Can Outreach Raise SSDI and SSI Application Rates and Improve Longer-Term Economic Outcomes?

Jessie Coe and David Powell

Focal Area 1: Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Sex

Focal Area 3: Economic Security of Program Applicants and Beneficiaries

Focal Area 5: Understanding Communication Needs

Social insurance programs can only effectively improve economic outcomes if people are aware of them, know how to apply to them, and can navigate the application process. There are concerns that many people may find it challenging or daunting to apply for disability benefits in the United States. The SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) project provides active outreach to individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness with special focus on individuals with mental illness. SOAR provides assistance in applying for disability benefits and is currently active in each state. The program represents an intensive model for outreach to encourage disability insurance applications and an important experiment for understanding the scope for outreach to affect application rates and improve economic outcomes. It was initially phased-in between 2005 and June 2012 at the state-level. This rollout provides variation in the availability of the program by state but has never been used to study the impacts of the program.

We propose to study disability application rates using data from the Social Security Administration Fiscal Year Disability Claim Data in a difference-in-differences "event study" framework. We will estimate the initial and enduring effects of the program, using the staggered rollout of the program. In addition, we will use the American Community Survey (ACS) to study economic outcomes, such as poverty, employment, and disability outcomes. The ACS analyses will focus on longer-term effects. We will stratify the ACS analyses by race, ethnicity, and sex given hypotheses that outreach programs may disproportionately benefit different demographic groups and because homelessness rates are not uniform across demographic groups. The literature has generally not studied the role of such active involvement in helping people apply for disability benefits. The results of this study should help inform policymakers of the potential for similar programs to further reduce the barriers of applying for benefits.