup> [New America Foundation \(2014\)](#).

<sup>26</sup> Data from [U.S. Department of Education \(2015a\)](#).

<sup>27</sup> Data from [EdSource Online \(2015\)](#).

<sup>28</sup> Data available from Education Law Center at <http://www.edlawcenter.org/index.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, [Lafortune et al. \(2016\)](#) show that the most recent set of equalization reforms, which focus on leveling up, have worked to raise education achievement of low-income school districts.

# Chapter 11

- <sup>1</sup> [Parker \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [U.S. Department of Education \(2010\)](#). An evaluation of RTT after five years found that the program led to a significant improvement in high school graduation rates and AP test scores. See [U.S. Department of Education \(2015b\)](#). Under “Race to the Top” published November 2015 by the U.S. Dept of Ed.
- <sup>3</sup> [Glod \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Bruce \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Resmovits \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Straus \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [U.S. Department of Education \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> See [Peltzman \(1973\)](#). This discussion is couched in terms of school quality, but the same argument could be made about quantity of education received.
- <sup>9</sup> The model assumes that individuals cannot simply “top off” public education by supplementing it with private spending, for example, on tutoring.
- <sup>10</sup> [National Center for Education Statistics \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Hoxby \(2000\)](#). This important study has been the subject of some controversy; see [Rothstein \(2007\)](#) and [Hoxby \(2007\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> A real-world example of this issue arose recently in Texas, where some charter schools were found to be teaching Creationism and to be dismissing the science of evolution. See [Koplin \(2014\)](#) for more information.
- <sup>13</sup> [National Center for Education Statistics \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Orfield et al. \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [New America Foundation \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> See, for example, [Figlio and Hart \(2014\)](#) for the United States; [Chan and McMillan \(2009\)](#) for Canada; and [Neilson \(2013\)](#) for Chile. For opposing views, see [Card, Dooley, and Payne \(2008\)](#) for Canada and [Hsieh and Urquiola \(2003\)](#) for Chile.
- <sup>17</sup> See [Cullen et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Deming et al. \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> Her work builds on earlier conflicting analyses by [Greene et al. \(1996\)](#) and [Witte \(1997\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> As reviewed In [Abdulkadiroglu et al. \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Harris \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> For contrasting results see [Feigenberg et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> For a detailed review of this literature, see [Oreopoulos and Salvanes \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>23</sup> A paper by [Clark and Royer \(2010\)](#) using evidence from the United Kingdom questions the conclusion of [Lleras-Muney \(2005\)](#) and others that more education leads to lower mortality rates.
- <sup>24</sup> [National Center for Education Statistics \(2015a\)](#), Table 106.40.

- <sup>25</sup> [Institute of International Education \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> [National Center for Education Statistics \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [Chingo \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> [Mulhere \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2015b\)](#), Table 2. This is in sharp contrast to a long-standing previous program, the Guaranteed Student Loan Program, under which the federal government subsidized private banks to make student loans; this program was, on net, a large cost to the government before ending in 2010.
- <sup>30</sup> This evidence is reviewed in [Gruber and Johnson \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> [Nilsen \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> [Velez and Woo \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> [Puzzanghera \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> [Carey \(2017b\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> [Cellini et al. \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> [Cohen \(2017b\)](#).
- <sup>37</sup> [Deming et al. \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>38</sup> [Cohen \(2017a\)](#) and [Green \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>39</sup> [College Board \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>40</sup> [Douglas-Gabriel \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>41</sup> [Nilsen \(2018\)](#).

# Chapter 12

- <sup>1</sup> Note that the data in Figure 12-1 differ somewhat from the data in Figure 1-7 in Chapter 1, which shows a similar breakdown of federal spending. These differences are largely definitional. In this figure, for example, Social Insurance spending includes the disability insurance program, but that program is included elsewhere in Figure 1-7.
- <sup>2</sup> Budget statistics from the [Office of Management and Budget \(2014\)](#). Income statistics on the elderly from [Social Security Administration \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Krugman \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [American Council of Life Insurers \(2014\)](#); [Insurance Information Institute \(2014a, b\)](#); [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2012b\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> It is possible, of course, that when there is an adverse event, your taste for consumption might change. For example, if you are disabled, you may need to spend less on consumption (other than medical expenditures, which are covered by health insurance), because you do not pay work expenses, don't partake in as much entertainment, and so on. In this circumstance, you wouldn't desire full consumption smoothing; maximizing utility would mean allowing your consumption to fall when disabled. This is called a *state-dependent utility function*. We ignore that case here and assume that individuals have the same taste for consumption in all states (regardless of whether the adverse event occurs). As a result of this assumption, all an adverse event does is change the budget constraint, not the utility function. Recent research has begun to question this assumption, however; [Finkelstein et al. \(2009\)](#) reviewed a series of studies showing that marginal utility does appear to fall when individuals are ill.
- <sup>6</sup> More generally, the degree of risk aversion bears a more complicated relationship to the shape of the utility function, but the intuition that more rapidly diminishing marginal utility equates to more risk aversion is a fairly general (and helpful) one.
- <sup>7</sup> For the original paper, see [Akerlof \(1970\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [Journal of Commerce \(1988\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Woolhandler and Himmelstein \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [Drew and Treaster \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2007a\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Pasha \(2005\)](#). For direct evidence on this phenomenon, see [Gallagher \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Koebler \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Song et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Walsh \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> See [Chetty and Looney \(2006\)](#) for an excellent discussion of this point in the context of developing countries.
- <sup>20</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2014\)](#), Table 9.B2.
- <sup>21</sup> [CBS San Francisco \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Bowles \(2017\)](#).

# Chapter 13

- <sup>1</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Daly \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Cooper and Walsh \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Friedman \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Stein and Grim \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Cooper and Walsh \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> As with all of the social insurance and welfare programs that we discuss in Chapters 12–17, this chapter presents the minimal institutional details necessary to understand the economics of the program. For much more detail on all of these programs, [Robert Moffitt's \(2003\)](#) edited volume *Means-Tested Transfer Programs in the United States* has details on some of these programs, along with a rich review of the economics literature. For up-to-date information on the Social Security program, see <http://www.ssa.gov>.
- <sup>9</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Radin \(1980\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2014b\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> Traditionally, this age was called the Normal Retirement Age, but this is a misnomer because 80% of workers today have retired by this age. What is critical about age 67 is that this is the age at which workers become entitled to their full PIA.
- <sup>14</sup> [Huffington Post \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> Information on Ida May Fuller from [Social Security Administration \(n.d., 1996\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> Work by [Brown et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Goldman and Orszag \(2014\)](#) argues that the amount of redistribution by income group is much smaller than measured here due to a growing gap in life expectancy between the rich and poor and due to differences in overall family income and human capital endowments by income group.
- <sup>17</sup> Population and wage growth rates derived from [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2011\)](#) and previous editions of that publication.
- <sup>18</sup> For example, suppose that I am entitled to a Social Security benefit of \$10,000 per year. If my wife never worked, we will receive \$15,000 per year (150% of my benefit). If my wife has earnings identical to mine and has paid identical payroll taxes, we will, as a couple, receive \$20,000 in benefits per year. Even though we've paid 100% more in payroll taxes, our benefits are only 33% larger.
- <sup>19</sup> Note that individuals will also value annuities not only because of uncertainty about the date of death, but uncertainty about the date of retirement. [Caliendo et al. \(2016\)](#) show that young workers are highly uncertain about their date of retirement.
- <sup>20</sup> A useful way to understand annuities is to compare them to life insurance contracts, whereby a person pays an insurance company up front, and the insurance company pays the person's descendants after the person dies. Life insurance is insurance against living too few years (so that one's family is left without resources after one is dead); annuities are insurance against living too long (so that one is left without resources while one is still alive).

- <sup>21</sup> [Finkelstein and Poterba \(2004\)](#) provide striking evidence for adverse selection in annuities markets. Those who live long lives are much more likely to buy annuities than the short-lived. Moreover, those who lead long lives are much more likely to buy “true” annuity products, while short-lived people are much more likely to buy products that are partial annuities that pay their heirs something if they die soon.
- <sup>22</sup> Annuities market failure may also be due to consumer confusion over the complexity of this product; [Brown et al. \(2013\)](#) find that consumers do not appear to be able to choose annuities optimally.
- <sup>23</sup> [Attanasio and Brugiavini \(2003\)](#); [Attanasio and Rohwedder \(2004\)](#); [Lachowska and Myck \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> For more recent international evidence, see [Manoli and Weber \(2016\)](#), who find that increasing the early retirement age by one year in Austria raised average retirement ages by 0.5 years.
- <sup>25</sup> This raises the interesting question of why, then, we see this large spike in retirement at age 62 in the United States. This is indeed one of the great mysteries of retirement behavior. One view is that people are “liquidity constrained”: they would like to actually retire before age 62, but they have no savings, so they can’t afford to retire until benefits become available at age 62. The other view is that people don’t fully understand the system and think that they are penalized if they work past 62 (or, equivalently, that they are too impatient and retire at 62 without thinking through the consequences).
- <sup>26</sup> This measure is the natural logarithm of the “tax force” to retire across these nations: the sum of the implicit taxes on work at all ages from the early retirement age to age 69.
- <sup>27</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2018c\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> The commission’s final report can be found in [Social Security Administration \(1983\)](#).
- <sup>30</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2018\)](#). Note that the off-budget surplus actually consists of \$45 billion from Social Security and \$4 billion from the Railroad Retirement trust fund.
- <sup>31</sup> Existing results are mixed on whether the trust fund, in fact, just crowds out other government spending. [Nataraj and Shoven \(2004\)](#) suggested such crowd-out is full, and [Bosworth and Burtless \(2004\)](#) found that OECD nations that attempted to accumulate social security surpluses ended up running larger deficits in the rest of government than nations that did not. On the other hand, Bosworth and Burtless found no evidence that state governments offset the saving in their government employee pension trust funds with larger deficits in the rest of government.
- <sup>32</sup> [Social Security Trustees \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> Life expectancies calculated at <http://www.ssa.gov/planners/lifeexpectancy.html>.
- <sup>34</sup> [Diamond and Koszegi \(2000\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> [Agarwal et al. \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> To see this, consider a reduction in the inflation adjustment of 1% each year. In the first year of the inflation adjustment, all elderly people receive 1% lower benefits than the baseline without reduction. In the second year, those elderly people who die are unaffected, but those who live now receive 2% lower benefits. Over time, it is those elderly who live to the oldest ages who see the greatest cuts in their benefits relative to the alternative of no reform (or a simple across-the-board benefit cut).
- <sup>37</sup> [Cubanski et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>38</sup> Calculation based on Current Population Survey’s March 2003 Supplement.
- <sup>39</sup> [Social Security Trustees \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>40</sup> [Sass \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>41</sup> See [Alan Greenspan’s January 28, 1999, testimony at Federal Reserve Board \(1999\)](#).

- <sup>42</sup> This argument presumes that individuals wouldn't just offset this change by reducing other private savings they had for retirement. We discuss the importance of such offsets in Chapter 22. [Aguila \(2011\)](#) estimated that about 25% of the private savings induced by introducing private accounts in Mexico was offset by reducing other savings.
- <sup>43</sup> [Social Security Trustees \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>44</sup> [Orszag \(1999\)](#). Costs have remained in this range more recently, as noted by [Carrera \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>45</sup> [James et al. \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>46</sup> [Mitchell \(1999\)](#).
- <sup>47</sup> [VanDerhei et al. \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>48</sup> [Davis \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>49</sup> Information about the President's Commission to Strengthen Social Security (CSSS) can be found at <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/csss/index.htm>.

# Chapter 14

- <sup>1</sup> [White House \(2009b\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> The [U.S. Senate Committee on Finance \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Garver \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Plumer \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> For more information on UI, see Chapter 4 of the Green Book ([U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 2014](#)).
- <sup>6</sup> [U.S. Department of Labor \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [U.S. Department of Labor \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Figures calculated using the method provided by the [Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> Data available from the UI Replacement Rates Report maintained by the Department of Labor ([U.S. Department of Labor, 2016](#)).
- <sup>10</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on WC, see Section 15-WC of the Green Book ([U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 2004](#)).
- <sup>12</sup> [Grabell and Berkes \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> Recall from the cost-benefit analysis of Chapter 8 that transfers from one party to another do not affect social costs, so any costs in enabling these transfers are wasteful from a social perspective.
- <sup>14</sup> [Swanson \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Gruber \(2001c\)](#) shows that the wealth holdings of the unemployed are sufficient to weather average unemployment spells for most workers, but that those who have the longest unemployment spells typically do not have enough wealth to cover their consumption for that extended period.
- <sup>16</sup> [Engen and Gruber \(2001\); Cullen and Gruber \(2000\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Woodbury and Spiegelman \(1987\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> With a perfectly functioning capital market, this argument doesn't make much sense: workers who need to wait to find the right job matches could just take loans. In fact, however, banks will usually not make loans to unemployed workers so that providing income to the unemployed could improve their search.
- <sup>19</sup> [Meyer \(1989\)](#) found that higher UI benefits led to longer spells but not higher reemployment wages; [Card et al. \(2007\)](#) found that severance payments in Austria had a similar effect to UI in terms of lengthening durations but had no impact on ultimate job match quality, and [van Ours and Vodopivec \(2008\)](#) found that reduced UI generosity in Slovenia did not affect job match quality. For contrasting recent evidence, see Nekoei and Weber (2017).
- <sup>20</sup> [Maestas et al. \(2015\)](#), 177–82.
- <sup>21</sup> The standard deviation is a numerical value used to indicate how widely individuals in a group vary. If individual observations vary greatly from the group mean, the standard deviation is big, and vice versa ([stattrek.com](#)).
- <sup>22</sup> [Gruber \(2000\); Autor et al. \(2016\); Gelber et al. \(2017\)](#).

- <sup>23</sup> [Smith \(1989\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> Referring to our discussion of regression analysis in the appendix to Chapter 3, the estimates for the three treatment groups were all statistically significant, while neither of the estimates for the two control groups was statistically significant.
- <sup>25</sup> [Topel \(1983\)](#); [Anderson and Meyer \(1993\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> See [Autor and Duggan \(2010\)](#) for a detailed reform proposal for DI that would separate shorter- and longer-term disabilities.

# Chapter 15

- <sup>1</sup> The story about President Garfield comes from [www.anecdoteage.com](http://www.anecdoteage.com).
- <sup>2</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Chernew et al. \(2003\); Congressional Budget Office \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> See the technical appendix to Chapters 3 and 4 of [Cutler \(2004\)](#); updated data from [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2018c\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2018c\)](#); country comparisons accessed at the CIA World Factbook at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2091rank.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> [Ingraham \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(2018c\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(2015\); Boyd \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> Data available at [www.commonwealthfund.org](http://www.commonwealthfund.org).
- <sup>14</sup> In particular, a large number of health experts would argue that price differences play a much larger role than is illustrated here, as best summarized by [Anderson et al. \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> The most frequent countries that are used for comparison are Australia, Switzerland, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Spain, and Argentina.
- <sup>17</sup> [Gold \(2018\); Kliff \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Lam \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Chernew et al. \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Patashnik \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> [Kolata \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Kyle and Williams \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>23</sup> [Johnson \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018c\)](#).
- <sup>25</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018c\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion of the flaws with the individual insurance market, see [Pollitz and Sorian \(2002\)](#) or [Collins et al. \(2006\)](#).

- <sup>27</sup> Payroll tax information found at [www.irs.gov/Businesses/Small-Businesses-&-Self-Employed/Questions-and-Answers-for-the-Additional-Medicare-Tax](http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Small-Businesses-&-Self-Employed/Questions-and-Answers-for-the-Additional-Medicare-Tax).
- <sup>28</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>30</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> [Hadley and Holahan \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> For a review of this literature, see [Gruber and Madrian \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> This conclusion assumes that (1) firms can't offer health insurance only to some workers or (2) firms can't set worker-specific wages to address their valuation of health insurance. If firms could do these two things, then Firm 2 could lure Emma away from Firm 1 by offering health insurance just to her and reducing wages accordingly. But assumption (1) is legally justified; firms cannot restrict eligibility for health insurance based on characteristics other than hours of work or tenure with the firm. Assumption (2) is trickier; we'll discuss this point in Chapter 18.
- <sup>36</sup> RAND has conducted “appropriateness of care” studies for a number of medical situations. See [Winslow et al. \(1988\)](#) for an example of a procedure that is inappropriately conducted roughly a third of the time.
- <sup>37</sup> As noted in the text, the RAND HIE involved making a \$1,000 payment to all participants to ensure that no one was made worse off. This payment did not cause any bias, however, because it was made equally to treatments and controls. So any income effect from the money was the same across both groups, and they could still be compared to assess the impact of coinsurance variation.
- <sup>38</sup> Although, as reviewed in the next chapter, there was a very exciting randomized trial of the presence or absence of insurance coverage in recent years.
- <sup>39</sup> The analysis uses the natural logarithm because then comparisons across months can be interpreted in percentage terms. So if two months are 0.1 apart on the log scale, that means that they are different by 10%.
- <sup>40</sup> For an excellent comprehensive summary of the study's findings, see [Newhouse and the Insurance Experiment Group \(1993\)](#). For a shorter summary, see [Gruber \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>41</sup> Chandra et al. (2006).
- <sup>42</sup> [Agarwal et al. \(2018\)](#). For an overview of these issues and resources on this topic, visit the Center for Value Based Insurance Design at [www.vbidcenter.org](http://www.vbidcenter.org).
- <sup>43</sup> [Gruber and Lettau \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>44</sup> In many workplaces, however, employers have set up *flexible spending accounts* whereby employees can set money aside at the start of the year to pay their coinsurance costs on a tax-free basis.
- <sup>45</sup> [America's Health Insurance Plans \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>46</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2012c\)](#).
- <sup>47</sup> These are also often referred to as “capitated” payment schemes because providers are paid a given amount per capita (per patient enrolled), rather than for treatments.
- <sup>48</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2009\)](#).
- <sup>49</sup> [Manning et al. \(1984\)](#).

# Chapter 16

- <sup>1</sup> [Lee \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2014b\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> For details on the programs discussed in this chapter, see the 2014 Green Book ([U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 2014](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> Poverty line information from [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2018a\)](#); Medicaid eligibility information from [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Technically, the extension is to 133% of the poverty line, but due to the way income is defined, it effectively goes to 138% of the poverty line.
- <sup>7</sup> [Decker \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#), Table 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Calculations from the author's research with Kosali Simon at Cornell University.
- <sup>10</sup> [Kaiser Family Foundation \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> See [Gruber and Simon \(2008\)](#) for a review of this literature. More recent evidence in [Goldstein et al. \(2014\)](#)—who look at the CHIP program expansion of 2008 to 2012—found even larger crowd-out.
- <sup>12</sup> [Currie and Gruber \(1996a,b\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Cesur et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> For a review of this literature, see [Rudowitz and Antonisse \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> Cost distribution from [Kaiser \(2014\)](#); premiums from [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2012a\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> Data for prescription drug spending come from the [Congressional Budget Office \(2012b\)](#). Data for average Americans' health spending come from the "National Health Expenditures" section of [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#). All other health-spending statistics in this chapter come from *National Health Expenditure Accounts* unless otherwise noted. See [www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/NationalHealthExpendData/index.html](http://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/NationalHealthExpendData/index.html).
- <sup>18</sup> [Finkelstein \(2003\)](#) shows that innovation in pharmaceuticals responds to the incentives provided by government insurance coverage.
- <sup>19</sup> [Chronic Conditions Data Warehouse \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> Information from Medicare Interactive at [www.medicareinteractive.org/page2.php?topic=counselor&page=script&script\\_id=1479](http://www.medicareinteractive.org/page2.php?topic=counselor&page=script&script_id=1479).
- <sup>21</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2012b\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Card et al. \(2008\)](#) found that there are few health gains at age 65, either for those insured or uninsured before reaching that age, and [Finkelstein and McKnight \(2008\)](#) found little health gain for the elderly in aggregate when Medicare was introduced. On the other hand, [Card et al. \(2009\)](#) found that for those patients admitted to the hospital with an emergency condition, Medicare was associated with reduced patient mortality.

- <sup>23</sup> [Fitzgerald et al. \(1987\)](#); [Leibson et al. \(1991\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> [Eichenwald \(2002\)](#); [Gottlieb et al. \(1997\)](#).
- <sup>25</sup> [Office of the Federal Register \(2005\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> [Kliff \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [Creswell and Abelson \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> [Huckfeldt \(2011\)](#); [Sood et al. \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Brown et al. \(2011\)](#) report estimates of the overpayment that range from 14% to greater than 50%. It is true that Medicare HMOs provide a richer benefits package than does traditional Medicare, but it is unclear why the government should be subsidizing that richer package just for those who happen to choose HMOs. Indeed, [Pizer et al. \(2003\)](#) found that those choosing HMOs do not value these extra benefits at or above their costs, suggesting little reason to be subsidizing their provision.
- <sup>30</sup> For an overview of issues on choice in health insurance markets, see [Gruber \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> For a detailed discussion of how a premium support system would work in practice, see [Congressional Budget Office \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> [Bhargava et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> See [Geruso and Layton \(2017\)](#) for an excellent review of the issues here.
- <sup>34</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2014b\)](#), Tables 2 and 15.
- <sup>36</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2014b\)](#), Table 2.
- <sup>37</sup> To see what long-term care costs in your own state, visit [Genworth.com](#) at [www.genworth.com/aging-and-you/finances/cost-of-care.html](http://www.genworth.com/aging-and-you/finances/cost-of-care.html).
- <sup>38</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2014b\)](#), Table 15.
- <sup>39</sup> [Grabowski and Gruber \(2007\)](#), however, found no evidence of moral hazard in nursing home utilization.
- <sup>40</sup> [Woolhandler et al. \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>41</sup> [Howard et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>42</sup> This discussion borrows heavily from [Gruber \(2008, 2011, 2012\)](#).
- <sup>43</sup> For details on the ACA, see [Gruber \(2012\)](#) or visit the health reform sections of the websites for the Kaiser Family Foundation ([www.healthreform.kff.org](http://www.healthreform.kff.org)) or the Commonwealth Fund ([www.commonwealthfund.org/health-reform.aspx](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/health-reform.aspx)).
- <sup>44</sup> For more details on the political development of the ACA, see [Starr \(2011\)](#) and [McDonough \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>45</sup> [Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>46</sup> Another major reason is state decisions not to expand Medicaid; the CBO earlier projected about 6 million more uninsured to gain coverage.
- <sup>47</sup> See [Sommers et al. \(2014\)](#); [Wallace and Sommers \(2015\)](#); [Barbaresco et al. \(2015\)](#); [Akosa Antwi et al. \(2015\)](#); [Lipton and Decker \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>48</sup> [Furman and Fiedler \(2014\)](#).

- <sup>49</sup> [Boccuti and Casillas \(2015\).](#)

- <sup>50</sup> [Frakt \(2015\).](#)

- <sup>51</sup> [Gawande \(2015a\).](#)

- <sup>52</sup> [CNN Politics \(2016\).](#)

# Chapter 17

- <sup>1</sup> Protest statistics from [Morse and Bui \(2015\)](#) and [Wenger \(2015\)](#); life expectancy data from [Ingraham \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Fletcher \(2015\)](#). Facts from Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance at [bniajfi.org/vital\\_signs/data\\_downloads/](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Gingrich \(1995\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Leonard \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> Note that these data come from tax filings, while the data in Table 17-1 come from individual surveys, so they aren't necessarily consistent.
- <sup>6</sup> A recent attention-getting book by [Piketty \(2014\)](#) has claimed that such broad inequality is more “natural” for a capitalist economy than is the equality of the middle of the twentieth century and that this is likely to worsen over time. Others have criticized that conclusion; see [Rognlie \(2014\)](#) for one rejoinder.
- <sup>7</sup> This table uses the typical measure of industrialized nations for economic comparisons, the set of nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).
- <sup>8</sup> This section echoes the conclusions of a National Academy of Sciences panel convened to study this issue ([National Research Council, 1995](#)).
- <sup>9</sup> [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2006, 2017c\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> [National Association of Realtors \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Meyer and Sullivan \(2009\)](#) showed the sensitivity of poverty measurement to these issues over the past five decades. They found that a more reliable measure of poverty is based on individuals' consumption, rather than their income, because consumption better reflects changes in individuals' true resources. Using this measure, they found that poverty has declined much more over the past 50 years than is implied by income-based measures, particularly for disadvantaged groups that have benefited from the growth in redistributive programs.
- <sup>12</sup> [Kristof \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> See [Deaton \(2003\)](#) for an excellent review of this literature.
- <sup>14</sup> Further evidence on this point comes from [Card et al. \(2011\)](#), who show that university employees are less satisfied with their job the more their coworkers make (holding constant how much the worker makes). Interesting evidence of a potential mechanism comes from [Bertrand and Morse \(2013\)](#), who found that when the rich consume more in an area, middle-income families consume more as well, holding their incomes constant.
- <sup>15</sup> [Bottan and Perez-Truglia \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Matthews \(2016a\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Bertrand and Morse \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Lee \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> See [Joumard et al. \(2013\)](#) for data.
- <sup>20</sup> For more detail on each of the programs discussed in this chapter, see [Moffitt \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> For detailed information on AFDC/TANF, see Chapter 7 of the 2014 Green Book ([U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, 2014](#)).
- <sup>22</sup> [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2016\)](#).

- <sup>23</sup> [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2014\)](#), Table II.A.3.
- <sup>24</sup> See [Garrett and Glied \(2000\)](#) for a discussion of this change.
- <sup>25</sup> [Social Security Administration \(2017b\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> [U.S. Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> Median income statistics come from the website of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) at [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2018/select\\_Geography.odn](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2018/select_Geography.odn).
- <sup>29</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2017\)](#), Table 4.1.
- <sup>30</sup> [U.S. Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> [U.S. Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service \(2018c\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> For Okun's original discussion, see [Okun \(1975\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> All data from calculations using [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> Under this system, the transfers would affect work behavior because leisure is a normal good. Those who are of low earning capacity and receive the transfers would work less hard as a result. As with the access effect and health insurance, however, this is not a moral hazard effect because individuals are working less simply because they are richer, not due to welfare per se. Moral hazard only arises when individuals change their behavior in response to the incentives put in place by a government program (only through substitution responses to government programs, not through income effects).
- <sup>35</sup> Poverty data are from the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, at <http://www.nclcj.org/poverty-in-the-us.php>.
- <sup>36</sup> [Quayle \(1992\)](#).
- <sup>37</sup> See [Moffitt \(1992\)](#) or [Hoynes \(1997\)](#).
- <sup>38</sup> An excellent discussion of this set of issues is provided by [Nichols and Zeckhauser \(1982\)](#).
- <sup>39</sup> [Lieber and Lockwood \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>40</sup> [Cunha et al. \(2010\)](#) present another argument for in-kind transfers in a developing country context: by providing goods, rather than cash, policy makers can raise the supply of goods in imperfectly competitive markets and lower prices overall.
- <sup>41</sup> For a review of the literature, see [Gueron \(1990\)](#).
- <sup>42</sup> EITC information taken from the IRS website at <http://www.irs.gov/>.
- <sup>43</sup> For details on the implementation and results of SSP, see [Ford et al. \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>44</sup> This section draws heavily on literature reviews in [Almond and Currie \(2010\)](#), [Baker et al. \(2015\)](#), and [Bitler et al. \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>45</sup> [U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means \(2004\)](#), Section 8.
- <sup>46</sup> [Rossin-Slater and Wust \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>47</sup> [Rossin-Slater and Wust \(2018\)](#); [Rossin-Slater \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>48</sup> For reviews of the effects of welfare reform, see [Blank \(2002\)](#). For evidence on welfare reform and consumption,

see [Meyer and Sullivan \(2004\)](#).

- <sup>49</sup> [Bitler et al. \(2006\)](#) emphasize the differential effects of welfare incentives throughout the earnings distribution.
- <sup>50</sup> Indeed, [Meyer and Sullivan \(2008\)](#) showed that leisure time fell sharply for low-income single mothers after welfare reform, and they suggested that in a standard model, this would imply a loss in utility for these families if non-market time is valued above \$3 per hour. Likewise, [Greenberg and Robins \(2008\)](#) found that the large benefits estimated for the SSP program in Canada become much smaller, or even negative, when the value of leisure is incorporated.
- <sup>51</sup> [Clark \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>52</sup> [Duggan \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>53</sup> [Goldsmith \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>54</sup> [Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>55</sup> [Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>56</sup> [Herz \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>57</sup> [Boots \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>58</sup> [Matthews \(2016b\)](#).

# Chapter 18

- <sup>1</sup> [Cohen \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Landler and Cushman \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Herszenhorn \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Salisbury \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Soffen and Fischer-Baum \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Harwood \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> IRS statistics located at <http://www.irs.gov/taxstats>.
- <sup>8</sup> There is also optional withholding for other forms of income, such as pension and transfer payments. Some taxpayers have large earnings in non-withheld forms, such as interest on savings or self-employment income; these taxpayers make *estimated tax payments* four times per year based on their best guess of their taxable income for that year.
- <sup>9</sup> [Slemrod and Bakija \(2008\)](#), p. 49.
- <sup>10</sup> Vertical and horizontal equity are illustrations of the “ability to pay” approach to tax fairness. There is an entirely different approach called the “benefits” approach, which states that tax fairness should be measured by comparing the tax burdens borne by individuals to the benefits they receive from the public sector. This principle is rarely used in tax policy debates, but we do discuss the importance of tax-benefit linkages in Chapter 20.
- <sup>11</sup> [Lee and Friedman \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [Krugman \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Elmendorf et al. \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Stein \(2018a\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Matthews \(2017c\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Matthews \(2017b\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Lopez \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Wood \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Vasilogambros \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Stern \(2013b\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> [Stern \(2013a\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> If you buy the home, you may also be paying some money each month toward the principal on your mortgage. This doesn’t affect the Haig-Simons tax burden because you are simply converting one form of asset (cash) into another (housing).
- <sup>23</sup> [Gruber et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> [Rosen \(1985\)](#).
- <sup>25</sup> [Lowry \(2014\)](#).

- <sup>26</sup> This discussion draws heavily on [Firestone \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [Batchelder et al. \(2006\)](#), the source for this fact, presents an elegant defense of refundability as a tax principle.
- <sup>28</sup> For a description of this policy change, see [Maag \(2013\)](#) or [Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Hendrickson and Galston \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>30</sup> [Matthews \(2017a\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> Note that these tax expenditure estimates show the impact of changing one aspect of the tax code at a time. Therefore, the total amount spent on the tax expenditures is not necessarily the same as the amount that would be raised if all of these expenditures were removed at once.
- <sup>33</sup> [Congress.gov \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> [Macur \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> [O'Rourke \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> [Lin and Tong \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>37</sup> Thinking about getting married and interested in computing your own tax penalty? You can do so at <http://taxpolicycenter.org/taxfacts/marriagепenaltycalculator.cfm>.
- <sup>38</sup> [Frimmel et al. \(2010\)](#) find that a preannounced end to a marriage subsidy in Austria did lead to a large rise in marriages in the months before the subsidy ended, but they also found that these marriages were 17% more likely to end in divorce, suggesting that any general social benefits of marriage may not extend to the “marginal” marriages induced by financial incentives.
- <sup>39</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(1997\)](#), Appendix A.

# Chapter 19

1. <sup>1</sup> [Kocieniewski \(2002a, 2002b\)](#).
2. <sup>2</sup> Technically, this rule is just an application of the first rule of tax incidence, but it is useful to think of it as a distinct rule when applying tax incidence principles.
3. <sup>3</sup> Technically, the tax incidence analysis discussed here applies strictly only to very small changes in taxes. For those very small changes, the sole consumers who no longer consume the good are those for whom the value of the good is the same as the value of the next best alternative purchase (consumer surplus is zero). Similarly, the only suppliers who no longer sell the good are those for whom the cost of producing that good is the same as the revenues gained from selling it (producer surplus is zero). So, as in the perfectly elastic demand case, there is no implication of changing quantity for the well-being of either consumers or suppliers; only the change in price matters. In practice, we use the same formulas for larger changes in taxes, continuing to ignore any effects of changes in quantities. A full welfare analysis of the equity effects of a larger tax change should incorporate the entire change in consumer and producer surplus, which would involve both quantity and price effects. But the key intuitions for tax incidence analysis are best demonstrated in this simpler framework.
4. <sup>4</sup> You will recall from Chapter 13 that the FICA tax that finances Social Security is an ad valorem tax (a fixed percentage of wages) rather than the specific \$1 per hour tax modeled here. The conclusions of this section would not change in any way if we instead modeled the ad valorem tax, but the shift in demand or supply resulting from the tax would be a rotation (a percent shift) rather than a linear outward shift.
5. <sup>5</sup> [Institute for Energy Research \(2015\)](#).
6. <sup>6</sup> [Friedman \(1977\)](#).
7. <sup>7</sup> The demand for labor is determined by its after-tax marginal value: the marginal product of the worker times the value of the goods produced net of taxes paid on those goods.
8. <sup>8</sup> [Tax Policy Center \(2017\)](#).
9. <sup>9</sup> Due to a lack of consistent data on excise taxes over time, we assume a constant excise tax rate from 2006 to 2011.
10. <sup>10</sup> These income shares differ from what was presented in Table 17-1 because that table was based only on cash incomes, and CBO's income definition includes imputed income from the corporate sector, employer contributions for health and retirement plans, and the value of in-kind benefits, such as food stamps and public health insurance.
11. <sup>11</sup> One-year mobility from [McMurrer and Sawhill \(1996\)](#); decade mobility from [Auten and Gee \(2009\)](#).

# Chapter 20

- <sup>1</sup> [Harberger \(1995\)](#), p. 307.
- <sup>2</sup> Details and quotes from [Oates and Schwab \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> The window tax had an antecedent in a hearth tax levied in 1662 on each hearth and stove. The hearth tax was viewed as too intrusive because inspectors had to enter each house to count the number of hearths and stoves. The window tax had the advantage that windows could be counted outside the home.
- <sup>4</sup> [Balakrishnan \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> See Doug Porter's letter at <http://www.wirksworth.org.uk/MAIL-1.htm>.
- <sup>6</sup> Facts about sign taxes taken from <https://www.mazars.co.th/Home/Doing-Business-in-Thailand/Tax/Signboard-Tax-in-Thailand>.
- <sup>7</sup> See [Billboard \(2005\)](#); [Chrisafis \(2005\)](#); [Boland \(2010\)](#); [O'Halloran \(2018\)](#); and [Office of the Revenue Commissioners \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> DWL rises with the square of the tax rate only when elasticities are constant, as they are here. The more general point is the last one: the marginal deadweight loss of any tax rises with the tax rate.
- <sup>9</sup> Note that the mathematical derivations underlying this example assume demand and supply curves with constant elasticities, but the curves in Figure 20-7 are drawn with constant slopes.
- <sup>10</sup> For example,  $\lambda$  might be large during a war or some other crisis that requires government intervention.
- <sup>11</sup> For another application of this method to price reforms in Mexico, see [Nicita \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Indeed, if there is such a market failure, it is feasible that a program such as workers' compensation could *raise* the quantity of labor in the market. If workers value workers' compensation at more than its cost to employers (as might be the case if workers are risk averse), the labor supply curve would shift out by more than the demand curve shifted in; workers would be willing to accept a wage cut of *more* than the cost of workers' compensation in order to have this benefit. This would actually raise employment.
- <sup>13</sup> Further corroborating evidence on this point is provided by [Sheiner \(1999\)](#), who found that when health care costs rise in a city, the wages of workers who have the highest costs (older and married workers) fall the most. See [Gruber \(2001d\)](#) for a review of this literature.

# Chapter 21

- <sup>1</sup> There are exemptions from overtime regulations for certain classes of employees, such as executive, administrative, and professional employees. Professors, for example, qualify as professional employees because their fields require “advanced knowledge.” More details on the law can be found at [https://www.dol.gov/whd/overtime\\_pay.htm](https://www.dol.gov/whd/overtime_pay.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> Information on percentage of married women who are employed and the relative earnings of married couples comes from [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> For more information on <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/NegativeIncomeTax.html>. (2015).
- <sup>4</sup> [Internal Revenue Service \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Maag and Carasso \(2014\)](#). For current details on the EITC, see IRS Publication 596.
- <sup>6</sup> For an overview of the literature on the EITC and labor supply, see [Nichols and Rothstein \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> As of 2018, same sex marriages are treated as legal marriages for tax purposes, including for computation of the EITC. For simplicity we refer to a husband and wife here, but the example would apply to same sex couples as well.
- <sup>8</sup> [Eissa and Hoynes \(1998\)](#), Table 2.
- <sup>9</sup> These findings *do not* imply that cash welfare should be abolished and replaced by a larger EITC. Some household heads simply cannot earn a living (perhaps because they are too unskilled), so there is still a need for a purely income-related transfer that does not require work. Simulation work by [Saez \(2000\)](#) suggested that if an EITC is available, the optimal redistributive scheme should continue to feature a guaranteed income such as that discussed in the optimal income tax section of Chapter 20, with EITC-like incentives to work for the lowest income earners.
- <sup>10</sup> Evidence in [Hoynes et al. \(2012\)](#), [Dahl and Lochner \(2012\)](#), and [Manoli and Turner \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> EITC credit amounts calculated using Figure 21-7.
- <sup>12</sup> [Sawhill and Horn \(1999\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Ellwood \(2000\)](#), Table 9; [Holtzblatt and Rebelein \(2000\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> Sperling (2017).
- <sup>15</sup> [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2013\)](#), Table 1; [Congressional Budget Office \(2017c\)](#); and [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2017c\)](#) (updated to 2015 dollars).
- <sup>16</sup> To compute an elasticity, Gelbach used area child care costs to impute a value on the free child care provided by the public schools.
- <sup>17</sup> [Gelber and Mitchell \(2011\)](#) find that home and market work are highly substitutable, highlighting the importance of these tax wedges.
- <sup>18</sup> See Publication 503 by the IRS for more information on how to calculate the Child and Dependent Care Credit.

# Chapter 22

- <sup>1</sup> [U.S. Department of the Treasury \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Washington Post \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Howe \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> These policies are discussed in [Andrews \(2009\)](#), Gomstyn and Jaffe (2013), and [Cullen \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> At least not in standard models; some economists have proposed alternative models of savings that suggest that individuals actually derive utility from having savings.
- <sup>6</sup> In this simplified example, Jack has earnings only in the first period. In a more general model in which Jack has earnings in both the first and second periods, and in which he can borrow against second-period earnings to consume in the first period, there is another effect that further strengthens the negative effect of taxes on savings: the human wealth effect highlighted by [Summers \(1981\)](#). Jack's consumption in both periods in this model is determined by the present discounted value of his entire lifetime stream of income. Jack discounts his second-period labor earnings by the after-tax interest rate—from today's perspective, having earnings in the future is worth less at a higher interest rate. Rising taxes lower the discount rate and raise the net present value of second-period labor earnings. With a higher present value of lifetime labor earnings, Jack will consume more and save less in response to the higher taxation.
- <sup>7</sup> [Aizcorbe et al. \(2003\)](#), Table 2.
- <sup>8</sup> [Laibson et al. \(1998\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> This crowd-out is modeled formally by [Hubbard et al. \(1995\)](#), among others.
- <sup>10</sup> Data from Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey: <https://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2017/ownership/private/table02a.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on IRAs, see IRS publication 590.
- <sup>12</sup> In fact, even the nondeductible IRAs available to higher-income taxpayers after 1986 are valuable opportunities for long-term investors because they allow investors to defer the taxation on interest earnings until the investment is withdrawn. Indeed, over the long run, most of the benefits of an IRA come not from the initial deductibility of the IRA contributions, but from the tax-free accumulation of interest earned by the account.
- <sup>13</sup> [U.S. Joint Committee on Taxation \(1997\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Burman \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Rubin and Collins \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Friedman and Greenstein \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Lieber \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> [Rubin and Collins \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Poterba et al. \(1998\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Office of Management and Budget \(2018\)](#), Table 18-2. These figures include net exclusions for pension contributions and earnings, but no other forms of saving.

# Chapter 23

- <sup>1</sup> [United Nations \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Jenkins \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Nasaw \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Thompson \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Chandler \(1997\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Thompson \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Internal Revenue Service \(2018\); Marr et al. \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> More specifically, individuals are allowed to offset any investment losses in a year against investment gains in that same year; any remaining net losses can be deducted against other taxable income, up to \$3,000.
- <sup>9</sup> There is evidence that individuals reallocate their portfolio toward tax-preferred assets when tax rates rise, most recently in a study by [Alan et al. \(2010\)](#), who find fairly small effects of taxes on allocation.
- <sup>10</sup> [Lambo \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> Other nations have managed to index their capital gains taxes: India uses a cost-inflation index when computing capital gains to be taxed. (Source: Department of Revenue of India, Income Tax Department, available at <http://www.incometaxindia.gov.in>) For further information, see <http://www.simpletaxindia.net/2018/06/cost-inflation-index-fy-2018-19-released.html>. Until 2010, The United Kingdom indexed its capital gains taxes to inflation by providing for “indexation allowances.” Today, only corporation taxes on chargeable gains are indexed to inflation. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/corporation-tax-on-chargeable-gains-indexation-allowance-2017/indexation-allowance-july-2017>).
- <sup>12</sup> [Morgan \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Hungerford \(2012\)](#). Of course, much entrepreneurship is not financed by venture capitalists.
- <sup>14</sup> [Popper and Schwartz \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Cohen \(2015b\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Tax Policy Center \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> Income tax brackets accessed at <http://www.fivecentnickel.com/2011/09/28/2012-federal-income-tax-brackets-irs-tax-rates>.
- <sup>18</sup> [Alesci and Kelly \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Matthews \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Aron-Dine \(2007\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> [Langeler \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> If you eventually want to pass large amounts of assets to your grandchildren, first passing them to your children (who in turn pass them on to their children) would result in the application of the estate tax twice. People thus used to give the money directly to their grandchildren so that the estate tax was only applied once. The tax code now includes a generation-skipping transfer tax schedule that is applied in such a situation, effectively closing this loophole.

- <sup>23</sup> [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(2018b\)](#); [Tax Policy Center \(2018d\)](#); [Marr et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(2015\)](#); [Marr et al. \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>25</sup> [Wall Street Journal \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> In recent years, however, there has once again been a sharp rise in the share of incomes going to the highest-income families in some nations (most notably the United States), so that the share of income accruing to the top 0.1% of families is now back to the levels of the early twentieth century. In other nations (such as France and Japan), there has not been a comparable “reconcentration” of wealth.
- <sup>27</sup> [Koba \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> [Ehrenfreund \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Bakija et al. \(2003\)](#) estimated that, on net, reducing the estate tax would lower charitable giving.
- <sup>30</sup> [O’Sullivan et al. \(1995\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> This percentage was found by averaging all the states’ maximum residential assessment ratios, available at <https://www.lincolninst.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/50-state-property-tax-comparison-for-2016-full.pdf>.
- <sup>32</sup> [Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> [Ganz \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> [U.S. Bureau of the Census \(2018d\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> This section is largely lifted from [Gruber and Johnson \(2019\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> [Restuccia \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>37</sup> [Fitzpatrick \(2001\)](#).

# Chapter 24

- <sup>1</sup> [Stein \(2018b\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> [Hatch \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> [Seguerra \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Sevastopulo et al. \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Bryan \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [Alajbegu \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> [Congressional Budget Office \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Stewart \(2011\); Johnson \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> See [Rauh \(2006\)](#) for compelling evidence, as well as a review of past literature in this area.
- <sup>11</sup> A negative effective corporate tax rate is more likely if the firm has financed its investment with debt rather than equity. Recall that interest payments on a firm's debt are tax deductible. This deduction lowers even further the cost of financing investment because financing through debt costs only  $r \times (1 - \tau)$  rather than the full  $r$ .
- <sup>12</sup> [Clemente et al. \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Kocieniewski \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> This discussion draws on the review in [Gordon and Hines \(2002\)](#). Another interesting issue discussed in that article, but not reviewed here, is the sensitivity of foreign investment to a nation's tax rates. The available evidence suggests that companies are very sensitive to tax rates in deciding where to locate their investments across countries.
- <sup>15</sup> While this discussion is about corporate taxation, many of the concepts introduced here are applicable as well to the tax treatment of individual income earned abroad.
- <sup>16</sup> [Stewart \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>17</sup> [Hilzenrath \(2006\)](#). While most of the discussion of international taxation focuses on the comparison of territorial and global tax systems, [Auerbach \(2010\)](#) proposed a third alternative: destination-based taxation, whereby U.S. firms are taxed only on their sales in the United States but also can only deduct their expenditures in the United States. This approach would have the disadvantage of not taxing earnings of multinationals in other nations but would have the advantage of ending the ability of firms to shift profits made on domestic earnings to foreign tax havens.
- <sup>18</sup> [Duhigg and Kocieniewski \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> [Shwartz and Duhigg \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>20</sup> [Ting \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>21</sup> [U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> [Sheppard \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>23</sup> [Hickey \(2013\)](#).

- <sup>24</sup> [Tankersley \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>25</sup> For more info on corporate inversion, visit <https://americansfortaxfairness.org/files/7-ATF-Corporate-Tax-Inversions-fact-sheet.pdf>.
- <sup>26</sup> [Yglesias \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> [Americans for Tax Fairness \(2014\)](#); Tim Hortons revenue found at [Tim Hortons \(2014\)](#). Burger King revenue from [Restaurant Brands International \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>28</sup> [Cohen \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Desai et al. \(2001\)](#) compared the behavior of U.S. foreign *subsidiaries*, which do not pay U.S. tax on foreign income until it is repatriated, with that of U.S. foreign *branches*, which do pay tax on income when it is earned, regardless of repatriation. They found that foreign subsidiaries in low-tax locations were significantly less likely to repatriate dividends than were foreign branches in the same country, which is consistent with tax-motivated repatriations.
- <sup>30</sup> [Gongloff \(2013\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> [Mundaca \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>32</sup> For example, see [Furman \(2017\)](#).
- <sup>33</sup> Although in practice the effective tax rate on both corporations and noncorporate entities was much lower. [Cooper et al. \(2016\)](#) suggested that the effective tax rate on pass through businesses before the recent tax reform was 19%.
- <sup>34</sup> Recall from Chapter 4 that the PDV of an infinite stream of future payments is the payment level divided by the interest rate ( **$\$100,000/0.1 = \$1,000,000$** ).
- <sup>35</sup> [DeAngelo et al. \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> [Chetty and Saez \(2006\)](#) argued strongly that the agency theory was the correct one to explain the pattern of results that is seen in response to the 2003 dividend tax cuts—in particular, the larger response among firms where managers are more separated from owners.
- <sup>37</sup> [Auerbach \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>38</sup> The hypothesis that firm-retained earnings are central sources of investment financing was first tested by [Fazzari et al. \(1988\)](#). Additional strong evidence in support of this view is provided by [Lamont \(1997\)](#), who showed that oil company investments fell when they had less cash on hand due to declining oil prices, and [Rauh \(2006\)](#), who showed that firm investments fell when the government mandated they contribute more to their pension funds.
- <sup>39</sup> [Powell \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>40</sup> [Buffett \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>41</sup> [Goolsbee \(2002\)](#).
- <sup>42</sup> For those interested in learning more about these loopholes and how removing them could allow lower corporate tax rates, an excellent overview is provided by [Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget \(2012\)](#). Another popular approach to reducing corporate taxes would be to cap or remove the deductibility of debt, as discussed in [Pozen and Goodman \(2012\)](#), who argued that limiting deductibility to 65% of interest payments would raise enough money to pay for lowering the corporate tax rate to 25%.

# Chapter 25

- <sup>1</sup> [Scherer \(2011\)](#); see also Somashekhar (2011) and [Bacon \(2011\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> There were actually only two marginal rates—15% and 28%. There was a third bracket in practice because people with taxable income of \$71,900 to \$149,250 had to pay a 5% surcharge on the taxes they owed. For those with taxable incomes above \$149,250, the marginal rate dropped back to 28%. This third bracket effectively caused some people who were in a middle-income bracket to pay higher marginal rates than those in a higher-income bracket.
- <sup>3</sup> An excellent source for learning about tax reform debates is [Slemrod and Bakija \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Godwin \(2008\)](#).
- <sup>5</sup> [Mikkelsen \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>6</sup> [Wood \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> [DiManno \(2011\)](#); [Steinvorth \(2010\)](#); [Jones \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Of course, if the government sets penalties as a function of the amount saved on taxes, as opposed to the amount of income evaded, then cheating incentives won't necessarily rise with the tax rate.
- <sup>9</sup> [Internal Revenue Service \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>10</sup> Sweden example from [Skatteverket \(2014\)](#); Moldova example from [Anderson and Carascieu \(2003\)](#); Pakistan example from [Ahmed and Rider \(2008\)](#); Afghanistan example from [World Bank \(2005\)](#).
- <sup>11</sup> [Johnston \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> [Rossotti \(2002\)](#); [Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>13</sup> [Cohen \(2015a\)](#).
- <sup>14</sup> [Internal Revenue Service \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> [Guyton et al. \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> From OnTheIssues (2014).
- <sup>17</sup> [Matthews \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> As discussed by [Saez \(2004\)](#), this is only strictly true if the substitution into and out of taxed activities is from other untaxed activities—for example, if higher taxes lower revenues because of more leisure instead of more labor or more compensation through health insurance rather than through wages. But if the substitution is from activities taxed under one system to activities taxed under another, then the analysis is more complicated. For example, several studies have shown that a rise in the individual tax rate relative to the corporate tax rate causes people to shift their business activities from a form taxed by the individual tax system (called S-corporations) to a form taxed by the corporate tax system (called C-corporations).
- <sup>19</sup> See [Saez et al. \(2012\)](#) for an excellent review of this literature.
- <sup>20</sup> [Kopczuk \(2005\)](#) reviews the literature on the responsiveness of the tax base to tax rates and provides evidence that it is indeed the sensitivity of income definitions, and not the actual amount of income generated, that causes tax revenues to be elastic with respect to tax rates.
- <sup>21</sup> The increase in tax efficiency is only true if the elasticity of the newly taxed items is not sufficiently higher than the elasticity of items already included in the tax base. The aforementioned research by [Kopczuk \(2005\)](#) suggests that is the case.

- <sup>22</sup> [U.S. Department of the Treasury \(2012\)](#), Table 1.
- <sup>23</sup> [Chandler \(1996\)](#).
- <sup>24</sup> [Russakoff \(1985a, 1985b\)](#).
- <sup>25</sup> [Swardson \(1986\)](#).
- <sup>26</sup> [Melton \(2003\)](#).
- <sup>27</sup> In an important rejoinder to the earlier work of [Chamley \(1986\)](#) and [Judd \(1985\)](#), [Golosov et al. \(2003\)](#) provide a dynamic version of this argument. Once again, we would like to tax highly skilled individuals, but these individuals will earn less if the government is taxing their earnings. But if more highly skilled individuals have higher savings, then by taxing savings, we get these highly skilled individuals to work more (so that they have enough money when they retire). Thus, not only can capital income taxation serve to target high-ability groups, it can be used to motivate them to work more by reducing their savings.
- <sup>28</sup> [Bowley and Cohen \(2014\)](#).
- <sup>29</sup> [Slemrod and Bakija \(2008\)](#), p. 10.
- <sup>30</sup> The example used here refers to the “subtraction method” VAT that is used in Japan; European nations use a “credit method” VAT, whereby firms pay VAT on the full sales price but receive a credit for taxes paid at earlier stages of production. The economic impacts of these two approaches are the same for the purposes of this discussion. For more details, see [McLure \(1987\)](#).
- <sup>31</sup> See [Pomeranz \(2013\)](#) for an excellent discussion of these issues. She found that randomly announcing a tax audit on a firm actually increased compliance among downstream suppliers to that firm in a VAT system in Chile.
- <sup>32</sup> [Slemrod and Bakija \(2008\)](#), pp. 215–218.
- <sup>33</sup> Evidence on India and Sri Lanka from [Muten \(2001\)](#), p. 11; evidence on Sweden from [Sorenson \(2001\)](#).
- <sup>34</sup> For a detailed discussion of their proposal, see [Hall and Rabushka \(1995\)](#).
- <sup>35</sup> [Smartasset.com \(2018\)](#).
- <sup>36</sup> [Slemrod and Bakija \(2000\)](#), p. 10.
- <sup>37</sup> [Gruber and Lettau \(2004\)](#).

# Glossary

## 1970 Clean Air Act (CAA)

Landmark federal legislation that first regulated damaging emissions by setting maximum standards for atmospheric concentrations of various substances, including SO<sub>2</sub>.

## 401(k) accounts

Tax-preferred retirement savings vehicles offered by employers, to which employers will often match employees' contributions.

## absolute deprivation

The amount of income that the poor have relative to some measure of "minimally acceptable" income.

## accounting profits

The difference between a firm's revenues and its reported costs of production.

## actuarial adjustments

Changes to insurance premiums that insurance companies make in order to compensate for expected expense differences.

## actuarially fair premium

An insurance premium that is set equal to the insurer's expected payout.

## adjusted gross income (AGI)

An individual's gross income minus certain deductions, such as contributions to IRAs.

## adverse selection

The fact that insured individuals know more about their risk level than does the insurer might cause those most likely to have the adverse outcome to select insurance, leading insurers to lose money if they offer insurance.

## after-tax price

The gross price minus the amount of the tax (if producers pay the tax) or plus the amount of the tax (if consumers pay the tax).

## agency problem

A misalignment of the interests of the owners and the managers of a firm.

## altruistic

When individuals value the benefits and costs to others in making their consumption choices.

## annuity payment

A payment that lasts until the recipient's death.

## Arrow's Theorem

There is no social decision (voting) rule that converts individual preferences into a consistent aggregate decision without either (a) restricting preferences or (b) imposing a dictatorship.

## attrition

Reduction in the size of samples over time, which, if not random, can lead to biased estimates.

## automatic stabilization

Policies that automatically alter taxes or spending in response to economic fluctuations in order to offset changes in household consumption levels.

## automatic stabilizers

Automatic reductions in revenues and increases in outlays when the economy shrinks relative to its potential.

## average tax rate

The percentage of gross income that is paid in taxes.

## balanced budget incidence

Tax incidence analysis that accounts for both the tax and the benefits it brings.

## balanced budget requirement (BBR)

A law forcing a given government to balance its budget each year (spending = revenue).

## basis

The purchase price of an asset for purposes of determining capital gains.

## benefit guarantee

The cash welfare benefit for individuals with no other income, which may be reduced as income increases.

**benefit reduction rate**

The rate at which welfare benefits are reduced per dollar of other income earned.

**benefit taxation**

Taxation in which individuals are taxed for a public good according to their valuation of the benefit they receive from that good.

**bias**

Any source of difference between treatment and control groups that is correlated with the treatment but is not due to the treatment.

**block grant**

A grant of some fixed amount with no mandate on how it is to be spent.

**bonds**

Promises by a corporation to make periodic interest payments, as well as ultimate repayment of principal, to the bondholders (the lenders).

**broadest definition of tax wedges**

Any difference between pre- and post-tax returns to an activity caused by taxes.

**budget constraint**

A mathematical representation of all the combinations of goods an individual can afford to buy if she spends her entire income.

**bureaucracies**

Organizations of civil servants, such as the U.S. Department of Education or a town's Department of Public Works, that are in charge of carrying out the services of government.

**capital accounting**

A method of measuring the government's fiscal position that accounts for changes in the value of the government's net asset holdings.

**capital gain**

The difference between an asset's purchase price and its sale price.

**capital income taxation**

The taxation of the return from savings.

**cash accounting**

A method of measuring the government's fiscal position as the difference between current spending and current revenues.

**cash welfare**

Welfare programs that provide cash benefits to recipients.

**cash-flow accounting**

An accounting method that calculates costs solely by adding up what the government pays for inputs to a project and calculates benefits solely by adding up income or government revenues generated by the project.

**cash-flow tax**

A tax on the difference between cash income and savings.

**categorical welfare**

Welfare programs restricted by some demographic characteristic, such as single motherhood or disability.

**causal**

Two economic variables are causally related if the movement of one causes movement of the other.

**charter schools**

Small, independent public schools that are not subject to many of the regulations imposed on traditional public schools, including restrictions on teacher qualifications.

**child care**

Care provided for children by someone other than the parents of those children.

**child support**

Court-ordered payments from an absent parent to support the upbringing of offspring.

**Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)**

A program introduced in 1997 to expand eligibility of children for public health insurance beyond the existing limits of the Medicaid program, generally up to 200% of the poverty line.

### **Coase theorem (Part I)**

When there are well-defined property rights and costless bargaining, then negotiations between the party creating the externality and the party affected by the externality can bring about the socially optimal market quantity.

### **Coase theorem (Part II)**

The efficient solution to an externality does not depend on which party is assigned the property rights, as long as someone is assigned those rights.

### **commitment devices**

Devices that help individuals who are aware of their self-control problems fight their bad tendencies.

### **commodity egalitarianism**

The principle that society should ensure that individuals meet a set of basic needs, but that beyond that point income distribution is irrelevant.

### **compensating differentials**

Additional (or reduced) wage payments to workers to compensate them for the negative (or positive) amenities of a job, such as increased risk of mortality (or a nicer office).

### **conditional block grant**

A grant of some fixed amount with a mandate that the money be spent in a particular way.

### **constrained utility maximization**

The process of maximizing the well-being (utility) of an individual, subject to her resources (budget constraint).

### **Consumer Price Index (CPI)**

An index that captures the change over time in the cost of purchasing a “typical” bundle of goods.

### **consumer surplus**

The benefit that consumers derive from consuming a good, above and beyond the price they paid for the good.

### **consumption smoothing**

The translation of consumption from periods when consumption is high, and thus has low marginal utility, to periods when consumption is low, and thus has high marginal utility.

### **consumption tax**

A tax paid on individual or household consumption of goods (and sometimes services).

### **contingent valuation**

Asking individuals to value an option that they are not now choosing, that they do not have the opportunity to choose, or that is not yet available to them.

### **contracting out**

An approach through which the government retains responsibility for providing a good or service but hires private-sector firms to actually provide the good or service.

### **control group**

The set of individuals comparable to the treatment group who are not subject to the intervention being studied.

### **control variables**

Variables that are included in cross-sectional regression models to account for differences between treatment and control groups that can lead to bias.

### **corporate income tax**

Tax levied on the earnings of corporations.

### **corporate tax integration**

The removal of the corporate tax to tax corporate income at the individual (shareholder) level.

### **correlated**

Two economic variables are correlated if they move together.

### **corruption**

The abuse of power by government officials in order to maximize their own personal wealth or that of their associates.

### **cost-benefit analysis**

The comparison of costs and benefits of public goods projects to decide if they should be undertaken.

### **cost-effectiveness analysis**

For projects that have unmeasurable benefits, or are viewed as desirable regardless of the level of benefits, we can compute only their costs and choose the most cost-effective project.

### **cross-sectional regression analysis**

Statistical analysis of the relationship between two or more variables exhibited by many individuals at one point in time.

### **crowd-out**

As the government provides more of a public good, the private sector will provide less.

### **current tax incidence**

The incidence of a tax in relation to an individual's current resources.

### **cyclically adjusted budget deficit**

A measure of the government's fiscal position if the economy were operating at full potential GDP.

### **deadweight loss**

The reduction in social efficiency from preventing trades for which benefits exceed costs.

### **debt**

The amount that a government owes to those who have loaned it money.

### **debt finance**

The raising of funds by borrowing from lenders such as banks or by selling bonds.

### **deficit**

The amount by which a government's spending exceeds its revenues in a given year.

### **defined benefit pension plans**

Pension plans in which workers accrue pension rights during their tenure at the firm, and when they retire, the firm pays them a benefit that is a function of that workers' tenure at the firm and of their earnings.

### **defined contribution pension plans**

Pension plans in which employers set aside a certain proportion of a worker's earnings (such as 5%) in an investment account, and the worker receives this savings and any accumulated investment earnings when she retires.

### **demand curve**

A curve showing the quantity of a good demanded by individuals at each price.

### **depreciation**

The rate at which capital investments lose their value over time.

### **depreciation allowances**

The amount of money that firms can deduct from their taxes to account for capital investment depreciation.

### **depreciation schedules**

The timetable by which an asset may be depreciated.

### **difference-in-difference estimator**

The difference between the changes in outcomes for the treatment group that experiences an intervention and the control group that does not.

### **direct effect of tax changes**

A higher tax rate that raises revenues on a fixed base of taxation.

### **direct effects**

The effects of government interventions that would be predicted if individuals did not change their behavior in response to the interventions.

### **direct student loans**

Loans taken directly from the U.S. Department of Education.

### **disability insurance (DI)**

A federal program in which a portion of the Social Security payroll tax is used to pay benefits to workers who have suffered a medical impairment that leaves them unable to work.

### **discretionary spending**

Optional spending set by appropriation levels each year, at Congress's discretion.

### **discretionary stabilization**

Policy actions taken by the government in response to particular instances of an underperforming or overperforming economy.

### **dividend**

The periodic payment that investors receive from the company, per share owned.

### **dynamic scoring**

A method used by budget modelers that attempts to model the effect of government policy on both the distribution of total resources and the amount of total resources.

### **Early Entitlement Age (EEA)**

The earliest age at which a Social Security recipient can receive reduced benefits.

### **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)**

A federal income tax policy that subsidizes the wages of low-income earners.

### **economic depreciation**

The true deterioration in the value of capital in each period of time.

### **economic incidence**

The burden of taxation measured by the change in the resources available to any economic agent as a result of taxation.

### **economic profits**

The difference between a firm's revenues and its economic opportunity costs of production.

### **educational credit market failure**

The failure of the credit market to make loans that would raise total social surplus by financing productive education.

### **educational vouchers**

A fixed amount of money given by the government to families with school-age children, who can spend it at any type of school, public or private.

### **effective corporate tax rate**

The percentage increase in the rate of pretax return to capital that is necessitated by taxation.

### **efficiency gap**

A metric for measuring gerrymandering: Party A's wasted votes minus Party B's wasted votes, divided by all the votes cast in the election.

### **elasticity of demand**

The percentage change in the quantity demanded of a good caused by each 1% change in the price of that good.

### **empirical tools**

The set of tools designed to analyze data and answer questions raised by theoretical analysis.

### **empirical tools of public finance**

The use of data and statistical methods to measure the impact of government policy on individuals and markets.

### **entitlement spending**

Mandatory funds for programs for which funding levels are set automatically by the number of eligible recipients, not by the discretion of Congress.

### **equality of opportunity**

The principle that society should ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities for success but not focus on the outcomes of choices made.

### **equity finance**

The raising of funds by sale of ownership shares in a firm.

### **equity-efficiency trade-off**

The choice society must make between the total size of the economic pie and its distribution among individuals.

### **estate tax**

A tax levied on the assets of the deceased that are bequeathed to others.

### **estate taxes**

A form of wealth tax based on the value of the estate left behind when one dies.

### **ex ante BBR**

A law forcing either the governor to submit a balanced budget or the legislature to pass a balanced budget at the start of each fiscal year, or both.

### **ex post BBR**

A law forcing a given government to balance its budget by the end of each fiscal year.

### **excise tax**

A tax paid on the sales of particular goods, such as cigarettes or gasoline.

### expected return

The return to a successful investment times the odds of success, plus the return to an unsuccessful investment times the odds of failure.

### expected utility model

The weighted sum of utilities across states of the world, where the weights are the probabilities of each state occurring.

### expenditure tax

A consumption tax levied on yearly consumption rather than on specific sales.

### expensing investments

Deducting the entire cost of the investment from taxes in the year in which the purchase was made.

### experience rating

Charging a price for insurance that is a function of realized outcomes.

### externality

Externalities arise whenever the actions of one party make another party worse or better off, yet the first party neither bears the costs nor receives the benefits of doing so.

### First Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics

The competitive equilibrium, where supply equals demand, maximizes social efficiency.

### first-dollar coverage

Insurance plans that cover all medical spending, with little or no patient payment.

### fiscal equalization

Policies by which the national government distributes grants to subnational governments in an effort to equalize differences in wealth.

### foreign tax credit

U.S.-based multinational corporations may claim a credit against their U.S. taxes for any tax payments made to foreign governments when funds are repatriated to the parent.

### four questions of public finance

When should the government intervene in the economy? How might the government intervene? What is the effect of those interventions on economic outcomes? Why do governments choose to intervene in the way that they do?

### free rider problem

When an investment has a personal cost but a common benefit, individuals will underinvest.

### Full Benefits Age (FBA)

The age at which a Social Security recipient receives full retirement benefits (Primary Insurance Amount).

### full shifting

When one party in a transaction bears all of the tax burden.

### funded

Refers to retirement plans in which today's savings are invested in various assets in order to pay future benefits.

### general equilibrium tax incidence

Analysis that considers the effects on related markets of a tax imposed on one market.

### gerrymandering

The process of manipulating maps, on the part of the political party in power, in an effort to maintain or grow their power.

### gift tax

A tax levied on assets that one individual gives to another in the form of a gift.

### global tax system

A tax system in which corporations are taxed by their home countries on their income regardless of where it is earned.

### government failure

The inability or unwillingness of the government to act primarily in the interest of its citizens.

### government's intertemporal budget constraint

An equation relating the present discounted value of the government's obligations to the present discounted value of its revenues.

### greenhouse effect

The process by which gases in the Earth's atmosphere reflect heat from the sun back to the Earth.

**gross income**

The total of an individual's various sources of income.

**gross price**

The price in the market.

**Haig-Simons comprehensive income definition**

Defines taxable resources as the change in an individual's power to consume during the year.

**health maintenance organization (HMO)**

A health care organization that integrates insurance and delivery of care by, for example, paying its own doctors and hospitals a salary independent of the amount of care they deliver.

**health savings account (HSA)**

A type of insurance arrangement whereby patients face large deductibles, and they put money aside on a tax-free basis to prepay these deductibles.

**holdout problem**

Shared ownership of property rights gives each owner power over all the others.

**horizontal equity**

The principle that similar individuals who make different economic choices should be treated similarly by the tax system.

**house price capitalization**

Incorporation into the price of a house the costs (including local property taxes) and benefits (including local public goods) of living in the house.

**human capital**

A person's stock of skills, which may be increased by further education.

**implicit obligation**

Financial obligations that the government has in the future that are not recognized in the annual budgetary process.

**impure public goods**

Goods that satisfy the two public good conditions (non-rival in consumption and non-excludable) to some extent, but not fully.

**imputing home earnings**

Assigning a dollar value to the earnings from work at home.

**income effect**

A rise in the price of a good will typically cause an individual to choose less of all goods because her income can purchase less than before.

**indifference curve**

A graphical representation of all bundles of goods that make an individual equally well off. Because these bundles have equal utility, an individual is indifferent as to which bundle she consumes.

**indirect effects**

The effects of government interventions that arise only because individuals change their behavior in response to the interventions.

**indirect effects of tax changes**

A higher tax rate that lowers the size of the revenue base on which taxes are levied.

**individual income tax**

A tax paid on individual income accrued during the year.

**Individual Retirement Account (IRA)**

A tax-favored retirement savings vehicle primarily for low- and middle-income taxpayers, who make pre-tax contributions and are then taxed on future withdrawals.

**inferior goods**

Goods for which demand falls as income rises.

**information asymmetry**

The difference in information that is available to sellers and to purchasers in a market.

**inframarginal impacts**

Tax breaks the government gives to those whose behavior is not changed by new tax policy.

**in-kind welfare**

Welfare programs that deliver goods, such as medical care or housing, to recipients.

**insurance premiums**

Money that is paid to an insurer so that an individual will be insured against adverse events.

**interest rate**

The rate of return in the second period of investments made in the first period.

**intergenerational equity**

The treatment of future generations relative to current generations.

**intergovernmental grants**

Payments from one level of government to another.

**internalizing the externality**

When either private negotiations or government actions lead the price to the party to reflect fully the external costs or benefits of that party's actions.

**international emissions trading**

Under the Kyoto treaty, the industrialized signatories are allowed to trade emissions rights among themselves, as long as the total emissions goals are met.

**intertemporal budget constraint**

The measure of the rate at which individuals can trade off consumption in one period for consumption in another period.

**intertemporal choice model**

The choice about how much to save is really the choice about how to allocate one's consumption over time.

**investment tax credit (ITC)**

A credit that allows firms to deduct a percentage of their annual qualified investment expenditures from the taxes they owe.

**iron triangle**

There is no way to change either the benefit reduction rate or the benefit guarantee to simultaneously encourage work, redistribute more income, and lower costs.

**itemized deductions**

Alternative to the standard deduction, whereby a taxpayer deducts the total amount of money spent on various expenses, such as gifts to charity and interest on home mortgages.

**job lock**

The unwillingness to move to a better job for fear of losing health insurance.

**job match quality**

The marginal product associated with the match of a particular worker with a particular job.

**legacy debt**

The debt incurred by the government because early generations of beneficiaries received much more in benefits than they paid in taxes.

**lifetime tax incidence**

The incidence of a tax in relation to an individual's lifetime resources.

**Lindahl pricing**

An approach to financing public goods in which individuals honestly reveal their willingness to pay, and the government charges them that amount to finance the public good.

**liquidity constraints**

Barriers to credit availability that limit the ability of individuals to borrow.

**lobbying**

The expending of resources by certain individuals or groups in an attempt to influence a politician.

**lock-in effect**

To minimize the present discounted value of capital gains tax payments, individuals delay selling their capital assets, locking in their assets.

**long-term care**

Health care delivered to the disabled and elderly for their long-term rather than acute needs, either in an institutional setting (a nursing home) or in their homes.

**lump-sum tax**

A fixed taxation amount independent of a person's income, consumption of goods and services, or wealth.

**magnet schools**

Special public schools set up to attract talented students or students interested in a particular subject or teaching style.

**majority voting**

The typical mechanism used to aggregate individual votes into a social decision, whereby individual policy options are put to a vote, and the option that receives the majority of votes is chosen.

**managed care**

An approach to controlling medical costs using supply-side restrictions such as limited choice of medical provider.

**mandate**

A legal requirement for employers to offer insurance or for individuals to obtain some type of insurance coverage.

**marginal cost**

The incremental cost to a firm of producing one more unit of a good.

**marginal deadweight loss**

The increase in deadweight loss per unit increase in the tax.

**marginal impacts**

Changes in behavior the government hopes to encourage through a given tax incentive.

**marginal productivity**

The impact of a one-unit change in any input, holding other inputs constant, on the firm's output.

**marginal rate of substitution (MRS)**

The rate at which a consumer is willing to trade one good for another. The *MRS* equals the slope of the indifference curve, the rate at which the consumer will trade the good on the vertical axis for the good on the horizontal axis.

**marginal tax rate**

The percentage that is paid in taxes of the next dollar earned.

**marginal utility**

The additional increment to utility obtained by consuming an additional unit of a good.

**marginal willingness to pay**

The amount that individuals are willing to pay for the next unit of a good.

**market**

The arena in which demanders and suppliers interact.

**market equilibrium**

The combination of price and quantity that satisfies both demand and supply, determined by the interaction of the supply and demand curves.

**market failure**

A problem that causes the market economy to deliver an outcome that does not maximize efficiency.

**marriage tax**

A rise in the joint tax burden on two individuals from becoming married.

**matching grant**

A grant, the amount of which is tied to the amount of spending by the local community.

**means-tested**

Refers to programs in which eligibility depends on the level of one's current income or assets.

**means-tested welfare**

Welfare programs restricted only by income and asset levels.

**median voter**

The voter whose tastes are in the middle of the set of voters.

**Median Voter Theorem**

Majority voting will yield the outcome preferred by the median voter if preferences are single-peaked.

**Medicaid**

A federal and state program that provides health for poor families, the elderly, and the disabled.

## **Medicare**

A federal program that provides health insurance to all people over age 65 and disabled persons under age 65.

## **Medicare Part A**

Part of the Medicare program that covers inpatient hospital costs and some costs of long-term care; financed from a payroll tax.

## **Medicare Part B**

Part of the Medicare program that covers physician expenditures, outpatient hospital expenditures, and other services; financed from enrollee premiums and general revenues.

## **Medicare Part D**

Part of the Medicare program that covers prescription drug expenditures.

## **minimum wage**

Legally mandated minimum amount that workers must be paid for each hour of work.

## **models**

Mathematical or graphical representations of reality.

## **monopoly markets**

Markets in which there is only one supplier of a good.

## **moral hazard**

Adverse actions taken by individuals or producers in response to insurance against adverse outcomes.

## **mortgage**

An agreement to use a certain property, usually a home, as security for a loan.

## **multinational firms**

Firms that operate in multiple countries.

## **negative consumption externality**

When an individual's consumption reduces the well-being of others who are not compensated by the individual.

## **negative internality**

The damage done to oneself through adverse behavior that is not fully accounted for in decision making.

## **negative production externality**

When a firm's production reduces the well-being of others who are not compensated by the firm.

## **no-fault insurance**

When there is a qualifying injury, the workers' compensation benefits are paid out by the insurer regardless of whether the injury was the worker's or the firm's fault.

## **nominal interest rate**

The interest rate earned by a given investment.

## **nominal prices**

Prices stated in today's dollars.

## **non-excludable**

Individuals cannot deny each other the opportunity to consume a good.

## **nongroup insurance market**

The market through which individuals or families buy insurance directly rather than through a group, such as the workplace.

## **non-rival in consumption**

One individual's consumption of a good does not affect another's opportunity to consume the good.

## **normal goods**

Goods for which demand increases as income rises.

## **numeraire good**

A good for which the price is set at \$1 to model choice between goods, which depends on relative, not absolute, prices.

## **observational data**

Data generated by individual behavior observed in the real world, not in the context of deliberately designed experiments.

## **oligopoly markets**

Markets in which firms have some market power in setting prices but not as much as a monopolist.

**opportunity cost**

The cost of any purchase is the next best alternative use of that money, or the forgone opportunity.

**optimal commodity taxation**

Choosing the tax rates across goods to minimize deadweight loss for a given government revenue requirement.

**optimal fiscal federalism**

The question of which activities should take place at which level of government.

**optimal income taxation**

Choosing the tax rates across income groups to maximize social welfare subject to a government revenue requirement.

**ordeal mechanisms**

Features of welfare programs that make them unattractive, leading to the self-selection of only the most needy recipients.

**overtime pay rules**

Workers in many jobs must legally be paid one and a half times their regular hourly pay if they work more than 40 hours per week.

**partial equilibrium tax incidence**

Analysis that considers the impact of a tax on a market in isolation.

**partially experience-rated**

The tax that finances the UI program rises as firms have more layoffs, but not on a one-for-one basis.

**payroll tax**

A tax levied on income earned on one's job.

**pension plan**

An employer-sponsored plan through which employers and employees save on a (generally) tax-free basis for the employees' retirement.

**political economy**

The theory of how the political process produces decisions that affect individuals and the economy.

**pooling equilibrium**

A market equilibrium in which all types of people buy full insurance even though it is not fairly priced to all individuals.

**positive consumption externality**

When an individual's consumption increases the well-being of others, but the individual is not compensated by those others.

**positive production externality**

When a firm's production increases the well-being of others but the firm is not compensated by those others.

**poverty line**

The federal government's standard for measuring absolute deprivation.

**precautionary savings model**

A model of savings that accounts for the fact that individual savings serve to smooth consumption over future uncertainties, at least partly.

**preexisting distortions**

Market failures, such as externalities or imperfect competition, that are in place before any government intervention.

**preferred provider organization (PPO)**

A health care organization that lowers care costs by shopping for health care providers on behalf of the insured.

**premium support**

A system of full choice among health care plans for Medicare enrollees, whereby they receive a voucher for a certain amount that they can apply to a range of health insurance options (either paying or receiving the difference between plan premiums and the voucher amount).

**present discounted value (PDV)**

The value of each period's dollar amount in today's terms.

**primary earners**

Family members who are the main source of labor income for a household.

**private marginal benefit (PMB)**

The direct benefit to consumers of consuming an additional unit of a good by the consumer.

**private marginal cost (PMC)**

The direct cost to producers of producing an additional unit of a good.

**privatization**

A proposal to reform Social Security by allowing individuals to invest their payroll taxes in various assets through individually controlled accounts.

**producer surplus**

The benefit that producers derive from selling a good, above and beyond the cost of producing that good.

**profit**

The difference between a firm's revenues and costs, maximized when marginal revenues equal marginal costs.

**progressive**

Tax systems in which effective average tax rates rise with income.

**property tax**

A tax levied on the value of real estate, including the value of the land and any structures built on the land.

**proportional**

Tax systems in which effective average tax rates do not change with income, so that all taxpayers pay the same proportion of their income in taxes.

**prospective capital gains tax reduction**

Capital gains tax cuts that apply only to investments made from this day forward.

**Prospective Payment System (PPS)**

Medicare's system for reimbursing hospitals based on nationally standardized payments for specific diagnoses.

**prospective reimbursement**

The practice of paying providers based on what treating patients should cost, not on what the provider spends.

**public choice theory**

A school of thought emphasizing that the government may not act to maximize the well-being of its citizens.

**public finance**

The study of the role of the government in the economy.

**public goods**

Goods for which the investment of any one individual benefits everyone in a larger group.

**pure public goods**

Goods that are perfectly non-rival in consumption and are non-excludable.

**quasi-experiments**

Changes in the economic environment that create nearly identical treatment and control groups for studying the effect of that environmental change, allowing public finance economists to take advantage of randomization created by external forces.

**Ramsey Rule**

To minimize the deadweight loss of a tax system while raising a fixed amount of revenue, taxes should be set across commodities so that the ratio of the marginal deadweight loss to marginal revenue raised is equal across commodities.

**randomized trial**

The ideal type of experiment designed to test causality, whereby a group of individuals is randomly divided into a treatment group, which receives the treatment of interest, and a control group, which does not.

**real interest rate**

The nominal interest rate minus the inflation rate; this measures an individual's actual improvement in purchasing power due to savings.

**real prices**

Prices stated in some constant year's dollars.

**redistribution**

The shifting of resources from some groups in society to others.

**reduced form estimates**

Measures of the total impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable, without decomposing the source of that behavior response in terms of underlying utility functions.

**referendum**

A measure placed on the ballot by the government allowing citizens to vote on state laws or constitutional amendments that

have already been passed by the state legislature.

**refund**

The difference between the amount withheld from a worker's earnings and the taxes owed if the former is higher.

**refundable**

Describes tax credits that are available to individuals even if they pay few or no taxes.

**regression line**

The line that measures the best linear approximation to the relationship between any two variables.

**regressive**

Tax systems in which effective average tax rates fall with income.

**relative income inequality**

The amount of income that the poor have relative to the rich.

**rents**

Payments to resource deliverers that exceed those necessary to employ the resource.

**repatriation**

The return of income from a foreign country to a corporation's home country.

**replacement rate**

The ratio of benefits received to earnings prior to the entitling event.

**retained earnings**

Any net profits that are kept by the company rather than paid out to debt or equity holders.

**retirement hazard rate**

The percentage of workers retiring at a certain age.

**retrospective reimbursement**

Reimbursing physicians for the costs they have already incurred.

**returns to education**

The benefits that accrue to society when students get more schooling or when they get schooling from a higher-quality environment.

**revealed preference**

Letting the actions of individuals reveal their valuation.

**risk aversion**

The extent to which individuals are willing to bear risk.

**risk pool**

The group of individuals who enroll in an insurance plan.

**risk premium**

The amount that risk-averse individuals will pay for insurance above and beyond the actuarially fair price.

**Roth IRA**

A variation on normal IRAs to which taxpayers make after-tax contributions but may then make tax-free withdrawals later in life.

**sales taxes**

Taxes paid by consumers to vendors at the point of sale.

**savings**

The excess of current income over current consumption.

**school finance equalization**

Laws that mandate redistribution of funds across communities in a state to ensure more equal financing of schools.

**screening**

A model that suggests that education provides only a means of separating high-ability individuals from low-ability individuals and does not actually improve skills.

**Second Fundamental Theorem of Welfare Economics**

Society can attain any efficient outcome by suitably redistributing resources among individuals and then allowing them to freely trade.

**secondary earners**

Workers in the family other than the primary earners.

**secondhand smoke**

Tobacco smoke inhaled by individuals in the vicinity of smokers.

**self-control problem**

An inability to carry out optimal strategies for consumption.

**self-insurance**

The private means of smoothing consumption over adverse events, such as through one's own savings, the labor supply of family members, or borrowing from friends.

**separating equilibrium**

A market equilibrium in which different types of people buy different kinds of insurance products designed to reveal their true types.

**shareholders**

Individuals who have purchased ownership stakes in a company.

**short-run stabilization issues**

The role of the government in combating the peaks and troughs of the business cycle.

**Simplified Employee Pension IRA (SEP-IRA) accounts**

Retirement savings accounts specifically for the self-employed, under which up to \$55,000 per year can be saved on a tax-free basis.

**single-payer system**

A health care system in which all health insurance is provided and paid for by the government.

**single-peaked preferences**

Preferences with only a single local maximum, or peak, so that utility falls as choices move away in any direction from that peak.

**SO<sub>2</sub> allowance system**

The feature of the 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act that granted plants permits to emit SO<sub>2</sub> in limited quantities and allowed them to trade those permits.

**social capital**

The value of altruistic and communal behavior in society.

**social discount rate**

The appropriate value of  $r$  to use in computing  $PDV$  for social investments.

**social insurance programs**

Government interventions in the provision of insurance against adverse events.

**social marginal benefit (SMB)**

The private marginal benefit to consumers minus any costs associated with the consumption of the good that are imposed on others.

**social marginal cost (SMC)**

The private marginal cost to producers plus any costs associated with the production of the good that are imposed on others.

**Social Security**

A federal program that taxes workers to provide income support to the elderly.

**Social Security Wealth (SSW)**

The expected present discounted values of a person's future Social Security payments minus the expected present discounted value of a person's payroll tax payments.

**social welfare**

The level of well-being in society.

**social welfare function (SWF)**

A function that combines the utility functions of all individuals into an overall social utility function.

**special education**

Programs to educate disabled children.

**standard deduction**

A fixed amount that a taxpayer can deduct from taxable income.

### **states of the world**

The set of outcomes that are possible in an uncertain future.

### **static scoring**

A method used by budget modelers that assumes that government policy changes only the distribution of total resources, not the amount of total resources.

### **statutory incidence**

The burden of a tax borne by the party that sends the check to the government.

### **structural estimates**

Estimates of the features that drive individual decisions, such as income and substitution effects or utility parameters.

### **subsidiaries**

The production arms of a corporation that are located in other nations.

### **subsidy**

Government payment to an individual or firm that lowers the cost of consumption or production, respectively.

### **substitution effect**

Holding utility constant, a relative rise in the price of a good will always cause an individual to choose less of that good.

### **supply curve**

A curve showing the quantity of a good that firms are willing to supply at each price.

### **tax capitalization**

The change in asset prices that occurs due to a change in the tax levied on the stream of returns from that asset.

### **tax compliance**

Efforts to reduce the evasion of taxes.

### **tax credits**

Amounts by which taxpayers are allowed to reduce the taxes they owe to the government through spending, for example on child care.

### **tax deductions**

Amounts by which taxpayers are allowed to reduce their taxable income through spending on items such as charitable donations or home mortgage interest.

### **tax evasion**

Illegal nonpayment of taxation.

### **tax expenditures**

Government revenue losses attributable to tax law provisions that allow special exclusions, exemptions, or deductions from gross income, or that provide a special credit, preferential tax rate, or deferral of liability.

### **tax incidence**

Assessing which party (consumers or producers) bears the true burden of a tax.

### **tax loss offset**

The extent to which taxpayers can deduct net losses on investments from their taxable income.

### **tax price**

For school equalization schemes, the amount of revenue a local district would have to raise in order to gain \$1 more of spending.

### **tax shelters**

Activities whose sole reason for existence is tax minimization.

### **tax subsidy to employer-provided health insurance**

Workers are taxed on their wage compensation but not on compensation in the form of health insurance, leading to a subsidy to health insurance provided through employers.

### **tax wedge**

The difference between what consumers pay and what producers receive (net of tax) from a transaction.

### **taxable income**

The amount of income left after subtracting exemptions and deductions from adjusted gross income.

### **taxation on accrual**

Taxes paid each period on the return earned by an asset in that period.

**taxation on realization**

Taxes paid on an asset's return only when that asset is sold.

**tax-benefit linkages**

Direct ties between taxes paid and benefits received.

**taxing consumption**

Taxing individuals based not on what they earn but on what they consume (such as through a sales tax).

**territorial tax system**

A tax system in which corporations earning income abroad pay tax only to the government of the country in which the income is earned.

**theoretical tools**

The set of tools designed to understand the mechanics behind economic decision making.

**time series analysis**

Analysis of the comovement of two series over time.

**total social surplus (social efficiency)**

The sum of consumer surplus and producer surplus.

**transfer prices**

The amount that one subsidiary of a corporation reimburses another subsidiary of the same corporation for goods transferred between the two.

**transfer tax**

A tax levied on the transfer of assets from one individual to another.

**transitional inequities from tax reform**

Changes in the treatment of similar individuals who have made different decisions in the past and are therefore differentially treated by tax reform.

**treatment group**

The set of individuals who are subject to an intervention being studied.

**uncompensated care**

The costs of delivering health care for which providers are not reimbursed.

**unemployment insurance (UI)**

A federally mandated, state-run program in which payroll taxes are used to pay benefits to workers laid off by companies.

**unfunded**

Refers to retirement plans in which payments collected from today's workers go directly to today's retirees, instead of being invested in order to pay future benefits.

**utility function**

A mathematical function representing an individual's set of preferences, which translates her well-being from different consumption bundles into units that can be compared in order to determine choice.

**value of additional government revenues**

The value of having another dollar in the government's hands relative to its next best use in the private sector.

**value-added tax (VAT)**

A consumption tax levied on each stage of a good's production on the increase in value of the good at that stage of production.

**vertical equity**

The principle that groups with more resources should pay higher taxes than groups with fewer resources.

**voter initiative**

The placement of legislation on the ballot by citizens.

**warm glow model**

A model of the public goods provision in which individuals care about both the total amount of the public good and their particular contributions as well.

**wealth taxes**

Taxes paid on the value of the assets, such as real estate or stocks, held by a person or family.

**welfare economics**

The study of the determinants of well-being, or welfare, in society.

**withholding**

The subtraction of estimated taxes owed directly from a worker's earnings.

**workers' compensation (WC)**

State-mandated insurance, which firms generally buy from private insurers, that pays for medical costs and lost wages associated with an on-the-job injury.

**zoning**

Restrictions that towns place on the use of real estate.

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