



MICHIGAN RETIREMENT AND DISABILITY RESEARCH CENTER UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Promoting research on retirement, disability, and Social Security policy

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Director's corner



John Laitner

The Michigan Retirement and Disability Research Center held its annual researcher workshop on March 22-23, 2019. This year we included a half-day

addition, March 21, on international data sets that are “harmonized” with the HRS in the sense of having comparable basic survey questions. This event grew out of an MRDRC 2018 quick turnaround project on “Social Security Coverage Around the World.”

The presentations included an introduction to the Gateway to Global Aging Data platform by that program’s director, Jinkook Lee (University of Southern California), as well as talks on HRS-like surveys from Mexico (presenter, Rebeca Wong, University of Texas), Brazil (Cassio Turra, Federal University of Minas Gerais-Cedeplar), China (Albert Park, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), Korea (Junki Ahn, Korea Employment Information Service), and Germany (Axel Borsch-Supan, Max Planck). We had a

See Director, continued on Page 4

Upcoming projects featured at researcher workshop

The MRDRC Researcher Workshop allows attendees to present nascent projects to colleagues who offer questions and comments that can help refine work at its initial stages. This year the March event featured 28 10-minute presentations, followed by 10 minutes of feedback from the floor.

The first session carried over the global theme from the previous day’s international workshop (see Director’s Corner). Presentations bridging the workshops included the 2018 MRDRC project “Social Security Coverage around the World: The Case of China and Mexico” by Francisco Pérez-Arce, María Prados, and Erik Meijer. Other 2019 MRDRC projects presented included “Trends in Survival Expectations and Inequalities” by Susann Rohwedder, Michael Hurd, and Pèter Hudomiet;

See Workshop, continued on Page 2

In this issue

Director’s corner	1
Researcher Workshop	2
International Workshop	3

“Measuring Latent Work Capacity” by Italo Lopez Garcia, Nicole Maestas, and Kathleen Mullen; and “The Functional Capacity, Job Requirements, and Vocational Characteristics of Workers with Early Onset Dementia” by Andrew Houtenville.

‘Trends in Survival Expectations and Inequalities’

For several decades, demographers have noted rising inequalities in mortality rates. Rohwedder, Hudomiet, and Hurd are using Health and Retirement Study respondents’ self-reported survival expectations to age 75 to see if current declines are mirrored there and if they might continue. So far, the data has shown that, except for black women whose expectations have increased since 2008 and the upper quartile of education where expectations have remained flat, survival expectations have trended down, especially for white men and men in rural communities.

Rohwedder also pointed out that self-reported health is getting worse, “substantially. These are people in their prime years. And the diabetes rates, *double*; BMI over 35, *double*. There are some warning signs here,” she said. “It does make sense that these successive cohorts may become more pessimistic.”

As to whether self-reported life expectancies are predictive, Rohwedder said, “Wait a few years and we can look at whether these trends are aligning as well.”

‘Measuring Latent Work Capacity’

Mullen, Garcia, and Maestas are working on a new measure for latent work capacity, a challenging benchmark since it’s not directly observable. By collecting new survey data from the American Life Panel on a wide range of abilities and harmonizing it to Occupational Information Network (O*NET) measures of


occupation-level job demands, the researchers hope to create a “new measure of work capacity that links an individual’s abilities to jobs they could or could not perform,” Mullen said before presenting preliminary findings looking at all jobs and 52 abilities measured.

“Ideally...everybody would be able to do their current job. That’s not what we see, but this is still pretty encouraging,” Mullen said. “One is what we want. The mean is 0.93. ...That’s what we have right now with our match.”

The trio’s next steps include constructing/refining the latent work capacity measure using O*NET occupations, relating work capacity to near-term retirement expectations and long-term employment transitions, and possibly constructing work capacity measures using historical O*NET data. This last extension would allow them to look at how work has changed since 1998.

‘The Functional Capacity, Job Requirements, and Vocational Characteristics of Workers with Early Onset Dementia’

Houtenville is using 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data to look at the interactions between impairment type, functional capabilities, occupational requirements, and vocational factors. Understanding these relationships will help SSA evaluate assessment tools used in the disability determination process. The SIPP provides data on people who are working, allowing Houtenville to look at people’s actual choices. “I’m trying to think about how to draw a ‘possibility frontier’ for individuals...(SIPP) can tell us about occupational flexibility,” he said.

Some of the workshopped projects will be featured at the Retirement and Disability Research Consortium meeting, August 1 & 2. See Page 4 for details. 

Workshop offers global views on aging, pensions


In March, the MRDRC and the Gateway to Global Aging hosted an international workshop, “Institutional Influences on Retirement, Health, and Well-being,” in Ann Arbor.



Jinkook Lee and David Knapp presented an overview of the Gateway to Global Aging, g2aging.org. (See Laitner's Director's Corner, Page 1, for details.) Headquartered at the University of Southern California Dornsife, the Gateway hosts harmonized versions of the Health and Retirement Study's sister surveys

(see list of participants below), enabling cross-country research. Other features include documentation of international public and private pension policy changes, survey questionnaires, and a concordance search engine.

Many of the countries featured on the Gateway have made adjustments to their old-age pension systems, meaning that researchers can exploit far more natural experiments to test policy change effects than if they were only to use data from their home country.

The Social Security Administration was the primary funder of the event through a quick-turnaround award. Other funders were the Platform on Global Aging, the Health and Retirement Study, and the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. 


HRS sister surveys currently available on the Gateway

Harmonized studies

- ◆ Health and Retirement Study (HRS)
- ◆ Mexican Health and Aging Study (MHAS)
- ◆ English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)
- ◆ Survey of Health Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)
- ◆ Costa Rican Longevity and Healthy Aging Study (CRELES)
- ◆ Korean Longitudinal Study of Aging (KLoSA)
- ◆ Japanese Study of Aging and Retirement (JSTAR)
- ◆ The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)
- ◆ China Health and Retirement Study (CHARLS)
- ◆ Longitudinal Aging Study In India (LASI)

Nonharmonized studies *


- ◆ Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS)
- ◆ Study on Global Ageing and Adult Health (SAGE): includes China, Ghana, India, Mexico, Russian Federation, and South Africa
- ◆ Health and Aging in Africa: A Longitudinal Study of an Indepth Community in South Africa (HAALSI)
- ◆ Brazilian Longitudinal Study of Aging and Well-being (ELSI)
- ◆ Healthy Ageing in Scotland (HAGIS)
- ◆ Northern Ireland Cohort Longitudinal Study of Ageing (NICOLA)

* The Gateway aspires to harmonize these datasets as well. 

Director continued from Page 1

panel moderated by John Phillips, now at NIA, but Associate Commissioner, ORES, at SSA, at the time of the QTP project, and introduced by John and his SSA successor, Jason Brown. The panel, which included Michael Hurd, Arie Kapteyn, Susann Rohwedder, and David Weir, discussed current and future applications of the data.

Jason Brown and John Jankowski from SSA attended the regular MRDRC researcher workshop as well. We had 28 research presentations, including seven by new attendees (see article, Page 1). The workshop had more than 50 attendees — with most coming early for the international half-day event. As usual, the workshop featured short talks and extensive discussion from the floor after each presentation.

The MRDRC appreciates SSA's generous support that makes possible this annual chance to exchange ideas. 

Save the date for the RDRC Meeting

- ◆ **What:** The Annual Retirement and Disability Research Consortium Meeting
- ◆ **When:** Thursday, August 1, and Friday, August 2, 2019
- ◆ **Where:** The National Press Club, Washington, D.C.
- ◆ **Details:** This free event offers academics, policymakers, government officials, and others the opportunity to learn about recent research on retirement and disability issues.
- ◆ **Registration:** Required, check the MRDRC website for the link in June.



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