

Cornell University
PUBPOL 4280/PUBPOL 5290/ECON 3710:
The Economics and Regulation of Risky Health Behaviors
Spring 2024

Professor John Cawley

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Online office hours by appointment

Zoom personal meeting ID: 950 467 9535 Zoom pass code: Spr24CIW

Teaching Assistant Devansh Jotsinghani

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Lecture Time and Location:

Wednesdays, 6:30 – 9:50 p.m. in Wolpe room 118.

Course Description:

Risky health behaviors such as cigarette smoking, alcohol abuse, risky sex, drug use, poor diet and physical inactivity (leading to obesity), and self-harm are responsible for hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths and impose billions of dollars in medical care costs each year in the United States. This course teaches the economic approach to studying risky health behaviors. The research literature on the economic causes and correlates of risky health behaviors will be studied. Numerous policies to modify risky health behaviors, such as the minimum legal drinking age and recreational marijuana laws, will be debated in class. Students will also participate in a policy wargame on the subject of taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages.

Credits and grading options: 4 credits. Letter grade only.

Prerequisites:

Intermediate Microeconomics: PUBPOL 2000 or ECON 3030

Course Learning Outcomes:

1. Employ the economic perspective to explain risky health behaviors; in particular:
 - a. Distinguish the economic way of thinking from other viewpoints
 - b. Apply economics and other perspectives to understand why people engage in risky health behaviors, and assess the merits of each.
 - c. Define and describe the economic rationale for government intervention – to fix market failures – to evaluate the justification for, and design of, public policies.
2. Recognize and analyze how economic research is conducted, in particular, differentiate the methods used by economists to estimate the effect of one variable on another. These methods include randomized experiments, the method of instrumental variables, regression discontinuity, and difference-in-differences models. Accurately interpret the results of these methods.
3. Demonstrate strong oral and written communication skills, including the ability to compose clear and testable statements, critically examine arguments, fairly assess evidence, and conclude.

4. Explain and interpret the basic facts about risky health behaviors, such as cigarette smoking, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, obesity, risky sex, and suicide.

Course webpage:

The course web page on [Canvas](#) contains lecture notes, required readings, video lectures, quizzes, assignments, links to important internet resources, and announcements.

Required readings:

Readings for discussion are assigned for each week (see the schedule below). When reading these articles and chapters in advance of the discussion, you should think about the following questions:

- 1) What is the main question examined and why is it important?
- 2) How does the author apply microeconomics to a specific topic?
- 3) What data are studied?
- 4) What are the major findings and conclusions?
- 5) Do you see any problems with the reasoning? What are the limitations of the data and methods? How could one improve upon this study?

All students must come to meetings prepared to discuss the required readings.

Academic Integrity (this language is provided by Cornell University):

Absolute integrity is expected of every Cornell student in all academic undertakings. Integrity entails a firm adherence to a set of values, and the values most essential to an academic community are grounded on the concept of honesty with respect to the intellectual efforts of oneself and others. Academic integrity is expected not only in formal coursework situations, but in all University relationships and interactions connected to the educational process, including the use of University resources. A Cornell student's submission of work for academic credit indicates that the work is the student's own. All outside assistance should be acknowledged, and the student's academic position truthfully reported at all times. In addition, Cornell students have a right to expect academic integrity from each of their peers. For further information, see the [Essential Guide to Academic Integrity at Cornell](#).

Cornell has an [online tutorial regarding plagiarism](#).

Your first assignment in this course is: 1) to read the entire Cornell Code of Academic Integrity; and 2) to take the Cornell online tutorial on plagiarism. Ignorance of these policies will not be an acceptable excuse for any infractions.

Note that the quizzes and written assignments for this course are individual assignments, NOT group projects. All of the work you submit must be your own.

Unless you have my express written permission, you may not buy or sell course materials. Such unauthorized behavior constitutes academic dishonesty.

Students agree by taking this course that all writing submitted for the course may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com for the detection of plagiarism. All submitted papers will be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database

solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of such papers. Use of the Turnitin.com service is subject to the Usage Policy posted on the Turnitin.com site.

Inclusivity Statement:

Cornell University (as an institution) and I (as an individual) are committed to full inclusion in education for all persons. Services and reasonable accommodations are available to persons with temporary and permanent disabilities, students facing mental health or other personal challenges, and students with other kinds of learning challenges. Please feel free to let me know if there are circumstances affecting your ability to participate in class. Some resources that might be of use include:

Office of Student Disability Services: <https://sds.cornell.edu>

Cornell Health CAPS (Counseling & Psychological Services):

<https://health.cornell.edu/services/counseling-psychiatry>

Students with Disabilities: Your access in this course is important to me. Please request your accommodation letter early in the semester, or as soon as you become registered with SDS, so that we have adequate time to arrange your approved academic accommodations.

- Once SDS approves your accommodation letter, it will be emailed to both you and me. Please follow up with me to discuss the necessary logistics of your accommodations.
- If you experience any access barriers in this course, such as with printed content, graphics, online materials, or any communication barriers; reach out to me or SDS right away.
- If you need an immediate accommodation, please speak with me after class or send an email message to me and SDS at sds_cu@cornell.edu.
- If you have, or think you may have a disability, please contact Student Disability Services for a confidential discussion: sds_cu@cornell.edu, 607-254-4545, sds.cornell.edu.

Course Grade:

Quizzes: 15%

Essay on interview of someone from an older generation: 10%

Written policy assessments (choose 4 of 7): total of 40%

Policy wargame on soda taxes, including advertisement, presentation, reflective essay: 20%

Class attendance, participation, and discussion: 15%

Any academic misconduct will result in a grade penalty.

Grading Scale:

A+ = 98-100 B+ = 87-89 C+ = 77-79 D+ = 67-69

A = 93-97 B = 83-86 C = 73-76 D = 63-66 F = 0-59

A- = 90-92 B- = 80-82 C- = 70-72 D- = 60-62

Master's-level version of course (PAM 5290):

The master's-level version of the course is generally available only to those in master's degree programs. The course grade for the master's-level version differs in two ways: 1) the standards are higher for any given assignment (i.e. there are higher expectations, grading is tougher) and 2) the master's-level students write two additional policy assessments.

Mental Health Resources

College can be stressful, and you may find this semester particularly so given that you're in a new location (D.C.) and juggling an internship as well as your courses. Please feel free to talk with me anytime you are experiencing stress over this course; I want to work with you and can be flexible on deadlines. Please feel free to avail yourself of Cornell's resources regarding mental health: <https://health.cornell.edu/services/mental-health-care/resources-students>

There are mental health care providers available 24 hours a day at the following number: (607) 255-5155.

Course Schedule

| Date | Things to be Done <i>in Advance</i> of the class meeting | Synchronous Meeting Content |
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| January 24 | | Introductions, discussion of course format, overview of course, the prevalence and trends in risky health behaviors |
| January 31 | <p>National Center for Health Statistics. <i>Health, United States</i>, 2019. Hyattsville, MD. 2021. *Just the summaries of drug overdose, suicide, teen births, and tobacco use on pages 9, 10, 12, 14.</p> <p>Submit interview assignment of older generation.</p> | <p>The prevalence and trends in risky health behaviors</p> <p>Guest lecturer: Catherine Maclean, Associate Professor, George Mason University.</p> <p>Debriefing on interview assignment</p> |
| February 7 | <p>Cawley, John. 2015. “An Economy of Scales: A Selective Review of Obesity’s Economic Causes, Consequences, and Solutions.” <i>Journal of Health Economics</i>, 43: 244-268.</p> <p>Carpenter C, Dobkin C. 2011. “The Minimum Legal Drinking Age and Public Health,” <i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>, 25(2): 133-156.</p> <p>Complete online quiz on prevalence and trends in risky health behaviors</p> | <p>The economic approach to studying risky health behaviors</p> <p>Guest lecturer: David Ovalle, Washington Post reporter, on the opioid epidemic.</p> <p>Policy discussion 1: Minimum Legal Drinking Age</p> |
| February 14 | Keefe PR. 2013. “Buzzkill” <i>New Yorker</i> , November 18. | The demand for health and the model of health capital |

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| | <p>Grossman, M. 2022. “Demand for Health Turns 50: Reflections.” <i>Health Economics</i>, 1807-1822.</p> <p>Submit essay on Minimum Legal Drinking Age (choose 4 of 7)</p> <p>Complete online quiz on the economic approach to studying risky health behaviors</p> | <p>Policy discussion 2: Marijuana Legalization</p> |
| February 21 | <p>Nestler EJ, Malenka RC. 2004. “The Addicted Brain.” <i>Scientific American</i>, March, pp. 78-86.</p> <p>Giedd JN. 2015. “The Amazing Teen Brain.” <i>Scientific American</i>, June, 33-37.</p> <p>Holden C. 2001. “Behavioral Addictions: Do they Exist?” <i>Science</i>, 294: 980-982.</p> <p>Submit essay on Marijuana Legalization (choose 4 of 7)</p> <p>Complete online quiz on the demand for health</p> | <p>Guest speakers: Angela Wiles, former Health Policy Director in the U.S. Senate, on the legislative process for health policy</p> <p>The neurobiology of pleasure and addiction</p> <p>Policy discussion 3: Drug Testing of Welfare Recipients</p> |
| February 28 | <p>Cawley J. 2008. “Reefer Madness, Frank the Tank or Pretty Woman: To What Extent Do Addictive Behaviors Respond to Incentives?” Chapter 7 in Frank A. Sloan and Hirschel Kasper (editors), <i>Incentives and Choice in Health Care</i>, pp. 163-194.</p> <p>Read at least one of the first-hand accounts of addiction saved to the course webpage on Canvas.</p> | <p>Guest speaker: Sofia Hamilton, former Research Associate at the Cato Institute, on harm reduction and methadone</p> <p>Economic models of addiction</p> |

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| | <p>Submit essay on Drug Testing of Welfare Recipients (choose 4 of 7)</p> <p>Complete online quiz on the neurobiology of pleasure and addiction</p> | |
| March 6 | <p>Cawley, John, Alex Susskind, and Barton Willage. 2020. "The Impact of Information Disclosure on Consumer Behavior: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment of Calorie Labels on Restaurant Menus." <i>Journal of Policy Analysis & Management</i>, 39(4): 1020-1042.</p> <p>Complete online quiz on economic models of addiction</p> | <p>Identifying the causes of risky health behaviors</p> <p>Guest speaker: Chipper Dean, Program Director, Health Behaviors Research Branch, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health</p> <p>Policy discussion 4: Legalization of Sex Work</p> |
| March 13 | <p>Cunningham S, Shah M. 2018. "Decriminalizing Indoor Prostitution: Implications for Sexual Violence and Public Health." <i>Review of Economic Studies</i>, 85(3): 1683-1715.</p> <p>Submit essay on Nevada Prostitution Laws (choose 4 of 7)</p> | <p>Identifying the causes of risky health behaviors (cont.)</p> <p>Guest speaker: Nicholas Courtney, U.S. Department of Commerce, on "Health Disparities in Tribal Communities - Risk Factors and Solutions."</p> <p>Introduction to the Policy Wargame: Taxes on Sugar-Sweetened Beverages</p> |
| March 20 | <p>Complete online quiz on identifying the causes of risky health behaviors</p> | <p>Meet with TA Devansh for feedback on your materials for the policy wargame (see below)</p> |
| March 27 | <p>For the policy wargame, prepare advertisements for your side (pro-tax or anti-tax): TV (video), radio (audio) or print (image only). Also prepare a presentation and prep for Q&A.</p> | <p>Policy wargame: city-level tax on sugar-sweetened beverages</p> |

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| | Numerous studies of the effects of taxes on SSBs are saved to the course webpage. You should review these and base your arguments in part on that evidence. | |
| April 3 | Spring Break | |
| April 10 | <p>Laibson D, List JA. 2015. "Principles of (Behavioral) Economics," <i>American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings</i>, 105(5): 385-390.</p> <p>Matjasko JL., Cawley J, Baker-Goering M, Yokum D. 2016. "Applying Behavioral Economics to Public Health Policy: Illustrative Examples and Promising Directions." <i>American Journal of Preventive Medicine</i>, 50(5 Suppl 1): S13-S19.</p> <p>Sacarny A, Yokum D, Finkelstein A, Agrawal S. 2016. "Medicare Letters To Curb Overprescribing Of Controlled Substances Had No Detectable Effect On Providers." <i>Health Affairs</i>, 35: 471-479.</p> <p>Submit reflective essay on the policy wargame.</p> | <p>Guest lecturer: Dr. Mandy Cohen, Director of the Centers for Disease Control</p> <p>Behavioral economics and risky health behaviors</p> <p>Policy discussion 5: Nudges to improve risky health behaviors</p> |
| April 17 | de Walque D. 2007. "Does education affect smoking behaviors? Evidence using the Vietnam draft as an instrument for college education." <i>Journal of Health Economics</i> , 26: 877-895. | <p>Education and risky health behaviors</p> <p>Policy discussion 6: Moral hazard and harm reduction</p> |

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| | <p>Submit essay on Nudges to improve risky health behaviors (choose 4 of 7)</p> <p>Complete online quiz on behavioral economics and risky health behaviors</p> | |
| April 24 | <p>Marchell TC. 2011. <i>Means Restriction on Ithaca's Bridges: A Key Element of a Comprehensive Approach to Preventing Suicide</i>.</p> <p>Submit essay on Moral hazard and harm reduction (choose 4 of 7)</p> <p>Complete online quiz on education and risky health behaviors</p> | <p>Svante Myrick, former three-term Mayor of Ithaca, on safe injection facilities</p> <p>The economics of suicide</p> <p>Policy discussion 7: Legalization of Assisted Suicide</p> |
| May 1 | <p>Eisenberg, D., Golberstein, E., Whitlock, J.L. 2014. "Peer Effects on Risky Behaviors: Evidence from College Roommate Assignments." <i>Journal of Health Economics</i>, 33: 126-138.</p> <p>Complete online quiz on the economics of suicide</p> | <p>Guest lecturer: Rep. Beth Van Duyne (TX-24)</p> <p>Peer Effects on risky health behaviors</p> |
| May 8 | <p>No class meeting – exam week.</p> <p>Complete online quiz on peer effects in risky health behaviors</p> <p>Submit essay on Oregon Assisted Suicide Law (choose 4 of 7)</p> | |