Should unemployment insurance be asset-tested?*

Sebastian Koehne[†]

Moritz Kuhn[‡]

PRELIMINARY VERSION

February 15, 2012

Abstract

Empirical studies show that job search behavior depends on the financial situation of the unemployed. Starting from this observation, we ask how unemployment insurance policy should take the individual financial situation into account. We use a quantitative model with a realistically calibrated unemployment insurance system, individual consumption-saving decision and moral hazard during job search to answer this question and find that the optimal policy provides unemployment benefits that increase with individual assets. By implicitly raising interest rates, asset-increasing benefits encourage self-insurance, which facilitates consumption smoothing during unemployment, but does not exacerbate moral hazard for job search. Asset-increasing benefits also have desirable properties from a dynamic perspective, because they emulate key features of the dynamics of constrained efficient allocations. The welfare gain from introducing asset-increasing benefits is substantial and amounts to 1.5% of consumption when comparing steady states and 0.8% of consumption when taking transition costs into account. More generous replacement rates or benefits targeted to asset-poor households, by contrast, have a negative effect on welfare.

JEL: E21, H21, J65

Keywords: Unemployment insurance, asset testing, incomplete markets, consumption and saving

*The authors thank Arpad Abraham, Christian Bayer, Thomas Gall, John Hassler, Per Krusell, Nicola Pavoni, Robert Shimer and seminar participations at the IIES, the University of Bonn, and the Rhineland Macro Workshop for helpful comments and remarks. The usual disclaimer applies.

[†]Institute for International Economic Studies (IIES), Stockholm University, SE-10691 Stockholm, Phone: +46 8 16 35 64, sebastian.koehne@iies.su.se

[‡]University of Bonn, Department of Economics, D-53113 Bonn, Phone: +49 228 73 62096, mokuhn@uni-bonn.de

1 Introduction

This paper starts from the empirical observation that job search behavior depends on the financial situation of the unemployed. For instance, Silvio (2006), Card, Chetty, and Weber (2007), and Lentz (2009) document that higher asset holdings prolong job search, and Chetty (2008) finds that job seekers in financially worse situations react more strongly to changes in the unemployment insurance (UI) system. Motivated by these findings, we ask how the UI system should optimally take the individual financial situation into account. We answer this question using a quantitative model with a realistically calibrated UI program, individual consumption-saving decisions, and moral hazard during job search.

We find that the optimal UI system provides benefits that increase with individual assets. The welfare gain of this system over the optimal asset-independent one is sizable and amounts to 1.5 percent of consumption when comparing steady states, and 0.8 percent of consumption when taking transition costs into account. Intuitively, an asset-increasing benefit scheme is preferable to an asset-independent one, because it enhances precautionary savings during employment and thereby allows additional consumption smoothing during unemployment without worsening moral hazard. By contrast, additional insurance coming from higher replacement rates or benefits targeted to asset-poor households has a negative effect on welfare, because such systems crowd out self-insurance and exacerbate moral hazard by distorting the relative price between work and leisure. Furthermore, from a dynamic perspective, asset-increasing benefits improve the insurance-incentive trade-off by exploiting the information about past search effort inherent in the accumulated asset stock. A high asset stock signals short unemployment durations in the past, and the optimal policy rewards such histories by paying higher benefits in case the agent becomes unemployed in the present.

Due to the complexity of the government's problem in this setup, we refrain from a characterization of the second best allocation and follow the large strand of the literature that uses calibrated models to study the optimal policy for a restricted class of policy instruments (Ramsey optimal policy).¹ We build an incomplete markets model in which workers are randomly laid off and exert unobservable effort to influence their chances of finding a job. Workers accumulate or decumulate a risk-free asset during employment and unemployment subject to a

¹See Hansen and Imrohoroglu (1992), Wang and Williamson (2002), and Abdulkadiroglu, Kuruscu, and Sahin (2002), for example.

borrowing constraint. The asset distribution is thus endogenous and depends, in particular, on the structure of the UI system. To keep the analysis tractable, we restrict attention to UI systems that condition only on asset holdings, but not directly on the employment history.² Although potentially restrictive, such systems already achieve sizable welfare gains.

In the quantitative analysis we put strong discipline on the model’s parameters. We calibrate the model to match the empirical evidence for U.S. job finding and job loss rates, as well as the asset holdings of displaced workers (Gruber, 2001), the estimated change in marginal utility during unemployment (Chetty, 2008), and the elasticity of the job finding rate with respect to the replacement rate (Krueger and Meyer, 2002). Starting from the calibrated benchmark economy we proceed in two steps. In the first step, we show that optimizing the replacement rate of the UI system leads to negligible welfare gains relative to the benchmark system. This finding is in line with results by Chetty (2008), who using a different model and approach also finds that the current U.S. system is close to optimal in terms of the replacement rate. In the second step, we go beyond asset-independent UI systems and explore simple parametric functional forms of asset tests. We maximize social welfare over a large parameter space and show that substantial welfare improvements are possible if asset-increasing UI benefits replace the current asset-independent system.³ The gains remain large even when we take the transition towards the higher steady state asset stock into account. We also show that additional asset heterogeneity generated by heterogeneous time discount factors does not alter the result that asset-increasing benefits are optimal.

The reason for the optimality of asset-increasing benefits becomes apparent once we distinguish between the two purposes of UI, namely providing liquidity in situations without income and encouraging job search (Chetty, 2008; Shimer and Werning, 2008). The first step of our analysis shows that additional liquidity from more generous UI benefits does not improve welfare, because this crowds out self-insurance and worsens the moral hazard problem, so that agents substitute from search effort towards leisure. Hence, a welfare gain requires to generate additional liquidity without imposing further distortions on the returns to job search. Asset-

²For simplification, we assume that assets are observable for the UI agency without costs. How costly it is to monitor asset holdings in practice remains an open question. Yet, the fact that asset-tested social transfer programs are widespread throughout the world suggests that the costs of verifying asset holdings are somewhat limited. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that under the optimal UI system in our model agents have no incentive to underreport assets, but only to overreport, and the latter is probably a lot easier to detect.

³The functional forms also allow for transfers targeted to the asset-poor, i.e. benefits that decrease with assets. We show that asset-decreasing benefits lead to welfare losses.

increasing UI benefits are a simple tool to achieve this goal, since they implicitly raise the rate of return on assets and thereby encourage self-insurance while keeping the average generosity of transfers unchanged. This generates extra liquidity via private asset accumulation without changing the average level of benefits, which means that there is no average increase in moral hazard and no average loss of publicly provided liquidity.

In addition to the welfare gain from improved liquidity provision, asset-increasing benefit schemes create a number of desirable effects highlighted in the literature on optimal dynamic contracts. As the agent's asset stock tends to fall during unemployment and grow during employment, the asset stock can be interpreted as a summary statistic of the agent's employment history. Hence, when benefits increase with assets, the duration of present and past unemployment spells has a negative impact on the generosity of public transfers. This property is commonly found to be optimal in the dynamic contracting literature, see Shavell and Weiss (1979); Hopenhayn and Nicolini (2009). Similarly, since asset-increasing benefit systems enhance precautionary savings, the magnitude of asset accumulation and decumulation tends to be larger than for asset-independent UI systems. This has again favorable dynamic consequences, since consumption after re-employment then decreases more strongly with the duration of previous unemployment spells, which generates larger 're-employment taxes' in the sense of Hopenhayn and Nicolini (1997).

To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first that delivers an analysis of asset-tested UI in a model with endogenous asset accumulation. Hansen and Imrohoroglu (1992) and Wang and Williamson (2002) use quantitative models similar to ours to study optimal UI systems without asset-tests. While Hansen and Imrohoroglu (1992) explore to what extent optimal replacement rates vary with the degree of moral hazard, Wang and Williamson (2002) investigate the effect of dynamic benefits and experience rating for employers.

In line with the work by Rendahl (2011), our results point out the importance of assets as a state for UI policy. Yet, due to key differences in modeling assumptions, we reach very different conclusions on how this should be done. Rendahl (2011) studies asset-dependent UI in a model with a single unemployed agent who experiences a single unemployment spell. In this setup, the distribution of assets at job loss is exogenous and homogeneous by assumption, and therefore the UI system has no effect on precautionary savings behavior. Moreover, assets

include no information on the agents history prior to the current unemployment spell. These peculiarities of the single spell model seem to matter a lot for the results: Rendahl (2011) finds that optimal unemployment benefits decrease with assets, while we conclude the opposite.

Finally, our results are related to the work by Shimer and Werning (2008), who study the optimal timing of UI benefits in a single-spell model of unemployment where agents have access to a savings technology. They find that UI systems with a simple, time-independent replacement rate are very close to optimal in this environment. Our results show that when asset accumulation prior to job loss and multiple unemployment spells are taken into account, this result no longer applies and large welfare gains are possible by moving to less restrictive UI systems.

The paper proceeds as follows: In Section 2 we describe the model. We describe our calibration, solve for the optimal policy and present the results in Section 3. Section 4 provides some discussion and a sensitivity analysis of the results. We provide conclusions in Section 5.

2 Model

There is a continuum of mass 1 of ex ante identical agents. At each date $t \in \{0, 1, \dots, \infty\}$, the agent's employment state θ_t is an element of the set $\Theta = \{E, U, S\}$, where E stands for employment, U for unemployment, and S for social assistance. Employment states are stochastic and transition probabilities between states depend on the (unobservable) effort exerted by the agent. If the agent exerts effort e_t and is in state θ at time t , then her probability of being in state θ' in period $t + 1$ is denoted by

$$\text{Prob}(\theta_{t+1} = \theta' \mid \theta_t = \theta, e_t) = \pi_{\theta\theta'}(e_t).$$

In each period, the agent derives utility $u(c_t)$ from consumption c_t and disutility $\phi(e_t)$ from effort e_t , where $u : \mathbb{R}_+ \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is strictly increasing and strictly concave and $\phi : \mathbb{R}_+ \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is strictly increasing and (weakly) convex. Given prices (r, w) , discount factor $\beta \in (0, 1)$, utility functions u and ϕ , and the above specification of uncertainty, the agent chooses a consumption sequence $\{c_t\}_{t=0}^\infty$, a sequence of asset holdings $\{a_{t+1}\}_{t=0}^\infty$, and a sequence of effort levels $\{e_t\}_{t=0}^\infty$

to maximize expected discounted life-time utility:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \max_{\{c_t, a_{t+1}, e_t\}} \mathbb{E} \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \beta^t (u(c_t) - \phi(e_t)) \right] \\
& \text{s.t.} \quad c_t + a_{t+1} = (1+r)a_t + y(a_t, \theta_t) \\
& \quad a_{t+1} \geq \underline{a}, \quad c_t \geq 0, \quad e_t \geq 0 \\
& \quad a_0, \theta_0 \text{ given}
\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where $y(a_t, \theta_t)$ denotes the agent's income in period t , r is the return on assets between periods t and $t+1$, and $\underline{a} \leq 0$ represents a borrowing constraint.

If the agent is employed ($\theta_t = E$), she receives a wage w and pays proportional income taxes at rate τ . In state $\theta_t = U$, she receives unemployment benefits $b(a_t)$. Finally, in state $\theta_t = S$ the agent is unemployed and receives social assistance transfers $z(a_t)$. The agent's income (excluding interest income) in period t is hence given by

$$y(a_t, \theta_t) = \begin{cases} (1-\tau)w & \text{if } \theta_t = E, \\ b(a_t) & \text{if } \theta_t = U, \\ z(a_t) & \text{if } \theta_t = S. \end{cases}$$

The government provides unemployment benefits and social assistance benefits and levies a proportional tax τ on labor income. Unemployment benefits $b(a)$ and social assistance benefits $z(a)$ may depend on the agent's current asset position a . The government runs a balanced budget in each period, i.e., the government policy must satisfy

$$\tau w \int_{a_t} d\mu_t(a_t, E) = \int_{a_t} b(a_t) d\mu_t(a_t, U) + \int_{a_t} z(a_t) d\mu_t(a_t, S) \quad \forall t \tag{2}$$

where μ_t denotes the distribution of agents over asset holdings $A = [\underline{a}, \infty)$ and employment states $\Theta = \{E, U, S\}$ at time t .

The general setup of the model is not accessible for a quantitative analysis. We will therefore make some standard assumptions on functional forms.

Assumption 1. *The agent's period utility function is given by*

$$u(c) - \phi(e) = \begin{cases} (1 - \beta) \left(\frac{c^{1-\gamma}}{1-\gamma} - e^\chi \right), & \gamma \neq 1, \chi \geq 1, \\ (1 - \beta) (\log(c) - e^\chi), & \gamma = 1, \chi \geq 1. \end{cases}$$

Since empirical knowledge on the extent to which workers can influence their layoff risk is very limited, we will model layoffs as exogenous.⁴ In addition, we assume that the job search technology of the agent is the same during social assistance and unemployment benefit receipt.

Assumption 2. *Transition probabilities from employment to employment (EE) are independent of the agent's effort:*

$$\pi_{EE}(e) = \pi_{EE},$$

with $\pi_{EE} > 0$. *Transition probabilities from unemployment to employment (UE) and from social assistance to employment (SE) depend on effort in the following way:*

$$\pi_{SE}(e) = \pi_{UE}(e) = 1 - \exp(-\psi e).$$

To economize on the number of state variables, we assume that the duration of unemployment benefits is stochastic.⁵ An agent who is unemployed in period t and did *not* receive social assistance transfers in period $t - 1$, will receive unemployment benefits with probability p and social assistance transfers with probability $1 - p$. By contrast, an unemployed agent who received social assistance transfers at time $t - 1$ and continues to be unemployed at time t will receive social assistance transfers (and no unemployment benefits) with certainty. We will later choose $p = 5/6$, which means that unemployed agents, in expectation, have access to unemployment benefits during the first 6 months of their spell.

Combining these functional forms with the above rules for UI eligibility gives rise to the

⁴From a technical point of view, introducing layoff probabilities that depend on effort would not be difficult. However, in such a setup wealthy workers would ceteris paribus lose their job more often than poor ones. As a consequence, the asset distribution of job losers would dominate that of employed workers, which is contradicted by the findings from Gruber (2001). The fact that wealth matters for transitions from unemployment to employment, on the other hand, is well-established empirically. Silvio (2006) and Lentz (2009), among others, document that wealthier individuals ceteris paribus take longer to find a job. Our model will endogenously generate this feature.

⁵By making the duration of unemployment benefits stochastic, we substantially reduce the computational complexity of the problem, but nonetheless capture the fact that benefits are paid for a limited time only. If the duration of unemployment benefits were deterministic, we would have to introduce the current duration of an unemployed's spell as an additional state variable.

following matrix of transition probabilities over states (E, U, S) :

$$\begin{pmatrix} \pi_{EE} & (1 - \pi_{EE})p & (1 - \pi_{EE})(1 - p) \\ 1 - \exp(-\psi e) & \exp(-\psi e)p & \exp(-\psi e)(1 - p) \\ 1 - \exp(-\psi e) & 0 & \exp(-\psi e) \end{pmatrix} \quad (3)$$

where the first, second, and third row contain the transition probabilities for an agent in state E , U , and S , respectively.

The following assumption allows us to solve the agent's decision problem using first-order conditions.⁶

Assumption 3. *Unemployment benefits $b(a)$ and social assistance transfers $z(a)$ are differentiable on $[\underline{a}, \infty)$.*

2.1 Equilibrium

Recall $\Theta = \{E, U, S\}$ and denote the asset space by $A = [\underline{a}, \infty)$. The agent's problem has a recursive structure and we restrict attention to recursive policies from now on. We adopt standard notation and denote current period's variables without time subscript and next period's variables by a prime, e.g. θ and θ' for the employment state in the current and the next period. The agent's Bellman equation reads

$$\begin{aligned} v(a, \theta) &= \max_{\{a', e\}} u((1 + r)a + y(a, \theta) - a') - \phi(e) + \beta \sum_{\theta' \in \Theta} v(a', \theta') \pi_{\theta\theta'}(e) \\ \text{s.t. } &e \geq 0, a' \geq \underline{a}, (1 + r)a + y(a, \theta) - a' \geq 0. \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

A *(recursive) steady state equilibrium* consists of a value function $v : A \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, an asset policy function $a' : A \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_+$, an effort policy function $e : A \times \Theta \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, a government policy $(b(\cdot), z(\cdot), \tau)$ and an invariant distribution μ on the state space $A \times \Theta$ such that:

1. v , a' , and e solve the agent's problem (1) given prices (w, r) and the government policy.
2. The government's budget constraint (2) is satisfied.
3. μ is invariant under the operator that maps distributions over states at time t into distributions over states at time $t + 1$ using decision functions e, a' and transition matrix

⁶Our approach relies on the agent's decision problem being concave, which we verify numerically.

(3).

3 Results

We take a model period to be one month. We normalize the wage rate to 1 and set the interest rate to match an annual return on assets of 4%. The parameters ψ and π_{EE} are chosen to replicate the average job finding and job loss rate in the United States in the period from 1980 to 2005.⁷ The target for β is median assets (gross financial wealth) of newly displaced workers reported by Gruber (2001). For reasons specified below, we set the parameters of the agent's utility function to $\gamma = 2$, $\chi = 1$. The benchmark UI policy consists of an asset-independent replacement rate of 0.5, $b(a) = 0.5(1 - \tau)w$, which represents the average replacement rate currently effective in the United States. Social assistance benefits $z(a)$ are chosen according to the average transfer received by a single adult with no children in the 60th month of unemployment in the U.S., which gives $z(a) = 0.08(1 - \tau)w$.⁸

The calibration generates the following parameters: $\pi_{EE} = 0.9855$, $\psi = 0.0472$, $\beta = 0.974$, $\tau = 0.0211$. With these parameters, the steady state equilibrium matches the calibration targets as shown in Table 1. The corresponding consumption and effort decisions can be found in Figure 1.

Table 1: Calibration

	model	target
job finding rate	27.0%	27.0%
job loss rate	1.5%	1.5%
median assets of job losers	1.2	1.2

Notes: Calibration result. The first column gives the data target, the second column the model predicted value of the data target, and the third column the empirical value of the calibration target. The sources for the empirical values of the data targets are given in the main text.

Our choice of the coefficient of relative risk aversion, $\gamma = 2$, turns out to be well in line with the relative change in marginal utility during unemployment estimated by Chetty (2008).

⁷The rates are derived using monthly worker flows from the Current Population Survey (CPS) for all workers aged 16 years and older from 1980 to 2005. Details are available upon request.

⁸This number is the net replacement rate in the 60th month of unemployment in the U.S. in 2009, calculated for single persons with no children and averaged over three stylized pre-unemployment income levels. See <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/17/19/39720308.xls> for further details. Benefits include social assistance (SNAP) and housing benefits.

Consider the expression

$$\frac{u'(c^U) - u'(c^E)}{u'(c^U)} \quad (5)$$

where c^E denotes consumption during employment and c^U represents consumption when receiving UI benefits. We compute this expression by comparing the consumption levels of employed and unemployed agents with identical asset positions. We then average over asset holdings, putting weights according to the asset distribution of the unemployed. While Chetty estimates (a dynamic version of) expression (5) to be roughly 0.6, our model generates a number of 0.64.

To check the plausibility of the effort cost parameter, $\chi = 1$, we examine the elasticity of the job finding rate with respect to UI benefits. Intuitively, the higher the convexity of effort costs, the smaller is the reaction of effort to changes in benefit generosity. With $\chi = 1$, at the benchmark UI system the elasticity of the job finding rate with respect to the replacement rate is approximately 0.48.⁹ This number is closely in line with the results by Chetty (2008), who estimates an elasticity of 0.53. Most estimates surveyed by Krueger and Meyer (2002) fall into a similar range.

3.1 Asset-independent UI

We now hold the parameters of the model fixed and vary the replacement rate of the UI system, while adapting the tax rate to keep the government budget balanced. Table 2 displays mean asset holdings, unemployment, taxes and welfare for the steady state equilibria associated with various replacement rates. We also report the utilitarian welfare gain relative to the benchmark policy, expressed in terms of equivalent variation of consumption of the benchmark economy.

Using utilitarian steady state welfare as our criterion, the optimal replacement rate is 40 percent. The welfare gain relative to the benchmark policy is negligible, however, as steady state welfare raises by only 0.02 percent in consumption equivalent terms. The benchmark replacement rate of 50 percent is hence very close to optimal.

The benchmark government policy yields a substantial welfare increase relative to autarky. Table 3 shows the welfare effects of eliminating unemployment insurance and/or social assistance. Relative to the benchmark policy, autarky (no UI, no social assistance) entails steady state welfare losses of 0.64 percent in consumption equivalent terms.

⁹More precisely, a ten percent increase in the replacement rate (from 0.5 to 0.55) reduces the job finding rate of agents receiving UI benefits by roughly 4.8 percent in our model (from 0.2233 to 0.2125).

Table 2: Steady states for various asset-independent replacement rates

replacement	assets	unemployment	tax	welfare change
80%	0.73	6.2%	3.9%	-0.38%
70%	0.84	5.8%	3.2%	-0.18%
60%	0.98	5.4%	2.6%	-0.06%
50%	1.13	5.1%	2.1%	0.00%
40%	1.31	4.8%	1.6%	0.02%
30%	1.53	4.6%	1.2%	0.00%
20%	1.78	4.4%	0.8%	-0.03%

Notes: Results of varying the replacement rate starting from the benchmark economy. Column 1 gives the different replacement rates, column 2 the average asset holdings in the economy, column 3 the unemployment rate, column 4 the tax rate, and column 5 the welfare change expressed as equivalent variation in steady state consumption generated by moving from the benchmark economy to the economy with the new replacement rate.

Table 3: Steady states for the benchmark policy, no UI, no social assistance, and autarky

policy	assets	unemployment	tax	welfare change
benchmark	1.13	5.1%	2.1%	0.00%
no social assistance	1.35	4.6%	1.9%	-0.35%
no UI	2.50	4.1%	0.1%	-0.25%
autarky	2.56	3.8%	0.0%	-0.64%

Notes: Results of eliminating unemployment insurance benefits, social assistance benefits, or both. The first column describes the policy experiment, column 2 gives the average asset holdings in the economy, column 3 the unemployment rate, column 4 the tax rate, and column 5 the welfare change expressed as equivalent variation in steady state consumption.

3.2 Linear asset-dependent UI

We now allow UI benefits $b(a)$ to depend on assets, holding the tax rate $\tau = 0.0211$ fixed at the benchmark level.¹⁰ For now, we restrict ourselves to systems where the replacement rate depends on assets in a linear way,

$$\frac{b(a)}{(1-\tau)w} = \alpha_1 a + \alpha_2. \quad (6)$$

We explore various slopes α_1 and choose the intercept α_2 to preserve budget balance. Recall that the social assistance replacement rate is set to 0.08. We therefore allow for intercept values $\alpha_2 \in [0.08, 1]$.

Table 4 shows that steady state welfare increases in α_1 , the slope of the benefit scheme. We

¹⁰We also explored asset-dependent benefits for alternative tax rates. The results are very similar to the ones reported for $\tau = 0.0211$. Moreover, this tax rate is approximately optimal. See Appendix ?? for further details.

Table 4: Steady states for linear asset-dependent replacement rates

α_1	α_2	assets	unemployment	welfare change
-0.150	0.615	0.57	4.7%	-0.88%
-0.100	0.590	0.72	4.8%	-0.62%
-0.050	0.553	0.89	4.9%	-0.33%
0.000	0.500	1.13	5.1%	0.00%
0.050	0.419	1.47	5.3%	0.38%
0.100	0.283	2.02	5.7%	0.86%
0.138	0.084	2.83	6.1%	1.34%

Notes: Results for replacement rates that are linear in assets. The first column gives the slope of the replacement rate with respect to assets, column 2 the intercept, column 3 the average asset holdings in the economy, column 4 the unemployment rate, and column 5 the welfare change expressed as equivalent variation in steady state consumption generated by moving from the benchmark economy to the economy with asset-dependent replacement rates. The tax rate $\tau = 0.0211$ is fixed at the benchmark level.

note that the potential welfare gain of linking benefits linearly to assets corresponds to roughly 1.3 percent of steady state consumption. This gain is more than twice as large as the gain of moving the economy from autarky to the benchmark policy. In addition, we find that systems where benefits *decrease* with assets (the conventional definition of an asset test) bring welfare losses compared to the benchmark system with asset-independent benefits. The optimal linear asset-dependent UI system is given by parameters $\alpha_1 = 0.138$, $\alpha_2 = 0.084$. These parameters are at the corner. If we increase the slope α_1 even further, it becomes impossible to find an intercept $\alpha_2 \in [0.08, 1]$ such that the government budget is balanced.

Under the optimal linear asset-dependent system, agents with zero assets face a replacement rate equal to that under social assistance. For the median job loser, having assets of around 3.1, the replacement rate equals 50 percent during the first month of unemployment. Figure 2 shows the shape of UI benefits under this system. Figure 3 displays the corresponding consumption decisions and job finding probabilities.

For technical reasons, benefit schemes that increase with assets generate higher unemployment rates than schemes with asset-independent or asset-decreasing benefits. This is simply a peculiarity of our policy experiment. Recall that we fix the tax rate, which implies that the amount of government transfers is approximately the same for all policies. Since asset-increasing UI systems implicitly subsidize pre-cautionary saving and thereby raise steady state asset holdings, the total amount of resources available during unemployment is higher for those systems. Quite straightforwardly, job finding rates are thus lower. It would not be difficult to reduce the

tax rate and the average level of benefits such that the job finding rate of the asset-increasing UI system matches the rate of the benchmark policy.

3.3 Nonlinear asset-dependent UI

We now consider a more flexible functional form for UI benefits. This allows us to locally increase the slope of benefits even further than in the experiments conducted above. Given that the optimal linear benefit function was the one that had the highest possible slope subject to obtaining budget balance, there might be room for a further welfare improvement.

Since asset-decreasing benefit schemes lead to welfare losses in the linear case, we restrict ourselves to a class of increasing functions,

$$\frac{b(a)}{(1-\tau)w} = 1 - 0.92 \exp\left(- (a/\lambda_2)^{\lambda_1}\right), \quad (7)$$

where λ_1, λ_2 are positive parameters. The class of functions in (7) includes S-shaped and concave benefit schemes, as well as schemes that are approximately linear over some range. Intuitively, the slope parameter λ_1 determines the sensitivity of benefits as we move from the center of the asset distribution to the tails. Notice that benefits exceed the social assistance level of 0.08 and are bounded above by 1 for all parameter values.

We examine different values for λ_1 and choose λ_2 to ensure that the government budget is balanced. Table 5 shows the results of various parameter values for this functional form. Figure 4 displays the shape of UI benefits under the optimal parameters, while Figure 5 shows the corresponding consumption levels and job finding probabilities. The steady state welfare gain relative to the benchmark policy is substantial and amounts to an equivalent variation of 1.56 percent of period consumption. Yet, this gain is only slightly larger than the one obtained by the optimal linear benefit system. Besides, we find that steeper slopes of the benefit function are not necessarily better. For functions with parameter values λ_1 higher than the optimal level, $\lambda_1 = 2$, the slope of benefits at the mean of the asset distribution is steeper (and mean asset holdings are higher), but steady state welfare is lower.

Table 5: Steady states for various nonlinear asset-dependent replacement rates

λ_1	λ_2	assets	unemployment	welfare change
1.0	4.378	2.50	5.9%	1.16%
1.5	4.500	3.04	6.2%	1.43%
2.0	4.815	3.48	6.5%	1.56%
2.5	5.200	3.56	6.7%	1.06%

Notes: Results for various asset-dependent replacement rates using the functional form described in equation (7). The first two columns display the parameter values, column 3 the average asset holdings in the economy, column 4 the unemployment rate, and column 5 the welfare change expressed as equivalent variation in steady state consumption generated by moving from the benchmark economy to the economy with asset-dependent replacement rates. The tax rate $\tau = 0.0211$ is fixed at the benchmark level.

4 Discussion

The quantitative results from the previous section have shown that linking the UI replacement rate to individual assets generates a substantial welfare gain relative to asset-independent systems. Most importantly, we have found that the replacement rate should be an increasing function of assets.

The economic forces behind this result become straightforward once we differentiate between the moral hazard effect and the liquidity effect of UI. As emphasized by Chetty (2008), UI programs play two very distinct roles.¹¹ On the one hand, they narrow the income gap between employment and unemployment. This distorts the relative price between work and leisure, and results in moral hazard so that unemployed workers substitute from search effort towards leisure. On the other hand, UI programs alleviate borrowing constraints by raising the worker's wealth during unemployment. This second channel, referred to as the liquidity effect, also leads to a reduction in search effort. Although both the liquidity and the moral hazard effect influence the agent's search behavior in a similar direction, the welfare consequences are very different. Liquidity provision is a socially beneficial response to credit market imperfection, while the moral hazard effect resulting from the price distortion is detrimental to social welfare.

Ideally, a UI program should generate liquidity without generating moral hazard. In a model with endogenous asset accumulation, the UI system affects the liquidity situation of unemployed workers not only directly through transfers during unemployment, but also indirectly by changing the worker's precautionary saving behavior prior to job loss. In standard, asset-independent

¹¹Shimer and Werning (2008) also discuss a dual role of UI with a slightly different focus.

UI systems, public transfers and individual asset accumulation have opposing effects on the liquidity situation, because any increase in the generosity of UI will crowd out precautionary savings. Systems with asset-increasing UI benefits, however, implicitly raise the rate of return on assets and thereby enhance precautionary savings while keeping the average generosity of transfers unchanged. This generates extra liquidity via private asset accumulation without changing the average level of benefits, which means that the effect on publicly provided liquidity and moral hazard is on average zero.

Moreover, if we look at the *dynamic* distribution of moral hazard effects, we find that asset-increasing UI benefits have some additional desirable properties. As long as agents accumulate assets during employment and decrease assets during unemployment, assets are a summary statistic of the agent's employment history, where a high asset stock signals short (and/or infrequent) periods of unemployment. Asset-increasing UI benefits therefore have the feature that benefits decrease with the duration of present and past unemployment spells, which is commonly found to be optimal in the dynamic contracting literature; see Shavell and Weiss (1979), and Hopenhayn and Nicolini (2009). Furthermore, the magnitude of asset accumulation and decumulation tends to be larger in systems with asset-increasing benefits, so that consumption during employment decreases more strongly with the duration of previous unemployment spells. Hence, UI systems with asset-increasing benefits create more significant 're-employment taxes' in the sense of Hopenhayn and Nicolini (1997). In these two ways asset-increasing UI benefits successfully emulate the dynamics of constrained efficient allocations, which complements the efficiency gain resulting from improved liquidity provision.

Finally, by raising the steady state asset stock, asset-increasing UI systems generate extra interest income, compare Table 4, so that a part of the welfare change results simply from higher mean income. For instance, when comparing the benchmark economy to the economy with optimal linear asset-dependent benefits, we observe that the change in the asset stock generates additional interest income equivalent to approximately 0.6 percent of period consumption, while the total welfare gain amounts to 1.34 percent of period consumption.

For a conclusive welfare analysis, the steady state effects discussed above have to be compared to the costs of reaching the new steady state. The following two sections show that the welfare gains of asset-increasing UI systems need to be corrected downwards when the transi-

tion phase is taken into account. Yet, transition effects will not invalidate the basic insight that optimal UI benefits are increasing in individual asset holdings.

4.1 A simple transition experiment

To approximate the consequences of an optimal transition, we suppose throughout this section that the government can arbitrarily change the asset distribution at the time of a policy reform using individual specific lump-sum transfers. There are many possible ways to design those transfers, however, in terms of the costs they are all identical: if mean assets in the pre-reform steady state are given by A_{old} and mean assets in the post-reform steady state are A_{new} , then the lump-sum transfers can be financed by the government by repaying $r(A_{\text{new}} - A_{\text{old}})$ in every period. We add this cost or revenue to the government's budget constraint and keep the budget balanced by adjusting UI benefits accordingly.

In this experiment, the economy immediately jumps from the pre-reform steady state to the post-reform steady state. Yet, the costs of changing the asset stock are taken into account, because they enter the government's budget and are repaid over the future. Using this approach, the welfare effects of policies that raise the steady state asset distribution will be corrected downwards. Table 6 displays mean asset holdings, unemployment, taxes and welfare changes for various asset-independent UI systems taking into account the transition costs outlined above. For asset-independent systems, we find that the optimal replacement rate coincides with the benchmark rate of 50 percent.

Table 7 considers UI benefits that are linear in assets. Confirming the results from Section 3.2, we find that welfare is increasing in the slope of UI benefits even when the transition costs described above are included. Since part of the tax revenue is used to finance the change in the steady state asset stock, the benefit functions from Section 3.2 are no longer feasible. The highest possible slope of benefits is now given by $\alpha_1 = 0.12$, and leads to a welfare gain of 0.79 percent of period consumption.¹²

¹²By contrast, when the costs of the lump-sum transfers to change the capital stock are ignored (as in Section 3.2), the intercept of the benefit function with slope $\alpha_1 = 0.12$ can be increased from $\alpha_2 = 0.08$ to a level of $\alpha_2 = 0.20$. At the same time, the welfare gain rises to 1.09 percent of consumption.

Table 6: Steady states for various asset-independent replacement rates. Transition costs as outlined in Section 4.1 are included.

replacement	assets	unemployment	tax	welfare change
80%	0.73	6.2%	3.8%	-0.27%
70%	0.84	5.8%	3.1%	-0.10%
60%	0.98	5.4%	2.6%	-0.02%
50%	1.13	5.1%	2.1%	0.00%
40%	1.31	4.8%	1.7%	-0.03%
30%	1.52	4.6%	1.3%	-0.10%
20%	1.77	4.4%	1.0%	-0.20%

Notes: In this transition experiment, the government immediately moves the economy to the post-reform steady state using individual specific lump sum transfers. The costs or revenues of these transfers enter the government's budget and are repaid over the future.

Table 7: Steady states for linear asset-dependent replacement rates. Transition costs as outlined in Section 4.1 are included.

α_1	α_2	assets	unemployment	welfare change
-0.150	0.658	0.51	4.8%	-0.71%
-0.100	0.621	0.67	4.9%	-0.49%
-0.050	0.571	0.87	5.0%	-0.26%
0.000	0.500	1.13	5.1%	0.00%
0.050	0.394	1.51	5.2%	0.30%
0.100	0.210	2.16	5.4%	0.64%
0.120	0.081	2.62	5.5%	0.79%

Notes: In this transition experiment, the government immediately moves the economy to the post-reform steady state using individual specific lump sum transfers. The costs or revenues of these transfers enter the government's budget and are repaid over the future. The tax rate $\tau = 0.0211$ is fixed at the benchmark level.

4.2 An explicit transition phase

If we rule out individual specific lump-sum transfers, the steady state asset distribution induced by a policy reform cannot be implemented instantaneously. It will thus take some time before individual saving decisions have moved the asset distribution to its new steady state.

The simplest way of modeling an explicit transition would be to posit that the UI reform is not anticipated and takes effect immediately at the time it is announced. For the introduction of asset-increasing benefits, however, this would be the worst possible approach. During the transition phase, agents would not only have to give up consumption to build a higher asset stock, they would also face very little insurance against unemployment. For instance, at the linear UI policy that maximizes steady state welfare in Section 3.2, the replacement rate at

average pre-reform asset holdings amounts to little more than 20 percent and so it would take a significant amount of time before the agent is reasonably well insured against unemployment. Indeed, if we perform this exercise, we find that the steady state welfare gain of 1.34 percent of consumption transforms into a welfare loss of 1.31 percent when taking the transition phase into account.¹³

To compensate for the lack of insurance during the transition phase, we allow the government to pay a common transfer to all agents at the time of the policy reform. This transfer is financed by the cost savings of the UI program during the transition phase and by a slight increase in the tax rate. Table 8 presents the results of this experiment for the optimal linear UI policy from Section 3.2. Recall that average steady state asset holdings rise from 1.1 to 2.8 under that reform. As Table 8 shows, the policy reform yields a welfare gain if the initial transfer is at least 0.9 or, in other words, if roughly half of the change in steady state assets is paid as an initial transfer.

Table 8: Linear asset-dependent replacement rates with initial transfers. Welfare includes the transition phase.

α_1	α_2	initial transfer	tax	welfare change
0.138	0.08	0.28	2.11%	-1.31%
0.138	0.08	0.50	2.19%	-0.83%
0.138	0.08	0.89	2.33%	0.00%
0.138	0.08	1.00	2.37%	0.23%
0.138	0.08	1.50	2.56%	1.21%

Notes: In this experiment, the government pays a common one-time transfer to all agents when introducing the optimal linear UI policy from Section 3.2.

Alternatively, underinsurance during the transition phase can be avoided by introducing asset-increasing benefits *on top of* the benchmark system. In that case, asset-increasing UI systems actually improve welfare without requiring any initial transfer. More specifically, we carry out the following exercise. We set the intercept of the benefit function to $\alpha_2 = 0.5$ and then explore different values for the slope α_1 . At the same time, we adjust the tax rate to keep the government budget balanced (in present value terms, including budget effects of the transition). As usual, we assume that agents do not anticipate the policy reform until it takes effect. The results of this experiment are shown in Table 9. We see that asset-increasing UI

¹³The transition phase generates a budget surplus for the government, since benefit payments during the transition are lower than in the new steady state. We neutralize this by paying an initial transfer of 0.28 to all agents.

systems improve welfare by a consumption equivalent variation of up to 0.12 percent. Different from the experiments in Section 3.2, welfare is no longer monotonic in the slope parameter α_1 , because higher slopes now require higher taxes and higher average benefits. The tax and benefit levels therefore become inefficiently high when slopes are too steep.

Table 9: Linear asset-dependent replacement rates. Welfare includes the transition phase.

α_1	α_2	assets	unemployment	tax	welfare change
0.000	0.50	1.13	5.1%	2.1%	0.00%
0.025	0.50	1.22	5.3%	2.3%	0.08%
0.050	0.50	1.33	5.6%	2.5%	0.12%
0.075	0.50	1.48	6.0%	2.9%	0.11%
0.100	0.50	1.71	6.7%	3.5%	-0.07%

Notes: The replacement rate is bounded below by fifty percent for all asset levels. In other words, asset-increasing benefits are introduced on top of the benchmark UI system.

Finally, we would like to remark that there are several alternative ways of limiting the harm of the transition phase when an asset-increasing UI policy is introduced. For instance, one could announce the introduction of such policy a number of years in advance. This would give agents the opportunity to accumulate assets while the benchmark UI system is still in place, which is certainly much more sensible than the introduction of an asset-dependent policy without advance notice.¹⁴ Another option would be to pay extra transfers to agents who become unemployed shortly after the policy reform.

4.3 Heterogeneous discount factors

4.4 Comparison of results to other quantitative papers

To the best of our knowledge, there is no other quantitative assessment of asset testing in the unemployment insurance literature. In terms of the setup, however, our basic model is related to the works by Hansen and Imrohoroglu (1992) and Wang and Williamson (2002).

Hansen and Imrohoroglu (1992) explore optimal asset-independent UI in a framework where job offers are not observable and, as in the present paper, agents have access to a savings technology subject to liquidity constraints. They find that, depending on the degree of moral hazard, the optimal replacement rate varies between 15 and 65 percent. The present paper

¹⁴The agent's decision function loses its stationarity during such a transition, which creates challenging computational problems.

finds an optimal asset-independent replacement rate of 40 percent, see Section 3.1, which falls into the range calculated by Hansen and Imrohoroglu (1992). Instead of varying the degree of moral hazard exogenously, we calibrate our model to match empirical findings on the elasticity of the job finding rate with respect to UI benefits.

Our basic model also has similarities with the setup from Wang and Williamson (2002). Yet, we follow a very different calibration strategy. In particular, we use empirical results on asset holdings of job losers as the target for the discount factor, whereas Wang and Williamson (2002) choose a discount factor in line with the real business cycle literature, which results in asset holdings that are about five times larger. It comes as no surprise that the welfare effects of UI are much bigger in the present paper. For instance, relative to autarky the benchmark UI system raises welfare by a consumption equivalent variation of 0.64 percent in our model, whereas Wang and Williamson (2002) find welfare gains of only 0.09 percent. Moreover, the behavioral responses to changes in the replacement rate are stronger in the present paper. In our model, the unemployment rate in autarky is 34 percent lower than under the benchmark UI system, whereas it falls by only 9 percent in the setup from Wang and Williamson (2002).

5 Conclusions

This paper studies the question whether UI benefits should depend on individual asset holdings. We explore this question in a quantitative model where agents face moral hazard during job search and accumulate a risk-free asset for self-insurance. We find that the optimal UI program is one where benefits are an increasing function of assets. Intuitively, since liquidity concerns are crucial for unemployed workers, and since public transfers generally exacerbate moral hazard, it is expedient to encourage precautionary saving rather than to punish it. In addition, asset-increasing benefits emulate key features of the dynamics of constrained efficient allocations. Since the asset stock is a summary statistic of the employment history where high assets signal short unemployment spells, a system where benefits increase with assets rewards histories that are linked to high job search effort in the past.

Two final remarks seem appropriate. First, it is important to keep in mind that all jobs are identical in our model. Our results should thus be interpreted in the sense that the optimal UI replacement rate is an increasing function of assets, not that the absolute level of benefits is

increasing with assets.

Second, in practice assets are observable for the UI agency at a cost only. Even though a precise estimate of this cost seems difficult to obtain, we are confident that the benefit quite plausibly outweighs the cost for two reasons. First of all, the welfare gain of conditioning UI on assets is substantial and exceeds even the gain of moving the economy from autarky to the benchmark UI system. Second, under the optimal asset-dependent UI policy agents have no incentive to underreport assets, but only to overreport, which is probably easier to detect.

References

- ABDULKADIROGLU, A., B. KURUSCU, AND A. SAHIN (2002): “Unemployment Insurance and the Role of Self-Insurance,” *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 5(3), 681–703.
- CARD, D., R. CHETTY, AND A. WEBER (2007): “Cash-on-Hand and Competing Models of Intertemporal Behavior: New Evidence from the Labor Market,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122(4), 1511.
- CHETTY, R. (2008): “Moral Hazard versus Liquidity and Optimal Unemployment Insurance,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 116(2), 173–234.
- GRUBER, J. (2001): “The wealth of the unemployed,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, pp. 79–94.
- HANSEN, G. D., AND A. IMROHOROGLU (1992): “The Role of Unemployment Insurance in an Economy with Liquidity Constraints and Moral Hazard,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 100(1), 118–42.
- HOPENHAYN, H. A., AND J. P. NICOLINI (1997): “Optimal unemployment insurance,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 105(2), 412–438.
- (2009): “Optimal Unemployment Insurance and Employment History,” *Review of Economic Studies*, 76(3), 1049–1070.
- KRUEGER, A., AND B. MEYER (2002): “Labor supply effects of social insurance,” in *Handbook of Public Economics (Volume 4)*, ed. by A. J. Auerbach, and M. Feldstein, pp. 2327–2392. North-Holland.

- LENTZ, R. (2009): “Optimal unemployment insurance in an estimated job search model with savings,” *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 12(1), 37–57.
- REND AHL, P. (2011): “Asset Based Unemployment Insurance,” *International Economic Review*, forthcoming.
- SHAVELL, S., AND L. WEISS (1979): “The optimal payment of unemployment insurance benefits over time,” *The Journal of Political Economy*, pp. 1347–1362.
- SHIMER, R., AND I. WERNING (2008): “Liquidity and Insurance for the Unemployed,” *American Economic Review*, 98(5), 1922–42.
- SILVIO, R. (2006): “Job Search And Asset Accumulation Under Borrowing Constraints,” *International Economic Review*, 47(1), 233–263.
- WANG, C., AND S. WILLIAMSON (2002): “Moral hazard, optimal unemployment insurance, and experience rating,” *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 49(7), 1337–1371.

Figure 1: Benchmark economy (replacement rate 0.5)

Notes: The upper left panel shows the consumption policy as a function of assets. The upper right panel shows job finding rates as a function of assets. The lower panel displays the asset distribution. In all three plots the red solid line represents employed workers, the blue dashed line represents unemployed workers who receive UI benefits, and the green dashed dotted line represents unemployed workers who receive social assistance benefits.

Figure 2: Optimal linear asset-dependent UI system

Notes: The left panel shows the after tax wage for the employed (red solid line), the benefits for the unemployed (blue dashed line), and the benefits for agents in social security (green dashed dotted line). The right panel shows the interest rate (blue solid line) and the implied interest rate (blue dashed line) for employed agents for this economy.

Figure 3: Optimal linear asset-dependent UI system

Notes: The upper left panel shows the consumption policy as a function of assets. The upper right panel shows job finding rates as a function of assets. The lower panel displays the asset distribution. In all three plots the red solid line represents employed workers, the blue dashed line represents unemployed workers who receive UI benefits, and the green dashed dotted line represents unemployed workers who receive social assistance benefits.

Figure 4: Optimal nonlinear asset-dependent UI system

Notes: The left panel shows the after tax wage for the employed (red solid line), the benefits for the unemployed (blue dashed line), and the benefits for agents in social security (green dashed dotted line). The right panel shows the interest rate (blue solid line) and the implied interest rate (blue dashed line) for employed agents for this economy.

Figure 5: Optimal nonlinear asset-dependent UI system

Notes: The upper left panel shows the consumption policy as a function of assets. The upper right panel shows job finding rates as a function of assets. The lower panel displays the asset distribution. In all three plots the red solid line represents employed workers, the blue dashed line represents unemployed workers who receive UI benefits, and the green dashed dotted line represents unemployed workers who receive social assistance benefits.