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Sex, Disease, and Violence: Topics in Applied Microeconomics
(Dissertation)

My dissertation chapters study the health and well-being of women and minorities with a specific focus on reproductive health, infectious diseases, and police use of force.

In my job market paper, “**Safer Sex? The Effect of AIDS Risk on Birth Rates,**” I study the effect of increases in the risk of sexually transmitted infection (STI) and resulting STI avoidance behaviors on birth rates. Because of the trade-offs between STI and pregnancy prevention strategies, the effects of increases in STI risk are theoretically ambiguous. Condoms and monogamy both reduce STI risk, but can potentially increase the likelihood of pregnancy. I estimate the effect of STI risk on birth rates by exploiting exogenous variation in the spread of AIDS across U.S. cities in the 1980s and 1990s. Using a fixed effects approach, I find that local AIDS incidence has a positive and statistically significant effect on birth rates. At the height of the AIDS epidemic, AIDS avoidance behaviors increased the birth rate by as much as 1.5 percent. I use data on gonorrhea incidence to test whether the increase in birth rates is due to an increase in risky sex among women. If women are having more unprotected sex, then we would expect increases in both birth rates and gonorrhea. In contrast, I find that AIDS risk leads to decreases in gonorrhea incidence. This result shows that women are successfully adopting behaviors which decrease their likelihood of contracting AIDS and other STIs, but at the expense of heightened pregnancy likelihood. I provide evidence that the increase in births is due to women entering into monogamous partnerships to avoid AIDS.

In my second chapter, I evaluate the effect of Tasers on fatal police encounters. To decrease fatal encounters, police have sought weapons which can safely incapacitate people while they are taken into custody. One such weapon is the Taser. I estimate the effect of Taser restrictions on fatal police encounters using a novel data set on agency-level Taser policies. I compiled data on Taser policies from 2000 to 2019 for the 50 largest local police departments in the United States. I merge this information with data on fatal police encounters to evaluate the effect of Taser adoption and Taser policies on fatal police encounters. I identify the causal effect of Tasers on fatal police encounters by exploiting circuit court rulings which required agencies in some states to restrict use of Tasers.

My third chapter is joint with a former undergraduate student and studies the effects of abortion restrictions on prenatal care and infant outcomes. We consider four restrictions: requirements for abortion counseling, mandated waiting periods between counseling and abortion procedures, parental involvement laws, and whether public funding for abortion is available through the state’s Medicaid program. Using a difference-in-difference approach, we find that abortion restrictions affect birth rates, use of prenatal care by pregnant women, and infant birth weight.

JEL: I12, J13, J12, J16, K4

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