

ERIK JAMES

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WHARTON SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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Personal Information: U.S. Citizen

Undergraduate Studies:

BA, Economics, University of Chicago (with Honors), 2013

Graduate Studies:

Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 2018 to present

Thesis Title: "Essays in Public Economics"

Expected Completion Date: May 2025

Thesis Committee and References:

Professor Jessie Handbury
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Professor Fernando Ferreira
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Teaching and Research Fields:

Primary field: Public Economics, Labor/Personnel Economics

Secondary fields: Urban Economics, Applied Microeconomics

Teaching Experience:

Spring, 2023 Economics of Diversity and Discrimination (MBA and Undergraduate)
University of Pennsylvania, TA for Corinne Low

Spring, 2021 Managerial Economics (Undergraduate)
University of Pennsylvania, TA for Mike Abito

Research Experience and Other Experience:

Fall 2021	Research Assistant for Professor Jessie Handbury (1 Semester) <i>University of Pennsylvania</i>
2020-2021	Leader of the Wharton Applied Economics Student Workshop (4 Semesters) <i>University of Pennsylvania</i>
2019-2021	Research Assistant for Professors Jessie Handbury and Sarah Moshary (4 Semesters) <i>University of Pennsylvania and University of Chicago Booth School of Business</i>
2016-2018	Pre-Doctoral Research Assistant for Professor Amy Finkelstein <i>Massachusetts Institute of Technology and J-PAL North America</i>
2013-2016	Senior Research Analyst, Economic Consulting <i>The Brattle Group</i>

Professional Activities:

2024	117 th Annual Conference of the National Tax Association (Nov. 2024) Food and Nutrition Assistance RIDGE Program Conference Food and Nutrition Assistance RIDGE Program Interim Conference
2023	APPAM Fall Research Conference Instacart Economics Research Seminar 17 th North American Meeting of the Urban Economics Association USDA Economic Research Services Seminar Series
2022	Tufts Friedman School Conference on Food Access at Dollar Stores 11 th European Meeting of the Urban Economics Association Wharton-INSEAD Doctoral Consortium

Honors, Scholarships, and Fellowships:

2024	Robert R. Nathan Fellowship (\$20,000)
2023	Baker Retailing Center Research Grant (\$15,000)
2023	USDA RIDGE Dissertation Fellowship Grant (\$23,500)
2023	Boettner Center Pilot Award (\$14,300)
2019	Amy Morse Award
2018	NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program – Honorable Mention
2013	David S. Hu Award, University of Chicago

Research Papers:

[“The Effect of Managers on Public Service Provision: Evidence from Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF”](#)
(Job Market Paper)

Abstract: This paper studies how public sector managers impact both the quantity and quality of public service provision. I use novel administrative data containing case review decisions for three public benefit programs in the state of Texas: Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF. In this setting, managers oversee teams of caseworkers deciding whether to permit or deny household applications and can influence both the quantity of applications reviewed and the quality of decision-making. I document

wide variation in quantity- and quality-based measures of performance across manager teams. I exploit variation in caseworker-manager assignments to show that managers explain 8-10% of the overall variation in caseworker performance. I find that higher manager quantity-based performance does not come at the cost of quality. Replacing managers in the lowest quartile of quantity-based performance with those at the 75th percentile would increase output by 5.6%, enough to eliminate the organization-wide case backlog that led to months-long delays in case review decisions.

[“Welfare Implications of Increased Retailer Participation in SNAP”](#)

with Anne Byrne, Xiao Dong, Jessie Handbury, and Katherine Meckel

Abstract: Governments often rely on private vendors to distribute in-kind benefits. The types of vendors that participate can affect beneficiaries, local markets, and program costs. We study the effects of a dramatic increase in the number of non-traditional food stores – club, dollar, drug, and mass-merchandisers – accepting SNAP benefits during the Great Recession. These new authorizations reduced the proximity of SNAP recipients to SNAP-authorized retailers in both geographic and brand space. Newly authorized retailers also increased their product variety, attracting market share of both SNAP- and non-SNAP shoppers from grocery stores. We do not find evidence this shift in the competitive retail landscape induced adjustments in retail prices. Nevertheless, we estimate that SNAP adoptions reduced aggregate shopping costs (inclusive of time) by an average of 7% for SNAP recipients and 2% for non-recipients.

[“Impact of Dollar Stores on Household Shopping Patterns and Nutrition”](#)

with Xiao Dong

Abstract: This paper examines how household shopping trips, food expenditure, and nutrition are impacted by the entry of dollar stores. We use an event study approach with food retailer location data from Nielsen TDLinX and household food expenditure from a large consumer panel. We find that when a dollar store enters a household’s zip, households shift food expenditure to dollar stores from other food retail channels, with larger effects for low-income, low-access, and non-metro county households. Households shift the overall composition of their grocery baskets resulting in small impacts of dollar store entry on nutrition, particularly for households living in low-access areas. These effects are about 0.03 standard deviations, or about 5% of the nutrition-income gap. This suggests that household store choice could have an important role in food access and nutrition.

Research Papers in Progress:

“Are Good Workers Good Managers? Determinants of Promotion and Productivity in the Public Sector”

Abstract: In many settings managers are promoted internally and selected from the best workers. However, the skills needed to be an effective manager often differ from those needed to be a good worker. In this paper, I explore what makes an effective manager. I use variation in worker-manager assignments to measure the performance of public sector managers administering public benefit programs in Texas before and after being promoted to manager. In addition, I measure the performance of the manager’s “teacher” under which they were an apprentice prior to becoming a new manager. First, I determine if workers that get promoted have higher productivity, output, or accuracy and if they tend to have more experience or certain demographic characteristics. This provides useful insight into what factors the organization values when promoting workers. Second, I determine the extent manager productivity and tenure is predicted by their past productivity as a worker and the productivity of the manager they were trained by. This will speak to the distinctness and transferability of managerial skills.

“Targeting Administrative Burden and Assistance: Evidence from SNAP Interviews in Louisiana”

Abstract: Application screening requirements create frictions that can improve or worsen benefit targeting based on who they “screen out” from receiving benefits. However, interview requirements provide one-on-one application assistance to applicants, which means they could also “screen in” applicants. This makes the impact of interviews on program participation theoretically ambiguous. I investigate how removing required SNAP interviews impacts program participation and benefit targeting based on who is screened in and out on these two separate margins. Using SNAP application review decisions from Louisiana where interview waivers suddenly and unexpectedly removed and reinstated interviews, I find limited overall impacts of removing interviews on SNAP participation. Next, I will use the quasi-random assignment of cases to case workers to measure different propensities of workers to approve cases and be “helpful”, i.e. make observable changes to an application that increase or decrease the chance of approval. I then will investigate which applicants are marginal to interview completion and to their interviewer both when they do and do not conduct interviews.

“Variation in the Political Preferences of Public Sector Administrators for Public Benefit Programs”

Abstract: Different political parties in the United States enact different policies for public benefit programs that reflect different beliefs about the optimal size and generosity of public benefits. Within a policy regime, do administrator political preferences also explain differences in decision-making when granting public benefits? This could reflect differences in overall permissiveness across administrators but also differences in permissiveness for different applicants based on their perceived characteristics. I link data in the public domain to obtain the political affiliation of managers supervising the review of applications for public benefit programs. I use variation in worker-manager assignments to identify causal differences in the share of cases that managers permit. First, I will determine if overall manager permissiveness correlates with political affiliation. Then I will re-estimate manager permissiveness allowing for differential treatment of cases from counties with different political alignment relative to the manager. This leverages the statewide quasi-random assignment of cases that expose managers to wide variation in county-level applicant characteristics outside of their own region. This will provide new evidence about how the political preferences of administrators shape public policy.

“Household Spillovers from School Policy: The Impact of the Federal School Nutrition Standards on the Healthfulness of Household Grocery Expenditure”

Abstract: This paper investigates whether the federal school nutrition reforms enacted after the passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 had spillover effects onto the healthfulness of student household grocery expenditure. Focusing specifically on the Smart Snacks in Schools regulation and household grocery expenditure on unhealthy snack food, a difference in differences framework is used to compare the relative changes in unhealthy snack expenditure for households in states with and without strong state snack regulations prior to the federal regulation. The results indicate that the federal regulation decreased unhealthy snack expenditure by about 5% after three years for households with a student. This suggests that spillovers from school policy enhance the impact of the policy.