

RESEARCH AGENDA

Overview

My research agenda is focused broadly on the nature, causes, and consequences of disparities in children's human capital that lead to inequality in health status and socioeconomic attainments. My work has examined the interrelationships of inequities in multiple arenas—education, health, labor markets, and neighborhood conditions—at various stages of the life cycle.

As an applied microeconomist, my work considers the role of poverty and inequality in affecting life chances. I have focused on such topics as the long-run impacts of child neighborhood and school quality on socioeconomic success and later-life health; the determinants of intergenerational mobility; the societal consequences of incarceration; effects of maternal employment patterns on child well-being; the socioeconomic determinants of health disparities over the life course; and the effects of growing up poor and poor infant health on childhood cognition, educational attainment, adult health and economic status.

My work is organized around three broad themes. The first concerns the extent to which residential segregation patterns (by race and income) contribute to economic and racial differences in labor market and health outcomes. The second seeks to identify sources of current health disparities. The third is a separate line of research in which I investigate the intergenerational consequences of the welfare policy reforms of the 1990s and analyze effects of maternal employment patterns on the well-being of children from low-income families. My program of research aims to study the intersection of labor markets, spatial features of the urban economy, and socioeconomic determinants of health over the life cycle. The emphasis on issues of poverty and inequality is the common thread of this research. My research in labor economics has focused on the less-skilled labor market; my research in urban economics has been concerned with the concentration of the poor and its effects on the structure of opportunity; and my research in health centers on understanding underlying processes that produce health disparities over the life course. The intersection of these provides a rich set of research questions with significant policy relevance.

My research to date has employed a rich variety of data sources and methodologies to address important economics and public policy questions along these lines. I bring cutting-edge econometric techniques to bear on these issues. My research applies creative and innovative research designs to substantive questions in health, education, and social policy. My use of high-quality microeconomic models and rigorous empirical techniques at the frontier of available methods to address endogeneity enable both methodological contributions and advances in our understanding of these topical areas. In my endeavors to put empirical clothing around these issues, I give careful attention to identification issues and the validity of causal inference.

The motivation for my research agenda springs from my interest in the interactions between public policies, children's school, neighborhood and home environments, and how they impact children's long-run success. Since graduate school, I have been interested in the study of vulnerable populations and public policies designed to improve their wellbeing. I received my graduate training as a labor economist in the University of Michigan's Economics department, and my scholarship and appreciation for an interdisciplinary approach to study the causes and consequences of inequality was cultivated at its National Poverty Center Training Program. My interest in understanding the effectiveness of public policy on vulnerable populations and my research on health are complimentary. My research agenda on health disparities began in 2002 when I was awarded a two-year postdoctoral fellowship through the Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Scholars program. This award fundamentally changed my career path. Over the past 5 years I have begun to publish consistently at the intersections of health, labor economics, poverty/inequality, and child and family policy.

Johnson – Personal Statement

I am a hybrid of labor economist, race and poverty scholar, and applied econometrician. As such, my research output and approaches do not fit neatly into a single category. While focused on centralized themes, my research attempts to bridge several fields and methodologies. My empirical style is more like that of a labor economist, but my research interests are generally considered poverty/inequality and health topics. My willingness to use rigorous empirical approaches to answer questions is fueled by my interests in applied econometrics. In general, I have chosen a research route that involves sophisticated modeling coupled with complex, longitudinal data sets. This approach to research demonstrates my commitment to acquiring a deep understanding of the underlying causal effects of social and economic policy. I have chosen this complexity in an effort to produce more meaningful predictions, to obtain a deeper understanding of behavior, and to evaluate a wider array of policy impacts than can be obtained with quicker, straightforward methods and less detailed data. In this way, I have maintained my aims of enhancing the breadth of understanding without sacrificing rigor or depth.

Much of my work is motivated by or related to public policy questions and debates. My work addresses economic questions about behavior and the structure of opportunity that are ultimately relevant for health policy and social welfare policy. I expect this research to contribute significantly to the debate over the most effective health policy interventions and social welfare policy levers targeted at improving the health and well-being of children, and underserved and vulnerable populations. Ultimately, I want my research to inform scholarly, policy, and public debates about the social consequences of human capital policies by capturing its short- and long-term effects on the well-being of children and their families.