Is the social safety net working?

Meet GPS's new associate professor, Alexander Gelber, who works to improve the labor market with a focus on the social safety net

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News

[Professor Alexander Gelber](#) has always liked crunching numbers. Wanting to apply his interest in economics to understanding the determinants of human well-being, he remembers being inspired by his college professors who advised policymakers. In a dual appointment at the Department of Economics and the School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) at UC San Diego, he gets to fuse his two passions.

"I've always wanted my work to have impact, and to take the science of economics and apply those lessons to inform policymakers," said Gelber. "My professors, when I was in school, became role models for me. Public policy was always baked into my interest in economics."

Gelber's research centers on public finance, with a special focus on the social safety net. In a constantly evolving world economy, he is eager to bring his expertise to GPS.

"This appointment is a great fit for me. It's exciting that there is so much growth in the school and an increasing focus on domestic topics," said Gelber. "Looking at UC San Diego's and GPS' extraordinary rise over the past decades, the sky is the limit for the school. This joint appointment really allows me to forge interdisciplinary connections. While my focus is on economics, my heart is really in policy. I want to do research, but I also want it to inform policymakers."

From 2012 to 2013, Gelber served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Policy at the U.S. Department of Treasury Department, and in 2013 he served as Acting Assistant Secretary for Economic Policy and Acting Chief Economist at Treasury. During his appointment, he received the U.S. Treasury Meritorious Service Award.

"I came away from my experience at the Treasury with a much better understanding of how policy works and how economics informs policy," said Gelber. "This has helped me frame my classes and teaching style. Beyond textbooks, I can draw on my first-hand experience in teaching students the skills needed to succeed in the policy world."

Gelber's recent work generally uses large government datasets to explore the effects of the U.S. social safety net. In his most recent paper, ["Disability Insurance Income Saves Lives"](), Gelber and his co-authors focus on disability insurance, showing that higher payments from the U.S. Social Security Disability Insurance (DI) reduce mortality, particularly among lower-income groups.

"DI is a health-oriented program, but surprisingly there has been little research on the health effects of the program. Because health and human life is very valuable, the positive health effects of the program turn out to be important when thinking about costs relative to the benefits of disability insurance," said Gelber.

Also interested in the labor market, Gelber's paper ["The Effects on Youth Employment: Evidence from New York City Lotteries"](#) examines labor market activity among youth. While previous government assessments of youth employment programs have generally found little impact on future employment outcomes and therefore doubted the programs' benefits, Gelber and his co-authors revisit this critique.

They find that while the New York City summer youth employment program has little effect on future employment and college education – similar to the results of previous work – the program also leads to a decrease in crime and death, particularly due to homicide. This uncovers previously obscured benefits of the program that were not observed in prior work on the effects on mortality.

"These programs keep kids out of trouble, from reductions in incarceration rates to putting them on a life path with a decreased probability of death," said Gelber. "As in the disability context, the benefits of life are large when you consider the cost-benefit analysis of an issue."

At GPS, he will teach a class on public finance, including topics such as government tax and spending programs and the broader social safety net – including covering skills like effective memo writing and presentations to real world classroom simulations.

"I want students to understand the theories and data but also connect these lessons to the policymaking process," said Gelber. "I want students to walk away being able to communicate ideas and concepts that they will face in the policy

world."

With a rich background in both the public and private sector, Gelber encourages students to find a mentor whose advice they trust, citing no better time than graduate school.

"I should have taken more advice. Find people who are going to give you good advice, people you trust and take that advice," said Gelber. "Take advantage of being in the phase of training to solicit that advice, as people are eager to give it you."

Joining at the start of the School's 30th anniversary year-long celebration, he hopes his teaching and research will contribute to a community of global leaders, today and beyond.

"I hope to offer GPS students a sense of cutting-edge economic tools, data analytics and new training methods in how to apply them," said Gelber. "These are the areas that will create impact and inform public debate for a better future."

3 questions with Associate Professor Alexander Gelber

What is your academic focus?
I focus on the social safety net, particularly issues relating to social insurance, taxation and the labor market. Much of my recent work has focused on Social Security and Disability Insurance in the U.S.

What are the real-world impacts of your research?
I have had the privilege of serving at the U.S. Department of Treasury. In that context I covered a wide range of U.S. economic policy issues and saw how policy relates to research. Currently, I am a member of the Social Security and Disability Insurance Technical Panel on Assumptions and Methods, which advises the Social Security Administration on their projections of the Social Security and Disability Insurance Trust Funds. My research has been cited in a number of leading media outlets, as well as the Economic Report of the President. I have also worked as an advisor on analytics in the private sector (both for non-profit and for-profit companies) and have seen economic research applied to create and improve

products that help governments, firms and individuals function to the social good.

What skills or understanding do you hope students leave your class with?
My classes have three key features. First, the classes teach them about ways that economic data and theory can inform better policymaking. Second, I try to guide students to understand how economic theory and data actually are used in real-world examples as I have seen it, and how to use economic tools to maximal effect in the context of how policymaking works. Third, I give assignments that try to mimic these settings, such as memo-writing, delivering a presentation and an urgent simulation where recommendations must be formulated and delivered to policymakers quickly. From all of this, I hope students come away with an improved understanding of how to use economics to improve policymaking as it is practiced.