

I am a development economist studying issues of work, productivity, identity, and inequality, and how these intersect with social protection programs, public policies, and political economy. I use quasi-experimental and experimental approaches to empirical questions, and employ qualitative research to build a contextual foundation for generating questions and interpreting results. My scholarship typically involves themes that relate to forced displacement, social protection, gender in politics and work, or business creation and productivity. My work aims to be relevant to contemporary policy debates, has had distinct impact on policy implementations, and I actively advise doctoral students writing dissertations on these topics. While some recent research projects have been awarded substantial external funding, much of my work takes advantage of partnerships to carry out studies by integrating design into ongoing policies or programs and makes use of existing data sources. Below, I discuss my work in three groups, although several papers deal with multiple themes. At the end of this document, I also briefly cover research impact, teaching, advising and mentoring, and professional service.

### **Social protection program design and their effectiveness.**

Implementing organizations face numerous information challenges when designing social protection programs. Who should be eligible for the program, how much will they benefit, and are there unexpected effects on eligibles, or spillovers onto non-eligibles? Recent and ongoing work studies humanitarian aid programs in the Middle East to approach these questions empirically.

In an ongoing study, [“Economic recovery aid and social cohesion after conflict”](#) (*in progress 2025*), we are using a randomized controlled trial and large-scale survey to recover spillover effects of a business grant program on social tensions. With funding from NSF and JPAL/IPA, we partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to embed a study design into their operational social assistance program to study this question, which aims to add to the understanding of the relationship between economic inequality and social cohesion in developing economies. Our baseline survey was collected in 2024, with midline data collection ongoing as of March 2025 and funded endline surveys being to be fielded in 2026.

I am also currently undertaking [“Capital for Peace? Social and Distributional Impacts of Capital Grants in Post-Conflict Iraq”](#) (*in progress 2025*) that investigates the effects of high-value capital grants on small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMSEs) in post-conflict Iraq. The research question focuses on how these grants impact business performance, employment, and social cohesion and employs a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to provide grants averaging \$16,000 to businesses to support growth and job creation. The significance of this study lies in its focus on employees, whereby we exploit rare employer-employee linked data to observe employment flows and measure changes in social attitudes across new, continuing, and separated workers as a result of a capital grant. This paper contributes to the literature on economic recovery and social cohesion in fragile environments by examining the distributional effects of these grants, and aims to provide insights into the broader implications for peacebuilding and economic development.

The two above ongoing studies relate to several earlier papers on forced displacement, conflict, and humanitarian aid. Most recently, in [“Geographic poverty targeting in social protection programs: Evidence from a nationwide policy experiment”](#) (*working paper 2025*), Altındağ and I undertook a nationwide experiment over 2021-2022 that sought to understand the implications of alternative aid targeting approaches on both program performance, household welfare, and perceptions of the aid system by beneficiaries and agency staff. To do this, we partnered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon to target their \$300MM annual cash transfer program to alternative metrics of poverty. This allowed us to test a typical supposition that targeting social protection programs to a particular metric of poverty has disproportionate effects on alleviating that type of poverty. Speaking to a core debate in development economics, we characterize the tradeoffs faced when aiming to target demographics versus program effectiveness and show that (a) no single poverty metric yields overall effectiveness gains, despite (b) substantially

different demographic profiles being eligible for the program across approaches. This implies that in many cases, program designers' choices are simpler and should not be made with any expectation that program effectiveness can be improved with changes to targeting methods.

While cash transfers are generally known to have positive effects on household welfare across the various contexts in which they have been studied, whether they have sustained effects after transfers end is not as clear. In [“The short-lived effects of unconditional cash transfers to refugees”](#) (*Journal of Development Economics* 2023), we study the short- and medium- term effects of the aid programs described above – which is among the largest unconditional cash programs studied in the literature. This program gave refugee families in Lebanon \$2,100 over the course of a year, and using a regression discontinuity design borne of the agencies implementation strategy, we show that the program markedly improved household consumption, child well-being, and food security. But despite the high value of the transfers and their year-long structure – which are common constraints in program design that may limit longer-term effects – this program did not result in lifting refugee families out of poverty after the transfers ended. This finding is in contrast with the majority of the literature on unconditional cash assistance programs, which, when reported, consistently show positive effects of such programs even years after they end.

As the effects of humanitarian assistance on refugees' welfare have historically been difficult to characterize due to both the nature of implementing agencies and a lack of credible research designs, I wrote two additional papers on this topic with former undergraduate students: [“Gender differences in the adequacy of poverty-targeted food assistance programs: Evidence from Syrian refugee households in Lebanon”](#) (*World Development* 2025) with Jackson Schneider (Emory '23) and [“Are children so mobile? Endogenous household composition effects of cash transfers”](#) (*working paper* 2024) with Nick Skelley (Emory '22, current Cornell Economics Ph.D. student).

Earlier in this line of work, my coauthors and I studied poverty targeting in information-scarce environments. The motivating problem for this is that institutions in low-income contexts often face a dearth of information available to effectively target programs to poor households. Governments and aid agencies can thus either undertake resource-intensive data collection efforts to determine eligible beneficiaries, or use readily-available proxies to achieve the same purpose. Whether this is possible depends on the methods used, data quality available, and the degree to which the information available comprises viable proxies. In [“Targeting humanitarian aid using administrative data: model design and validation”](#) (*Journal of Development Economics* 2021), we show that basic demographic information held by international aid organizations can be used to accurately identify the poor. To do this, we partnered with UNHCR to design and validate an econometric targeting model for humanitarian aid to refugees in Lebanon. Compared to traditional resource-intensive methods for targeting this type of program, we show that the switch to administrative data incurs only small losses in targeting accuracy – providing support for this type of alternative approach to the administration of antipoverty programs. We also directly identify the missing proxies to which the performance loss is attributable, providing guidance for practitioners looking to build such targeting systems in the future. Given the advent of increasingly extensive and interoperational data sources for administering social programs, this paper ultimately questions the justification for the resource-intensive targeting methods such as those which have been common in developing countries over the past several decades.

Another form of livelihood interventions for the poor or underemployed come in the form of skills and job training, which have long been known for their low levels of effectiveness in raising the employment and earnings of trainees. One of the reasons for this stems from the information problem faced by the government in choosing course offerings: future skill demand is difficult to predict. One common belief is that the government's information problem may be overcome through the involvement of employers, who may be better suited to indicate local skill demand. Historically, however, testing this hypothesis has been difficult due to a natural difficulty in holding fixed context and design features of job

training programs that do and do not involve employer input. In “[Tell us what you need: Matching public job training to local skill demand with employers’ input](#)” (*working paper 2024*), Mation and I partnered with the Brazilian Ministries of Industry and Education to investigate whether and how information from employers can be used to target job training to skill demand using a policy change in Brazil in 2013 in which the federal government began taking information from local employers into consideration when offering courses under its national job training program. Importantly, two segments of the national job training program ran in parallel, allowing us to show the difference in program effectiveness holding constant context and other design confounds. We show that informational input from local employers doubles program efficacy, as measured by trainees’ employment and earnings, in the five years after taking a course. While this provides novel evidence for the hypothesis regarding employer input to job training programs, we also show that (a) the overall difference in effectiveness is still relatively small in absolute magnitude, unlikely to pass a cost-benefit test, and (b) the differential effectiveness attenuates after approximately four years, limiting the horizon on which benefits might be expected to continue over time and tempering expectations about the ability for public-private collaboration to fully solve the difficulties inherent in job training programs.

### **Business creation and productivity.**

Much of the per capita income gap between rich and poor countries can be traced to differences in aggregate productivity, which is ultimately a combination of reallocation from entry and exit of businesses, and the productivity growth of existing businesses. My work has investigated both these antecedents to aggregate productivity in the context of India, which – despite market liberalization in 1991 – saw slower growth than many Asian economies over the following decades.

Prior to this, I worked on several studies related to firm creation and productivity in India. In “[How Do Electricity Shortages Affect Industry? Evidence from India](#)” (*American Economic Review 2016*), we sought to understand and characterize the precise effect that endemic electricity shortages have on productivity, output and investment at the firm level. Guided by a structural model of firm production under input uncertainty, we used variation in water flows through hydroelectric power generators to identify fluctuations in relative grid shortages versus surplus and estimate the causal effects of electricity shortages on firm performance. In line with the model’s predictions, electricity shortages are large and negative on output and revenues, although productivity is relatively unaffected. Our paper thus shows that despite its high incidence and being commonly cited as a major impediment to growth, this particular type of infrastructure failure is unlikely to be responsible for cross-country differences in aggregate productivity.

The above paper grew out of several works on firm creation in India, starting with “[Spatial Determinants of Entrepreneurship in India](#)” (*Regional Studies 2013*) in which we characterize the determinants of firm creation across localities in India to show the importance of incumbent market structures and infrastructure in India. Overlapping with my work on gender gaps below, two subsequent papers investigated the link between local policies, market conditions, and female entrepreneurs in India’s manufacturing sector: “[Local Industrial Structures and Female Entrepreneurship in India](#)” (*Journal of Economic Geography 2013*) and “[Political Reservations and Women’s Entrepreneurship in India](#)” (*Journal of Development Economics 2014*). The former showed that the local industrial structure comprised of female-owned businesses is an important determinant of future business creation by women, while latter started my work on leadership and gender through its investigation of the link between political empowerment and economic participation. In “[The Spatial Development of India](#)” (*Journal of Regional Science 2015*), we further characterize the relationship between density and growth in a model of spatial equilibrium, to show that infrastructure and human capital are the likely primary constraints in India to the growth of medium-density cities from faster growth.

### **Gender, politics, work and careers.**

It is well known that women are underrepresented in the upper echelons of business, academia, and politics, among other fields. The second strand of my work studies gender gaps through the perspective of careers and the limiting or enabling factors for career advancement.

Most recently, (“Strength in Numbers? Gender Composition, Leadership, and Women’s Influence in Teams” (*The Journal of Political Economy* 2024)) studied the relationship between individual’s influence in team-based work settings when group gender composition and leadership changes. Across several hundred six-person student work teams engaged in a group project over the course of a semester at a top private university in the U.S., we randomly varied the gender composition of groups and the gender of a group leader, and collected extensive data on various forms of participation and group dynamics in order to be able to relate any output quality differences to intermediate inputs in the production of the work product of these teams.

Several earlier papers preceded the above in studying the nature of political leadership positions as viewed through a career lens. While institutions are one determinant of gender representation gaps in powerful positions, so too are such positions filled as a result of career trajectories of individuals. Work with Brown, Mansour and Reeves (current graduate student at UMich), including “Gender Differences in Political Career Progression” (*Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 2025) and “Does Local Female Political Representation Empower Women to Run for Higher Office? Evidence from State and National Legislatures in India” (*The World Bank Economic Review* 2022), studied gender differences in the relationship between local political experience and climbing the career ladder in politics in the U.S. and India, respectively.

In “Gender Differences in Political Career Progression” (*Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 2025), coauthors and I investigate dynamics of the gender gap in political careers in the United States. Because gender gaps in politics have been clearly shown to emerge at the margin of candidacy, rather than performance in elections, we focus on quantifying the role that prior political experience has in generating candidates for Congressional elections, and whether this differs for men relative to women. To do this, we undertook novel data linking efforts to accurately trace political careers of state legislature candidates to the federal level since the late 1960’s. We then show that an additional state legislature term increases the probability of ever running for Congress by twice as much for men as it does for women, and the effect on ever winning a Congressional race is five times larger for men than women. While it has been established that female candidates perform as well as men conditional on entry, we show that the effects of political experience on career progression are substantially smaller for women than men, even among otherwise equally competitive candidates.

“Does Local Female Political Representation Empower Women to Run for Higher Office? Evidence from State and National Legislatures in India” (*The World Bank Economic Review* 2022) followed this line of work to understand the career effects of competitively-won elections for female candidates and others around them. The motivation here is that competitively won elections may have larger effects on candidates or voters than quota-mandated female leadership. We confirm this hypothesis, again in the context of India, showing larger effects from competitively won local elections on candidacy by women in subsequent federal elections. We show that this is in part due to what is likely an inspiration effect, in which new female politicians enter races directly at the federal level after recent exposure to a woman winning a seat in local government. We also show that effects on representation may exist, as some of these female candidates win the elections they contest at the federal level.

Most recently, “Experience, institutions, and candidate emergence: The political career returns to state legislative service” (*Political Science Research and Methods* 2022) with McCrain (Emory Ph.D. ’20) tests the role that prevailing institutions have on generating upwardly-mobile politicians. In this paper, we show that states with

professionalized legislatures have a substantially higher return to career progression for their legislators than do less professionalized legislatures. Because Congressmembers with state legislative experience have been shown to be more effective, this has important implications for inequality in Congressional representation across states – as state-level institutions may differentially hinder or enable career progression to national politics.

My interest in this topic began with two of my dissertation chapters studying seat quotas for women in local government in India. A common argument for their use is that quota-induced entrants to a field will eventually “climb the career ladder” and improve parity throughout the organizational hierarchy. In “[Can quotas increase the supply of candidates for higher-level positions? Evidence from local government in India](#)” (*Review of Economics and Statistics* 2020), I tested this hypothesis using a national policy in India that instituted a random assignment of quotas for women in leadership positions in local government over time. I find that longer cumulative exposure to seat reservations increases the number of female candidates who contest elections at higher levels of government, both in the state and national legislatures, where quotas are not prescribed. On one hand, the findings show that local quotas increase candidacy in elections for more prominent positions, and do play a role in creating a cohort of experienced politicians who contest seats at higher levels of government over time. In contrast to expectations regarding these entrants eventually reaching high levels of the organizational hierarchy, however, I show that they do not win the later elections they contest, leaving representation at higher levels unaffected.

Also finding spillover effects, “[Political Inclusion and Educational Investment: Estimates from a national policy experiment in India](#)” (*Journal of Development Economics* 2018) tested whether the introduction of quotas for women in local government in India increased investments in human capital among school-age children. While research has shown that female leadership in local government changes girls’ attitudes about their education and work, less is known about this effect for politicians in higher levels of government. Using the same quota rule in India, I was able to build on prior research done at the local level to show that female leadership in politics has equal or larger “role model” effects at higher levels of government – adding to the existing understanding of the effects that female political leaders have on constituents.

**Research Impact.** A secondary aim of my research is to be relevant for contemporary policy, and have seen the evidence of this in various ways. Most recently, the econometric model my coauthors and I developed in “[Targeting humanitarian aid](#)” for targeting the cash transfers to refugees in Lebanon has been put directly into practice over the past six years to target over \$1 billion in humanitarian aid in the country. “[Geographic poverty targeting](#)” led UNHCR to change their targeting approach for cash transfers in Lebanon in 2022 after incorporating the initial findings of our work. Earlier, findings from “[Tell us what you need](#)” were presented to the Special Secretariat for Strategic Affairs of the Brazilian Presidency as well as the Ministry of Industry, and the same was covered in a hearing of the Brazilian Federal Senate. This work has been used in various ways to inform the ongoing discussion on the reformation of the national skills training program in Brazil. I have also brought research findings to broader audiences, including invited contributions, short-form research summaries in policy research outlets, and presentations of research to staff at the World Bank, the United Nations, and other development and aid sector audiences.

**Teaching, Mentoring, and Advising.** To date, my teaching has focused on technical and research-focused courses. As the undergraduate level, these include Introductory Econometrics, Causal Inference and Policy Analysis, Honors Research, and Undergraduate Research. At the Masters level, I teach a more advanced course in Causal Inference and Policy Analysis, and at the Doctoral level I have taught Labor Economics. My course evaluations typically score above 8 out of 9.

Mentorship and advising are an integral component of an academic career. I advise 1-2 Honors Theses annually,

and build other mentoring and advising relationships by involving undergraduate and doctoral students in my active research projects. I am currently chair or co-chair for two graduate students at Emory, and serve as an external committee member for a Ph.D. student at Georgia Tech. I have also served as an advisor through other undergraduate research programs at Emory both during the academic year and summers.

**Professional service.** I regularly serve as a referee for peer-reviewed journals and as a grant reviewer for NSF, the World Bank, and other organizations. Since 2023 I have co-organized DevSouth, a small conference for grad students and faculty doing research in development economics. I am a member of IZA, Households in Conflict Network, and am an Invited Researcher at the JPAL/IPA Displaced Livelihoods Initiative and Humanitarian Protection Initiative.

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