

Research Statement

Mike Cassidy

Rutgers University

October 2019

1 Introduction

As an applied microeconomist, my mission is to understand how individuals make decisions and how policy can help them make better ones. In my telling of it, economics is about bringing the scientific method into the realm of human behavior, a messy domain where preferences and endowments meet incentives and constraints to produce explicable, if not always desirable, outcomes—results ripe for optimization. Economics is not a collection of questions so much as a set of tools—methods, models, and modes of thought—that enforce rigor in reasoning and discipline in assessing evidence.

My animating passion is to improve the well-being of others, and I believe quantifying causality through exacting empiricism offers the best hope of doing so (or at least reflects my comparative advantage). And because maximizing welfare necessarily entails attending to the needs of the least fortunate, my leading application is social policy, comprehensively construed. My dissertation focuses on homeless families, a setting which implicates the fields of labor, public, education, health, welfare, and urban economics—which is indicative of the topical breadth of my research agenda.

My research rests on three principles. First, ask good questions. Often such queries take the form of evaluating exiting policies, but other suitable candidates for investigation are puzzles with yet-to-be-implemented solutions. Second, get good data. The questions one can answer depend on the evidence one can assemble. In my dissertation work, I've become proficient at acquiring and handling confidential government administrative data. Third, be econometrically clever. Rarely is the insight of interest directly accessible; instead, uncovering causality requires determined creativity.

Although my strengths are applied, I am also fascinated by microeconomic theory and econometric methods. I believe structured models are essential for organizing ideas and interpreting findings; I strive to hone my skills in this regard. In a similar way, results are only as valid as the methods from which they are construed, and so a deep appreciation

of technique is central to proper empiricism. As such, I seek to consistently incorporate—if not expand—the microeconomic frontier in my work. Currently, my econometric interests include marginal treatment effect informed instrumental variables, regression discontinuity, and machine learning.

2 Current Research

My dissertation consists of three applied microeconomic papers, unified by the themes of education and causal inference. Two study the effects of a neighborhood-based shelter placement policy for homeless families in New York City. The first chapter investigates homeless children’s short-term academic outcomes, while the second situates the placement policy in the context of the family as a whole, assessing its effects on length of stay, public benefit use, and parental employment. My third paper expands the inquiry to all primary school students, but considers a similarly-underappreciated academic intervention: aerobic exercise. The school-based distance running program I study is a promising means of jointly addressing childhood inactivity and academic underperformance, especially among disadvantaged youth.

The abstracts of these three papers follow. The first two are substantially complete, while the third is in its early stages.

2.1 A Closer Look: Proximity Boosts Homeless Student Performance in New York City

Convenience augments homeless students’ educational outcomes. Homeless K–8 graders whose families are placed in shelters near their schools have 8 percent (2.4 days) better attendance, are a third (18 percentage points) less likely to change schools, and exhibit higher rates of proficiency and retention. Homeless high schoolers have 5 percent (2.5 days) better attendance, 29 percent (10 pp) lower mobility, and 8 percent (1.6 pp) greater retention when placed locally. These results proceed from novel administrative data on homeless families observed in the context of a scarcity-induced natural experiment in New York City. A complementary instrumental variable strategy exploiting homeless eligibility policy reveals a subset of proximity-elastic students benefit considerably more. Panel evidence demonstrates homelessness does not cause educational impairment as much as reflect large preexisting deficits. (*JEL I21, I28, I38, H53, H75, D91*)

2.2 A Home Away From (or Nearby) Home: Homeless Family Responses to Exogenous Benefit Variation in New York City

Using an original administrative panel and exploiting a scarcity-induced natural experiment, I investigate the effects of New York City’s neighborhood-based shelter placement policy on homeless families. The outcomes I consider encompass shelter use, public benefit receipt, and employment. Complementary instrumental variable and regression discontinuity designs exploiting policy shocks and rules, respectively, assess heterogeneous impacts among difficult-to-place families. A family fixed effects model capitalizing on multi-spell counterfactuals delivers a third identification strategy. My results, which will be released pending agency review, yield behavioral insights that can be applied to the design of poverty alleviation programs more generally.

2.3 Childhood Running, Academic Performance, and Health

Individuals who participate in athletics tend to be healthier and academically outperform their sedentary peers. These educational differences persist into adulthood, with implications for earnings and employment. In this paper, I exploit quasi-random variation in the introduction of a school-based running program to identify the causal effect of athletics on educational performance and health. My data consists of confidential public school administrative data linked with running program records. I pursue two identification strategies. The first is a complementary difference-in-differences and student fixed effects design comparing schools and students pre- and post-program participation. The second is a novel instrumental variable strategy based on teacher road running affinity.

3 Future Research

My post-graduate research program will continue to highlight social policy evaluation. I will cultivate the government relationships I have developed in my dissertation research and investigate questions of mutual interest to myself and policymakers. Homelessness and education will remain key themes. However, I plan to expand my agenda to include both prominent programs (e.g., public assistance, nutrition assistance, child care, and work supports), as well as oft-neglected areas (e.g., after-school programs and senior services).

Although social policy is my most urgent research priority, I do have wide interests in other areas, ranging from childhood development and environmental policy to sports and exercise. In addition, I believe collaboration with the hard sciences is an endeavor ripe for investment, as fields such as medicine would benefit from economists’ statistical literacy, particularly as it relates to quasi-experimentation and observational studies.

Specific topics I plan to pursue include urban beautification as poverty policy, the economics of elite distance running, the long-term effects of elite high schools, the performance effects of sleep, the game theory of government contract negotiations, and mechanism design in homeless policy. Additional detail about these research proposals and others are available upon request.