

Issues in Health Policy

PPHA 38050 / PBPL 25510 / ECON 17720
Winter 2025
Prof. Zarek Brot (zarek@uchicago.edu)

THIS IS A PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS. IT MAY BE SUBJECT TO CHANGE BEFORE THE WINTER QUARTER STARTS.

Class Meetings: Mondays and Wednesdays, Keller 0007, Section 1: 1:30pm-2:50pm, Section 2: 3:00pm-4:20pm

Office Hours: Time TBD, Keller 3011. To reserve a slot during regularly scheduled office hours, please use <https://calendly.com/zarek/office-hours>. You do not *need* to reserve a slot, but I will give priority to those students who do. I ask you to do so because it will allow you to let me know in advance what you would like to discuss, and I can then prepare accordingly.

Teaching Assistant: Yalun Su (yalun.su@uchicago.edu). Yalun's main role will be in providing support and grading for the problem sets. Please only email Yalun about problem set issues; any administrative issues should be directed to me. He will hold office hours through the course to help with the replication exercise assignments.

Course Description

It is imperative that good policy rely on evidence. Health policy is no exception. Part of this is about the *production* of evidence—finding data, and figuring out ways to understand the effects of past institutional or policy changes, or describe important statistical associations. Part of this is about the *consumption* of evidence—figuring out how past studies inform potential policy decisions. In this course, we will consider the role of evidence in helping inform us about important health policy topics, such as the relationship between personal income and health, the effects of private equity acquisitions of medical facilities, and the reliability of clinical drug trials.

The course will primarily be structured into a set of two-lecture modules. In the first class, we will read an editorial or descriptive paper that helps introduce a health policy context and/or makes a claim. In the second lecture, we will read a study that confronts the question using empirical methods. I have hidden these studies (listed on the course schedule as **MYSTERY PAPERS**) so that we can genuinely learn and update our beliefs over the two lectures. The contrast between the two will not only help us better understand the policy context, but we will also use it to develop a better understanding of empirical methodology.

Our out-of-class time will be spent practicing being both a producer and a consumer of evidence. We will replicate prior studies (at an appropriate level for beginners) as well as write reports that synthesize existing evidence on chosen policy topics. In-class, we will discuss what we've read, with my role to help students understand 1) the policy context; and 2) how to evaluate empirical methods. Hopefully I will then be able to step back and let us discuss our reactions together.

Prerequisites

There are three general sets of things you will need to know to succeed in this course:

1. **Economics.** I am an economist and so my comparative advantage is to guide you through topics where health economists have made particular progress. You should only need introductory economics to understand the material we will cover. (e.g. MPP core Micro sequence; PBPL 20000 and 22200 or equivalent)
2. **Statistics.** We will be reading empirical papers, which involve reporting means, standard deviations, and coefficient estimates from regressions. While I will teach some topics of empirical methods, I will not stop to do a refresher on introductory statistics, so you should be previously familiar. (e.g. MPP core Stats sequence; PBPL 26400 or equivalent; this course is especially complementary with Program Evaluation)
3. **Statistical programming.** For the replication assignments, I will expect you to do statistical programming. You should either be reasonably familiar with a statistical programming language, such as R, Python, or Stata (any of these are fine), or willing to learn on the fly. While we will do no formal instruction in programming, TA office hours will be available for support. (e.g. taking the MPP Data and Programming sequence will definitely be sufficient)

Course Requirements and Grading

1. **Pre-class discussion (10%):** To help keep you engaged, I will ask you to tell me your reactions to the first reading of each module ahead of class. You will have to give a short response (1 or 2 paragraphs) to a prompt. Doing so in good-faith effort will grant full credit.
2. **Replication exercises (25%):** Even if you don't plan on becoming a data analyst, it is important that you know "how the sausage is made" first-hand to help you be a good consumer. For this purpose, there will be two replication exercises. In each, you will replicate an empirical study using real data. I will have you replicate part of the original analysis, then extend it. Students are expected to submit their code along with the answers to the prompts; this may be in any programming language you prefer.
3. **Writing assignments (65%):** TBD. I will announce the details of this at the start of the quarter.

Course Schedule

Lecture	Method topic	Policy topic	Reading(s)
1	Introduction, measurement	Maternal health	Optional: Tu (2023), "Why Maternal Mortality Rates Are Getting Worse across the U.S."
A	Measurement	Waste	Gawande (2009), "The Cost Conundrum"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 1
A	Control groups	Waste	Gawande (2011), "The Hot Spotters"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 2
A	Selection into treatment	Workplace wellness programs	Baicker, Cutler, and Song (2010), "Workplace Wellness Programs Can Generate Savings"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 3
A	Policy implications of descriptive associations	Income and health	Chetty et al. (2016), "The Association Between Income and Life Expectancy in the United States, 2001-2014"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 4
A	Sample selection	Medical debt	Himmelstein et al. (2005), "Illness And Injury As Contributors To Bankruptcy"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 5
A	Interpreting treatment effects	Private equity acquisitions	Schulte (2022), "Sick Profit: Investigating Private Equity's Stealthy Takeover of Health Care Across Cities and Specialties"; Bruch, Gondi, and Song (2020), "Changes in Hospital Income, Use, and Quality Associated With Private Equity Acquisition"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 6
A	Competing evidence	Insurance and ER use	Taubman et al. (2014), "Medicaid Increases Emergency-Department Use: Evidence from Oregon's Health Insurance Experiment"; Miller (2012), "The Effect of Insurance on Emergency Room Visits: An Analysis of the 2006 Massachusetts Health Reform"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 7
A	Competing interpretations	Consumer-directed health insurance	Baicker, Dow, and Wolfson (2006), "Health Savings Accounts: Implications for Health Spending"; Baicker, Dow, and Wolfson (2007), "Lowering The Barriers To Consumer-Directed Health Care"
B			MYSTERY PAPER 8
A	Biased studies	Drug clinical trials	Ostrom (2024). "Funding of Clinical Trials and Reported Drug Efficacy"

Course Readings

The links to the mystery papers will not be active until it is time to read them.

Introduction // Maternal health

I will discuss this, so you may find it useful to read: [Tu \(2023\)](#)

Measurement // Waste

Lecture A

Read in full: [Gawande \(2009\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper1_2025.pdf

Control groups // Waste

Lecture A

Read in full: [Gawande \(2011\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper2_2025.pdf

Selection // Workplace wellness programs

Lecture A

Read in full: [Baicker et al. \(2010\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper3_2025.pdf

You may also find it useful to read the introduction of: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper3b_2025.pdf

Policy implications of descriptive associations // Income and health

Lecture A

Read in full: [Chetty et al. \(2016\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper4_2025.pdf

Sample selection // Medical debt

Lecture A

Read in full: [Himmelstein et al. \(2005\)](#)

Skim: [Himmelstein et al. \(2009\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper5_2025.pdf

You may find it interesting to read this exchange: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper5b_2025.pdf, https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper5c_2025.pdf

Interpreting treatment effects // Private equity

Lecture A

Read in full: [Schulte \(2022\)](#)

Skim: [Bruch et al. \(2020\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper6_2025.pdf

Competing evidence // Insurance and ER usage

Lecture A

Read in full: [Taubman et al. \(2014\)](#)

Read at least through Section 4: [Miller \(2012\)](#)

Lecture B

Read the introduction, then as much of the rest as you can handle. This paper is much more technically demanding than other studies we will cover in this course, but the overall point is quite important: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper7_2025.pdf

Competing interpretations // HDHPs and HSAs

Lecture A

Read in full: [Baicker et al. \(2007\)](#)

Skim: [Baicker et al. \(2006\)](#)

Lecture B

Read in full: https://zarekcb.github.io/MysteryPaper8_2025.pdf

Biased studies // Clinical trials

Read in full: [Oostrom \(2024\)](#)

References

Baicker, Katherine, David Cutler, and Zirui Song, “Workplace wellness programs can generate savings,” *Health affairs*, 2010, 29 (2), 304–311.

—, **William H. Dow, and Jonathan Wolfson**, “Health Savings Accounts: Implications for Health Spending,” *National Tax Journal*, 2006, 59 (3), 463–475.

—, —, and —, “Lowering The Barriers To Consumer-Directed Health Care: Responding To Concerns,” *Health Affairs*, 2007, 26 (5), 1328–1332.

Bruch, Joseph D, Suhas Gondi, and Zirui Song, “Changes in Hospital Income, Use, and Quality Associated With Private Equity Acquisition,” *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 2020, 180 (11), 1428–1435.

Chetty, Raj, Michael Stepner, Sarah Abraham, Shelby Lin, Benjamin Scuderi, Nicholas Turner, Augustin Bergeron, and David Cutler, “The association between income and life expectancy in the United States, 2001–2014,” *Jama*, 2016, 315 (16), 1750–1766.

Gawande, Atul, “The Cost Conundrum,” *The New Yorker*, 2009.

—, “The Hot Spotters,” *The New Yorker*, 2011, 86 (45), 40–51.

Himmelstein, David U., Deborah Thorne, Elizabeth Warren, and Steffie Woolhandler, “Medical Bankruptcy in the United States, 2007: Results of a National Study,” *The American Journal of Medicine*, 2009, 122 (8), 741–746.

- , **Elizabeth Warren, Deborah Thorne, and Steffie Woolhandler**, “Illness and injury as contributors to bankruptcy,” *Health Affairs*, 2005, 24 (1), 570.
- Miller, Sarah**, “The effect of insurance on emergency room visits: An analysis of the 2006 Massachusetts health reform,” *Journal of Public Economics*, 2012, 96 (11), 893–908.
- Ostrom, Tamar**, “Funding of Clinical Trials and Reported Drug Efficacy,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 2024, 132 (10), 3298–3333.
- Schulte, Fred**, “Sick Profit: Investigating Private Equity’s Stealthy Takeover of Health Care Across Cities and Specialties,” 2022. <https://kffhealthnews.org/news/article/private-equity-takeover-health-care-cities-specialties/>.
- Taubman, Sarah L., Heidi L. Allen, Bill J. Wright, Katherine Baicker, and Amy N. Finkelstein**, “Medicaid Increases Emergency-Department Use: Evidence from Oregon’s Health Insurance Experiment,” *Science*, 2014, 343 (6168), 263–268.
- Tu, Lucy**, “Why Maternal Mortality Rates Are Getting Worse across the U.S.,” *Scientific American*, 2023. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-maternal-mortality-rates-aregetting-worse-across-the-us>.