

Research Statement

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My dissertation and research agenda investigate the impacts of safety net and social insurance programs on families' and children's outcomes. This provides valuable evidence on the costs and benefits of these programs, which is crucial for optimal policy design. Additionally, by using exogenous changes in family resources as a result of changes in these programs, my work improves the understanding of the causal relationship between family income and children's outcomes. My current research focuses on three of the largest programs—Food Stamps, Unemployment Insurance, and the Earned Income Tax Credit—and estimates their effects on families' income and consumption, children's health, and adults' labor market outcomes.

The Effect of Food Stamps on Children's Health, *Job Market Paper*

Despite being the largest cash or near-cash means-tested program today, little is known about the effects of Food Stamps because it is a federal program without large variation in eligibility rules or benefit amounts. I take advantage of a large and previously unexplored source of quasi-experimental variation to identify the effects of the Food Stamp Program (renamed the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, SNAP, in 2008). Specifically I exploit changes in immigrant families' eligibility across states and over time from 1996 to 2003 to examine how parents' eligibility while their children are in utero to age four affects their children's health at ages 6–16. Using the geo-coded National Health Interview Survey, I find that an additional year of eligibility leads to medium-run improvements in parent-reported children's health, and I find suggestive evidence of medium-run reductions in school days missed, doctor visits, and hospitalizations.

A growing economics literature links negative shocks in early life to poor outcomes in adulthood (Almond and Currie, 2011; Currie and Almond, 2011), and my paper provides some of the first evidence that these detrimental effects may appear even earlier. Moreover my findings suggest that effects on health during childhood may be an important mechanism behind the longer-run effects in adulthood. Additionally, because many Food Stamp recipients treat Food Stamps similar to cash, my findings can be interpreted broadly as the effect of cash income on children's outcomes. Therefore, not only is my paper the first to look at the effects of the modern Food Stamp program on children's medium-run health outcomes but it is also one of the first to demonstrate that early-life income shocks affect health outcomes as early as school age.

The Labor Supply Response to Food Stamp Access

My work on Food Stamps and children's health demonstrates that there are large benefits of the Food Stamp program, but understanding the costs of this program is equally important and the second chapter of my dissertation examines one of these costs. Using the same policy changes as in my job market paper, I provide the first quasi-experimental estimates of the labor supply disincentives of the modern Food Stamp program. Among immigrants, both married couples and single women participate in the program at very high rates, so these policy changes provide a unique opportunity to compare the labor supply response across

demographics groups. I find that access to the program causes declines in labor supply, and the margin of response differs across demographic groups: single and married women reduce labor supply along the extensive margin, whereas married men continue to work but work fewer hours.

The Consumption Smoothing Benefits of Unemployment Insurance

The third chapter of my dissertation, joint with Elira Kuka (Assistant Professor of Economics at Southern Methodist University) and forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Economics*, studies the benefits of another important program, Unemployment Insurance (UI). We utilize differences in generosity of the UI program across states and over time to quantify the food consumption smoothing benefits of UI, and we find strong evidence of heterogeneity in this effect over time. Moreover, the effects are largest for individuals unemployed in states with high unemployment rates and high UI generosity. Taking account of differences in economic conditions and generosity over time can explain much of the heterogeneity in the overall effect over time. The Great Recession renewed interest among economists in this program, and new estimates of the costs of the program were generated (Rothstein, 2011; Farber and Valletta, 2013), but we are the first to examine of the benefits of the program for the most recent decades.

The Dynamics of Earned Income Tax Credit Eligibility

In joint work with Jessamyn Schaller (Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona) and Ann Stevens (Professor at UC Davis), we document the patterns of eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The EITC is designed to encourage work and reduce welfare dependency, but whether individuals use the program as a short-term safety net or a long-term income support is largely unknown. Additionally, the existing evidence on the duration of EITC receipt focuses only on the duration of single spells (Dowd and Horowitz, 2011; Heim and Lurie, 2014), which may understate the total time individuals spend receiving the EITC. We take a more comprehensive approach and analyze the total amount of time individuals spend *eligible* for the program, as well as the duration of single eligibility spells. We find that single spells are short—60% end within 2 years, but many individuals re-enter eligibility soon after exiting, and 50% of all eligible individuals spend at least 5 of the next 10 years eligible. EITC generosity has been linked to large improvements in families' well-being, and our findings suggest one possible reason for this is that the EITC raises the permanent income of individuals.

Future Work

In the next several years I will continue to build upon my research agenda and address questions about the effects of safety net and social insurance programs, as well as family resources more broadly, on individuals' outcomes.

In two ongoing projects, I will examine other effects of the UI program (along with my coauthor Elira Kuka). First, we will expand on our prior analysis on food consumption to look at the consumption smoothing benefits on other types of consumption. Since the income elasticity of consumption may vary across goods, we will investigate whether these consumption smoothing effects also vary across goods. Second, while the consumption smoothing benefits of UI are of first-order importance for optimal policy design, there may be other benefits of UI that are also important to understand. Therefore with Jes-

samyn Schaller and Mariana Zerpa (Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Arizona) we will evaluate the protective effects of UI and public health insurance (Medicaid and SCHIP) on children's health following a parental job loss. Parental job loss has harmful long-run effects on children's future earnings and the short-run negative effect on children's health is one potential mechanism behind these longer-run effects. Our work will be the first to shed light on whether the detrimental effects of parental job loss can be mitigated by transfers to the family. In future work I will look at these mitigating effects on outcomes beyond children's health and I will examine other effects of Medicaid and SCHIP on children's and families' well-being.

In addition to building on my current work, I will broaden my focus to examine other programs. Andrew Foote (Economist at the US Census Bureau) and I are currently in the process of gaining access to administrative data on children's outcomes in Colorado, in order to study the effects of two large expansions to school nutrition programs that made these programs universal, rather than means-tested. We will look at the potential benefits of these expansions—in terms of improved test scores, health, and behavioral outcomes—as well as the potential costs due to over-eating and worsened health.

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