Briana D. Sullivan – Research Statement

Department of Economics
University of California, San Diego

My economic interests steer toward social good topics. A public policy professor once introduced a thought experiment: “How would you choose income to be distributed if you lived in a world where income was randomly assigned?” Inspired by that question, my research is aimed at using my skills to develop or study policy aimed at improving the well-being of low-income households, specifically the well-being of individuals and families affected by incarceration.

My interest in researching policies that affect disadvantaged and minority groups began as an undergraduate. One of my first papers studied the relationship between manufactured housing and crime rates, an interest prompted by the negative perception of manufactured housing residents among local government officials or owners of site-built homes. Currently, my research focuses on economic issues pertaining to gender, criminal justice, and public assistance.

The starting point of much of my graduate research has been incarceration and the lives that it affects. Initially, I was interested in how the omission of incarcerated individuals’ potential wages affected the gender wage gap. Yet, few existing gender wage gap studies account for male selection into the labor force. This led me to replicate Mulligan and Rubinstein’s “Selection, Investment, and Women’s Relative Wages Over Time,” henceforth referred to as MR, with extensions aimed at accounting for recent declines in male labor force participation.

Increases in female labor force participation rates in the past decades changed the female labor force composition. Since relatively more high-skilled women entered the labor force, women’s average potential wage is overestimated. Therefore, the convergence of the true gender gap in potential wages is also overestimated. Namely, if the composition of the female labor force had remained constant since 1970, women’s average earnings would have experienced only a small gain relative to men’s average earnings. MR examines the gender wage gap over time among demographic groups that have had high labor force participation rates since the 1970s, such as highly educated, never-married men and women. While the gender wage gap among all labor force participants substantially fell, the wage gap among those with strong labor force attachment shows little convergence. MR, therefore, conclude that the change in female labor force composition contributed to the narrowing of the gender wage gap.

Their results, however, are obtained using the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is only representative for a subset of the US population since it does not include individuals residing in group quarters, such as correctional institutions. This presents a problem for their analysis of individuals with strong labor force attachment because it requires demographic groups with high labor force participation rates to be correctly identified. A challenge arises when the data are missing for certain subpopulations. The omission of these individuals can lead to an artificially high estimate of labor force participation among some subpopulations, which can yield a misestimated wage. Therefore, I extend on MR’s work in two ways: (1) replicating their methodology using Census data, which is more representative of the overall US population, and (2) addressing male labor force participation and its effect on measured...
wages. Overall, my results are similar to those of MR, suggesting that changing selection into the female labor force appears to drive the convergence of the gender wage gap.

Currently, I am studying the effects of sentencing guidelines on the variability of sentence length. In 2006, Alabama implemented voluntary sentencing worksheets, which recommended a sentence length range depending on the severity of the crime and the offenders' criminal history. Then in 2013, the use of sentencing worksheets became presumptive, or mandatory unless aggravating or mitigating circumstances are present, for a subset of drug and property offenses.

I will use sentence length data from the National Corrections Reporting Program to compare differences in the distribution of sentence lengths, for a given crime before and after the implementation of the mandatory sentencing guidelines. Rather than studying average sentence length, however, this paper will use measures of inequality common to the wage literature, such as comparing the 90th and 10th percentiles of sentence length. Additionally, since not all counties in Alabama adhered to the voluntary sentencing standards, I can compare how the transition from voluntary to mandatory guidelines affected counties differentially. Namely, I want to examine whether the change in sentence length inequality was smaller in counties that had voluntarily adopted the sentencing guidelines prior to 2013 relative to counties that did not adopt the voluntary guidelines.

My future research will study how a public assistance ban affects food stamp recipiency and marriage formation. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) instituted a lifetime ban on participation in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance program (SNAP) for individuals with felony drug convictions. However, the policy gave states the ability to opt out of or modify the ban. Using the Survey of Income Program Participation (SIPP) and monthly Current Population Survey (CPS), I will analyze the effects of opting out of the ban on food stamp receipt and marriage.

First, I will estimate the effects of restricting access to SNAP, or food stamps, on the number of welfare-eligible individuals that receive food stamps. Next, I will study how PRWORA affects the families of former drug felony offenders. While benefits are not denied to the entire family, family size is used to calculate the benefit amount, so I want to examine whether the dollar value of benefits for the families of individuals convicted of a drug felony decline.

Furthermore, PRWORA was meant to encourage marriage while reducing dependence on government benefits. Former drug felony offenders face limited employment prospects and, because of the ban, a reduction in public assistance. As a result, offenders may respond to the reduction in welfare by marrying to increase their financial position. On the other hand, spouses of former offenders might divorce in search of a new partner who can bring in additional income. Overall, I aim to examine how restricting access to public assistance affects welfare recipiency and, consequently, family structure.

Ultimately, I aim to become what Esther Duflo terms a “plumber” – an economist that seeks to successfully implement policies through careful observation and tinkering. Therefore, I plan to continue evaluating how well policies serve the low-income population and improve economic and social outcomes for incarcerated individuals and their families.