Joe LaBriola: Examining the Role of New Housing Regulations in Exacerbating Wealth Inequality

The stark inequalities that have divided American society over the past three decades don’t just appear in people’s paychecks. They also increasingly determine where Americans live, how much preparation their children receive for the future, and whether workers can count on predictable and steady work from one week to the next.

Those are the sorts of diverse forms of social inequality that Joe LaBriola, a sixth-year sociology Ph.D. candidate, has built his academic career researching. He’s explored, for example, the role of worker power in reducing inequality in work hour instability. That paper, written with O-Lab affiliate Daniel Schneider, won LaBriola the 2018 IPUMS USA research award for best graduate student paper.

“The thing that jumped out to us is that right after the Great Recession, work hour volatility spiked for workers who were less educated and making the least amount of money,” LaBriola said. “Next we want to think about what we think is causing work hour volatility.”

LaBriola has been a prolific researcher, with five peer-reviewed publications and three chapters looking at subjects such as the effects of post-prison employment quality on recidivism, risk-taking at U.S. commercial banks, and how class gaps in parental investment in children change during the summer. His research is motivated by a recognition that the well-off enjoy more advantages at every stage of life, and that those at the bottom end of the workforce are too-often denied the security and benefits of full-time and predictable employment.

Another of LaBriola’s ongoing projects focused on how home ownership - and the attempts of some homeowners to restrict the development of new housing - has exacerbated wealth inequality. He points to research showing how the housing market increasingly shuts out low-income people who are hoping to build wealth through ownership. The “wealth gaps” that then arise can be just as consequential as income gaps, and only exacerbate and compound inequality over generations.

“If we build more housing supply, this could be something that will even out the playing field in terms of household wealth allotment,” LaBriola said. “Wealth inequality is not something that’s talked about as much as income equality, but it’s extremely important because wealth determines the amount of resources you have to move around in the world.”

For his research on housing development, he is merging national data on residential building permits going back to 1980 with data on household finances. He is also investigating the relationship between lawsuits over residential land use policy and housing development.

“I’m interested in whether homeowner opposition to new housing is a form of social closure,” LaBriola said. “Basically, people who already have a house they like - and who like the neighborhood they live in and don’t want to change - they might gain wealth by keeping it this way while everyone else suffers.”