

RESEARCH

Overview

My research agenda is focused broadly on the nature, causes, and consequences of disparities in health, education, income, and wealth. I am specifically interested in the interrelationships between health, education, income and wealth, at various stages of the life cycle.

My work considers the role of poverty and inequality in affecting life chances. I have focused on such topics as low-wage labor markets, spatial mismatch, the societal consequences of incarceration, the impacts of childhood school and neighborhood quality on adult health and socioeconomic success, and the effects of growing up poor and poor infant health on childhood cognition, educational attainment, and health over the life course.

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 employment outcomes, wealth accumulation, 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 effects of the welfare policy reforms of the 1990's using broader measures of well-being, beyond earnings and caseload declines, to examine effects of job transition patterns on housing and neighborhood quality, and child well-being.

Because a significant share of my research time over the past year has been devoted to the second of the aforementioned themes, I provide below more discussion of this set of projects. This research analyzes the dynamics of economic and health inequalities and how they evolve over the life cycle, with emphasis on how the relationship between health and economic status changes over time. An aim of this strand of my research agenda is to study the origins of current health disparities and the roles of neighborhood and family background as mechanisms of the intergenerational transmission of inequality. The way we spatially organize ourselves may have important implications on many aspects of well-being—along both economic and health dimensions. An aim of this research is thus to identify neighborhood features that have the most impact on health and are amenable to policy interventions, and to determine at what stage of the life cycle they are likely to have their greatest potential effects. This research makes substantive and methodological contributions to the literature examining the socioeconomic determinants of health.

The life course perspective emphasizes that the aging process starts at birth. Accordingly, one paper investigates the long-run consequences of poor infant health on child health, cognitive achievement, educational attainment, earnings and health in adulthood. That paper provides the first evidence on the association between birth outcomes— low birth weight in particular— and adult health for a nationally representative sample in the U.S.

My most recent work exploring sources of racial health disparities analyzes the impacts of male incarceration dynamics on AIDS infection rates. A principal aim of this work is to examine whether the relatively high incarceration rates of black men can provide an explanation for the large and increasing black-white AIDS infection rate disparity. The sources of racial differences in HIV/AIDS infection rates are not well understood. This research represents the first systematic analysis of the relationship between incarceration and AIDS infection rates using nationally representative population data from the U.S. The findings of this research have implications for national and state-level policy debates regarding the optimal level of incarceration.

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My most recent work in this area analyzes two related questions regarding the societal benefits and costs of increases in incarceration. The first concerns the geographic incidence of crime and the impacts of incarceration on the communities that send and receive the majority of inmates. The second is among the first studies to analyze the intergenerational transmission of risks of imprisonment and examine how inmates' families/children are impacted by their incarceration.

Much of my work is motivated by public policy debates and relates directly or indirectly to policy questions. 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 inform and 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 underserved, vulnerable, and elderly populations.

Taken together, my work aims to study the intersection of labor markets, spatial features of the urban economy, and socioeconomic determinants of health and health disparities 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.