

Research Statement

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My research examines how educational institutions, family and peer networks shape people’s opportunities across the life course. With my work, I aim to understand and tackle inequality in human capital accumulation and access to opportunity. A central focus is the economics of education—how access to higher education is formed, how students make educational choices, and how schools and universities influence outcomes across generations. My work also studies social influences beyond schools, including the role of neighbors and local institutions in education and crime.

In my research, I combine quasi-experimental and experimental designs with rich administrative data, and I often work in direct partnership with governments and NGOs, to move from causal diagnosis to policy. Although much of my work is set in Chile, I focus on identifying mechanisms that are relevant in other contexts. Below, I describe four strands of this agenda.

1. Elite Institutions and Social Mobility

What does access to an elite university change, and for whom? Using five decades of intergenerationally linked data from Chile, I find that admission to elite programs changes the social environment in which graduates’ children grow up—their schools, neighborhoods, and peers—even when it leaves their test scores largely unchanged (*American Economic Review*, with C. Neilson and S. Zimmerman). Elite admission also raises the chance of reaching top positions in the bureaucracy, especially for mid-SES applicants, which suggests admissions policy can help diversify the state’s elite (with A. Paredes, C. Neilson, and S. Zimmerman). Looking across countries, I also document a remarkably stable gender gap in STEM applications among top-scoring students, which suggests that differences in choices, not only in preparation, sustain this gap (conditionally accepted, *Economics of Education Review*).

2. Educational Choices at the End of High School

Why do similarly prepared students make different educational choices? I study the roles of social interactions, information, and application costs. Older siblings causally shape where younger siblings apply and enroll in Chile, Croatia, Sweden, and the United States (*Quarterly Journal of Economics*), and close neighbors’ college enrollment raises enrollment and completion among younger applicants (*AEJ: Applied Economics*). These spillovers mean that barriers facing disadvantaged students are amplified within their networks, but also that access policies have multiplier effects beyond direct beneficiaries. On the policy side, a randomized trial with about 27,000 students shows that brief group counseling—not information alone—increases financial-aid applications and college enrollment (*“Brief yet Effective”*, with J. Eluchans-Errázuriz and F. Ramírez-Espinoza); a larger follow-up trial tests whether these effects hold when teachers and school counselors deliver the program. Ongoing projects study how children follow their parents’ fields of study and how Finland’s move to centralized admissions changed students’ applications.

3. Academic Preparation, School Effectiveness, and Affirmative Action

How can schools and admissions policies close gaps in preparation and attainment? I find that a national expansion of instructional time raised learning more in charter schools, which could hire new teachers, than in public schools, which had to extend the hours of current staff (*Economics of Education Review*,

with G. Bovini). Differences in teacher effectiveness account for an important share of gender gaps in test scores and later education, and teachers with smaller gender biases are more effective with both boys and girls (*Economics of Education Review*, with M. Riudavets-Barcons). In ongoing work I compare Chilean affirmative-action programs with different targeting rules, examining graduation, mismatch, and earnings, and how program design could improve them; related work shows these programs also benefit beneficiaries' siblings and neighbors. Other projects study how exposure to immigrant peers affects native students' outcomes and how new transit lines change school choice and competition among schools.

4. Beyond Education: Crime and Neighborhood Institutions

Can local institutions change trajectories outside the classroom too? The opening of Evangelical churches and secular organizations offering similar social support reduces reincarceration among property offenders (*Journal of Labor Economics*, with J. García-Hombrados). A reform that permanently assigns police officers to small, fixed patrol areas reduces victimization, increases trust in police, and lowers private spending on security, even without additional police resources (“*Boots in the Beat*”, conditionally accepted, *The Economic Journal*, with J. García-Hombrados and D. Pérez-Parra). As in my education work, how institutions are embedded in a community matters as much as how many resources they receive.

The Human Development Lab

I founded and direct the [Human Development Lab](#) at Universidad de los Andes, an interdisciplinary center working on early childhood, K-12 and higher education, and workplace development. The Lab maintains the data partnerships and field capacity behind large-scale studies, and hosts an annual Workshop on the Economics of Education and policy panels that connect researchers with Chilean policymakers.

Looking Ahead

Going forward, I want to move from diagnosis to design: to identify which combinations of school reforms, access policies, and admissions rules most effectively expand opportunity for low- and middle-income students, and to do so in direct partnership with the policymakers who can act on the evidence.