



Promoting research on retirement, disability, and Social Security policy

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Director's corner



John Laitner

One of the four principal aims MRDRC listed in its center proposal FY2019-2023 was to attract scholars from the academic and foundation communities into the study of Social Security issues. Over the course of its existence, MRDRC has continuously worked to broaden its community of affiliated scholars to accomplish that goal. One of the primary mechanisms that we use is the natural process in which an affiliated scholar includes nonaffiliated researchers on his/her MRDRC-sponsored research project,

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MRDRC adds four quick turnaround projects to 2023 roster

Solicited outside of the Retirement and Disability Research Consortium's (RDRC) regular funding cycle, quick turnaround projects (QTPs) allow the Social Security Administration and RDRC investigators to address developing research needs as they arise. Past years have seen SSA request QTPs for work on totalization agreements, data development, and the redesigned Social Security Statement, among other topics. MRDRC recently added four QTPs to its FY23 project list — two suggested by researchers, two in response to an SSA call.

RAND HRS Poverty Measures for HRS 1994, UM23-Q1

Susann Rohwedder (RAND)

MRDRC's QTPs frequently address data development. (See also **UM22-Q1** and

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and we subsequently encourage the new researchers to propose projects of their own. Another important mechanism, however, is our annual MRDRC researcher workshop in Ann Arbor. We invite a mixture of affiliated and nonaffiliated scholars to attend and present their current work — hoping to interest the new attendees to join our group thereafter. Our list of affiliated researchers (excluding students who may participate in projects) now exceeds 400.

Each year, SSA issues a memo of priority research topics, and the size of our overall team is an advantage. If a priority memo has, for example, eight topic areas, MRDRC can often propose projects for nearly all. The topics tend to vary from year to year,

of course, but we believe our team is well-positioned to meet current and future requests.

In addition to an annual call each spring to the centers for research project proposals, SSA can ask, at any time, for quick turnaround proposals (QTPs) on special topics of immediate interest. There are often two to four QTP calls per year. With our extensive list of affiliated researchers, MRDRC expects to respond to virtually all such short-notice requests. If a topic is too specialized for our team, we use them as a network to find other experts. In fact, we often are able to offer SSA two or more possibilities. This newsletter briefly summarizes our four QTP projects for FY2023. 

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UM21-Q3) This project takes on an issue discovered by Rohwedder during the course of **UM21-Q5**, “Extending RAND HRS (Health and Retirement Study) Poverty Measures to Earlier HRS Waves,” which is developing poverty measures for HRS and AHEAD (Asset and Health Dynamics among the Oldest Old) surveys completed before 2002 when the investigations used different questions. In the 2021 project, Rohwedder found a substantial roadblock when working on the 1994 data, and put aside work on that year in order to complete the other years. With this QTP, Rohwedder returns to 1994 with some custom solutions for creating the year’s poverty measures.

Mixed-method Study on Information, Communications, and Access to Government Benefits among Rural Populations, UM23-Q2

*Lila Rabinovich and Francisco Perez-Arce
(University of Southern California)*

Distances to SSA field offices, public transportation availability, and broadband access are markedly different for rural populations compared to urban and suburban dwellers. Late last year, SSA released a call for QTPs addressing barriers and communications preferences of rural populations. In this project, Rabinovich and Perez-Arce propose to conduct a mixed-methods study examining the barriers faced by rural populations when seeking government benefits, as well as rural community

members' preferred methods of communication for outreach and education efforts. The study will include a literature review, qualitative interviews with individuals in rural areas (n = 50), and an analysis of survey data from the Understanding America Study online panel.

Barriers and Communications Preferences of Rural Populations: A Scoping Review, UM23-Q3

Megan Henly, Debra Brucker, Andrew J. Houtenville, and Kelly Nye-Lengerman (University of New Hampshire)


SSA's call for QTPs on rural populations also yielded this project from University of New Hampshire scholars Henly, Brucker, Houtenville, and Nye-Lengerman. They plan to identify current literature on communications and service-related barriers faced by individuals living in rural areas when seeking government benefits. They also will identify differences by sociodemographic groups within rural populations.

Only Spot a Few Blacks the Higher I Go: Occupational Segregation and the COVID-19 Pandemic, UM23-Q4

Jhacova Williams (American University)

Some QTPs are researcher driven, such as Williams' project examining whether a link exists between occupational segregation by race and labor market outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Williams plans to estimate the extent to which those employed in occupations with higher concentrations of Black workers were more likely

to indicate changes in employer, hours employed, and/or earnings during the pandemic. Because unemployment and its associated earnings reductions can affect future Social Security payments, racial differences in labor market outcomes directly relate to SSA programs.


These projects will be complete by the end of September with their findings, working papers, and briefs hitting MRDRC's website later this fall. 

Register for the annual RDRC meeting

Join MRDRC virtually for the 25th Annual Retirement and Disability Research Consortium, Thursday, August 3, and Friday, August 4.

The half-day programs feature the latest SSA-funded research on benefit receipt, SSDI and SSI application trends, retirement and disability disparities, and more, presented by researchers from MRDRC, National Bureau of Economic Research, Center for Retirement Research at Boston College, and the Center for Financial Security at University of Wisconsin-Madison. **Here is the complete program** as it currently stands.


The event is free, but **registration is required**.

This page will be updated with meeting materials closer to the event. 

News from MRDRC researchers

Journal publications

The **May 2023 Social Security Bulletin** included Megan Henly, Debra L. Brucker, and Andrew J. Houtenville's article, "Occupational Requirements and Worker Physical and Mental Health Functioning: How Measuring Workplace Accommodation Use May Inform Disability Policy," in its Perspectives section. The article is based on the trio's MRDRC working paper for UM21-04, "**Occupational Requirements and Worker Functional Abilities: A Close Look at Three Key Occupations.**"

Francisco Perez-Arce and María J. Prados published "**The Decline in the U.S. Labor Force Participation Rate: A Literature Review,**" in the Journal of Economic Surveys. The piece acknowledges MRDRC funding for UM18-Q2, "**The Decline in the U.S. Labor Force Participation Rate.**" 

Researchers are encouraged to share academic publications, media coverage, and conference presentations of their MRRC/MRDRC-funded work. Please send announcements to mrdrumich@umich.edu.



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Keep in touch

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