

Research Statement

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I have spent the last several years crafting a research agenda focused on housing, health, and education—three fundamentals where outcomes remain unacceptably impoverished for far too many. It is a privilege to work as an academic economist, and I believe it is my responsibility to use my training to help those around me, especially the poor, the sick, and the otherwise vulnerable.

Building on my experience working on social services in New York City government, my early research has emphasized homelessness and housing, particularly among families and children. During my dissertation, I began a (still ongoing) fellowship at the Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence (CIDI) in the New York City Mayor’s Office, where I constructed a novel administrative panel linking individual-level records from the City’s departments of homeless services, social services, and education, as well as the State’s Department of Labor. The result has been one of the most detailed portraits of family homelessness to date—one which highlights the relationships between housing, school, and the labor market.

Thus far, the data have yielded two papers. The first, “School Proximity, Attendance, Stability, and Achievement among Homeless Students,” which is currently under review, finds that homeless students who are quasi-randomly assigned shorter commutes have better attendance, fewer transfers, and higher math scores. This is important not only because the number of homeless students in the United States alone easily outnumbers one million each school year, but also because it is a result that contrasts with prior literature finding little effect of proximity among more advantaged students. The second paper, “Short Moves and Long Stays: Homeless Family Responses to Exogenous Shelter Assignments in New York City” shows that, perhaps counterintuitively, families placed in shelters near their prior residences remain in shelter longer. However, these families also work more, earn more, and are better connected to public benefits. Collectively, I see these papers as helping to

introduce a causal perspective to the study of homelessness, which for too long has been lacking in social science.

To further this goal of developing a rigorous understanding of homelessness and how to end it, I also have two randomized controlled trials currently in the field. The first addresses widespread dissatisfaction with existing practices for prioritizing persons experiencing homelessness for scarce housing resources. Robert Collinson, David Phillips, and I are working with San Antonio find an empirically sound alternative. Our trial compares the efficacy of a novel machine learning algorithm with the subjective ratings of skilled assessors. Our goal is to optimally combine these sources of information, as well as client preferences, to reduce homelessness and improve housing stability by identifying the people at greatest risk of remaining homeless without housing assistance. Early evidence suggests that data-driven prioritization easily outperforms the incumbent screening tool. In the second experiment, with Mary Kate Batistich and Bill Evans in Ohio, I am conducting the first RCT of permanent supportive housing for exiting prisoners at risk of homelessness. Permanent supportive housing, which provides affordable housing and support services, is popular among policymakers as a solution to homelessness, but it is also intensive and therefore scarce. It is our hope that this work will provide a basis of evidence on which to make future policy decisions.

At any given time, many more people are at risk for homelessness than are actively experiencing it. One of the most common pathways from the former to the latter is eviction. With that in mind, Janet Currie and I recently published “The Effects of Legal Representation on Tenant Outcomes in Housing Court: Evidence from New York City’s Universal Access Program.” Taking advantage of the staggered geographic roll out of right to counsel, this work provides the first causal evidence that lawyers substantially improve tenant outcomes in housing court, thereby contributing to a growing understanding of the interconnections between the legal system and poverty.

Housing stability (or its lack thereof), in turn, has implications for many aspects of wellbeing. Among the most important of these is health. It is with that in mind that Janet and I have taken on a multi-year project linking longitudinal, individual-level data from Medicaid with records on housing court and homelessness. These data allow us to describe housing instability among Medicaid users, as well as to characterize the health patterns of the housing-insecure, more comprehensively than has been done before. Our past work on homelessness and housing court further enables us to answer precise causal questions in this context—e.g., how does the diminished probability of eviction that comes along with access to counsel contribute to the mental health of children and their parents?

Health also features prominently in several of my other active projects. In “Breastfeed, If You Choose: Parental Context and the Long-Term Legacy of Lactation,” I use five decades of

data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth to explore the impact of breastfeeding on a wider range of child and young adult outcomes than previous work. My results suggest that the effects of breastfeeding are heterogeneous and, moreover, that disagreements between estimates from different study designs may reflect variation among the populations in which the strategies are identified. In “Childhood Running, Academic Performance, and Health,” I combine administrative data with the time-varying introduction of an after-school youth running program to study the effect of aerobic exercise on short- and medium-term health and education—areas where associations are strong but causal evidence is lacking. Finally, children’s mental health is the focus of ongoing research Janet and I have with Emily Cuddy. Using a decade of detailed claims from a large U.S. health insurer we ask “Do Children’s New Mental Health Conditions Spillover onto Parents and Siblings?” While mental health outcomes within families are clearly correlated, little is known about causal directions and mechanisms. We exploit the conditionally random timing of mental health events to identify these relationships.

I believe this foundation of research has equipped me well—both in terms of research logistics (e.g, navigating data sharing agreements and institutional review boards) and technical skill (e.g., devising study designs and coding them)—to make contributions across a variety of applied fields in economics and public policy. I am excited to advance the frontier of what is known and, more importantly, use that knowledge to improve the wellbeing of my neighbors.