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23 questions with Sarah Burgard

Sarah Burgard is a Research Associate Professor at the Population Studies Center and an Associate Professor in the Departments of Sociology and Epidemiology.

Her current research focuses on the ways systems of stratification and inequality impact individual and population health. She is particularly interested in gender, socioeconomic status, and racial/ethnic disparities in work lives, and the influence of work life on health.

Sarah came to the Center as a Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society Scholar in 2003 and became a PSC affiliate in 2005 upon starting Assistant Professorships in both Sociology and Epidemiology.

In addition to serving as Co-director of PSC's Postdoctoral Training Program, Sarah has been an active mentor to 10 PSC trainees since 2006, recently publishing journal articles with trainees Patricia Chen, Lucie Kalousova, and Katherine Lin.

With data from the American’s Changing Lives study, she is studying the factors underlying the evolution of the gender gap in life expectancy in the United States, the links between stressful life events and unequal socioeconomic resources and health behavior change among adults, and the consequences of unstable employment histories for health and retirement pathways.

Using data from the Michigan Recession and Recovery Study, she is examining the health consequences of long-term unemployment and volatility in employment histories, financial resources, debt and housing trajectories.

Sarah uses convenience sampling in her pastry research. “In general, I love to experiment and am always looking for folks to make use of my experiments. It is especially nice to do pilot testing, and get some inter-rater reliability on whether a recipe should be chucked or repeated, and I hope I can count on PSC to continue to help with that venture.”

1. First job? One of my favorite early jobs for pay was the night shift, frying donuts, in the summer before college.

2. First website you access in the morning? Does email count? That’s sad, I know, but I try to stay off websites until later in the day. I am easily distracted so I stick with Twitter in the morning to get the most relevant news.


4. First music you ever bought? Probably something by Depeche Mode. On cassette tape. Oh, the humiliation.

5. Current favorite vacation destination? Anywhere with my mother and sister - we usually take a summer trip that involves two critical elements: 1) at least one national park, and 2) a rodeo. This means we’re usually in the western part of the U.S., staying in some roadside motels along the way.

6. What makes you laugh out loud? Mercifully, lots of things - I am a cheap date. But some representative things would be reviews people write for Amazon or Yelp. People who intentionally write snarky reviews, and those who unintentionally write hilarious ones, are a gift to us all. Tumblr sites like “*my reviewers say,“ which post actual snippets from peoples’ negative reviews of papers and grants, are another perk of contemporary life.

7. What ticks you off? People who walk or talk slowly (when they don’t have a good reason to do so).

8. If you had a time machine, where and when would you visit? That time when we have figured out how to transcend email.

9. If you could have any three dinner companions? Right this moment? I am thinking Roz Chast, who makes the most amazing cartoons, the Smitten Kitchen pastry chef at the French Laundry or Millennium, both in the Bay Area.

10. If you could trade places with any person for a day? Pastry chef at the French Laundry or Millennium, both in the Bay Area.

11. What super power would you like to have? The ability to make decisions and never experience regrets about them.

12. Life-changing moment? Acceptance to Reed College. I’m one of the first in my family to take an academic path, though I didn’t know that’s where I was headed when I got that acceptance letter.

13. Parents’ greatest impact? They work hard, always, and in the service of others. I strive to be as reliable and industrious and selfless.

14. Mind you’d most like to read? It’s generally better not to know what’s in there. My own mind is confusing enough.

15. Best award you ever won? Clearly: 4-H Saddle Club Queen. When else in life will I wear a tiara and be mortified beyond all past experience?

16. If money were no object, what would you like to do? I have a terrible memory. I like film as more of a holistic experience, and gravitate more toward characters than quotes. Right now I am partial to the lead in the television series Wallender (the Swedish version), played by Krister Henriksson. I love a good Scandinavian crime drama.


18. If you could choose another career? Probably MD-PhD.

19. Guilty pleasure? Making fancy, elaborately pastry that I then force on others. I am a passive-aggressive baker of the worst sort.

20. Fitness workout? Currently, I have an embarrassing zeal for lifting heavy weights.

21. What do you like about your work? Seeing hours of coding and meetings and tough decisions result in some coefficients that no one else has seen before, and seeing whether our expectations were correct.

22. Where do you see yourself in ten years? Hopefully better at saying no and fulfilling my obligations on time.
Recently Published Papers by PSC Affiliates


Miles Kimball and his anonymous female economist co-author, on sexism in the field of economics: “Many male economists underestimate the headwinds women face in economics, but they exist at every stage of a woman’s career.” Quartz, 1/6/2015.

William Frey, on low college completion rates among non-white Americans: “A great deal of attention must be paid to increasing minority postsecondary education so that the skill levels of our entire workforce stay competitive.” National Journal, 1/14/2015.

Fred Conrad, on why text messaging is effective in crisis-intervention hotlines: “[People are] more likely to disclose sensitive information via text message than in voice interviews.” New Yorker, 2/5/2015.

Deidre Bloome, on why any policy to help black families should address economic as well as other social factors. Deseret News International, 3/9/2015.

Elizabeth Bruch, on the need for new ways to model decision making using big data: “The social sciences are very intrigued by big data, but the same statistical models that have been used for survey and administrative data aren’t the right tools for it. There’s not a lot in the field that represents the underlying decision process.” U-M News Service, 2/18/2015.

Alexandra Murphy, on why programs to help the poor should look at transportation needs: “Transportation has been outside of what we define as a human need as a human service, even though it’s widely acknowledged that transportation creates opportunity and hardship.” Pacific Standard, 3/6/2015.

David Lam, on concern about the all-time low fertility rate in the U.S.: “I don’t think it’s an economic disaster, but it does create challenges…. You know, Germany is doing quite well right now economically, relatively speaking, with a lower fertility rate than we have.” NPR, 12/4/2014.

Daniel Eisenberg, on the importance of destigmatizing mental health support for athletes: “Some of them worry that if they reveal what people think of as a weakness, that might hurt their chances for playing.” Huffington Post, 1/28/2015.

John Bound, on why American universities should not be concerned about the large influx of foreign students crowding out U.S. students: “The widespread notion that dollars are being spent on foreign students and that they are displacing U.S. students… in general isn’t right.” Wall Street Journal, 3/24/2015.

William Frey, on why it’s important to distinguish recent black immigrants from US-born blacks: “Because they’re new immigrants they have different needs and patterns, probably in terms of language in many cases, in terms of assimilation. And so they shouldn’t be confused with native-born blacks in lots of ways, who have their own needs to be addressed.” Washington Post, 4/9/2015.
I first set my sights on the University of Michigan more than a decade before I applied for a job out of graduate school. I came to Ann Arbor in 1997, after my sophomore year at Reed College, to take quantitative methods courses in ICPSR’s Summer Program. A California native who had never lived off the west coast, I was enchanted not only with the white-tailed rabbits and twinkling fireflies, but also Michigan’s longstanding strengths in social research.

Once I started graduate school at UCLA, my appreciation for Michigan deepened. This is the only university in the country that boasts a top Sociology Department, a vibrant and productive Institute for Social Research, the Population Center, and a world-famous Center devoted to the study of complex systems. So of course, I was thrilled to officially join the ranks at Michigan as a new Assistant Professor in 2008. What I hadn’t realized at the time was how much a core feature of the university – the freedom of the scholars, and excellence in interdisciplinary research – would end up changing the trajectory of my research career.

My research is rooted in a classic demographic problem: the dynamic relationship between individual behavior and social environments. Social scientists have a longstanding interest in social phenomena in which the characteristics of the environment and the behavior of the individuals who constitute that environment are dynamically interdependent. For example, individuals who move out of a neighborhood because they cannot tolerate its racial composition simultaneously respond to and modify neighborhood racial composition. Agent-based modeling (ABM) is one approach that allows for feedback between individual behavior and social environments. My research blends ABM and statistical analysis in an effort to develop empirically based models of interactive social processes.

However, one thing that became increasingly clear to me after receiving my PhD was that the inferences taken from my models were quite sensitive to underlying assumptions about human behavior.

Michigan, and PSC especially, has been an extraordinary place to launch the next stage of my career. I think Michigan fosters go-big-or-go-home ideas in social science – an environment I find tremendously enriching and energizing. Moreover, in the past couple of years I’ve derived a great deal of joy and satisfaction in working with my PSC mentees. I’ve benefitted so much from the generosity of others – my undergraduate and graduate advisors, my senior faculty here at Michigan – it is profoundly satisfying to pay it forward to the next generation of social scientists, some of whom will help empirically unravel the complex and dynamic relationships between individual behaviors and social environments.

For example, an ABM that assumes agents consider every single neighborhood in the metro area with equal attention produces very different segregation outcomes than an ABM that assumes agents first select a focal area, and then search within that area more carefully. Over time, I became more and more frustrated with the inability of available statistical models of choice to capture the nuances of real-world behavior and decision making.

-standard statistical approaches assume a fully informed, computationally efficient, utility maximizing, rational actor. But over the past several decades, psychologists and decision theorists have convincingly shown that this is a poor representation of how real people behave. Real people have limited time for learning about choice alternatives, limited working memory and limited computational capabilities. As a result, a great deal of behavior is habitual, automatic, or governed by heuristics aimed at reducing the computational complexity and/or emotional conflict of a decision. Upon arrival at Michigan, I began attending the Quantitative Methods Program’s bi-weekly workshops at ISR. Through those workshops, I became acquainted with Fred Feinberg, a choice modeling expert with appointments in Statistics and the Business School. After talking with Fred, I began reviewing the literature on decision making in marketing. What I found is that quantitative marketing researchers have vastly more sophisticated statistical techniques for describing individuals’ preferences, search strategies, and heuristics for decision making than anything I have encountered in population research. Through our discussions around how the marketing models might fruitfully be applied to problems in population research, Fred and I embarked on a collaborative project exploring individuals’ strategies for mate search and mate choice using activity data from an online dating site. This project further convinced me that these methods could transform the study of individual behavior in population research.

I now have an NICHD K01 award to develop my expertise in choice modeling, and to explore how features of decision-making strategies across a wider range of domains – e.g., college choice, mate choice, and food choice – shape and are shaped by social environments. My hope is that this work will suggest new points of intervention in changing health related behaviors. Recent years have seen an increased interest in policy interventions that manipulate the decision making environment to “nudge” people towards healthier choices. So far, this interest has taken the form of proposing interventions along the lines of putting fruit before fried chicken in school cafeterias, or making retirement savings something people must opt out of rather than into. However, these kinds of propositions ignore the potentially multiplicative effects that result from the dynamic interplay between individuals’ behavior and their social environment.
H. Luke Shaefer is an Associate Professor of Social Work who joined PSC as a Faculty Associate in September 2014. He has a PhD in social service administration from the University of Chicago. His research explores rising levels of extreme poverty in the US, the impact of SNAP on material hardships, barriers to unemployment insurance faced by vulnerable workers, and strategies for increasing access to oral health care in the U.S.

Sonja Starr, Professor of Law, joined PSC in September 2014 as a Faculty Associate. She has a JD from Yale University. Her research interests include prosecutorial conduct, sentencing law and policy, remedies for violations of criminal defendants’ rights, and re-entry of ex-offenders.

Rob Stephenson, Professor of Health Behavior and Biological Sciences in the School of Nursing, became a Faculty Associate in September 2014. His PhD is in demography from the University of Southampton, UK. His research examines sexual and reproductive health, with a focus on HIV prevention interventions for sexuality minority populations, increasing HIV care adherence, and identifying how gender inequality puts women in poor countries at risk of negative maternal health outcomes.

JOHN KNODEL named PAA Honored Colleague

Nominated by a group of his friends and colleagues who support the Population Association of America, John Knodel has been named a PAA Honored Colleague.

PAA cites John’s important contributions to the field of population studies, with “numerous impacts upon the methods and substance of what are now considered to be central features of our field. That population scientists now embrace qualitative methods as a major component of their methodological toolkit is due in large part to John’s efforts to make such methods accessible and palatable to a field with a more quantitative orientation.” His professional service and teaching and mentoring skills are also extolled.

Other PSC researchers to achieve this honor include Ronald Freedman, Albert Hemalijn, David Lam, and Bob Schoeni.

Full citation and list of donors:
Jennifer Barber
Distal Determinants of Race-Ethnic Variation in Unintended Fertility
Bowling Green State University (P=NICHD)
7/1/2014 – 6/30/2015 $59,766
Unintended fertility has been high for decades, at about half of all pregnancies and a third of all births, and substantially higher among minorities than whites. Although the proximate determinants of unintended fertility are clear (failure to use effective contraception and carrying unintended pregnancies to term), the underlying causes of these behaviors, and of race-ethnic-rativity differences, are not well understood. This project examines two key distal determinants – reproductive knowledge and fertility motivation – with the goal of creating reliable and valid measures to identify those most at risk for unintended fertility.

Emily Marshall
Using Innovative Analyses of Attitude to Predict Fertility-Related Behavior
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)
3/1/2015 – 3/31/2017 $31,533
Demographers have struggled for decades with the difficulty of predicting fertility at the individual level using attitudinal measures. This project is applying new methods of analysis to improve the utility of attitudinal data in predicting fertility-related behaviors. Investigators take attitude measures as meaningful in relation to other attitude measures, and consider patterns of relationships between attitude measures as a proxy for patterns of cognitive associations. They are using novel methods for grouping respondents who think similarly about fertility, and for describing the patterns of cognitive associations and sociodemographic characteristics of the groups identified. They are also examining whether these methods predict behavioral outcomes (in this case, contraceptive use) better than conventional methods of analyzing attitude data. Analysis methods allow distinctions among respondents who give the same answers to some items but who think about fertility in fundamentally different ways.

Dean Yang
Promoting Preventive Health Care in Michigan: The Impact of Information and Incentives
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation
2/15/2015 – 8/14/2016 $99,766
Preventive health screenings can detect health problems early enough to maximize treatment effectiveness, improving health quality and potentially reducing healthcare costs. While the cost of preventive care under the Affordable Care Act will fall for many Michigan residents, several barriers to utilization will likely remain. This project is conducting a randomized field experiment in the metro-Detroit area that will address three questions: 1. What are the barriers to accessing preventive health care in Michigan, and how do they vary with demographic characteristics? 2. What are the impacts of information and incentives on individuals’ take-up of preventive health care, and can inducing an endowment effect be a low-cost way to increase individuals’ usage of preventive health care? 3. What are the short and medium-run impacts of incentivizing preventive health screenings on individuals’ health care usage? The sample will consist of adults living in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods in the metro-Detroit area. In early 2016, investigators will conduct a nine-month follow-up survey to measure the medium-run impacts on healthcare usage.

Emily Merchant
The Dynamics of Intimate Partner Violence
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)
4/1/2014 – 3/31/2016 $57,663
Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant public health problem among adolescent and young adults, with about a third of young people experiencing some form of IPV. Little is known about the individual and relationship factors that influence IPV. But newly available data from the Relationship Dynamics and Social Life (RDSL) study provide detailed weekly measures of violence and pregnancy for a racially and socioeconomically diverse, population-representative random sample of young women. This project uses the RDSL data to identify the dynamic patterns of violence within young women’s intimate relationships and to investigate individual and relationship factors that influence the dynamic patterns of violence.

PSC Center News - Spring 2015

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PSC Center News - Spring 2015
Advice for incoming trainees: Take advantage of everything that PSC/ISR has to offer. And stay well-rounded.

Best Ann Arbor experience: Balmy Ann Arbor summer evenings, spent watching fireflies, laughing and eating with friends, and listening to music.

Tong Yob Nam
PSC predoc trainee: 2012-2015
Field: Economics
PSC mentor: John Bound
Advice for incoming trainees: You are strongly encouraged to enjoy this interdisciplinary research environment and take advantage of priceless opportunities and research support. Attending seminars and workshops, meeting insightful people, and much more!

Best Ann Arbor experience: 2013 NCAA Basketball Championship, Watching football game in the largest stadium in the US.

Departing Former Postdoc Trainees

Dustin Brown
PSC postdoc trainee: 2013-2015
Field: Sociology
PSC mentor: Sarah Burgard
What’s next? Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Research Fellow, Social Science Research Center, Mississippi State University, August 15, 2015
Advice for incoming trainees: Take full advantage of all the incredible resources that PSC and ISR have to offer. Also, try to initiate collaborative research projects with other PSC affiliates during your time as a postdoc. This will help you integrate yourself into the broader PSC/ISR community, acquire new research skills, and move your research agenda beyond your dissertation work.

Best Ann Arbor experience: The birth of my first child.

Desmond Toohey
PSC predoc trainee: 2011-2015
Field: Public Policy and Economics
PSC mentor: Melvin Stephens, Jr.
Advice for incoming trainees: PSC is a great place to meet researchers with all sorts of different backgrounds and from many different academic disciplines. The ability to talk to, work with, and learn from a diverse group of researchers is not only valuable to potential employers, but can inform an influential research agenda.

Best Ann Arbor experience: Playing some of the many fun pub trivia games to found around town. And building a championship team!

Akilah Wise
PSC predoc trainee: 2009-2015
Field: Health Behavior and Health Education
PSC mentor: Airline Geronimus
What’s next? Still on the market!

Pawel Krolickowski
PSC postdoc trainee: 2013-2015
Field: Economics
PSC mentor: Mel Stephens, Jr.
What’s next? Research Economist, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, August 31, 2015
Advice for incoming trainees: The staff are incredibly supportive here and I found them to be a tremendous resource. Reach out to them (early) with issues you may have.

Best Ann Arbor experience: More than one: Attending county fairs and apple orchards; Mackinaw bridge and the UP; Top of the park; Nichols Arboretum; Michigan lakes.

Emily Smith-Greenway
Field: Sociology and Demography
PSC mentor: Bill Axinn and Dirgha Ghimire
What’s next? Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Southern California, August 2015

Advice for entering trainees: You are strongly encouraged to enjoy this interdisciplinary research environment and take advantage of priceless opportunities and research support. Attending seminars and workshops, meeting insightful people, and much more!

Best Ann Arbor experience: Excessively long happy hour in the largest stadium in the US.

Emily Smith-Greenway
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Best Ann Arbor experience: The birth of my first child.

Patrick Coate
PSC postdoc trainee: 2013-2015
Field: Economics
PSC mentor: John Bound
What’s next? Research Fellow, American Institute for Economic Research, August 31, 2015
Advice for incoming trainees: Meet as many people as you can when you first arrive and then set up a one-on-one meeting with those whose interests overlap yours; try to live somewhere you can park your car under cover in winter.

Best Ann Arbor experience: Seeing Manchester United-Real Madrid at the Big House.

Departing Center trainees were honored at PSC’s monthly coffee half hour, April 23, 2015.

Xiang Zhou
PSC predoc trainee: 2009-2015
Field: Sociology and Statistics
PSC mentors: Yu Xie
What’s next? Postdoctoral research associate, Princeton University, August 15, 2015 and on the job market.

Advice for incoming trainees: While enjoying all the freedom of being a graduate student, don’t forget two things: (1) get your work published, (2) build your scholarly connections.

Best Ann Arbor experience: Having my son.

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Field: Economics
PSC mentor: Mel Stephens, Jr.
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Advice for incoming trainees: Don’t be shy! Reach out to others whose work interests you. There are many incredible scholars here, so take advantage of being among these exceptional minds! And bundle up and be patient...spring will come some day! (hopefully?)

Best Ann Arbor experience: Midwinter visits to the botanical gardens.

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Congratulations to PSC programmer and data analyst **Cathy Sun**, who celebrated her 30th anniversary at U-M at the 2014 Service Awards Banquet on 10/20/2014 at the Michigan League Ballroom. (Cathy is pictured at the event with son Jason and PSC Assistant Director Violet Elder.)

8th Annual ‘ISR Runs for Bob’

April 1, 2015. Bob Schoeni and friends at Gallup Park for the 5k Twinkie Run.

Photo credit: Michael McIntyre