WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because It Can Challenge Conventional Wisdom

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Social science research provides evidence that helps us understand the drivers of social problems. A lot of times, this evidence is in contrast to the conventional wisdom and may on the face of it seem counterintuitive. However, evidence from social science research can show why certain policies work and why other policies fail, helping us inform policy and prevent unintended consequences.

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An example of this is "ban-the-box" policies, laws that forbid employers from asking whether a job applicant was ever involved with the justice system. The purpose of such policies was to improve hiring rates for individuals with criminal backgrounds and limit discrimination by employers, based on the theory that the stigma for those involved with the criminal justice system would not be present if employers did not have information about applicants' criminal histories. The large racial disparities in the criminal justice system lead to further racial disparities in the employment of ex-offenders. Thus, banning the box would have the added benefit of reducing racial disparities in employment. Thirty-one states plus the District of Columbia have passed ban-the-box policies, along with over 150 cities and counties.

However, research has shown that the ban-the-box laws actually may increase racial disparities due to statistical discrimination. Without information on the criminal history of the applicant, employers use other demographic characteristics to infer that history. Usually these characteristics relate to race along with income and/or geography. In one audit study, the authors found that a white applicant had a higher probability of receiving a call-back than an identical African-American applicant. In an analysis of ban-the-box laws, another study found that African-American and Hispanic men without college degrees have lower employment outcomes in states that had implemented the ban-the-box law. Thus, instead of lowering racial disparities that emanate from the criminal justice system, these policies exacerbated these disparities. These studies focused on the private sector. Other research has shown that ban-the-box laws can work as intended, but only in the public sector.

But the beauty of social science research is that the conversation does not end with the empirical analysis; it is just the beginning. If ban-the-box laws do exacerbate racial and ethnic disparities due to statistical discrimination, what can policymakers do to make these laws more effective? How do we amend these laws to counteract the unintended consequences? So far, there have not been any alterations to these policies in response to the new evidence. While there is more research needed to get behind the mechanisms of why these laws may not have their intended impact, policymakers can use this research not to remove ban-the-box policies but to augment them with race-conscious factors to mitigate the adverse

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effects of the policies. Here is another avenue where social science research on other topics can be useful. For example, the research on implicit bias may be helpful to improving ban-the-box policies. Research on rehabilitation certificates (a court document declaring that person has been rehabilitated) show that issuing these improves the call-back rate for individuals with a felony conviction. Another potential solution is to educate employers about the employability of ex-offenders. There are many examples of employers who make a point of hiring ex-offenders.

Social science research provides the rigorous analysis to produce evidence while providing a framework for understanding the context of this evidence and the translation into effective policy.

Why Social Science? Because it can challenge conventional wisdom and direct policy prescriptions to address unintended consequences.

OLUGBENGA AJILORE is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Toledo, where he has been since 2003. He received his PhD from the Claremont Graduate University in 2002. His research interests lie within Public Finance and Demographic Economics where he examines multiple components of state and local spending through the lens of ethnic diversity. Two publications analyze police expenditures and another publication estimates the effect of increased ethnic diversity on the acquisition of armored vehicles by local law enforcement, using data from the Pentagon's 1033 program. His current research tackles the important and vital topic of racial bias and policing. The work expands on the current study of traffic stops and arrests to analyze excessive use of force, both lethal and non-lethal. Some preliminary findings have been published in Economics Bulletin and the Atlantic Economic Journal. In addition to study of racial bias, Dr. Ajilore has developed an expertise on police militarization, analyzing the rise of militarization and its effects on lethal and non-lethal use of force. This work has been funded by the Charles Koch Foundation.

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