My research interests fall broadly in policy-focused applied microeconomics and more specifically in the fields of health, public, and labor economics. I am particularly interested in evaluating the health impacts and other impacts of safety net programs in the United States and how policymakers can improve these programs. My research so far largely exploits variation in the policies governing social programs – especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – in order to examine how they affect a variety of involved parties, including recipients, private industry, and other social programs. I estimate indirect program effects that may not be immediately obvious but are still important to evaluating their overall value.

My job market paper explores how social policy can impact private industry by focusing on the case of SNAP and food retailers. In it, I estimate the effects of SNAP on the number of stores, employment, and average pay among different types of food retailers and non-food retailers. SNAP benefits represent a major source of food-at-home spending – about 8.5% in 2017 – so the program may have significant impacts on demand. Estimating the effects of SNAP is difficult for multiple reasons, so I develop a novel instrumental variables strategy that allows me to identify the causal effects of changes in SNAP participation over time. I gather detailed information on state-level SNAP expansions since 1996 and use this information to create a measure of simulated eligibility representing the overall generosity of SNAP policy in each state and year. I use this measure to instrument for county-level SNAP participation rates. Within those retail industries where SNAP benefits are frequently accepted, I find evidence that firms operate more stores per capita in response to an increase in SNAP participation. This response is particularly strong for supercenters and smaller general stores like dollar stores that often target lower-income customers. SNAP appears to make it feasible for firms to open new stores and/or continue operating stores that would otherwise be unprofitable. A complete assessment of SNAP requires accounting for its impacts on the food retail industry.

In my dissertation’s second chapter, I examine the effects of SNAP on Medicaid enrollment and utilization. SNAP and Medicaid serve overlapping populations, are often administered jointly, and may affect health, so the potential for program interaction is high. Using a similar instrumental variables approach to that described above and detailed state-level Medicaid spending data, I estimate that SNAP participation greatly increases Medicaid enrollment. Despite this increase in enrollment, I find no evidence of increases in Medicaid spending per capita, but I do find evidence of decreases in spending per enrollee. This suggests that SNAP may induce positive selection into Medicaid. Households gaining Medicaid coverage only because their participation in SNAP makes it less costly for them to do so would be healthier on average than households directly seeking Medicaid coverage and therefore use less care, or they may use less care due to the information and access barriers associated with Medicaid utilization. Overall, SNAP expansions appear to be an effective way to improve Medicaid take-up.

In my dissertation’s third chapter, I estimate the effects of food stamps on adult health as measured by mortality rates. Decades ago, food stamps were introduced to address the problem of hunger. Due to the relationship between nutrition and health, it is likely that food stamps
would impact aggregate health outcomes. I use the county-level rollout of the Food Stamp Program (now named SNAP) as a natural experiment to estimate the impacts of access to food stamps on various mortality rates. I find evidence that access to food stamps reduced mortality rates over time in high-poverty counties, especially for vulnerable groups like African Americans and the elderly, but not in low-poverty counties. This finding is consistent with the diminishing positive relationship between health and income examined in the health literature. In other preliminary work (with Charles Courtemanche, James Marton, and Christian Gregory), we employ an instrumental variables strategy like that in my first two chapters and find evidence that SNAP participation reduces adult mortality rates in more recent years as well.

I am engaged in ongoing work with several teams of coauthors, including extensions of the simulated eligibility approach I develop, a re-examination of the effects of pre-Affordable Care Act Medicaid expansions on mortality rates, and an assessment of the feasibility of nurse call center data for monitoring public health in the United States. Of note in the first group of projects is an evaluation of the impact of SNAP on the food security and health of seniors (with James Marton, Charles Courtemanche, Rusty Tchernis, and Augustine Denteh). I co-wrote the proposal for this project, which is funded by a $250,000 two-year grant from the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research and the USDA. In the second project (with Antonios Koumpias, Charles Courtemanche, and Daniela Zapata), we use a synthetic control approach exploiting variation from Medicaid expansions targeted towards childless adults since the 1990s. Contrary to previous findings, we find preliminary evidence that there is little consistent effect of these expansions on reducing adult mortality rates. In the third project (with Douglas Roblin and Christina Fuller), we use detailed census block-level utilization data of Kaiser Permanente Mid-Atlantic States members including information on phone calls and e-mails to providers in conjunction with pollen and pollutant data to conduct spatiotemporal analyses of respiratory and gastrointestinal responses to these stressors. So far, this project has resulted in one publication with two more drafts under review or soon to be submitted.

In the future, I intend to continue pursuing research on the effects of social policy. I want to extend the approach in my job market paper to examine SNAP’s effects on factors like food prices, food access, labor market participation decisions, and household fertility decisions. I also aim to develop a broader research project examining supply-side responses to social programs. The effects of programs like SNAP and Medicaid on households have been widely investigated, but relatively little attention has been devoted to their impacts on industry. Understanding these effects are important to a complete evaluation of these programs’ benefits and costs as well as their effects on recipients. In the next few years, I aim to build a funding stream for projects like these. To do so, I will seek grants and/or cooperative agreements with federal agencies like the USDA and institutions focused on issues like food security.

Overall, my work focuses on clarifying the often-unclear benefits and costs of social programs. The effects of social policy on decision-making are interesting on their own from an academic perspective, but they are also important in terms of their implications for shaping the decisions of policymakers. I aim to contribute to a greater understanding of these programs and better inform policy decisions shaping their future.