



Using economics to understand the cost of inequity and discrimination

Lauren Russell PhD 2023

[HOME \(/\)](#) / [STUDENT LIFE \(/MORE/STUDENT-LIFE\)](#) / [STUDENT STORIES \(/MORE/STUDENT-LIFE/STUDENT-STORIES\)](#) / [USING ECONOMICS TO UNDERSTAND THE COST OF INEQUITY AND DISCRIMINATION \(\)](#)

An applied microeconomist, she's headed to the Federal Reserve Board to continue her study of racial disparities.

RALPH RANALLI

MAY 15, 2023

—

Born and raised in southwest Atlanta, Lauren Russell spent her formative years in a predominately Black city that celebrated African American culture, community, and history.

“It’s a place where Black culture is really entrenched,” the 33-year-old says.

“From an early age, I got a strong foundation in Black history. I got it in school, I got it in church, I got it from elders in my community, and I got it from home.”

Being raised in that environment, she says, gave her a deep appreciation for the

extraordinary achievements of African Americans, but also for the racism inherent in American political, economic, and social institutions that has historically impacted Black communities—and continues to impact them today.

Russell is an applied microeconomist with primary fields in labor economics and public finance, and her research centers on U.S. racial inequality with a focus on the criminal legal system. Her deep appreciation of racial inequality combined with her love of studying history motivated her passion to study root causes of racial disparities, using economics as a tool. “Economics provides a really powerful set of theoretical and empirical frameworks to understand racial disparities and propose policy solutions,” she says.

Although Russell’s passions have led her to economics and public policy, she did not plan to become an economist until a year after graduating college. Throughout high school and her undergraduate studies, she indulged a dual academic interest in humanities and classes that were math-related: physics and literature in high school, then at Harvard College with a concentration in classics and with a secondary study in economics. She translated plays from ancient Greek and wrote her senior thesis on “Boundaries, Ritual, and Transition in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*.”



At the time, she says, economics was mostly a fallback. “I didn’t really understand the full extent of things that I could study in economics; it just seemed like something I should do,” she said. “I do like doing quantitative studies, though, so it was nice for that reason.”

After college, she landed an internal consultant position at SunTrust Bank, but the job didn’t fit her. She considered business school, but that didn’t feel right either. So she started talking to friends and doing a lot of soul-searching about her future, and the possibility of doing research kept coming up. “I was thinking about: ‘What are the things I actually care about? If I was able to spend years on a topic, what would it be?’” The answer: her own history. “I have so many things to say, especially as it relates to the experiences of Black people in the United States. And I was like, ‘Okay, well there are a lot of different fields where you can study African American history ... so many different ways to approach it.’”

Eventually she set her sights on a doctorate in economics, which first took her to Duke University for a master's degree. Then a strong desire to combine economics with public policy took her to the Kennedy School for her PhD. "I wasn't necessarily trying to come back to Harvard," she says. "But policy-focused economists are my people—and the Kennedy School was a perfect fit."

A major part of her work has been analyzing how contact with the criminal legal system leads to racial disparities that impact economic and social mobility, particularly among historically disadvantaged groups. Her dissertation focuses on documenting the evolution of criminal background checks in the United States and investigating how the increasing availability of criminal record information to employers starting in the 1970s impacted the labor market outcomes of groups that are most likely to come into contact with the criminal legal system. Her results show that employer access led to declines in the labor force participation of Black men without college degrees. There were also declines in overall employment, she says, although they were smaller, suggesting that opening up access to criminal background information discouraged many people from even seeking jobs.

"I hope that my research is important in academia, yes. But I also hope it will be accessible to Black communities."

Lauren Russell

Her doctoral advisers include HKS Academic Dean David Deming, the Isabelle and Scott Black Professor of Political Economy; Professor of Public Policy Will Dobbie of the Weiner Center for Social Policy; and Professor Edward Glaeser, chairman of Harvard's economics department. Russell also credits the mentorship of political economist Ebonya Washington, who is now a professor of

economics and of international and public affairs at Columbia University, with helping her define her career path. “I also credit my research family at the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University,” she says.

Russell is currently living in North Carolina and working as a researcher in residence at the Cook Center, but after commencement she’ll start a new job at the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, again focusing on racial disparities. “I’m really excited to be at the Board,” she says. “To be able to do research on labor markets and continue to study racial disparities is very important to me.”

As for what she would like to accomplish in the field, publishing significant work is high on her list, but it’s not the only thing. “I hope that my research is important in academia, yes,” she says. “But I also hope it will be accessible to Black communities. I think the thing that I’ll be the most proud of is if a high school covered my research in one of their economics classes. To see Black students engage with my research—that would be my ultimate dream.”

—

Portraits by Lydia Rosenberg

MORE FROM HKS

Veteran storyteller pushes for new narrative

(<https://ash.harvard.edu/veteran-storyteller-pushes-new-narrative>)

(<https://ash.harvard.edu/veteran-storyteller-pushes-new-narrative>)

Strengthening public institutions and empowering public servants

(</more/student-life/student-stories/strengthening-public-institutions-and-empowering-public-servants>)

(</more/student-life/student-stories/strengthening-public-institutions-and-empowering-public-servants>)

Reaching for the stars, a new graduate heads for U.S. Space Force

(/more/student-life/student-stories/reaching-stars-new-graduate-heads-us-space-force)

(/more/student-life/student-stories/reaching-stars-new-graduate-heads-us-space-force)



HARVARD Kennedy School (<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/>)
JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO

Master's Programs (</educational-programs/masters-programs>)

Doctoral Programs (</educational-programs/doctoral-programs>)

Admissions Events (</admissions-aid/masters-program-admissions/admissions-events>)

Alumni (</more/alumni>)

Contact Us (</more/contact-us>)

Privacy (</more/about/policies/privacy-statement>)

Executive Education (</executive-education>)

Public Leadership Credential (</educational-programs/public-leadership-credential>)

Give Now
(<https://community.alumni.harvard.edu/give/1603959>)

Jobs (</more/about/leadership-administration/human-resources>)

[Accessibility \(https://accessibility.harvard.edu/\)](https://accessibility.harvard.edu/)

[Digital Accessibility \(https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy\)](https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy)

Copyright © 2023 The President and Fellows of [Harvard College \(http://www.harvard.edu/\)](http://www.harvard.edu/).

