

ICPSR Data Brunch Podcast

Episode 15: Pandemic & Policy

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Transcript

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Hi everyone. And welcome to Data Brunch with ICPSR. If you love data, this is going to be food for thought. I'm Dory.

Anna Shelton:

And I'm Anna. And I can't believe this, but it is our final episode of season two. This season, we've talked to some incredible folks, including Stephanie Labou, the mother of DataJeff. We talked about being a data detective during Love Data Week.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

We talked to Libby Hemphill, about extremism and social media in a live episode with many of you joining us.

Anna Shelton:

And we talked to Fabian Pfeffer, about wealth inequality. Wow, that was a good one. They were all good ones. We also talked to the Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives AKA CESSDA, along with our own director, Maggie Levenstein, about leading data communities through the years.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

That was a good one with CESSDA. And of course, we kicked off our season talking to Vanessa Otero at Ad Fontes Media, about the media bias in reliability chart. And if you miss any of these, you can find them on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. We'll be back for season three in fall of 2022.

Anna Shelton:

And I am so excited about today's interview because we get to talk to The COVID Border Accountability Project. They're looking into the data to determine if border closures actually slowed down the spread of COVID. It's going to be a fascinating interview, and it's going to be great to hear from them, especially since one of our interviewees is in the field as we speak. But first, some quick ICPSR updates.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

This week in current events, our minds are all on the invasion of Ukraine. In our show notes will include a list provided from the University of Michigan that includes ways to help address the humanitarian crisis, learning opportunities and events. A new article with findings based on data held at ICPSR explores whether Putin's Ukraine invasion will drive down support among Russian elites. You can find

the data and the article linked through our ICPSR Bibliography of Data-related Literature. And we'll have that in the show notes of course.

Anna Shelton:

All right. So we are recording this in mid-March 2022, and there are a few deadlines and exciting opportunities that are coming up. The scholarship applications for the summer program are due on March 28th, 2022. We're so excited. The summer program is coming up. We'll be hybrid this year and the summer program will start in May 2022. And we also have several job openings. Take a look at our home page at icpsr.umich.edu to see a list. I know we have some teaching assistant positions and some tech positions that are open at the moment. But for those who are listening in the future, you can always find our open positions on our website, or just send us an email. We would be happy to connect you to those.

Anna Shelton:

We also have a couple of data trainings that are coming up, including, "How Liberal Education Advances Democratic Engagement" which will be on March 31st, 2022. And another called, "Reimagining Primary Health Care for Individuals with Disabilities" which takes place on April 14th. And then, "Accessing and Using Data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey" and that webinar will be on April 19th. All of these are webinars. They're free to the public. We do record them, so if you're listening in the future and these dates have passed, you will be able to hear those recordings by going to our YouTube. And of course, we'll have a link to that and all of our upcoming events in our show notes.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Thanks, Anna. We also have some cool new data. Our curators here at ICPSR have been busy since we last talked. There is so much new data. We have about 30 new studies in our health and medical care archive, including surveys about public health priorities, discrimination in healthcare, and a poll conducted with NPR where participants answered the question, what shapes health.

Anna Shelton:

I'm really excited about those. We call that archive, the HMCA archive, and there is so much cool stuff in the HMCA archive. So check that out if you haven't been there. And speaking of health, great segue, Dory, we are very excited to introduce the COVID Border Accountability Project. We should note that the principal investigator Mary Shiraef, is currently doing field work. We were very lucky to catch her with hotel Wi-Fi. All right. Take it away Dory.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Welcome back everyone. And now we'd like to introduce you to our guests for today, who are all collaborators on the COVID Border Accountability Project, which examines whether the international border closures introduced throughout the 2020 and 2021 pandemic reduced the spread of COVID 19. So we have a few guests today to welcome to Data Brunch, a big welcome to Mary Louise Mitsdarffer a post-doctoral research associate in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Lehigh university. Welcome. As a post-doc, Mary works with the Institute of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, Health Justice Collaborative, supporting the Health Equity Activation and Research Team, which has a wonderful acronym, HEART.

Mary Mitsdarffer:

Thank you so much excited to be here.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Also, welcome to Paul Friesen from the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. Paul is a PhD candidate in political science and a dissertation year fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies. Paul's research centers on developing a more in depth understanding of political behavior, party attachment, and electoral competition across African countries. Welcome.

Paul Friesen:

Great to be here.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

And last one, not least welcome to Mary Shiraef, from the Department of Political Science, also at the University of Notre Dame. Shiraef is a PhD candidate in comparative politics and political theory. Her work examines identity transmission outcomes of border policies, especially in communist and post communist settings.

Mary Shiraef:

Thanks so much for having us.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

So for all of our listeners, if you want to follow along, as we're talking head over to covidborderaccountability.org where you can find a map that displays information on border closures around the world related to COVID 19. Amazingly, this map is all hand coded and of course we'll link to the website and data. And anything else we talk about here in our show notes. Okay. So I'll pass it over to you Anna, for the first questions.

Anna Shelton:

Awesome. I am so excited. I have so many questions I would love to, how did you hand code all this? I have so many questions, but first let's start at square one. Can you just tell us about what the COVID Border Accountability Project is and how your team started working together?

Mary Shiraef:

Sure. So I will give the overview introduction because I'm the principal investigator of the first publication, which Mary and I worked on. And the second publication that just came out this week, Paul and I headed up. So the project started March, 2020. Lots of things did then just kind of confused with what was going on. I was you personally and professionally impacted by the border closures. Personally, because I have a identity attachment to travel I would say. I've certainly learned that I do. And professionally, because my field work requires travel across international borders on a pretty regular basis. So my project got stalled and the border closures, I had question, how many are they going to be? How long are they going to last? Descriptive statistics to start?

Mary Shiraef:

And then the question of whether or not they were going to do the job that they were intended to do. Are they going to up the spread of COVID 19? And also are there other motivations for introducing them

that maybe they'll last longer than, than we want. So that's kind of the motivation for the study. I can go on and on forever. I'll just stop from time to time.

Anna Shelton:

No, that's great. That's a really great introduction and that leads me to the question about how did each of you get involved working in this? I know that COVID has been such a designer of our lives in these last couple of years. But Paul and Mary Louise, how did you get here?

Mary Shiraef:

So I want to let Mary take this because I haven't heard her impression.

Mary Mitsdarffer:

So I think it's a bit of a long story as most things are. So summer 2020, I was a teaching assistant at IPSR for a call in Lewis-Beck, that is in regression one. And that is where I met Mary. And Mary was like, "I have this idea. I'm going to talk to Colin about it. And I'll loop you in later on." Fast forward to the spring of 2021. And I remember it was a very snowy day in Philadelphia. I had gone for a walk with my dog and Mary told me all about this amazing scene project. And I was like, "Yep, I'm there, I'm down for it. How can I help?" And that's kind of how I came into it and then slung through a lot of very weird European policies for the remainder of that spring, into that summer and learned so much. Mary really put together just this phenomenal research team and kept us all motivated and kept us all going, despite us never actually meeting in person. So yeah, that's how I came to the work.

Mary Shiraef:

So that was great, Mary. So part of why I wanted to do this podcast, because we've just been marching forward in the project and not really taken a second to stop and look back and I'll talk about Paul later, but you guys ask me another question because I'll just keep talking.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Go ahead and talk about Paul now.

Mary Shiraef:

Okay. So Paul and I are in the same cohort at the university of Notre Dame, but Paul, you tell your side of the story.

Paul Friesen:

First of all, I want to say Mary is an incredible networker. So I think a big reason why this data set is in assistance is her ability to seek funding, seek out advisors and then put together this incredible team of research assistants, right? So they are the hidden heroes of any big data collection project are people that are putting in the grunt work of looking for these things online and can. So I wasn't part of that process. I just showed up at a workshop and she shows up with this just incredible data set that I didn't think a graduate student could put together.

Paul Friesen:

And so I was just really excited by the scope of it by the quality of work and all of us we're all interested in COVID research because it's all affected us. And so even just personally, it's like, and think back to the

very beginnings of the pandemic, the first main action that I remember from the US government was President Trump, closing international travel restrictions of China. And then just an argument in the media about whether that was effective or worthwhile or not. And it didn't seem like anybody really knew. And then we see as soon as COVID becomes a widespread phenomenon across countries around world, just this explosion of travel restrictions, border closures, certain countries picking on other countries, some countries just completely closing everything and shutting it down and being super careful.

Paul Friesen:

Other countries seeming they're not really paying attention to it or, I forget what it's called, like the Sweden model or something of like, let's just pretend it's not going on. And so, I think we're all interested in this and we need to get this data set analyzed and get some findings out there. And so that was something that just really excited me, Mary showing up with this incredible data set and then me being to join the team after that.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Thank you, Paul, for turning the conversation into the direction of the COBAP data set. And again, for people who might be just tuning in COBAP stands for COVID Border Accountability Project. So my next question is just, as I was reading your recent publication in nature, and I'll get to a question about that next, but there was some discussion about how there were some data missing or maybe did it didn't exist. And so tell us about this data set that you have assembled.

Mary Shiraef:

Yes. So I think this is where the grandma test comes in handy. I actually had the chance to describe the product to my grandmother. And the way that I described it to her is we went out and we collected any time, a country decided to close its international borders to a foreign population during 2020. And now we've extended the data set through end of 2021. So it's international border closures. And I was thinking it's going to be 20, maybe 60 in March. By the end of 2020, it was over a thousand. And end of 2021 we have a couple thousand policies that were introduced. So this doesn't include internal domestic lockdowns. And it doesn't include a few cases where countries actually forced people to leave. It just records incoming travel across international borders. And I forget how many countries we ended up with, but a lot of the data sets that were available didn't include African countries. Didn't include island countries, which I were really important for this topic. So the scope of our geography is 230 countries plus island territories. So it is massive. I'll give it that.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

So congratulations on your new article in nature and the title of that we'll include that and our show notes, but it's "Did border closures slow SARS-CoV-2?" And it's just a really great dive into the data. Can you talk about how you found no evidence in favor of international border closures, but a strong relationship between domestic lock downs in a reduced spread of COVID? How does that work exactly?

Paul Friesen:

I think this article is growing out of discussions from this early workshop. And Mary and I sat down and said, what are the big questions that we want to tackle here? The first two that came to mind were, were these effective or not? Which is, I mean, so basic, but if we just assume that if countries are doing it, that it is working, it's based on evidence, but we haven't had like a pandemic like this in a century,

right? And the nature of international politics is completely different. So I think a lot of these things are really unknown. And then the second article that we are just starting to work on now, not to get ahead, but is, "What motivated which countries to Institute lockdowns?" So that's more of like the geopolitics of it. But like the first step is just to see, did these things do anything? We have thousands of border closures between countries of different varieties. Do we see an effect of slowing COVID rates?

Paul Friesen:

So the short answer is no, we don't find any significant effects. We were a little bit concerned just because this is a non experimental setting. There are complex reasons why country choose to implement their border lockdowns in the first place or travel restrictions. So we said, okay, let's do another test on another policy to see whether our methods are sound or not. So we created a variable where countries were basically in increased their severity of domestic lockdowns quickly. So they had a big shock to their own domestic political system by restricting school closures, gatherings, like internal travel and all this sort of stuff. So that was our check to see whether our methods were relatively sound for the inner national test. And there we find a large drop in COVID cases, starting two weeks after the domestic lockdowns occur, basically. So that signals to us that this null finding of the border closures, not having any difference in slowing COVID is pretty valid. And I can go into the methods a little bit more, but that might not pass the grandma test.

Anna Shelton:

I love that the grandma test and what we're talking about for everybody who's listening is we want to make sure that the things that we're talking about are something that anybody's grandma could understand. So hearing something the international border closures didn't help, but the domestic closures did. That is huge. Are there other kind of key findings that came out of this that you wanted to share?

Mary Shiraef:

We don't know why we have such a strong correlation with the lockdowns and a reduction in SARS-CoV-2 spread a couple weeks later. That could be correlation, not causation. The only causal claim that we have in our paper was about the border closures. So I think we will take on the question of why border closures were introduced possibly for political motivations, but there's so many columns in the data that we haven't run any analysis on. So we haven't, for instance, run analysis on why countries were targeting other countries. And just from preliminary looks at the data, there were definitely cases where countries would introduce a ban against specific groups of foreigners. And then that country would retaliate with the exact same policy, sometimes copying and pasting and changing the country name.

Mary Shiraef:

So these were always fun to see. So there were alliances that were happening as well. Certain exceptions made for countries that were very interesting. So a lot of countries targeted China initially with the thought that it was coming from Wuhan, but based on the country's politics, they would either make an exception for Hong Kong or not. So there's so much you can unpack. And I don't know if Mary wants to talk from her experience collecting the data, but it's difficult to make claims without regional knowledge. And I think Paul's knowledge of Africa comes in handy as well here. I'll just pass it over.

Mary Mitsdarffer:

Yeah. If I could jump in well data collection, I feel like I could talk about the Schengen region of Europe which, if you do not know what the Schengen region is, and I don't think I say it right. I think it's, Schengen, Mary can you correct me. I think Schengen, it's the passport free zone of Europe. And we all found it incredibly challenging because how do you restrict borders when you don't have to travel with a passport? And so that presented really interesting obstacles. And one of my favorite research assistants and close personal friend who is on here, who helped us really dissect this out is a German researcher named Lucas Federan who is also an ICPSR alum, right? But, starting to dissect and figure that out was a really difficult task. And, from my American exceptionalism standpoint, I never really understood how interesting international law is and how cloudy and noisy it can be.

Mary Mitsdarffer:

And from a data perspective, I think that noise in the data set presents a lot of challenges, right? Because you're not going to have a perfect relationship between this border closure and this spread or all of these other things. And as a health disparities researcher, I think one of my big excitement over this data set is what it can tell us right? We saw a rise in anti-Asian climate in Asian hate crimes, right? In the United States during the COVID 19 pandemic. And it's no surprise that the US had closed borders to China, right? So when the US elects or other countries elect to close their borders towards a population of people, do we see inequities and hate and discrimination increase? And I'm excited to see if researchers will take up this call to be really understand how these policies create division, especially in heterogeneous nations, like the United States who often backlash comes towards minoritized and marginalized populations.

Mary Mitsdarffer:

So I think that's one really interesting thing we can think about on a global scale with this work. And also I love the finding of Mary and Paul's new paper around international borders. I come from a transnational family, my mom and my aunt are back and forth to Mexico a few times a year, taking care of elderly family members. And there was a lot of fear in early COVID around could we get to them? What would happen if they weren't able to go and help? And would we even be able to see them? Or would something happen prior to it? So I think it also validates this idea of keeping borders open during pandemic times and just dispels a lot of myths. And I think that's so important as we talk about equity and how data can create more equitable environments. So I'm in love with this project and the possibilities, and I would charge health disparities, researchers or health researchers listening to think about the structural implications of these policies and how they create division and how they create disparities and how can this inform your work, especially moving forward.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

So I want to bring it back to Paul and see if you have any reflections on the border closures as it relates to African countries.

Paul Friesen:

Yeah. This isn't been a central piece of my research. I'm more focused on elections and parties and this sort of thing. But I can definitely see when something like the pandemic happens, like when a big disaster or shock to the system in any country around the world, people look for something or somebody to blame. And so both here in the United States, and I could see this happening in the countries I work in Africa, because there's are already some like anti-Asian or anti-Chinese sentiments underneath the surface, just having something like saying the virus was first found in China creates this

xenophobia, which can be sometimes encouraged or leveraged by politic and pundits and this sort of thing.

Paul Friesen:

So I think that the nature of the pandemic, it being a global phenomenon has impacted all populations across all countries with a little bit more of like xenophobic fear or we're scared of people from other countries because that's where the disease is oriented and this sort of thing. I was surprised at like how global of a phenomenon in very diverse countries, looking for someone to blame kind of xenophobia rising to the surface in a ugly way. I especially kind of burned into my memory as a cartoon I saw on Twitter, which was being repudiated, but it was from a French newspaper and it was COVID shaped people African features coming in a boat to Europe, right.

Paul Friesen:

So it's the perfect intersection of anti-migration, xenophobic feelings, and then leveraging the fear of COVID into even more frighten and alarming kind of anti-immigration stance and racist really. So I think the first step is figuring out what did these border closures do? Where were they effective? Were they not effective? We see now from the general scope of taking all border closures, we don't see any helpful effects basically. So now it comes down to trying to answer the question of what were the costs of these border closures. We know that there are economic costs. We know that there are human costs, emotional us, people being separated from their families, etc. And then where does politics come into play? Which is really the interesting part from us as political scientists.

Paul Friesen:

Are these xenophobic feelings, especially as we see anti-immigration sentiments in Western countries, continuing to increase in last decades in the rise of more right wing parties. Is this something that politicians from that group are really leveraging to score political points basically. And our governments that have control that have these policies and are control of their countries saying that we're closing off borders or restricting visas for particular countries to basically score political points with their base is something that's really the crux of where we're trying to take the next steps of the project.

Anna Shelton:

Holy moly Paul. All the snaps, all the applause. Yes. I think we could talk about this for another five hours and still not digging into everything, but sadly we are coming up on our time. I do have a very important and hard hitting question that I want to make sure that we ask. We saw among your staff members on your website, that you have a chief snack officer. Can you please tell us about [Pepper 00:00:30:59] ?

Mary Shiraef:

This makes me so happy because I think about her every day and I FaceTime with her when I'm in the field every day. So Pepper is a crucial member of this team. She was at all those initial meetings and she also helped us raise a little bit of money, initially. I think it was like "Buy live feed to Pepper" I can't remember my great idea I had in 2020. But yeah Pepper's been the Chief Snack Officer from the very foundation of the project.

Anna Shelton:

That is fantastic.

Mary Shiraef:

I can send you a picture and I will. Anyway.

Anna Shelton:

That would be great. And we willing to that in the show notes, if you're willing. Can you give us a verbal description of Pepper?

Mary Shiraef:

Yes, this is important. So she's a beautiful black dog with white mane on her chest. And she is a rescue puppy from Atlanta Humane Society. And we rescued her from a litter of other gorgeous dogs like her. She looks like a lab, but she has the size of like a, I don't know [inaudible 00:32:16]. It's very confusing. Everyone thinks she's a puppy. And it was my dream when I was a kid to have a forever puppy. So I guess she's my forever puppy.

Anna Shelton:

Well, I have to say my forever puppy, you can probably hear in the background is very excited to hear about your forever puppy. So love it. Absolutely love learning about your chief snack officer.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

And speaking of snacks, since this is Data Brunch, what's your favorite snack that you like to have while you're doing this awesome research?

Mary Mitsdarffer:

I can go first, because I almost broke my jaw like doing it. But when I work with any kind of data, I usually get like two packs gum and I'm just continually chugging gum, not like eating, sometimes I swallow it. If I'm going to be real with you, but not swallowing it. Just continually changing out pieces to the point where I was doing this work while I was still finishing up my dissertation. And so at one point I was like, why does my jaw hurt so much? So I guess my favorite data snack is gum, which is so weird.

Mary Shiraef:

Eating is my favorite time of every day. So it's a very difficult question to answer without just thinking to the last meal that I just had. So the last meal, I'm in a hotel in [Coria Albania 00:33:44], and I wanted to make sure I had strong wifi for this. So I had a quick dinner which turned out to be totally delicious. It was kind of like a, I forget what it's called it. So it was COTA. They said it was a traditional Albanian meat, but it was in a pita like a Greek dish that is very popular Souvlaki. I don't know why I can think of that. So yeah, that was delicious. And then I got a beer because it's 9:00 PM, but I haven't drank it yet.

Paul Friesen:

Yeah. You guys have great responses to this. I don't think mine's going to be that exciting. But for me it's just vital to have like here, I'll show you Thermo of coffee instead of chugging it in the morning or whatever, I'm just like sipping it like every 30 minutes to make sure my brain is not like hey wiring out of control, but then also not going to sleep. And so I'm just like always thinking about that sweet spot caffeine level and then trail mix. It's got to be my food option.

Anna Shelton:

Ooh, trail mix. I'm going to have to get that recipe from you. I love it. Well, we are sad out of time. If folks wanted to learn more about this project or contact you, what would be the best way for them to do that?

Mary Shiraef:

so I've checked my professional email address pretty religiously and that's about it. But yes, if you reach out to me about the project, I'll be happy to respond. Paul can speak the best for the methods of the project. Mary can speak the best about the data collection aspect of the project. And I can speak for the whole project.

Paul Friesen:

Also, just a reminder, COBAP has an amazing website with graphical tools and a Twitter handle and all that sort of stuff.

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah. That's a good idea. So our Twitter handle is @COBAPteam, very easy, and the website is covidborderaccountability.org.

Anna Shelton:

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much. This has been eye opening. I feel like I have a hundred letters to write to my own policy makers to suggest that they take a look at these data and learn more about the actual information behind this. It's utterly incredible. What you've been able to pull together. It has been a total treat, getting to know you. Thank you so much for joining us at Data Brunch.

Mary Mitsdarffer:

Thank you.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Thank you so much.

Paul Friesen:

Thank you.

Mary Shiraef:

Thanks for having us.

Anna Shelton:

Wow. They are doing such incredible work. It is a little honor to get to meet people who are making a difference in the world like this. So that's the end of our episode and the end of our season. Thank you so much for being with us.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Yes. Thank you so much. If you aren't already subscribe now on Apple Podcast or wherever you get your podcast. Tell us what you like to hear by filling out the feedback form on our website. And don't forget to share your thoughts on social media using #DataBranch.

Anna Shelton:

Thank you as always to the over 700 members of ICPSR. This podcast would not be possible without our ICPSR members. And a special thank you to our produce, Scott Campbell.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

Thank you, Scott. Scott's waving back at us. You can get in touch with us by visiting our website. icpsr.umish.edu or emailing us at icpsr-podcast@umish.edu. So for those of you listening at home or in your car, or however you podcast just wanted to remind you that we do have some pretty cool swag here at ICPSR and it is going to a new home out there. To get it, take a picture and tag us on social media, using #DataBranch or send us an email at icpsr-podcast@umish.edu. We can't wait to see it.

Anna Shelton:

We love to see that stuff, especially during the summer while we'll be gone. But again, we will be back in your podcast in boxes in fall 2022. I'm Anna.

Dory Knight-Ingram:

And I'm Dory. And thanks for joining us at ICPSR's Data Brunch.