

OLUCHI MBONU

ombonu@g.harvard.edu

Cell: 626-354-1191



HARVARD
UNIVERSITY

Littauer Center
1805 Cambridge St
Cambridge MA 02138

Placement Director: Gabriel Chodorow-Reich
Placement Director: Jeremy Stein
Administrative Director: Brenda Piquet

chodorowreich@fas.harvard.edu 617-496-3226
jeremy_stein@harvard.edu 617-496-6455
bpiquet@harvard.edu 617-495-8927

Education

Harvard University

Ph.D. Economics, 2019 to 2025 (expected)

M.A. Economics, 2023

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

B.A Mathematics & Economics, Highest Honors and Highest Distinction, 2016

Minor Computer Science

Fields

Development Economics

Urban Economics

References

Professor Emily Breza
ebreza@fas.harvard.edu

Professor Edward Glaeser
eglaeser@harvard.edu

Professor Gabriel Kreindler
gkreindler@fas.harvard.edu

Fellowships & Awards

Center for International Development, PhD Affiliate, Harvard University, 2022-2024

American Law and Economic Review Best Empirical Paper Award, 2022

Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, Harvard University, 2021, 2022

Nigerian Fellowships for Distinguished African Students, Government of Nigeria, 2019-2021

Renwick Academic Achievement Award, UNC-Chapel Hill, 2012-2016

Teaching

Introduction to Econometrics (UG), Harvard University, teaching fellow for Prof. Bruich, 2022, 2024

Introduction to Econometrics (UG), Harvard University, teaching fellow for Prof. Pettenuzzo, 2021

Development Microeconomics (PhD), Harvard University, teaching fellow for Prof. Breza, 2023

Financial Markets for the Poor (UG), Harvard University, teaching fellow for Prof. Breza, 2023

Introduction to Scientific Programming (UG), UNC-Chapel Hill, teaching fellow for Prof. Bishop, 2014, 2016

Employment

World Bank (DIME), Short Term Consultant, 2021

Credit Suisse, Technical Analyst, 2016-2017

Research

Research Assistant, Harvard University, Prof. Gabriel Kreindler, 2022-2024

Research Assistant, Harvard University, Prof. Michael Kremer, 2020

Empirical Research Fellow, Stanford Law School, Prof. Daniel Ho, 2017-2019

Job Market Paper

“Informal Public Transportation and Commuter Demand” (with F. Christopher Eaglin)

Abstract: In many developing countries, public transportation is dominated by decentralized informal minibus networks. As cities consider how best to regulate this industry, a frequently cited advantage is its ability to nimbly respond to changes in demand patterns. In theory, informal transit can adjust routes and frequencies in response to commuter demand. However, there has been no empirical work quantifying this flexibility. We use novel data on informal transportation supply in Johannesburg to estimate the sector's flexibility. To instrument for demand, we use variation in

demand for mobility induced by monthly pay cycles. In practice, the sector is composed of agents who cannot optimize freely over prices and location; rather, minibuses owners must join an association in order to operate. These associations centrally control minibuses allocation and fares for the routes within their territory. In the short-term, the number of minibuses on a route increases by 0.85% when aggregate demand on that route increases by 1%. The supply elasticity on routes that are serviced by multiple associations is 0.55. In contrast, this elasticity is 0.8 on routes serviced by a single association. Flexibility is lower on routes which are serviced by multiple minibuses associations, as these associations must negotiate with each other to reallocate vehicles, thereby reducing their responsiveness to demand shocks.

Publications

“Mandatory Retirement and Age, Race, and Gender Diversity of University Faculties” (with Daniel Ho and Anne McDonough, *American Law and Economic Review*, 2021)
ALER Best Empirical Paper Award, 2022

Abstract: While many have documented the changing demographics of universities, understanding the effects of prohibiting mandatory retirement (“uncapping”) has proved challenging. We digitize detailed directories of all American law school faculty from 1971–2017 and show that uncapping in 1994 had dramatic effects. From 1971 to 1993, the percent of faculty above 70—when mandatory retirement would typically have been triggered—remained stable at 1%, but starting in 1994, that proportion increased to 14%. We use a permutation test of moving cohorts to show that these increases are attributable to uncapping. Roughly 39% of faculty members would counterfactually have been subject to mandatory retirement. Effects were less pronounced at public schools, which were more likely to have defined benefits retirement plans. Second, we show that schools with the highest proportion of faculty over 70, and thus most impacted by uncapping, also exhibit the slowest integration of female and minority faculty members. Our study highlights crosscutting effects of civil rights laws: preventing age discrimination can have collateral effects on racial and gender integration.

“Menu labeling, calories, and nutrient density: Evidence from chain restaurants” (with Daniel Ho, Rebecca Potash, and Anne McDonough, *PLOS One*, 2020)

Abstract: The Food and Drug Administration’s menu labeling rule requires chain restaurants to prominently display calories, while leaving other nutritional information (e.g., fat, sodium, sugar) to the request of consumers. We use rich micronutrient data from 257 large chain brands and 24,076 menu items to examine whether calories are correlated with widely used “nutrient profile” scores that measure healthfulness based on nutrient density. We show that calories are indeed statistically significant predictors of nutrient density. However, as a substantive matter, the correlation is highly attenuated (partial $R^2 < 0.01$). Our findings (a) suggest that the promise of calorie labeling to improve nutrient intake quality at restaurants is limited and (b) clarify the basis for transparency of nutrient composition beyond calories to promote healthy menu choices.

Working Papers

“Demand for Urban Exploration: Evidence from Nairobi” (with Joshua Dean and Gabriel Kreindler)

Abstract: Growing cities in low- and middle-income countries offer increased market access, yet this requires that residents explore their surroundings. This is not always the case. In a sample of 800 casual workers in Nairobi, the median person commutes 7.8 km but has never been to half the neighborhoods at most 75 minutes from where they live. We offer short-term employment to these workers and experimentally induce familiarity by training participants in either familiar or unfamiliar locations. We measure willingness to work in different locations across the city. Participants need to be paid more to work in a neighborhood that is unfamiliar at baseline. The premium is equivalent to 3.5 km of distance or to 113 Ksh (23% of the median daily wage), and this is fully offset after one visit. Participant beliefs about labor market opportunities and safety in unfamiliar neighborhoods are initially worse on average, but converge after one visit. We consider two additional potential barriers to exploration. First, participants only partially anticipate that one visit will eliminate the familiarity premium. Second, we use an open elicitation for job choice to

show that unfamiliar neighborhoods are less “top of mind.” In terms of persistence, treatment effects on take-up of a different paid opportunity 2-4 months after the intervention are similar in size yet somewhat noisy. We find that participants return on their own to the unfamiliar neighborhoods where they were trained to search for work and for non-work reasons.

“Putting the ‘Fare’ in Welfare: The Effects of Public Transportation Fare Discounts for Low-Income Households” (with Seth Chizeck)

Abstract: Public transportation fares in the United States are often unaffordable for low-income riders. We conducted a randomized controlled trial that provided fare discounts to 9,544 low-income households in one large U.S. County. Households were randomly assigned to receive either no discount, a 50% discount, or a 100% discount on all public transit trips for 16 to 19 months. Combining data from farecard boardings, surveys, and smartphone GPS logs, we find that reducing fares to zero causes substitution towards greater use of public transit for existing travel and increases total transit ridership by a factor of 1.6. Half-price fares yield little to no increase in ridership. We find no economically or statistically significant effects on labor market outcomes or overall health care consumption according to administrative data. Fare discounts improve several dimensions of transportation security according to survey data. Our results demonstrate the importance of fare prices in shaping travel behavior, yet also suggest that fares play a limited role in the broader socioeconomic lives of poor families.

Papers in Progress

“Nudging Parents out the Door: The Impacts of Parental Encouragement on School Choice and Test Scores” (with Guthrie Gray-Lobe, Michael Kremer, Joost de Laat, and Cole Scanlon)

Abstract: This study evaluates a large-scale automated SMS outreach program to engage caregivers of students in private primary schools in Kenya. Caregivers in outreach schools received weekly SMS messages, while those in control schools received none. Estimates suggest that messages increased test scores, especially for initially lower-performing students. Message content appears to matter little, and the benefits of outreach spill over onto students whose caregivers did not directly receive messages. Although modest in magnitude, test score effects are large enough to be highly cost-effective -- relative to other education interventions -- given the low cost of sending SMS messages. Outreach induced households to leave the private schools. Exit effects are especially large for initially higher-achieving students. The negative impacts on enrollment (and revenues) and positive impacts on test scores suggest a divergence between private and social incentives for encouraging parents to take an active role in their children's education.

Seminars & Conferences

Association for Public Policy Analysis & Management Research Conference (2023)

Academic Service

Mentor: Harvard/MIT Application Assistance and Mentoring Program (2021-2023), Harvard Graduate Student Peer Mentoring Program (2020-2023)

Research Grants

Policy Impacts Early-Career Scholar Grant, 2024
Kenneth C. Griffin Economics Research Award, 2023
Lab for Economic Applications and Policy (x2), 2022, 2023
J-PAL NA Social Policy Research Initiative Grant, 2023
Warburg Research Fund (x2), 2021, 2022
Institute for Humane Studies, 2019

Software skills

R, Python, Stata, MATLAB, SQL, ODK collect