Abstract: Delays in SSDI and SSI Applications Based on Mental Health Impairments

What accounts for the rapid decline in SSDI and SSI program participation in recent years? What are the characteristics of applicants or potential applicants who meet program criteria but fail to receive benefits because of administrative burden? Are there changes to SSA procedures that could diminish delays in receiving benefits? This project proposes the first stage in a multi-year mixed qualitative-computational text analysis project to better understand the experiences of applicants and potential applicants in hard to adjudicate cases. The first year of this project will focus on individuals who apply for benefits due to severe mental impairments, one of the largest subgroups of SSDI and SSI beneficiaries. SSDI and SSI claims based on mental impairments are particularly difficult to adjudicate due to their reliance on self-reported symptoms (Goldman, Frey, and Riley 2019). Moreover, people with mental health conditions may struggle to successfully engage with the application process without assistance. In addition, the literature on the social determinants of health indicates that factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status lead to mental health disparities, making access to benefits also an equity issue (Harden and Slopen 2022; Russel and Fish 2016; Schnittker and McLeod 2005).

This study will address Focal Areas 1 and 2 by examining the administrative records of a nationally representative sample of individuals with mental health conditions that were initially denied benefits but were later granted benefits on appeal. Focusing on this group is a way to identify hard to adjudicate cases and also to better understand the experiences of applicants who face lengthy delays and process burdens – burdens that may include learning, compliance, and psychological costs (Herd and Moynihan 2018). This representative sample analysis will be combined with in-depth qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation with applicants, DDS staff, and administrative law judges, to better understand the underlying mechanisms and identify potential program improvements. Later stages of the project may also include community-engaged research to identify barriers to initial applications.

Researcher Biography

Bernadette Blashill is a doctoral student in Sociology at Harvard University. Her research centers on mental health inequities in the United States, with a focus on the intersection of law, race/ethnicity, and trauma. Her other current project examines secondary trauma amongst immigration attorneys and judges. Prior to pursuing graduate school, Bernadette provided direct legal services for low-income and marginalized communities in Social Security disability and immigration law for three years. She also worked as a project manager and research assistant at UC Berkeley, and as a Policy and Research Analyst for Catalyst California.