

Brett Fischer, University of Virginia

Addressing Racial Disparities in the Classroom and the Courtroom

My dissertation examines how institutional actors can mitigate racial disparities in education and criminal justice. In my first chapter (“No Spending without Representation: School Boards and the Racial Gap in Education Finance”), I provide causal evidence that greater minority representation on school boards translates into greater investment in minority students. Focusing on California school boards, I obtain causal effects by instrumenting for minority (specifically, Hispanic) school board representation using the random order in which candidates appear on election ballots. Given the dearth of school-level expenditure data, I introduce a novel dataset containing detailed records from California's School Facility Program (SFP), a capital investment program for which I observe how school boards allocate the marginal dollar within-district. Instrumental variables estimates show that an additional Hispanic school board member increases SFP-funded investments at high-Hispanic schools within the district by 66 percent, with significantly lower effects at low-Hispanic schools. High-Hispanic schools also exhibit gains in student achievement of 0.08 standard deviations. I attribute this improved performance to increased spending alongside decreased teacher churn: new hiring at high-Hispanic schools decreases by 16 percent. These results provide the first causal evidence that school board politics—and, specifically, school board ethnic composition—shapes education finance policy at the local level. I conclude that enhancing minority representation on school boards could help combat racial disparities in education finance and achievement.

My second chapter (“Is There Racial Bias in Plea Bargaining—and Can Defense Attorneys Help Prevent It?”) spotlights racial disparity in pre-trial bargaining among criminal defendants, and demonstrates how defense attorneys can combat this inequity. I uncover these effects by comparing indigent defendants assigned private attorneys to those instead assigned public defenders. To deliver causal effects, I leverage idiosyncratic variation in public defender assignments, driven by public defender caseload capacities. Instrumental variables estimates indicate that Black defendants represented by private attorneys plead guilty to charges carrying 33 percent longer sentences and serve 50 percent longer prison terms, relative to comparable Black defendants represented by public defenders as well as comparable white defendants represented by private attorneys. In other words, prosecutors extract harsher plea deals specifically from Black defendants with private attorneys, pointing to opportunistic discrimination against nonwhite defendants with susceptible defense counsel. Consistent with a straightforward signaling model of plea bargaining, I provide empirical evidence that public defenders who have extensive interactions with prosecutors improve Black defendants' plea bargaining outcomes. Increasing access to seasoned public defenders could thus diminish prosecutors' leverage over minority defendants and better fulfill their constitutional right to effective legal counsel.

First chapter (“No Spending”):

JEL: H41, H72, H75, I22, I24

Keywords: School boards, racial gap, education finance, student outcomes

Second Chapter (“Racial Bias in Plea Bargaining”):

JEL: H10, J15, K14, K41

Keywords: Plea bargain, defense attorneys, defendant race