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EXPLORING HETEROGENEITY IN PRICE ELASTICITIES AT HIGH AND LOW PRICES

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The Effect of Cigarette Prices on Cigarette Sales: Exploring Heterogeneity in Price Elasticities at High and Low Prices

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have examined the effect of cigarette prices on cigarette consumption. These studies either evaluate the price elasticity of demand for each observation and report the average price elasticity across all observations or report the price elasticity of demand at the mean of the price variable. Policy makers rely on these average price elasticity estimates for public health and revenue generation purposes. The use of an average price elasticity may yield misleading predictions given the substantial variation in cigarette prices between states. This research is the first econometric study to examine the price elasticity of cigarette demand at different price levels. We use aggregate state-level data for years 1991 – 2012 and employ generalized linear models with log link and gamma distribution to estimate cigarette demand equations. We find that the absolute value of the price elasticity of demand monotonically increases with price. The findings from this study will be valuable to policymakers contemplating the use of cigarette excise taxes to reduce cigarette consumption or to generate revenue.

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Introduction

The prevalence of cigarette smoking has declined substantially since the release of the first Surgeon General's report on the health effects of smoking in 1964. In 1965, nearly half (42.4%) of adults aged 18 years and older in the United States were current smokers (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1999). By 2015 (for months January-September), 15.3% of adults 18 years and older in the United States were current smokers (CDC, 2016). Despite the significant declines in smoking over the past half a century, cigarette use remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States fully responsible for more than 480,000 deaths each year (USDHHS, 2014).

Much of the success in reducing cigarette smoking can be attributed to government tobacco control efforts which began in the mid 1960's following the release of the first Surgeon General's report on smoking (CDC, 1999). While information dissemination and consumer education were at the core of the government's tobacco control efforts in the early years, the campaign against tobacco shifted to public policy interventions (Warner, 2005). Beginning in the 1980's federal, state, and local governments began increasing cigarette excise taxes and enacting restrictions on smoking in public places and worksites in an attempt to decrease consumption. The smoking restrictions and tax increases continued in the 2000's at all levels of government with the restrictions becoming more comprehensive.

In 2002, Delaware became the first state in the union to ban smoking in all private worksites, restaurants, and bars (CDC, 2011). By April 4, 2016, 24 states and 812 municipalities had enacted smoking bans in all non-hospitality workplaces, restaurants, and bars (American Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation (ANRF), 2016a). ANRF estimates that 49.8% of the United

States population was covered by 100% smoke-free private worksites, restaurants, and bars laws on April 4, 2016 (ANRF, 2016b).

Three federal excise tax increases occurred in the 2000's and 47 states and the District of Columbia have passed 130 cigarette excise tax increases since January 1, 2000. Moreover, several local governments have substantially increased cigarette taxes. For example, in 2002 New York City increased its excise tax on cigarettes by \$1.42 per pack. Similarly, the city of Chicago and Cook County, Illinois (which includes Chicago) raised cigarette taxes on 6 separate occasions since 2004. Combining federal, state, and local level taxes, individuals purchasing cigarettes in Chicago and New York City pay the highest cigarette excise taxes in the country at \$7.17 and \$6.86 per pack, respectively.

For more than a half a century, economists have been interested in how economic forces affect cigarette consumption. The relationship between cigarette price and cigarette demand has been the central focus of much of this work. Economists have used diverse data, theoretical modeling, and empirical strategies to estimate cigarette demand equations. A vast majority of these studies find clear evidence of a strong inverse relationship between the price individuals pay for cigarettes and consumption. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) provided a thorough review of the literature based on hundreds of studies. Consensus estimates from the IARC review imply that a 10 percent increase in cigarette price reduces overall cigarette consumption by between 2-6 percent (IARC, 2011).

The estimated price elasticities of demand found in the literature vary for a variety of reasons including the time period examined, the inclusion/exclusion of different confounding variables, the level of aggregation of the data, and the methods employed in the estimation process. Researchers typically evaluate the price elasticity of demand for each observation and

report the average price elasticity across all observations, or report the price elasticity of demand at the mean of the price variable. While these average price effects are important, they provide no information on consumer price responsiveness at different cigarette price levels.

Countries, states, and municipalities have relied on average price elasticity estimates to predict revenue and cigarette consumption effects associated with changes in cigarette taxes. The use of an average price elasticity of demand may yield misleading consumption and revenue predictions as there is tremendous variation in cigarette prices across countries, states, and municipalities. Indeed, a 10 percent change in price in a low price state may have a very different effect on cigarette consumption than a 10 percent change in price in a high price state. No published econometric studies have examined the degree of price responsiveness as cigarette prices vary. This research is an attempt to fill that void by being the first econometric study to estimate price elasticities of cigarette demand at different cigarette price levels.

We find that the absolute value of the price elasticity of demand monotonically increases with price. This makes intuitive sense as a 10 percent increase at a higher price results in a large absolute monetary increase than 10 percent increase at a lower price and given the lower affordability of cigarettes in states with high taxes and prices to begin with. The estimates from this research will be valuable to policy makers attempting to more accurately predict the effects of cigarette tax increases.

Brief Review of Studies Using Aggregate Data

Researchers have estimated cigarette demand equations using aggregate level data for more than half a century. Early studies focused on estimating income and price elasticities for a variety of household goods including cigarettes (for example, see Stone, 1945 and Prest 1949). Given that the science on the detrimental health effects of smoking was in its infancy stage,

cigarettes were treated just like other household items and there was no discussion on the public health effects associated with taxation or price. As the science on the deleterious health effects of cigarette smoking became more prevalent, so did the number of published econometric studies on the demand for cigarettes using aggregate data.

Using meta-analysis methods, Andrews and Franke (1991) quantitatively summarize the econometric findings on the relationship between cigarette consumption and price. The studies used in the meta-analysis employed only aggregate level data primarily from the US and UK and were published between 1933 and 1990. A vast majority of the price elasticity estimates ranged from -1.0 to -0.10 and the mean price elasticity of demand for the United States for this period was found to be -0.697. Andrews and Franke (1991) grouped studies into different time periods and found cigarette demand to become less elastic over time with the average price elasticity of demand in the latest time period (1970-1990) to be -0.357.

A more recent review of the literature conducted by IARC (2011) that included the US studies used by Andrews and Franke (1991) and more recent studies found that there is no strong evidence that the demand for cigarettes in the United States has become less price elastic over time. The IARC review concludes that the more recent US studies suggest that the range of estimated price elasticities has narrowed somewhat since the 1970s, with reduced variability, between -0.6 and -0.2 (IARC, 2011).

Data

We used aggregate state-level data for the United States over the period 1991-2012 in our analyses. The dependent variable in all models was per-capita tax paid cigarette sales. The tax paid sales data were obtained from the Tax Burden on Tobacco (Orzechowski and Walker,

2014). The sales data for each state were converted to per-capita sales using state annual population estimates from the United States Census Bureau.

We merged cigarette prices with the sales data. The price data were also obtained from the annual Tax Burden on Tobacco. These prices are yearly weighted averages for a pack of 20 cigarettes and are inclusive of state-level excise taxes applied to cigarettes. To account for changes in the relative price of cigarettes over time, all cigarette prices were deflated by the national Consumer Price Index published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1982–1984 = 100). Cigarette price (in 2012 dollars) ranges from \$2.08 to \$9.99 per pack in our sample with a mean price of \$4.14 and a standard deviation of \$1.36.

We also created a variable to capture the presence and magnitude of smoke free air laws in each state. In particular, we created a variable that reflect the percent of the state’s population that is covered by a smoke-free policy prohibiting smoking in private worksites taking into account both state and local level laws. We created a similar variable reflecting the percent of the state’s population that is covered by a smoke-free laws prohibiting smoking in restaurants and another variable for bars. We then created an index variable reflecting the average of these three variables to capture the magnitude of the population covered by smoke-free air laws.

We created several variables to control for cross-border sales of cigarettes. These measures are updated versions of what Farrelly et al (2003) employed in their analysis of adult smoking. Failing to account for cross border sales will bias estimates of the price elasticity of demand based on sales data away from zero, suggesting that cigarette demand is more responsive to price than it actually is. Low cigarette price states are likely to have tax paid sales that are in excess of the actual cigarette consumption of that state, whereas, high cigarette price states are likely to have tax paid sales that are lower than actual cigarette consumption in that state. Our

controls for cross border sales take into account differences in cigarette taxes between states, the size of border populations, and the distance of these populations to the border. In particular, the import and export measures follow:

$$IMPORT = \sum_{b=1}^{adjstates_a} (taxdiff_{ab} \times \sum_{i=1}^{census\ blocks_a} \left\{ \left(\frac{pop_{ia}}{pop_a} \right) \left(\frac{1}{d_{iab}} \right) \right\}$$

Where state a is the importing state and state b is the state being imported from, taxdiff is the tax differential between states, pop is the size of the population, and d is the distance of the population to the border.

$$EXPORT = \sum_{b=1}^{adjstates_a} (taxdiff_{ba} \times \sum_{i=1}^{census\ blocks_b} \left\{ \left(\frac{pop_{ib}}{pop_a} \right) \left(\frac{1}{d_{iab}} \right) \right\}$$

Where state a is the exporting state and state b is the state being exported to, taxdiff is the tax differential between states, pop is the size of the population, and d is the distance of the population to the border.

From the United States Department of Labor - Bureau of Labor Statistics, we obtained monthly unemployment rate data for each state and DC. We converted the monthly unemployment data into fiscal year unemployment numbers. From the United States Department of Commerce – Bureau of Economic Analysis, we obtained quarterly state specific personal income data for each state and DC. Again, we converted the quarterly income data into fiscal year data and deflated by the national Consumer Price Index published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (1982–1984 = 100) to adjust for inflation. From the United States Department of Commerce – Census Bureau, we obtained state level population data for each year. We

defined variables that represent: the total state population; the percent of the population aged less than 5, aged 5-17, aged 18-24, aged 25-44, aged 45-64, and aged 65 or older; the percent of the population that is Hispanic, White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaskan Native, and non-Hispanic other race/ethnicity. Finally, from the US Census we received the percent of each state's population that has less than a high school degree, a high school degree or some college, and a Bachelors degree or more from college.

Methods

We employed a two-way fixed effects Generalized Linear Model (GLM) to estimate the per-capita tax paid cigarette sales equations. The use of a GLM requires the selection of a link function and a distribution function. We used a Box-Cox analysis (1964) to determine the appropriate link function and a modified Park test (1966) as described by Manning and Mullahy (2001) to determine the most appropriate distribution to employ. Unlike Park's original test, which was designed to test for heteroscedasticity for a specific variable, the modified Park test checks for a very specific type of heteroscedasticity, one in which the raw-scale variance is a power function of the raw-scale mean function. Based on the findings of our specification tests, we determined that a GLM with log-link and Gamma distribution was the most appropriate functional form to employ to model the per-capita tax paid cigarette sales equations. The two-way fixed effects approach amounts to including a dichotomous indicator for each state (less one) and each year (less one) as explanatory variables in the models. This assumes that the differences across states and over time, not captured by the other covariates included in the model, can be captured by the state and year fixed effects. Finally, the standard errors are cluster corrected at the state-level using a robust method of calculating the variance covariance matrix developed by Huber (1967).

Table 1 contains the estimates from four alternative models. Model 1 is a basic model that contains the following covariates: real cigarette price, year fixed effects, and state fixed effects. Model 2 is identical to Model 1, except Model 2 adds the import and export controls for cross border sales and the smoke-free air index variable. Model 3 is identical to Model 2, except Model 3 adds two socio-economic variables: inflation adjusted personal income and unemployment rate. Model 4 is identical to Model 3, except Model 4 adds the following demographic variables: gender, age, race, ethnicity, and educational attainment. Some caution should be used when interpreting the results from model 4 as our identification strategy of including state fixed effects in the models relies solely on changes in variables within states over time. There is not much variation year after year within states in gender, age, race, ethnicity, and educational attainment.

Cigarette Price Results

The average price elasticity of demand across all observations in Models 1, 2, 3, and 4 are -0.77, -0.66, -0.65, and -0.73. These estimates are comparable to previous estimates, but indicated that cigarette demand in the U.S. during this period is somewhat more responsive to price than indicated by the consensus estimates of -0.2 to -0.6 found in the literature. Table 2 contains estimates of the price elasticity of demand at different values of cigarette price ranging from \$2 to \$10, in \$0.50 increments. The absolute value of the price elasticity of demand is found to monotonically increase with price. The average estimated price elasticity of demand across the four models is -0.34 at \$2 per pack and is -1.70 at \$10 per pack. As expected, the models that control for import and export cross border sales reduce the effect of price on demand and result in smaller absolute price elasticity estimates. Indeed, the absolute value of the price elasticity of demand is reduced by 13.81 percent on average when comparing the price elasticity

estimates from model 1 to model 2. The inclusion of the socio-economic variables in model 3 reduce the absolute value of the price elasticity of demand by another 1.5% on average compared to model 2. Finally, when all the demographic variables are added in model 4, the absolute value of the estimated price elasticities of demand becomes larger than models 2 and 3, but are still 5.4% lower than those estimated in model 1 on average. The inclusion of the demographic variables in Model 4 results in considerable collinearity among the variables.

Other Results

The fraction of the state that is covered by smoke-free air laws is found to have a negative effect on cigarette sales in all the models that were estimated. The smoke-free air results are significant at the 9% level of a one-tailed test in model 3 and at the 12% level of a one-tailed test in model 2. The negative effect of smoke-free air laws on cigarette consumption is consistent with a growing number of studies on the effects of smoke-free air laws (IARC, 2009).

While the incentive to import variable is not significant in any model, the incentive to export has a positive and nearly significant effect on cigarette sales in all the models. The export incentive finding is consistent with our a priori expectations – states with cigarette taxes that are low compared to neighboring states have higher tax paid sales because residence close to the border in the high tax states can purchase cigarettes in low tax states.

An inverse relationship is found between cigarette sales and both the unemployment rate and inflation adjusted personal income, although the personal income variable fails to meet significance at conventional levels in Model 4. Controlling for personal income and unemployment, a positive and significant relationship is found to exist between states that have a

high percent of residents that have a high school degree or some college and cigarette sales. There is a strong inverse relationship between the percent of the population that is Hispanic and cigarette sales. Finally, there is a positive relationship between states that have a high percent of residents that are of another race and cigarette sales.

Discussion

States contemplating cigarette excise tax changes have relied on average price elasticity estimates from the literature when predicting changes in revenue or cigarette consumption. There is substantial variation in cigarette prices across states and over time and the use of an average price elasticity may yield misleading predictions if the price elasticity of demand varies by price. We find that the absolute value of the price elasticity of cigarette demand monotonically increases with price. At a cigarette price of \$2 per pack, the average price elasticity of demand across the different models is -0.34. This compares to an average price elasticity of demand across the different models of -1.70 when the price of a pack of cigarettes is \$10. The estimates from this research will be valuable to policy makers as they will be able to more accurately predict the effects of cigarette tax increases. For a tax increase that raises cigarette price by 10%, states that have cigarette taxes/prices above the national average will generate less additional revenue, but have a greater public health impact compared to states that have cigarette taxes/prices below the national average, which will collect more additional revenue, but have less public health benefit.

The results of this research may also shed some light on the possibility that the demand for cigarettes is becoming less price elastic over time as suggested by Andrews and Franke (1991) who grouped studies into different time periods and found cigarette demand to become

less elastic in the latest time period examined (1970-1990) compared to earlier time periods. The inflation adjusted price of cigarettes in the United States declines substantially throughout the 1970's and early 1980's. Indeed, the real price of cigarettes reached its lowest point on record in 1981, and not until 1987, did the real price revert back to the 1970 level. Our finding that the absolute value of the price elasticity of demand decreases as price declines is consistent with studies finding smaller absolute price elasticities of demand during 1970-1990 time period, a period characterized by very low inflation adjusted prices for cigarettes.

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Table 1**Cigarette Demand Equations**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Inflation Adjusted Cigarette Price	-0.19 (-8.02)	-0.16 (-6.37)	-0.16 (-6.43)	-0.18 (-9.42)
Smoke-free Air Index		-0.04 (-1.22)	-0.05 (-1.39)	-0.02 (-0.65)
Import		-0.00 (-0.21)	0.00 (0.41)	0.00 (0.22)
Export		0.00 (1.80)	0.00 (1.95)	0.00 (1.75)
Unemployment Rate			-0.03 (-2.86)	-0.01 (-2.05)
Inflation Adjusted Personal Income			-0.00 (-2.12)	-0.00 (-0.81)
High School Graduate or Some College				0.01 (3.36)
Bachelors Degree or Higher				0.00 (1.04)
Age 5-17				-0.05 (-1.79)
Age 18-24				-0.05 (-1.77)
Age 25-44				-0.06 (-1.90)
Age 45-64				-0.06 (-1.85)
Age 65+				-0.06 (-1.68)
Male				-0.01 (-0.13)
Hispanic				-0.03 (-4.20)
Black non-Hispanic				0.02 (1.71)
American Indian non-Hispanic				-0.02 (-0.70)
Other Race non-Hispanic				0.03 (2.18)
1992	-0.00 (-0.47)	-0.01 (-0.94)	0.01 (1.12)	-0.00 (-0.39)
1993	-0.08 (-11.14)	-0.08 (-11.69)	-0.07 (-9.27)	-0.09 (-6.32)
1994	-0.09 (-8.74)	-0.09 (-8.17)	-0.09 (-8.21)	-0.10 (-4.50)

1995	-0.10 (-8.78)	-0.10 (-8.28)	-0.11 (-7.51)	-0.10 (-3.54)
1996	-0.10 (-7.41)	-0.10 (-7.17)	-0.10 (-5.59)	-0.09 (-2.29)
1997	-0.11 (-6.94)	-0.11 (-7.18)	-0.11 (-5.74)	-0.09 (-2.17)
1998	-0.08 (-4.35)	-0.09 (-5.22)	-0.09 (-4.13)	-0.06 (-1.39)
1999	-0.02 (-0.53)	-0.04 (-1.39)	-0.05 (-1.36)	0.00 (0.02)
2000	0.01 (0.22)	-0.03 (-0.78)	-0.02 (-0.60)	0.01 (0.20)
2001	0.02 (0.42)	-0.03 (-0.64)	0.01 (0.17)	0.04 (0.54)
2002	0.05 (1.05)	-0.02 (-0.33)	0.04 (0.80)	0.08 (0.90)
2003	0.00 (0.08)	-0.06 (-1.18)	0.01 (0.17)	0.04 (0.43)
2004	-0.03 (-0.57)	-0.09 (-1.81)	-0.02 (-0.30)	0.01 (0.10)
2005	-0.08 (-1.55)	-0.15 (-2.85)	-0.07 (-1.03)	-0.04 (-0.32)
2006	-0.10 (-1.81)	-0.16 (-2.98)	-0.08 (-1.12)	-0.05 (-0.38)
2007	-0.13 (-2.36)	-0.19 (-3.29)	-0.09 (-1.22)	-0.06 (-0.47)
2008	-0.17 (-3.17)	-0.24 (-4.30)	-0.11 (-1.46)	-0.10 (-0.74)
2009	-0.12 (-1.69)	-0.19 (-2.53)	0.01 (0.08)	0.00 (0.03)
2010	-0.10 (-1.24)	-0.18 (-2.10)	0.03 (0.32)	0.03 (0.22)
2011	-0.13 (-1.66)	-0.21 (-2.44)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)
2012	-0.17 (-2.20)	-0.26 (-2.91)	-0.05 (-0.46)	-0.03 (-0.22)

Note. All equations include an intercept and dichotomous indicators for each state in the sample less one. Z-statistics are in parentheses. The critical values for the z-statistics are 2.58 (2.33), 1.96 (1.64), and 1.64 (1.28) at the 1%, 5%, and 10% significance levels, respectively, based on a 2-tailed (1-tailed) test.

Table 2
Price Elasticities of Demand

Price Elasticity at Alternative Values of Price	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
\$2.00	-0.37	-0.32	-0.32	-0.35
\$2.50	-0.46	-0.40	-0.39	-0.44
\$3.00	-0.56	-0.48	-0.47	-0.53
\$3.50	-0.65	-0.56	-0.55	-0.62
\$4.00	-0.74	-0.64	-0.63	-0.70
\$4.50	-0.84	-0.72	-0.71	-0.79
\$5.00	-0.93	-0.80	-0.79	-0.88
\$5.50	-1.02	-0.88	-0.87	-0.97
\$6.00	-1.12	-0.96	-0.95	-1.05
\$6.50	-1.21	-1.04	-1.03	-1.14
\$7.00	-1.30	-1.12	-1.10	-1.23
\$7.50	-1.39	-1.20	-1.18	-1.32
\$8.00	-1.49	-1.28	-1.26	-1.41
\$8.50	-1.58	-1.36	-1.34	-1.49
\$9.00	-1.67	-1.44	-1.42	-1.58
\$9.50	-1.77	-1.53	-1.50	-1.67
\$10.00	-1.86	-1.61	-1.58	-1.76