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Seize the Time: Needed Research on Local Economic Development in an Era of Increased Attention to Problems of Place

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Seize the Time: Needed Research on Local Economic Development in an Era of Increased Attention to Problems of Place

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ABSTRACT

With the increased attention to place-based policies comes an increased need for policy-relevant research on local economic development. Within the policy area of local economic development, this paper identifies five types of research needs: 1) better definitions of local labor markets; 2) policy know-how on how local economic development's benefits can be better spread to distressed neighborhoods; 3) evidence on what types of jobs have both good growth prospects in the U.S. economy yet also provide good long-run job opportunities in local labor markets for the majority of U.S. workers who lack a bachelor's degree; 4) estimates of how local worker education or skill-upgrading programs, or worker attraction programs, affect local labor market outcomes for different groups of workers; and 5) more-rigorous evaluation both of customized business services provided to individual firms and of more-comprehensive regional economic development strategies.

JEL Classification Codes: R11, R12, R23

Key Words: Local economic development policies, local labor markets, good jobs, program evaluation, neighborhoods, remote worker attraction, place-based scholarships

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What are the major under-researched questions that are most relevant to improving local economic development policies?

- First, one major research issue that is a moving target because of economic changes is this: what is a local labor market, which we are trying to improve through local economic development policies?
- Second, how do we better share the gains from local economic development with particular neighborhoods, which is key to achieving that buzzword of “inclusive growth”?
- Third, in the changing American economy, what jobs really offer a future of sustainable employment?
- Fourth, with an aging workforce and increasing educational requirements, what are the effects on local labor market outcomes of local “labor supply” policies—e.g., place-based education or training policies, or remote worker-attraction policies?
- Fifth, can we finally develop a robust literature of credible causal analyses of the effects of economic development programs? We need better evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of particular economic development services to individual businesses, such as customized job training, manufacturing extension, and small-business development services. We also need better evaluations of the community effects of some of the major comprehensive economic development programs that have recently been carried out or authorized at the federal level.

These five research questions are based on the implicit assumption that local economic development policy is the “demand side” of local labor market policy. The assumption—backed by at least some research (Bartik 2019)—is that the main benefit of local economic development policy is what it does to increase local earnings per capita for the original local residents.

Therefore, research on local economic development policies should never end with saying “This policy promotes local economic growth” without also asking “How do local residents benefit from this growth?”

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: WHAT ON EARTH IS A LOCAL LABOR MARKET?

The concept of a local labor market is clear: a local labor market is some spatial area, within which there is sufficient internal commuting that a shock to labor demand or labor supply in any portion of the spatial area will have short-term effects throughout the spatial area, but exactly where the shock occurs within the spatial area is of significantly less importance.¹ “Sufficient commuting” spreads the effects throughout the spatial area through job vacancy chains, even if not everyone can commute. For example, extra jobs in the suburbs affect labor market conditions for city residents, even city residents who cannot commute, because some workers will leave their city jobs to take the new suburban jobs, which opens up job vacancies to less-mobile city residents. Demand shocks or supply shocks to a local labor market may not equally affect all workers throughout the local labor market—for instance, effects likely differ by education or race. But even these differential group effects depend primarily on the magnitude of the shock at the local labor market level, with the location of the shock within the local labor market being of secondary importance.

Labor market effects also spread across local labor markets, through worker migration or changes in firms’ decisions about where to locate, expand, or contract employment. But this spread across local labor markets is slower than within local labor markets, because adjustments facilitated by commuting are a faster process than adjustments from worker migration or firms’ employment decisions. Because these cross-local labor market reallocations are slower, local labor demand shocks have sizable effects on local residents’ labor market outcomes in the short

¹ For example, in some recent work, I show that once one controls for shocks to commuting-zone labor demand, shocks to county labor demand do not have statistically significant effects on a county’s employment rate (Bartik 2021a,b). This suggests that commuting zones are closer to a local labor market definition than counties, at least on average.

run, which lead to long-run effects. For example, when a short-run increase in demand for labor leads to some local residents' getting more and better jobs, this extra labor market experience increases these workers' job skills, self-confidence, and reputation with employers, all of which improve workers' long-run outcomes. In other words, a once-and-for-all increase in local labor demand may have long-run effects on the quality of local labor supply. This argument for local labor market "hysteresis effects"—long-run effects on equilibrium labor market outcomes of a short-term shock—is the main point of Bartik (1991).

For local economic development policy, the issue of what is the relevant local labor market is key. This local labor market is the spatial area that will contain most of the immediate and even long-term effects on local residents' labor market outcomes of some local economic development policies that boost labor demand for some types of jobs. Therefore, ideally, local economic development policies should be managed and designed so that they consider benefits and costs at the local labor market level. Policies that focus on benefits and costs only in some spatial area that is much smaller than a local labor market—for example, in an individual suburban community—will overlook substantial benefits or costs elsewhere in the local labor market. Policies that focus on benefits and costs in some spatial area that is much larger than a local labor market—for instance, at the state level—should also consider what happens in that spatial area's constituent local labor markets. For instance, a labor-demand boost in a local labor market in a state will only slowly spread its influence to the state's other local labor markets. A state government that omits some local labor markets from consideration will not achieve growth that is inclusive of residents of all local labor markets.

Traditionally, the local labor market concept has been operationalized by federal designation of *metropolitan areas*. In recent years, *micropolitan areas* have been added, in order

to include smaller communities. And *commuting zones* have been added that allow all U.S. counties to be included in a local labor market, including rural counties.

The first problem is that these definitions are too ad hoc, with boundaries drawn based on arbitrary commuting percentages, without rigorously asking the question, “For these counties that we are grouping together, how closely are workers’ outcomes in these different counties *really* integrated?” Anyone who seriously looks at metropolitan areas or commuting zones is struck by how large, geographically, many of them have become. The current rules for defining these multicounty regions need to be rigorously reexamined, to determine what definitional rules for grouping counties lead to the closest match to a truly integrated local labor market.²

The second problem is that with recent trends toward more remote work, the old definitions of local labor markets may be obsolete.³ Maybe in an era of remote work our definition of local labor markets should be enlarged. Perhaps some of our current local labor market definitions are too small. Perhaps more-remote counties will in the future be more integrated with nearby central counties where remote workers occasionally commute for meetings.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: HOW DO WE INCREASE JOB ACCESS IN DISTRESSED NEIGHBORHOODS?

Research increasingly suggests that neighborhood characteristics have important effects on the long-term outcomes for children growing up in the neighborhood.⁴ Neighborhoods do not

² Some of these definitional problems have previously been discussed by Goetz, Partridge, and Stephens (2018).

³ Some papers discussing the rise in remote work include Althoff et al. (2022) and Bick, Blandin, and Mertens (2022).

⁴ See Chyn and Katz (2021) for a review and Chetty et al. (2020) for oft-cited evidence.

appear to have causal effects on labor market outcomes for adults. Yes, there are low-income neighborhoods with low employment rates and low wages, but that is because, for many reasons such as U.S. housing policy, people with low incomes tend to cluster in particular neighborhoods, not because the neighborhood causes their outcomes. But for children, who obviously cannot choose their neighborhood, some distressed neighborhoods are much worse places in which to grow up.

Among the characteristics of neighborhoods that matter is the percentage of adults who are working. Such working adults may provide role models and job networks, which may affect the aspirations and opportunities of the neighborhood's children.

These neighborhood problems are particularly important for Black children, because of America's continued racial segregation by neighborhood. On average, neighborhood conditions tend to be worse for Black children (Sharkey 2013).

Therefore, if we are to achieve inclusive growth through local economic development policies, we will have to help the residents of distressed neighborhoods access those jobs. Because local labor markets are bigger than neighborhoods, improved job access is not best achieved by plopping jobs down in a neighborhood. Plopping jobs down in a neighborhood is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for helping that neighborhood's residents; most residents of any neighborhood do not work in that same neighborhood, and most jobs in any American neighborhood are not held by that neighborhood's residents.

How do we effectively improve neighborhood job access? We lack rigorous research evidence on how to do so. Research evidence suggests that the federal Empowerment Zone program of the 1990s improved neighborhood residents' employment rates (Busso, Gregory, and Kline 2013), but we are uncertain what component of Empowerment Zones made the difference:

Was it the program's subsidies for hiring neighborhood residents? Was it the program's job training and job information services? Was it the combination of training and subsidies---the job training helps make neighborhood residents more skilled, and the subsidies further support resident hiring?⁵

Some places around the country are trying out ideas such as Neighborhood Employment Hubs, which co-locate job information and training services at trusted neighborhood institutions, such as neighborhood advocacy groups, subsidized housing projects, or local churches. Another promising intervention is Employer Resource Networks, under which disadvantaged entry-level workers are given the support of a success coach in overcoming issues that might reduce job retention.⁶ Although these ideas are promising, we lack rigorous evidence of their effectiveness.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: WHAT TYPES OF JOBS WILL PAY OFF IN THE FUTURE?

David Autor and others have argued that one problem in the U.S. economy is the loss of *midwage jobs*—occupations, particularly in manufacturing, that pay well relative to their required educational credentials (Autor 2019). The argument is that for many workers with less than a bachelor's degree, such jobs can provide decent wages and upward mobility opportunities. In contrast, *high-wage jobs*, such as many professional and managerial jobs, may have too high of educational-credential requirements to be accessible to the majority of U.S. workers who lack a bachelor's degree. In addition, *low-wage jobs*, such as many service jobs, are accessible to

⁵ An innovative program of the past that combined training and screening of long-term unemployed workers, plus selective subsidies to increase hiring, was Minnesota's MEED program of the 1980s. However, MEED (initially an acronym for Minnesota Emergency Employment Development, later an acronym for Minnesota Employment and Economic Development) was never rigorously evaluated (Bartik 2001).

⁶ For more on Neighborhood Employment Hubs and Employer Resource Networks, see Miller-Adams et al. (2019).

most workers, but they pay poorly and often lack upgrading opportunities. Some research evidence suggests that at the local labor market level, only increases in midwage jobs have benefits for increasing local residents' per capita earnings. The benefits of increasing midwage jobs are particularly strong for less-educated workers (Bartik 2022b).

But the challenge is that in the future, achieving robust job growth in manufacturing is likely to be a difficult goal to achieve for local economic developers. After the pandemic, and in an atmosphere of growing global tensions, U.S. firms may choose to do some reshoring of manufacturing. But given the growing use of robots and other automation, the glory days of fast manufacturing job growth seem unlikely to return.

Therefore, more research is needed on what occupations offer decent opportunities for upward mobility for American workers who have less than a bachelor's degree, *and* are also jobs that might grow robustly. Some research has been done on these topics, but more is needed (Demaria, Fee, and Wardrip 2020).

With better research on what job types best pay off for local residents, particularly the majority of residents with less a college degree, local economic developers will be better able to target the right industries and firms---ones whose job growth will most improve labor market outcomes for local residents.

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: HOW DO LOCAL LABOR SUPPLY POLICIES AFFECT LOCAL LABOR MARKETS?

In recent years, many local communities (at least 204!) have instituted some type of “place-based scholarship” program. Such programs provide at least some local residents with free or at least lower-cost tuition at some colleges. Some place-based scholarships also support

training or apprenticeship programs. Place-based scholarships are rationalized as helping both scholarship recipients and the local economy. The increased education and training credentials that scholarship recipients gain both help those recipients and boost the skills offered by the local economy to employers. The scholarships also encourage in-migration and discourage out-migration of households with young children. The resulting increase in population will promote local economic development by boosting local demand for goods and services and also by boosting the area's available labor supply.⁷

Other local communities, particularly after the pandemic, have adopted programs to attract remote workers. One database lists 78 such programs.⁸ The presumed benefit is to attract additional workers with more education in order to boost local economic development. The attraction of more-educated workers will increase local demand for goods and services, and may over time bolster the local labor supply of more-educated workers. In addition, some of these additional workers with more education may start up local small businesses.

Some research evidence exists on the individual effects of place-based scholarships that sheds light on the question of whether these programs increase educational attainment. This research evidence suggests that indeed these programs *can* boost educational attainment (Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska 2021; Carruthers, Fox, and Jepsen 2020; Swanson and Ritter 2020).

On remote worker attraction programs, research on individual effects is less available. Some case studies provide anecdotal evidence of these programs' effects (Choudhury, Salomon, and Logan 2022).

⁷ The pioneering place-based scholarship program is the Kalamazoo Promise, begun in 2005 (Bartik, Hershbein, and Lachowska 2021; Miller-Adams 2009). Information on 204 such local programs can be found at <https://www.upjohn.org/promise/>.

⁸ See <https://www.makemymove.com/get-paid>.

But less research exists on the aggregate *macro* or *general equilibrium* effects of such programs. For example, attracting the parents of children through place-based scholarships, or attracting remote workers with cash subsidies, potentially boosts both local demand and local labor supply. What happens to local housing prices and local wages of groups with different educational levels? Some prior research evidence suggests that having more local workers with higher educational credentials may produce positive spillovers for the wages of other local workers, particularly those workers with less education (Moretti 2012). These spillover effects are thought to occur because of various agglomeration economies: having more local skilled workers can spill over to increase the productivity of other local workers. But there's little evidence that directly looks at the aggregate impact on local economies of these more-recent policies, which boost the educational attainment of current residents and attract more highly educated workers.⁹

Is there a difference in the aggregate local impact of place-based education and training programs versus place-based worker attraction programs? The former focuses on upgrading the education of the existing residents, with secondary impacts on population size. The latter focuses on increasing the local population, with additional impacts on the local education mix. The former would seem likely to have greater benefits for the original local residents. But the relative magnitude of the indirect effects is uncertain.

Both recent evidence as well as some longstanding evidence suggests that migration shocks to local population produce percentage shocks in local employment of roughly the same magnitude (Beaudry, Green, and Sand 2018; Howard 2020). Thus, in the aggregate, migration

⁹ One exception is Bartik and Sotherland (2015), which finds some evidence for the effects of place-based scholarships in reducing out-migration effects on households with children, but no strong evidence of housing price effects.

does not seem to affect employment rates very much, which suggests limited effects on local real wages. The major effects of migration would be on local property values and housing prices. But what about the effects of different types of population shocks---for example, to more-educated groups or more-entrepreneurial groups? What about the different effects of increasing in-migration versus reducing out-migration—does this make a difference?

RESEARCH QUESTION 5: WHAT IS THE COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICES IN AFFECTING INDIVIDUAL FIRMS AND THE LOCAL ECONOMY?

Tax incentives and other cash grants to firms to create jobs are relatively expensive, on the order of \$300,000 per job created (Bartik 2022a). Some research suggests that the cost per job can be much lower, at \$50,000 to \$60,000 per job created, for customized services to business, such as customized job training (Holzer et al. 1993) and manufacturing extension (Jarmin 1999). But we need more-recent rigorous evidence on a variety of customized services to business, including not only customized job training and manufacturing extension but also small-business development centers, business incubators, various types of business parks (industrial parks, research parks), and infrastructure provision such as roads and utilities.

Services to business may complement one another in a local economy, so benefits to one firm may spill over through agglomeration economies onto other local firms. Therefore, we also need rigorous evidence on what comprehensive economic development services can do to boost a local economy and help (or hurt) local residents. Some research evidence exists on the effectiveness of broad regional economic development programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) (Kline and Moretti 2013), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) (Jaworski and Kitchens 2019), and Empowerment Zones (Busso, Gregory, and Kline 2013).

More-recent work has begun to examine the effects of Opportunity Zones (Arefeva et al. 2021; Atkins et al. 2021; Chen, Glaeser, and Wessel 2022; Freedman, Khanna, and Neumark 2021). But we need additional work on the overall impact of recent and upcoming federal programs that offer comprehensive economic development services, and we need more-rigorous ways of selecting comparison groups for such broad regional programs.

The recent and upcoming federal programs I am referring to include the Build Back Better Regional Challenge (BBBRC) to aid regional clusters (a \$1 billion program) and two programs that were part of the just-enacted CHIPS and Science Act (CSA): 1) Regional Technology Hubs (a \$10 billion program) and 2) the RECOMPETE Act for distressed places (a \$1 billion program). All three of these programs provide broad and flexible aid for regional economic development, but with somewhat different targets. BBBRC is aimed at developing local industry clusters in 21 local regions, the Hubs program is aimed at diversifying U.S. high tech to 20 or more additional regions, and the RECOMPETE Act is directed at providing economic development aid to 10 distressed local labor markets.¹⁰ These programs are large. For example, the five-year funding for the two CSA programs (Hubs plus RECOMPETE) of \$11 billion exceeds the peak five-year funding in today's dollars for TVA (\$9 billion) or the ARC (\$10 billion) (Bartik, Asquith, and Bolter 2022). These new federal regional initiatives deserve rigorous evaluation to see whether such regional economic development efforts can produce local labor market benefits sufficient to justify their multi-billion-dollar costs. Without such rigorous evaluation, it will be more difficult to rationalize further large-scale federal and state interventions to help economically distressed places.

¹⁰ For more information on BBBRC, see <https://eda.gov/arpa/build-back-better/>. The Hubs program and the RECOMPETE program are discussed in Bartik, Asquith, and Bolter (2022).

Such targeted regional aid programs can be evaluated by comparing funded recipients with unfunded places that are similar. This is the technique that has been used in the past for evaluating TVA, ARC, Empowerment Zones, and now Opportunity Zones. But such evaluations can be made more convincing and robust if policymakers adjust their grant award procedures to make them more precise and quantitative.

From an evaluation standpoint, random assignment of assisted places would be the ideal for making evaluations more rigorous. But random assignment seems unlikely to be politically or practically feasible for these regional programs. Policymakers will want to select regions for assistance that come up with better proposals, or that are needier, which are legitimate selection criteria. However, for evaluation purposes, a close substitute for random assignment of grants is awarding grants through a quantitative scoring system, which considers relevant regional selection criteria such as the quality of the proposal and the region's distress level. Then a good comparison group is one that does the following: it helps to estimate how regional success along various dimensions (job growth, wage growth, and employment rates, both in the aggregate and broken down by various industries and worker groups) varies as one goes from regions that just made the score cutoff and were funded, to regions that just missed the cutoff and were therefore not funded. Regions just below the score cutoff for awards are likely to be similar on both observed and unobserved characteristics to those that just made the cutoff. Such "regression discontinuity" studies have been shown to give similar evaluation results to a randomized controlled trial (Angrist et al. 2015; Chaplin et al. 2018). An example of how such a regression discontinuity analysis might be applied to regional aid programs is found in Bartik (2019).

If scoring systems to provide large-scale regional aid are implemented, such scoring systems could also help evaluate programs that provide customized services to individual

businesses. These federal aid programs include support for various types of business services such as customized training and business advice. Ideally, customized services to individual businesses would also be evaluated in a randomized controlled trial. Evaluators would like to see program operators flip a coin and say that Firm A is randomly chosen to receive assistance, and that Firm B is randomly chosen for the control group. But such randomized assistance seems unlikely to be politically viable. Policymakers and businesses will demand some criteria that base awards on who needs or deserves aid more, or on who can make better use of the aid.

However, an alternative would be to compare firms in regions that were funded by these large-scale regional assistance programs, versus similar firms in regions that unsuccessfully applied. The probability of a business receiving program services from a particular type of customized business service is likely to vary discretely as one goes from assisted to unassisted regions, yet other factors affecting program success will vary more smoothly as one examines firms in regions that vary in their grant application score. This discontinuity in the probability of firms receiving assistance in regions just above or just below the score cutoff for funding can be used to help evaluate the effects of the customized services on firm performance.¹¹

CONCLUSION: SEIZE THE TIME

Place-based policies have begun to receive increased attention in recent years. This increased attention is in part motivated by widening regional disparities and the resulting political unrest.

¹¹ Bartik (2019) provides additional ideas for improving the evaluation of both individual firm assistance programs and regional assistance programs.

But for this attention to place-based policies to lead to policies that work, we need better evaluation of such policies and a better understanding of how local economic development affects local labor markets and different groups within local labor markets. We need better evaluation of the place-based policies being adopted in the immediate term. But in the medium term and long term, we need greater progress on more-fundamental understandings: what is a local labor market, how are neighborhoods connected to that local labor market, and how do various types of labor demand and labor supply shocks affect the local labor market outcomes of different groups? Only by both improving our fundamental understandings and improving our program evaluations will place-based policies be able to be an effective part of our policy tool kit.

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