



# MICHIGAN RETIREMENT AND DISABILITY RESEARCH CENTER UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Promoting research on retirement, disability, and Social Security policy

MRDRC Newsletter | Late Summer 2020 | 20(3)

## Director's corner



*John Laitner*

On July 28, 2020, the MRDRC, with the generous support of the Social Security Administration,

sponsored an online workshop about “Building Data Resources for Studying the Effects of Occupational Characteristics on Health, Disability, and Retirement.” The workshop took place via Zoom, with the support of the technical staff at the Institute for Social Research. Eighty-two people connected to the meeting.

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## Workshop explores occupational and survey data links

In July MRDRC hosted a virtual workshop, “Building Data Resources for Studying Effects of Occupational Characteristics on Health, Disability, and Retirement,” organized by Amanda Sonnega (University of Michigan), Brooke Helppie-McFall (University of Michigan), Dawn Carr (Florida State), and Gwen Fisher (Colorado State University). As a first step in discussing challenges and opportunities, as well as creating best practices, Sonnega hopes to encourage publicly available linkages between population-level occupational data with survey data collected from individuals. Such combinations — between the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), for example — offer potentially powerful ways of exploring the relationships between work and later-life outcomes and could inform development of

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policies to encourage longer work and help disabled workers adapt to new careers.

Two data sets were featured in the workshop: O\*NET and the Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS). A project of the Department of Labor (DL), O\*NET replaced the outdated Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) in 2000. It offers descriptive job characteristics and requirements compiled from worker surveys of job tasks and basic demographics, as well as online job postings' technological skill requirements. Occupational analysts use these surveys and job postings to develop abilities and skills information for a given job. The DL's focus while developing O\*NET was on career


exploration and planning. An emphasis on transferable skills means that O\*NET has a robust cross-job organizing structure. The data set links to Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes and the Occupational Outlook Handbook.

Created through an interagency agreement between Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the Social Security Administration (SSA), ORS helps SSA in making disability determinations. ORS surveys private, state, and local government employers about the jobs available at their work sites. It does not include information on self-employed or federal workers. The data set includes 40,000 estimates across 420 jobs with an emphasis on an occupation's

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The workshop examined the data resources of the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) and the Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS). We had two sessions, each presenting three research papers using the O\*NET. The O\*NET's information content is formidable, but it can be challenging to employ. While the O\*NET is based upon the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC), the HRS, for example, used census classifications prior to 2004, so linking the data sets can be difficult; the O\*NET includes several hundred job characteristics, hence consolidation is often necessary in practice; and occupational characteristics such as physical demands or needed computer skills tend to change through time. Nevertheless,

the presented papers illustrated that impediments can be surmounted to gain interesting results. The ORS is new and offers great potential for the future.

The workshop finished with a panel, moderated by Amanda Sonnega (University of Michigan). The panel members were Manuel Cifuentes (Regis College), Kathleen Mullen (RAND), Pam Frugoli (Department of Labor); Kristen Monaco (Bureau of Labor Statistics); and, Matt Messel (SSA). Frugoli summarized the rich descriptive resources for the O\*NET available online, and Monaco discussed the same for the ORS. Messel noted the great potential value of both the O\*NET and ORS for research on important issues in retirement and disability. 

physical demand characteristics (e.g., strength, hearing, or stooping), specific vocational preparation requirements (educational, experience, licensing and certification, post-employment training), as well as mental and cognitive demands. A relative newcomer, ORS released its first wave in 2019. Data access is available through BLS' on-site researcher program.

The workshop sessions included research using the O\*NET or ORS. Fisher moderated the first session, which explored work linking O\*NET with the HRS.

- ◆ Peter Hudomiet (RAND) outlined how he created his O\*NET/HRS crosswalk, [available on his website](#).
- ◆ Richard Johnson (Urban Institute) presented “What Explains Educational

Differences in the Propensity to Work at Older Ages?” The paper examines differences in self-reported versus objective job characteristics.

- ◆ Carr used Hudomiet’s crosswalk for “Alternative Retirement Paths and Cognitive Performance: Exploring the Role of Preretirement Job Complexity,” which looks at the relationship between health and career and retirement choices.
- Carr moderated the second session exploring O\*NET linkages to other data sets.
- ◆ Mike Ford (Alabama) shared “Integrating O\*NET Ratings and Self-reported Working Conditions,” and offered insights into issues he encountered linking O\*NET to the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce.
  - ◆ Joe Grzywacz (Florida State) outlined

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## Workshop panel discusses questions of interest

As Matt Messel (SSA) pointed out, past occupational research has helped policymakers and practitioners to support the agency’s constituents. The panel portion of the “Building Data Resources for Studying Effects of Occupational Characteristics on Health, Disability, and Retirement” workshop (see main story) explored future research questions that would help continue those efforts. A few of the topics that came up:

- ◆ How is COVID-19 affecting occupations and how might it affect them in the future?
- ◆ Will telework will change job requirements in the aftermath of COVID-19?

- ◆ How can rehabilitation programs best serve people to keep them working?


How have mental and physical job requirements changed since the last Dictionary of Occupational Titles update in 1991? What impact have these changes had on lower-skilled workers?

There also was a general call for work exploring Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS) microdata without the use of crosswalks to other data sets, particularly groupings of physical and mental requirements in relation to occupations. Since ORS data currently is only available on site, researchers have some time to mull their ideas. 

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the O\*NET linkages to the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study. These will be publicly available through ICPSR (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research).

- ◆ Ross Andel (University of South Florida) presented “O\*NET based work characteristics in the Puerto Rican Elderly: Health Conditions (PREHCO) Study,” which looked at work complexity by using publicly available crosswalks between O\*NET and the 1970 Census and 1977 DOT.

Kathleen Mullen (RAND) moderated a panel on future directions and opportunities for research and collaboration that included Manuel Cifuentes (Regis College), Kristen Monaco (ORS/BLS), Pam Frugoli (O\*NET/DL) and Matt Messel (SSA). (See accompanying article, Page 3) The workshop was funded by a cooperative agreement between MRDRC and the SSA. 



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The Michigan Retirement and Disability Research Center is supported by a cooperative agreement with the Social Security Administration.

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