

# OLUCHI MBONU

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# HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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## Education

### Harvard University

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

M.A. Economics, 2022

### 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  
eglaser@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

**“Market Segmentation in Informal Public Transportation: Evidence from Johannesburg's Minibus Taxi Networks”** (with F. Christopher Eaglin)

*Abstract:* In many developing countries, the market for public transportation is segmented among private associations of minibus owners. We study how this segmentation affects the supply of public transportation in these contexts. Using detailed GPS traces for over 40 million minibus trips in Johannesburg, South Africa, we document two key findings. First, this segmentation affects the industry's ability to nimbly respond to shifts in aggregate mobility, an advantage that is often cited – but little studied. To instrument for aggregate mobility, we introduce a new, cyclic, expected mobility demand shock: the sharp increase in recreational mobility following monthly pay dates. Elasticity is significantly lower on routes that connect different associations' territories (0.40)

compared to routes contained within an association's territory (0.99). This lower supply elasticity on "across-territory" routes increases wait time for commuters by almost one million minutes per day, which translates to about 4 minutes per trip. Second, we find that when associations are faced with exogenous shocks to fleet size via bus breakdowns, they prioritize maintaining supply on across-territory routes, and thus reduce supply more on within-territory routes. This suggests that these across-territory routes are more profitable at the margin. These empirical patterns are consistent with a model in which associations face steeper allocation costs on across-territory routes, reflecting the need for associations to negotiate with each other to provide services on these routes. Our findings highlight important inefficiencies that arise from spatially decentralized transport markets.

## 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 can be prohibitively expensive for low-income riders, potentially creating barriers to accessing jobs, health care, and social services. We conduct a randomized controlled trial that provides fare discounts to 9,544 low-income households in one large U.S. county. Households are randomly assigned to receive either no discount, a 50% discount, or a 100% discount on all public transit trips for 16 to 19 months. Free fares increase transit ridership by 43% relative to status quo prices, accompanied by a decrease in private vehicle trips. Half-price fares yield no change in transit ridership. There is suggestive evidence that fare reductions decrease the overall frequency and spatial breadth of travel, implying the need for other measures when quantifying improvements in a person's mobility capacity. We find little to no downstream effects on labor market outcomes, health care consumption, or self-reported health and well-being. Fare prices appear to play a limited role in the socioeconomic lives of poor families.

## 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.

#### **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**

North Eastern Universities Development Consortium (NEUDC) Conference, 2024\*  
 North American Meeting of the Urban Economics Association (UEA), 2024\*  
 Policy Impacts Conference, 2024  
 Association for Public Policy Analysis & Management Research Conference, 2023  
 \* *Scheduled*

#### **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