THE ROLE OF THE POLICY CONTEXT IN USING AND UNDERSTANDING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

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So, now that we have the linked data, what do we do with it?

- Linked data, whether across agencies within a state, across states or between state and federal datasets, offers enormous opportunities for research and program evaluation.
  - Additional variables (outcomes and controls)
  - Broader populations
  - May be longitudinal
  - Policy variation

- Understanding the policy context is important for all policy-relevant research, whether the data are linked or not.

WHAT IS THE POLICY CONTEXT?

- Rules and policies ("program parameters")
  - Examples
  - Sources of information about program parameters
    - Welfare Rules Databook; CCDF Policies Database

- Processes and procedures that describe or characterize how programs are run
  - Local variation can be a challenge and an opportunity
  - Data sources?

- Broader environment or context of the program and local conditions
  - Broad view of social assistance programs – policies interact within and across programs

WHY IS THE POLICY CONTEXT IMPORTANT?

We all know the policy context is important, but …

"It is easy to reel off a number of contextual factors … and then ignore them in the analysis and understanding of the policy-making system."

Collins, C., Green, A., Hunter, D. "Health sector reform and the interpretation of the policy context" *Health Policy* 47 (1999): 69-83.

THE POLICY CONTEXT SHAPES ADMINISTRATIVE DATA IN IMPORTANT WAYS

1. How administrative data are collected (when and by whom).

2. How variables are defined may change in different policy contexts or over time.

3. With administrative data, those in the dataset are typically not a random sample – policy affects the composition of the caseload and thus who is in the dataset.

1. THE POLICY CONTEXT AFFECTS WHICH DATA ARE COLLECTED

- Data availability and reliability matter for policy analysis.

- Importance of knowing who collected the data and for what purpose.

  - Eligibility-related variables
  - Performance measurement variables

  - Example: Missing education level
  (From Davis, E., Connolly, L. & Weber, B., 2003)

2. THE POLICY CONTEXT AFFECTS HOW VARIABLES ARE DEFINED
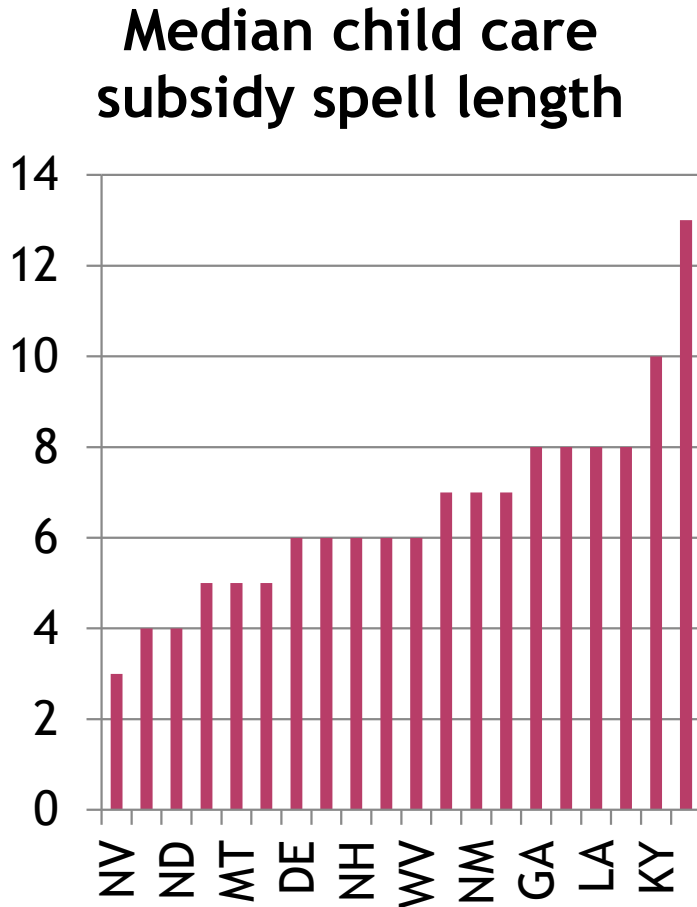
- Definitions of variables in the administrative database relate to policies and program rules.

- Example #1: Total monthly income (for determining eligibility)

- Example #2: What counts as a work activity (for different programs)

- Example #3: Type of child care

3. THE POLICY CONTEXT AFFECTS WHO IS IN THE PROGRAM DATASET

- Both through intentional setting of state (or local) policy priorities.
  - Example #1: TANF recipients are given priority for child care subsidies in some states.
  - Example #2: Whether noncitizens can receive certain benefits (from federal or state programs).
- And through the perhaps unintended consequences of policy and program parameters.
  - Program and policies interact (e.g., through eligibility policies and income disregards).
  - Rules about who can provide (subsidized) care and provider payment rates affect which families decide to participate in the child care subsidy program.

OUTCOME DIFFERENCES ACROSS STATES REFLECT CASELOAD DIFFS.

Median child care subsidy spell length

Source: Swenson, K. 2014.

- Differences in median child care spell length across states may be due in part to differences in caseload characteristics.
- Studies in several states have found that spell length varies with TANF receipt, age of children and reason for subsidy.

THE POLICY CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

1. The "treatment" – what is the policy or what policy changed

2. Who was "treated" and who is in the comparison or control group

3. How to interpret the findings

- Example: Oregon child care subsidy policy change reduced parent copays.

PARENTS REPORTED FREQUENT CHANGES IN COPAYS

- When asked how much her child care copay was, one respondent replied: *"Oh gosh, I have no idea. [My copay] changes. I mean it would literally change every six months, if not less than that. It's usually always anywhere between $50 and up to $300 I think is the most. Maybe it got up to $350 sometimes."*

- Another said *"Right now my co-pay is, I think $138, for a few months now. And then before that, it was like $158, and it's been right below $200. It goes up and down…"*

Source: Scott, E.K. et al (2011).

LOOKING AT COPAY CHANGES USING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

- Month-to-month changes in copay were relatively infrequent:
  - Nearly 80% of the time, there was <u>no change </u>in copay from one month to the next.
- In terms of a spell of program participation: copays changed <u>at least once </u>in about half of the spells.
  - In about half of the spells where families experienced a copay change, the difference between the highest and lowest copay exceeded $100.
  - More than half of the time, there was a copay change between the end of one spell and the beginning of the next.
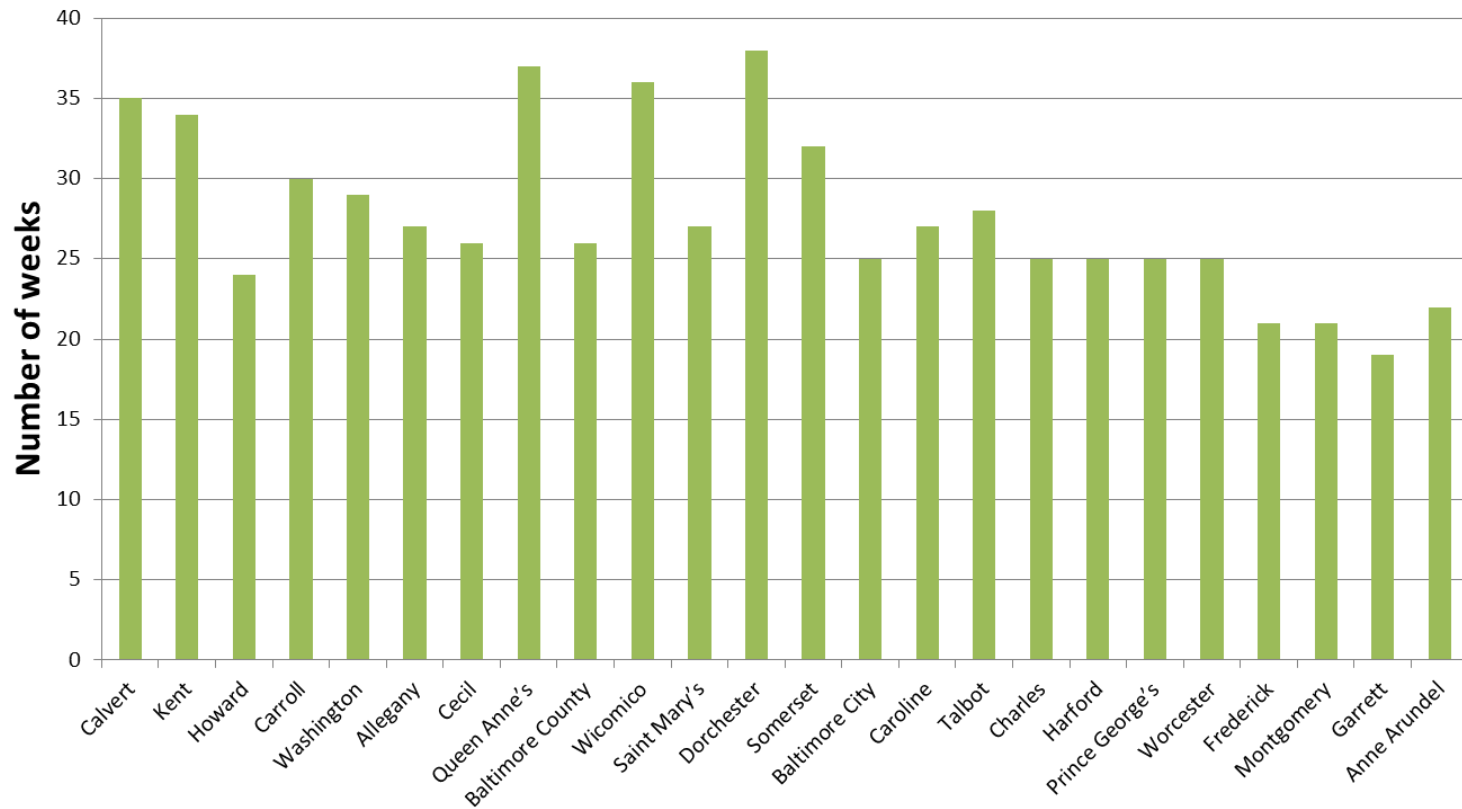
Source: Grobe, Weber, Davis & Scott, 2012.

THE POLICY CONTEXT: WRITTEN POLICY VS. FAMILY EXPERIENCE

- Policy parameters provide some information about the policy context.
- But these parameters may not tell us much about families' experiences.
- And, implementation may differ across locations or over time.

- Example: Maryland's child care subsidy policy is set statewide, but case management (prior to 2015) was handled at the county level.

Source: Davis, Krafft, Forry & Tout (2015)

LOCAL VARIATION IN OUTCOME:
MEDIAN LENGTH OF PARTICIPATION IN CHILD CARE SUBSIDY PROGRAM

LOCAL VARIATION IN OUTCOMES MAY BE RELATED TO VARIATION IN IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of eligibility redetermination requirements in Maryland child care subsidy program:

- State policy requires redetermination of eligibility at least every 12 months.

- Based on administrative data, both six- and twelve-month eligibility periods were common, but there was wide variation across counties in the percentage of families who are required to recertify eligibility in less than 12 months.

- Families were much more likely to exit the subsidy program when it's time to recertify eligibility.

Despite statewide policy on redetermination, local variation strongly influenced outcomes for subsidy continuity.

CONCLUSIONS

- Administrative data offers great opportunities for policy analysis, particularly when linked across agencies, localities and time.

- But challenges arise in understanding the variation in policy context in order to interpret findings.

- Partnerships or involvement of those who know the programs and data systems are important to understanding the data and interpreting the findings.

THANK YOU

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LIST OF SOURCES AND RELATED STUDIES

- Welfare Rules Databook http://anfdata.urban.org/wrd/databook.cfm

- CCDF Policies Database http://www.urban.org/policy-centers/income-and-benefits-policy-center/projects/ccdf-policies-database

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