The Role of Internal Migration in Disability Program Applications and Awards

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

This paper considers whether internal migration, meaning geographic movements of the population within the United States, influences SSDI enrollment. One source of data, drawn from previous work by Ganong and Shoag, contains a longitudinal index of state-level land-use restrictions, which may influence internal migration. Data on state-to-state migration come from two sources: the 1982 to 2010 waves of the Current Population Survey, and IRS migration counts beginning in 1993. The paper finds that:

- Across states with historically strong migration flows, in-migration to a state rises when other states increase their land-use restrictions, and in-migration falls when other states reduce their land-use restrictions.

- These induced changes in in-migration to a state have a significant effect on local SSDI and SSI applications and awards. For every five-person increase in in-migration to a state, caused by land-use restrictions, there is approximately one additional SSDI applicant.

- These induced applicants are about as likely to be accepted as the average applicant, suggesting that the effect of migration on SSDI is not confined to the less severely disabled. The estimates imply that for every 9 new in-migrants, there is approximately one more local SSDI award.

- Although the mechanisms are uncertain, there is suggestive evidence that the rise in SSDI participation in these states is not primarily from the people who in-migrate to the state, but instead from higher participation among existing residents who are directly or indirectly induced to apply.

By demonstrating a link between relative land-use restrictions across states and SSDI applications, the study provides a new window into the interactive complexity of how life and community circumstances interact with health and economic factors in influencing program participation.

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