



MRDRC Newsletter | Summer 2024 | 24(3)

26th Annual RDRC meeting centers on structural barriers

The National Press Club in Washington, D.C., hosted the first in-person Retirement and Disability Research Consortium (RDRC) meeting since 2019. The August event featured a day of research on structural barriers to equity followed by two days of presentations on fiscal year 2024 RDRC projects.

Recurring themes

Recurring themes over the event included the importance of administrative data access and zip code in determining need for and access to OASDI benefits. Discussions on how to define disability and poverty also threaded throughout the panels. In a Wednesday session, “Disability and Accessibility in Underserved Communities,” Lydia X. Z. Brown (National Disability Institute) shared that federal law contains more than 80 different definitions of disability, a fact that garnered discussion in numerous other panels.

“SSA uses a different definition of disability
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CDU joins with RAND and MRDRC for research mentorship

In September, MRDRC’s new training partnership with RAND and Charles R. Drew University held its first in-person, two-day workshop. Charles Drew (CDU) is an Institution Serving Students of Color, Historically Black Graduate Institution, and Hispanic Serving Institution.

MRDRC and RAND provide experienced mentors from their networks of Social Security policy researchers to partner with CDU investigators. Workshops, hosted at CDU and/or RAND, aim to:

- ◆ create a nurturing environment for education in retirement and disability

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than the Census Bureau does than the HUD does than the Department of Transportation does,” Susan J. Popkin (Urban Institute) said. “There is not a lot of communication across agencies about how to define disability or who is eligible for services. That makes it really difficult for people to access to benefits and services they need.”

Several subsequent speakers pointed out that disability can be situational, making a single, overarching definition difficult to achieve.


“I am really interested in an emerging idea that the definition of disability should be the same across all these different areas,” Nanette Goodman (Center for Inclusive Policy) said. “I think how we define disability for the ADA, for people who need civil rights protections, is and should be different than how the Social Security Administration defines disability or how the ACL [Administration for Community Living] defines disability for intellectual disabilities.”

Thursday’s panel, “New Perspectives on Poverty,” included multiple discussions of measurements. As H. Luke Schafer (University of

Michigan), who moderated the session, put it, “It is possible for scholars to endlessly debate the right way to measure poverty,” when it comes to which assets (e.g., health insurance, home ownership) and expenses (e.g., taxes, work expenses such as childcare) to include.

Schafer used of out-of-pocket medical expenses to illustrate the complexity of poverty measures. “When someone has a ‘zero’ in out-of-pocket medical expenditures,” he said, “it can signal that they don’t have (those expenses), but it can also signal that they need to pay for out-of-pocket medical expenses and don’t have the resources to do so.” He also pointed out that poverty measures, historic and newly developed, rely on assigned values (imputations) more than other measures.

If you missed the meeting

Presentation summaries, slides, and videos from the **meeting’s sessions** are available on the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College’s website. The annual RDRC meeting is made possible through a cooperative agreement with the Social Security Administration. 


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research;

- ◆ offer training on developing well-defined research questions and creating successful research proposals, increasing participants’ chances of becoming independent investigators; and
- ◆ enable researchers from HBCUs/ISSCs to use their unique perspectives to address the Social Security Administration’s current and future focal areas.

In coming years, quarterly, hybrid workshops

will complement the annual in-person workshop.

This partnership enhances diversity in the retirement and disability research community and within the MRDRC researcher network. RAND researchers have contributed to RDRC research for more than 20 years and have experience conducting SSA-related research. The close geographic proximity of RAND’s MRDRC researchers to CDU partners strengthens the collaboration and facilitates in-person and virtual/hybrid workshops and gatherings. 

MRDRC researchers present FY24 projects


The annual RDRC meeting featured research presentations by the six Retirement and Disability Research Centers — University of Michigan, **Boston College**, **University of Wisconsin**, **National Bureau of Economic Research**, **City University of New York**, and **University of Maryland-Baltimore County**. Due to the later than normal start for this year's projects, most presentations focused on project design and preliminary findings.

Four MRDRC researchers shared work in progress (links to slides may require scrolling to presentation):

- ◆ David Powell (RAND): **“Understanding Barriers to Applying for DI and SSI,”** work with Lisa Abraham (RAND), Jessie Coe (RAND), and Derek Ruiz (Southern University and A&M College); **UM24-02 slides;**
- ◆ Maria Casanova (University of California-

Fullerton): **“Pathways and Persistence of Workforce Transitions during COVID-19,”** work with David Knapp (University of Southern California); **UM24-04 slides;**

- ◆ Debra L. Brucker (University of New Hampshire): **“How Do Rural Residents Prefer to Communicate with SSA?,”** work with Megan Henly, Andrew J. Houtenville, and Kelly Nye-Lengerman (all UNH); **UM24-06 slides;** and
- ◆ Malcolm Williams (RAND): **“The Color of Wealth in Chicago,”** work with Darrick Hamilton (New School of Social Research), Lilian Perez (RAND), Susann Rohwedder (RAND); **UM24-07 slides.**

Final results from these projects will be available sometime in 2025. 


HRS offers December workshop on disability data

Disability Data in the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) is a three-day online (Zoom) workshop intended to give participants an overview of the disability data resources in the HRS. The workshop will be held December 2-4, 2024. Content lectures delivered by HRS co-investigators and content area experts will cover a range of topics including:

- ◆ the various ways that disability, disabling conditions, health, and functioning are measured in the HRS;
- ◆ how measures of disability have changed as

the survey has evolved;

- ◆ how the HRS captures disability benefit receipt in the survey and through a linkage with data from the Social Security Administration; and
- ◆ how disability-related topics such as employer accommodations, assistive technology, and personal assistance are measured in the survey.


More information is available on the **HRS website**. 

News from MRDRC researchers

Publication

Disability and Health Journal published “**Understanding disability benefits decision-making among adults with self-reported work disabilities: A qualitative study,**” Lila Rabinovich, Doerte Junghaenel, and Tabasa Ozawa’s article based on their MRDRC project “Mixed-methods Study on Work-disabled Adults Who Do Not Apply for Social Security Disability Benefits,” **UM23-08**.

Media

USA Today interviewed Tony Webb about his research with Leora Friedberg, “The House: Is it an Asset or a Liability?” **UM23-17**. Webb pointed out the disparities in home ownership at retirement: “‘If you look at Black households with mortgages, the median financial assets of those households ... is basically zero,’ Webb said. ‘And I would seriously worry about those households.’” 

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



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

Keep in touch

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