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Dr. Glick, the Arnold S. and Bette G. Hoffman Professor in Sociology at Penn State, has been appointed as director of the Population Research Institute. Dr. Glick’s research focuses on migration and family processes. She brings with her an international comparative project focusing on migration being funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Dr. Glick received her doctorate in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin before moving onto Arizona State University, where she served as director for the Center for Population Dynamics and was also a professor of sociology.

The SSRI Welcomes New Director

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Our Mission

The Social Science Research Institute fosters novel, interdisciplinary research in the social and behavioral sciences that addresses critical human and social problems at the local, national, and international levels. We do so by bringing together researchers from different disciplines around emerging areas of study and by providing consultation, financial support, and shared infrastructure and services to social and behavioral scientists at Penn State.

Housed within the Office of the Vice President for Research, the SSRI is one of five university-wide research institutes at Penn State.
The Human System

How environments and experiences affect stress and immune function, social cognition, and effective social processes, and gene-x-environment interac-
tions—a mechanism in the way in which these processes both shape and are shaped by human behavior, health, and development

Social Disparities

Discovery of causes and consequences of health disparities; understanding and reducing racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in health; and evaluating the role of individual, community, and societal interventions.

Smart and Connected Health

Health and mental health promotion and disease prevention and treatment using novel technologies toward a sustainable health system

Innovative Methods

Novel approaches to research design, data collection, security, and archiving, and modeling and analysis

Dissertation and Implementation Science

The role of dissertation and implementation science in advancing knowledge into policies, programs, practices, and products

Letter From the Director

Susan McHale, Ph.D.

I am proud to report to you the achievements of the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) during the 2017-2018 academic year. The SSRI is an interdisciplinary research institute that is part of the University’s mission to advance knowledge and improve the human condition. The SSRI supports the research of Penn State’s social and behavioral scientists and engages with policymakers and practitioners to advance evidence-based policies, programs, practices, and products.

The SSRI is committed to advancing the Institute’s 2014-2019 strategic research directions: the human system, social disparities, smart and connected health, innovative methods, and dissemination and implementation science. These areas of research are aligned with the Institute’s mission of translating social science knowledge into real-world impact. The SSRI’s 2017-2018 Annual Report presents some recent research by Penn State’s social and behavioral scientists. These include studies on how human behavior and social processes influence health outcomes, research on the role of resilience in the face of change, and studies on the impact of cultural processes and influences on social policies that target vulnerable populations.

The SSRI has also been active in advancing the Institute’s translational mission. The Consortium of Social Science was one of 10 initiatives funded in the first round of the Provost’s Strategic Alliance Initiative. The Consortium is to build Penn State researchers’ capacity to address cross-systems questions and share the results in a policy-friendly format through collaborations with policymakers.

In another effort to advance the Institute’s translational mission, the SSRI convened a summit on the opioid crisis. Held in January, this event convened almost 200 researchers and practitioners from across the University with the goal of developing an interdisciplinary and translational research on the opioid epidemic.

The SSRI is also committed to supporting Penn State researchers’ work on the opioid epidemic. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been hit especially hard by this crisis with the opioid overdose death rate putting Pennsylvania in the top five states nationally. SSRI’s initiative began with the formation of an advisory board comprised of the directors of 15 centers from across the university with expertise that could be brought to bear on the crisis. A first step was a Penn State-wide summit on the opioid crisis. Held in January, this event convened almost 200 researchers and practitioners from across the University with the goal of developing an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary agenda aimed at combating the opioid epidemic. The summit provided an opportunity for colleagues to talk about their work and learn about one another’s expertise that could be brought to bear on the crisis.

Also in keeping with its goal of translating scientific knowledge into real-world impact, the SSRI launched an initiative aimed at combating the opioid epidemic. The Consortium was one of 10 initiatives funded in the first round of the Provost’s Strategic Alliance Initiative. The Consortium is to build Penn State researchers’ capacity to address cross-systems questions and share the results in a policy-friendly format through collaborations with policymakers.

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As the report communicates, the social and behavioral sciences remain a vibrant component of Penn State research. In the coming year, the Social Science Research Institute will continue to support and promote this vital work.
SSRI Centers and Institutes

Child Maltreatment Solutions Network
Director: Jeannie Nick, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies / maltreatmentnetwork.psu.edu

The_clearinghouse_works_to_foster_and_support_interdisciplinary_applied_research_and_evaluations,_translational_and_implementation_science,_and_outreach_efforts_that_advances_the_health_and_wellbeing_of_veteran_service_members_and_their_families.

Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness
Principal Scientist: Daniel Perkins, Ph.D., Professor of Youth and Family resiliency policy / militaryfamilies.psu.edu

Cedar conducts multi-disciplinary research aimed at closing the opportunity and achievement gaps often faced by children of service members with low income, law income, or lower stability; the CEDR is co-sponsored by the College of Education.

Center for Educational Disparities Research
Director: Paul Morgan, Professor of Education and Demography / cedr.ssri.psu.edu

CEDR conducts multi-disciplinary research aimed at closing the opportunity and achievement gaps often faced by children of families with disabilities, low income, or lower stability; the CEDR is co-sponsored by the College of Education.

Information Technology Core
Director: Sherry Yocum

The IT Core provides strategic IT vision, leadership, and solutions to the faculty, staff, and students within the SSRI to enable them to meet their research goals, deliver results, and enhance the SSRI’s position at Penn State and throughout the research community.

Communications Core
Director: Joe Broniszewski

The Communications Core promotes the SSRI mission by engaging a broad community of stakeholders in the Institute’s activities via news releases, news letters, social media and website development. Additional efforts are directed at increasing the visibility of important social science research to the broader community.

Administrative Core
Director: Sherry Yocum

The Administrative Core is in addition to its budgetary and human resource activities, is responsible for the planning and coordination activities pertaining to the SSRI research supports. This includes Level 1 and Level 2 seed grants, facilitated research projects, Faculty Fellow Program, UCLA and SAAB Pilot awards, grant proposal consultation with SSRI and investigators and coordinators around SSRI and external funding, and the SSRI Co-funded Faculty.

Survey Research Center
Director: Joshua Rosenberger, Assistant Professor of Biobehavioral Health / survey.psu.edu

The SRC provides survey services, promotes and contributes to the science of survey research methodology, helps investigators prepare effective proposals for external funding, and educates members of the Penn State community on best practices and emerging developments in the survey research field.

Federal Statistical Research Data Center
Director: Mark Roberts, Professor of Economics / fsrdc.psu.edu

The RDC is one of 24 Federal Statistical Research Data Centers across the nation that provide researchers with secure access to restricted economic, demographic, and health data collected by US federal agencies. The RDC at Penn State, together with a branch in Philadelphia, is funded and operated by a consortium including Penn State, Drexel University, University of Pennsylvania, and the Philadelphia Federal Reserve Bank.

Federal Statistical Systems Methodology Core
Director: Niles Ramsay, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Psychology / systemsmethodology.psu.edu

QuantDev develops new methods for the study of human behavior and behavior change, including measurement, design, and analysis techniques that span multiple time-scales and levels of analysis.

Population Research Institute
Director: Jennifer Glick, Arnold S. and Bette G. Hoffman Professor in Sociology and Demography / pop.psu.edu

PRI supports and promotes innovative, interdisciplinary population research and is one of 25 centers across the US funded in part by a grant from the Susan Kenneth Biner National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Social, Life, and Engineering Sciences Imaging Center
Director: Aniko D’Amour, Interdisciplinary Professor of Psychology and Mathematics / slesic.psu.edu

SLEIC fosters cutting edge research for which imaging methodologies play a central role by providing instrumentation, technological and substantive expertise, educational opportunities, and financial support.

Penn State Social Science Research Institute Annual Report 2017 - 2018

The Penn State Social Science Research Institute Annual Report 2017 - 2018

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Here we provide an overview of the outcomes realized by Level 1, Level 2, and Facilitated seed grants since the inception of the SSRI grant program in 1998. The figures below describe “closed” projects only, i.e. projects that have been completed and are no longer being actively tracked for outcomes.

LEVEL 1: 387 Level 1 projects were closed as of June 30, 2018, representing a total investment of over $1.67 million. From these 387 projects, 236 external grant submissions resulted, and 97 (41%) of these were funded. Awards from lifetime external grants based on Level 1 awards now exceed $68.7 million. In addition, nearly 10% of Level 1 projects progressed to Level 2 submissions. In most other cases, Level 1 projects were evaluated to have met goals either through establishing networking connections of providing professional development and support. As of June 30, 2018, each $1 invested by the SSRI in Level 1 projects has yielded approximately $18.22 of indirect return to the University.

LEVEL 2: To date, 286 Level 2 projects have been completed with a total investment of $5.2 million. From these, 338 external proposals were submitted. Of the external proposal submissions, 136 (40%) were funded. The lifetime external grant awards for closed projects as of June 30, 2018 totaled $104.3 million. Each $1 invested in Level 2 projects has yielded approximately $6.64 of indirect return to the University.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSRI Pre-Award Consultations</th>
<th>SSRI Seed Grants</th>
<th>Outcomes of Closed Level 1 Grants (Lifetime)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Agricultural Sciences</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Developed Into Level 2 Submissions:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Human Development</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>Cost Not Accomplished:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>Developed Into Facilitated Project:</td>
<td>Developed Into Facilitated Project:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>External Grant Proposal Submitted:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Faculty Members</strong></td>
<td>484</td>
<td><strong>387</strong></td>
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<td>130</td>
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During 2017-2018, SSRI directors met with 484 faculty members. Of these, 422 were affiliated with Penn State. The number of consultations by college is shown in the figure below. As in previous years, the breakdown of consultation by college largely followed the distribution of open research expenditures, with faculty members from the Colleges of Health & Human Development and the Liberal Arts receiving the majority of consultations. Consultations were broad in disciplinary scope as reflected in 20% of consultations taking place with faculty from “Other” colleges.

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Scientific synergy and innovation from Military Family and Child Welfare Contexts

September 27 – 28, 2017

The Child Maltreatment Solutions Network’s sixth annual conference was co-sponsored by the Clearinghouse for Military Readiness and brought together researchers, policy analysts, and practitioners to collaborate and discuss how military family research and programs can be translated into be used in both military and civilian contexts. Topics included information about programs such as child maltreatment assessment protocol, combined parent-child cognitive behavioral therapy for at-risk families, the Clearinghouse’s GROW! program for children, use of technology to deliver and promote evidence-based programs, and families OverComing Under Stress family education.

Families and Technology

October 23 – 24, 2017

During the 25th annual National Symposium on Family Issues, researchers from fields such as media, film, and journalism; family social science, sociology, marriage and family therapy, human development and family studies, medicine, and pediatrics gathered to discuss how new technologies are changing both family dynamics and relationship formation. The Family Symposium series is funded in part by a grant from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and also receives support from Penn State’s Clinical and Translational Science Institute, the Prevention Research Center, and the Child Study Center, and the Departments of Sociology and Criminology, Psychology, Human Development and Family Studies, Anthropology, and Biobehavioral Health.

Inaugural Summit on the Opioid Epidemic

January 12, 2018

SSRI hosted its first university-wide summit on the opioid epidemic and brought nearly 200 Penn State researchers, practitioners, and educators together to discuss and devise an integrative and translational plan to combat this critical problem. Flash talks and roundtable discussions included topics such as community-university collaborations for prevention programs, the neuroscience of opioid treatment outcomes, economic costs, family and child welfare, criminal justice, and more. In addition to SSRI, the summit was sponsored by Colleges of Agricultural Sciences, Communications, Education, Health and Human Development, Information Sciences and Technology, the Liberal Arts, Medicine, and Nursing, Penn State Law, the Office of the Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses, Penn State-University and Online Education, the Addiction Center for Translators, Center for Applied Studies in Health Economics, Center for Health Care and Policy Research, Center for Education-Disparities Research, Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness, Child Maltreatment Solutions Network, Justice Center for Research, Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, Population Research Institute, Clinical and Translational Science Institute, and Rock Ethics Institute.
2014 - 2019 STRATEGIC RESEARCH THEMES

The Human System
Social Disparities
Smart and Connected Health
Innovative Methods
Dissemination and Implementation Science

2018 SSRI STORIES

- Animal-assisted therapy for abused children
- Trends in college attendance rates in rural America
- Penn State ranks third for federal social and behavioral science funding
- International research impacts felt around the world
- New project to reduce racial inequities in kidney transplants
- Grant renewal will support research on aging and language production
- Physical abuse and punishment impact children's academic performance and adjustment
- Prescription drug monitoring programs evaluated by Penn State researchers
- Posttraumatic stress affects academics
- School choice policies may impact segregation and diversity of public schools
Animal-assisted therapy for abused children

Animals have been used in therapy for decades to assist with a person’s physical, emotional, and social well-being to reduce anxiety and facilitate healing. Until recently, however, there has been little scientific evidence to show the effectiveness of animals in these treatments.

Penn State researchers were awarded a Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development grant to learn more about animal-assisted therapy in child abuse situations.

Specifically, principal investigator Brian Allen, SSRI co-funded faculty member and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry, and his team will be analyzing the effectiveness of integrating animals into Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT).

“TF-CBT is a structured, 12-session treatment for children who have experienced maltreatment such as physical or sexual abuse or exposure to inter-partner violence,” Allen explained. “During the treatment, the child is gradually exposed to their memories and thoughts related to their maltreatment. We are examining whether animal-assisted therapy may improve treatment outcomes, reduce patient dropout, and/or improve the process for children during sessions.”

The presence of animals seems to allow children to better cope with distress and thereby allow for greater discussion of traumatic memories, as well as improve the support between the child and clinician. “For these reasons, nearly one-third of mental health clinicians serving maltreated children reported being somewhat likely to integrate animals during their sessions,” said Allen. “Despite this, there is relatively little data to support its effectiveness, and there are no guidelines on their use.”

To gauge the effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy, Allen and his team will look at approximately 60 maltreated children ages 6 to 17. Half of the group will receive animal-assisted therapy during their TF-CBT sessions, while the other half will undergo therapy without the animals. “We will compare the groups and measure outcomes such as the improvement of posttraumatic stress, along with reductions in depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems,” Allen said. “Our ultimate goal is to determine if animals enhance or weaken the effects of TF-CBT.”

Researchers will also look into other factors, including therapy retention rates, child and caregivers satisfaction ratings, and how often treatments were missed or shortened due to the animal being unavailable or disruptive.

Additionally, the therapy animals will be assessed for stress as a result of them being present during treatment. The research team will be working with Nancy Dreschel, instructor of small animal science at Penn State, who is an expert on the assessment of stress response in dogs.

Researchers will measure animal stress by assessing saliva cortisol levels in the therapy animals along with behavioral responses. Cortisol is a hormone that becomes elevated in the saliva during times of conflict or stress.

“This study will be the first to address animal-assisted therapy for the treatment of maltreated children, and the first to determine the impact of animals participating,” said Allen. In the future, Allen would like to expand the study to include a larger group of children to further investigate animal-assisted therapy on TF-CBT and the impacts on the children and animals in the sessions.

Other researchers on the project include Chad Shenk, SSRI co-funded faculty member and Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, and Ming Wang, Assistant Professor of Public Health Sciences at Penn State College of Medicine.

The Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and SSRI provided support for the project.
The Human System

Strategic Research Themes

The benefits of obtaining a college degree are higher than ever in the current economy, as researchers estimate that by the year 2020, 65 percent of all jobs will require postsecondary education.

While increasing college enrollment and graduation rates is a national priority, targeting the college behaviors of rural students is particularly important, according to Soo-yong Byun, SSRI co-funded faculty member and Associate Professor of Educational Theory and Policy. “Almost 10 million students in America go to public schools in rural areas, but rural students are vastly underrepresented in education research. New studies have examined the college trajectories of rural youth at a time when the country has witnessed a heightened emphasis on increasing college graduation rates.”

With a growing number of rural students attending two- and four-year colleges, Byun and his team investigated the college attendance of over 2,000 students from rural high schools across the United States using data from the Rural High School Aspirations Study and its follow-up study, administered by the National Research Center on Rural Education Support at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Using this unique data set, the research team’s analysis, published in the journal Research in Higher Education, is the first to explore postsecondary attendance patterns among contemporary rural youth.

“We found that more than half of rural youth attended two-year institutions during their college career, and about a fourth initially enrolled in a two-year college before enrolling in a four-year college,” Byun said. “We also found that students who enrolled in a two-year college only, were far less likely to be enrolled in a college preparation program in high school and had the lowest educational aspirations.”

The researchers further identified factors that affect these college choices, revealing that parental education, college preparatory track and preparation experiences, and teacher expectations predicted students’ college attendance patterns.

“Our findings point to the importance of two-year colleges and highlight the influence of family on students’ postsecondary education choices,” said Byun. “Additionally, there are more community colleges now than there were a few decades ago, and their proximity creates a greater number of entry points to a four-year college.”

In the future, Byun would like to examine if students who first enrolled in a two-year college differed from four-year attendees in terms of degree completion, and how other factors, such as academic, social and financial, affect four-year college attendance and completion. “In addition, incidences of students taking time off from college, transferring between colleges, starting at two-year colleges, delaying college, attending school as a part-time student, and attending multiple four-year institutions are more common than they were a few decades ago and can all affect college attendance and completion,” Byun said.

Other researchers on the project were Judith Meece, professor of educational psychology, and Charlotte Agger, doctoral student in education, both at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The project was funded by the Spencer Foundation and the Institute of Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, with additional support from Population Research Institute of the National Institutes of Health and SSRI.
Penn State ranks third for federal social and behavioral science funding

In the 2018 edition of their College and University Rankings for Federal Social and Behavioral R&D, the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) ranked Penn State No. 3, with almost $40 million in research and development funding. The University was ranked No. 6 in 2017. Vice President for Research Neil Sharkey stated “Social and behavioral sciences are an integral part of Penn State’s research community. Human behavior and social relationships play a significant role in the world’s major challenges and thus are central to addressing their solutions.”

The 2018 rankings, which reports total federal research dollars in the social and behavioral sciences awarded to U.S. institutions, feature a new dashboard with an interactive map of recipients of social and behavioral science research and development funding to compare how each university stacks up against more than 400 U.S. institutions. Based on the most recent available federally collected data, the COSSA rankings use an inclusive selection of fields to calculate the total federal R&D funding received by universities in the social and behavioral sciences. The map shows the location of many of these programs.

Strategic Research Themes

- The Human System
- Social Disparities
- Smart and Connected Health
- Innovative Methods
- Dissemination and Implementation Science
International research impacts felt around the world

Penn State researchers are working with academic and non-academic partners to create a more holistic view of migration in shaping family environments and demography, is also involved in several international projects. SSRI co-funded faculty member Guangqing Chi, associate professor of rural sociology and demography and Director of the Computational and Spatial Analysis Core, has spent three years exploring the effects of environmental stress and policy strategies for building more resilient communities in the central Asian highlands in collaboration with other researchers, including SSRI co-funded faculty member Jennifer Glick.

According to Chi, people born and raised at high elevations — above 8,200 feet — exhibit distinct physiological characteristics, such as increased blood viscosity caused by higher hemoglobin content. Other issues, including psychological stress and lower reproductive success, make residents of high-elevation communities particularly vulnerable to additional stressors caused by harsh environmental conditions.

"We are evaluating various aspects of environmental changes in human agricultural settlements and associated pasturelands in Kyrgyzstan to assess the impacts on these communities and the land on which the residents make a living," explained Chi. "Our goal is to determine whether changes in pasture conditions can be detected via remote sensing technologies and subsequently linked to community well-being.

Results will inform policies and strategies for local communities to adapt to environmental changes and deflect ecosystem services and improve community well-being and pasture productivity sustainability. Recommendations will be adapted and exported to other settings that experience pasture degradation and chronic out-migration.

In another project, Chi and other researchers are examining the links between environmental change and left-behind children’s well-being in Kyrgyzstan. "Environmental change can have diverse and unexpected consequences that are not well understood," Chi explained. "Women’s and left-behind children’s experiences in rural areas are one of these outcomes. The research will recommend strategies for accommodating labor migrants and families with left-behind children and adapting to environmental change and deflecting ecosystem services."

Leif Jensen, assistant director of SSRI and distinguished professor of rural sociology and demography, is also involved in several international projects. In one five-year project in Honduras led by Penn State in partnership with Zamorano University, Janelle Larson, project principal investigator and professor of horticulture, and their colleagues are looking to empower women’s roles in the household, and many have limited control over household norms and values as well as the broader socio-economic context influence women's roles in the household, and many have limited control over household norms and values as well as the broader socio-economic context.

In another five-year project, Jensen, Rick Bates, project principal investigator and professor of horticulture, and their colleagues are exploring the impact of migration on children and adolescents in communities of origin in three interrelated research projects. "By focusing on gender, using otherwise technical training in horticultural production as a delivery mechanism," Jensen said. "We hope to identify a sensitive model for nudging attitudes and behaviors regarding gender, using otherwise technical training in horticultural production as a delivery mechanism." Jensen explained.

"Women play an important role in agricultural production, however they face many more challenges than their male counterparts," Jensen explained. "Gender norms and values as well as the broader socio-economic context influence women’s roles in the household, and many have limited control over household financial income."

The researchers are identifying technologies, institutions and policies that facilitate small-scale farming, including horticultural production, and nutritional status of women and their households and to strengthen employment opportunities for women and entrepreneurship opportunities for women with associated pasturelands in Kyrgyzstan to assess the impacts on these communities and the land on which the residents make a living," explained Chi. "Our goal is to determine whether changes in pasture conditions can be detected via remote sensing technologies and subsequently linked to community well-being."

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Jonathan Daw, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
Sociology

"Building on this information, we will create the first predictive model to map out a potential donor pool," said Daw. "This information is critical to improve clinical practice and efforts to ethically influence the living donor search process."

Other Penn State researchers on the project are Ashton Verdery, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Demography; and Selena Ortiz, Gregory H. Wolf Professor of Health Policy and Administration. Additional researchers include Peter Reese, Associate Professor of Medicine, and Deirdre Sawinski, Assistant Professor of Medicine, both at the University of Pennsylvania; and Robert Gaston, Endowed Professor of Transplant Nephrology at the University of Alabama-Birmingham.

Support for the project was provided by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases and the Population Research Institute.

Kidney disease is one of the top ten leading causes of death in the U.S., with diagnoses rising almost 600 percent in the last 30 years. Kidney transplants by a living donor are often the most effective way of treating the disease, but for many, large racial disparities affect the likelihood of obtaining this life-saving treatment. A $1.2 million National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases grant will fund a new, five-year Penn State project to investigate and reduce these racial disparities.

According to principal investigator Jonathan Daw, Population Research Institute Associate and Assistant Professor of Sociology, the project will look at the entire pool of potential donors in kidney transplant candidates’ networks, and the processes by which candidates and network members negotiate potential donations.

Motivated by previous research showing that white transplant candidates were more than twice as likely to obtain a living donor kidney transplant, Daw and his research team conducted a pilot study and found that, contrary to a common hypothesis, African Americans were more likely than whites to have access to promising potential donors, but are less likely to receive those organ donations.

"We theorize key barriers to eliminating racial disparities in living donation kidney transplantation and promoting it for all groups are primarily social, not biomedical, in origin. There is some disconnect with the social process and norms that prevent people from donating, and we are just beginning to understand the factors that get people to go to the hospital to be screened in the first place."

Daw and his research team are trying to identify methods to help kidney transplant candidates efficiently identify and recruit healthy, well-matched, and willing living donors in their family and social networks. They plan to develop and test two interventions intended to assist candidates in their efforts to identify and recruit biomedically suitable, willing living kidney donors.

The team will first develop a search intervention tool to assign those in a candidate network a probability of being biomedically suitable donors for the candidate, which can be adjusted using candidate reports on health status and perceived willingness to donate. This tool will then be combined with social network data also collected in the study to calculate which members of a candidate’s network are most likely to be suitable donors, and advise candidates to initiate donation discussions with these individuals.

Next, they plan to use experimental survey studies to develop a series of verbal scripts that can be used by candidates with potential donors in their networks. "The scripts will help candidates initiate conversations with potential donors, and ethically increase their effectiveness in discussing donation," said Daw. "We’ll look at previous research to determine consistent themes that come up in these conversations and reasons why potential donors end up not donating in order to develop scripts that address these issues."

To test these interventions, researchers will recruit new kidney transplant candidates from two large, racially diverse kidney transplant programs and survey them on their health status, views and knowledge about kidney transplantation. The researchers will also assist the candidates in mapping their social networks, focusing on health status and their relationship with the candidates.

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Michele Diaz, SSSRI co-funded faculty member, Director of Human Imaging for the Social, Life, & Engineering Sciences Imaging Center (SLEIC) and Associate Professor of Psychology, Linguistics, and Neuroscience, received an R01 grant renewal from the National Institute on Aging to support her research on how aging affects language production.

Diaz will use both behavioral measures and neuroimaging techniques to compare older and younger adults to understand why we have more difficulty speaking as we age. As older adults are the largest growing demographic in the country, understanding how we age has large social, financial, and societal significance. Declines in communication can be both frustrating and lead to decreased social and intellectual interactions.

Specifically, Diaz plans to utilize behavioral measures, diffusion tensor imaging, and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to uncover the patterns of sparing and decline in phonological and semantic processes that healthy aging has been known to affect. This renewal will support Diaz’s research for the next five years.

Diaz began her education at Penn State, receiving her bachelors in psychology. Then continued at Duke University where she earned both her masters and doctorate in psychology with a certificate in cognitive neuroscience. After completing her academic studies, Diaz went on to become associate director for Duke’s Brain Imaging & Analysis Center and assistant professor of psychiatry before returning to Penn State in 2014.

Throughout her experiences, Diaz has studied the relationship between human behavior, cognitive function, and aging using behavioral, neuropsychological, and neuroimaging methodologies. Some of her previous work focuses on the interaction of semantic and phonological processes during communication and studies figurative language, discourse, and novelty to understand the right brain’s role in language production. She also investigated the best neuroimaging and multi-site experiment methods for the Biomedical Informatics Research Network, a national data and collaborative online database for biomedical research. The National Institute on Aging and SSSRI supports this work.

The National Institute on Aging and SSSRI supports this work.
Sara Font, SSRI co-fund and Assistant Professor of Sociology, and Jamie Cage, Assistant Professor in Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Social Work, found that physical abuse was associated with decreases in children’s cognitive performance, while non-abusive forms of physical punishment were independently associated with reduced school engagement and increased peer isolation.

While corporal punishment and physical abuse have been previously linked with reduced cognitive development and academic achievement in children, Font’s study is one of the few that simultaneously examines abusive and non-abusive physical punishment as reported by both children and caregivers. Even if physical punishment does not result in serious physical injury, children may experience fear and distress, and this stress has been found to negatively impact brain structure, development, and overall well-being. “This punishment style is meant to inflict minor pain so the child will change their behavior to avoid future punishment, but it does not give children the opportunity to learn how to behave appropriately through explanation and reasoning,” stated Font.

In this study, over 650 children and their caregivers were examined in three areas of physical punishment: mild corporal punishment, harsh corporal punishment, and physical abuse. The groups reported their use or experience with physical punishment and researchers then measured cognitive outcomes, school engagement, and peer isolation in the children. The data were analyzed to determine trajectories between cognitive and academic performance and how initial and varying exposure to physical punishment and abuse influences them.

“We found that while all forms of physical punishment and abuse are associated with declines in school engagement, only initial exposure to physical abuse has a significant negative influence on cognitive performance and only harsh corporal punishment notably increases peer isolation in children and was observed in both child and caregiver reports. This suggests that preventing physical abuse could promote children’s cognitive performance, but it may not be enough to get children to be involved and well-adjusted in school,” said Font.

Considering that mild physical punishment can develop into physical abuse and that even these mild punishments have consequences on children’s cognitive and social school functioning, parent education on alternative forms of punishment may be one solution to prevent physical abuse.

Programs that reach parents during services that they regularly use may be one way to give them alternative punishment technique education. This could be a medical professional informing parents during a child’s health visit or staff members of an Early Head Start program providing parent education during the child’s enrollment. “Further research and efforts in these types of interventions needs to continue so we can learn more,” Font said.

This research was made possible with support from the Population Research Institute and SSRI.

Physical abuse and punishment impact children’s academic performance and adjustment

Sarah Font, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Sociology

Strategic Research Themes

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Prescription drug monitoring programs evaluated by Penn State researchers

Deaths resulting from prescription drug overdoses have increased more than seven-fold over the last several decades, and public health officials are calling the epidemic the worst drug crisis in American history.

Prescription drug monitoring programs (PDMP) are being implemented in an increasing number of states to address their misuse, and a team of Penn State researchers have been investigating their impact.

According to Yunfeng Shi, Assistant Professor of Health Policy and Administration, inappropriate drug use not only affects health outcomes, but can also cause increases in waste and societal costs. “More and more, we are seeing states monitoring prescription drug use via statewide databases that collect data on the prescribing, dispensing and purchasing of prescription drugs.”

These programs use patient databases to identify inappropriate patient behavior (such as doctor shopping), facilitate drug treatment, and inform public health initiatives designed to combat the misuse of prescription drugs, especially opioids.

The researchers looked at the impact of these programs on drug overdose mortality rates across all drug categories from 1999 to 2014, and each of the categories separately from 1999 to 2010, using data from the US Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They examined 34 states that began operating PDMPs in 2002 or later and found that prescription drug monitoring programs had no appreciable impact on drug overdose mortality rates. Moreover, PDMPs may actually have contributed to increases in mortality rates from the use of illicit drugs and other (unidentified) drugs. These counterintuitive effects were concentrated in states with PDMPs operating for five or more years.

“The literature on PDMPs has been accumulating. However, the findings have not been consistent,” explained Shi. “To our knowledge, this is the first study that analyzes drug overdose deaths across different classes of drugs with a relatively novel statistical-model that accounts, in a flexible way, for trends in drug overdose mortality that are unrelated to PDMPs.”

The researchers were surprised by the fact that states with longer-standing PDMPs may actually be exacerbating the problem, especially with respect to illicit drug use.

“However, it is important to note that we only looked at mortality rates; PDMPs could be exerting a positive influence along other dimensions, such as inappropriate prescribing, drug-related emergency room visits, or overconsumption more generally,” said Shi.

“The potentially positive impacts on these outcomes, which were not examined in our study, may eventually lead to a reduction in mortality rates. But that needs to be examined in future research. For now at least, our results point to a potential unintended consequence of PDMPs, whereby reduced access to prescription drugs may have led some individuals with addictive disorders to look for alternatives.”

The findings have several policy and clinical implications, as PDMPs do not seem to be successful in reducing overdose mortality rates, even in the target categories of prescription opioids. “Unfortunately, PDMPs may not be able to fully address prescription diversions, doctor shopping, or other problematic behaviors. Under these programs, potential drug-related illegal activities are only detectable through prescription filling,” Shi explained. “Further, PDMPs may drive patients away from doctors who could help them address drug abuse or addiction. In addition, the rapid growth of online pharmacies may have increased opportunities for individuals to abuse prescription medications.”

The researchers concluded PDMPs need to be combined with more comprehensive and prevention-oriented approaches to address drug overdose deaths, such as improving patient education on appropriate drug use, ensuring proper access to prescription drugs for those with medical needs, expanding treatment programs, and providing pain management education for providers.

In the future, the research team plans to examine the effectiveness of PDMPs based on specific program features, which vary substantially from state to state.

Other researchers on the project were Dennis Shea, Professor of Health Policy and Administration; John Moran, Associate Professor of Health Policy and Administration; and Young Hee Nam, current Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Pennsylvania and former Doctoral Student in Health Policy and Administration at Penn State.
Posttraumatic stress affects academics

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by traumatic military experiences is associated with feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness, and/or guilt. New Penn State research is evaluating how PTSD symptoms increase risks for academic difficulties as well.

Steffany Fredman, Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and the Karl R. Fink and Diane Wendle Fink Early Career Professor for the Study of Families, wanted to explore one potential process by which PTSD symptoms may contribute to academic problems in student veterans.

It’s an issue rising to the forefront, as increasing numbers of veterans are enrolling in colleges and universities. “Many of these former service members are experiencing posttraumatic stress symptoms secondary to their military service, and these symptoms are associated with academic difficulties,” Fredman explained. “There’s an extensive literature demonstrating that PTSD symptoms can cause disruptions in trauma survivors’ close relationships. However, less is known about ways that these relationship problems can, in turn, affect other domains of trauma survivors’ adjustment, such as students’ academic functioning.”

The study, recently published in the journal “Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy”, is the first to demonstrate the effects of military-related posttraumatic stress on academic adjustment through impairments in veterans’ relationships with family and friends.

For the study, Fredman and her collaborators examined data from a large, national sample of students seeking mental health services while enrolled in college. The data were collected from college- or university-based counseling centers affiliated with the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH). The CCMH, which is housed at Penn State, is a national practice-research network of more than 500 college and university counseling centers that collects standardized data as part of routine clinical care and then pools de-identified data for research and clinical purposes.

Fredman and colleagues looked at a subsample of over 2,000 student service members and veterans, then further divided them into four groups based on relationship status and gender, including both partnered and non-partnered women, and partnered and non-partnered men. They found that, for all groups, military-related posttraumatic stress was associated with greater family distress and lower support from friends and acquaintances and that these difficulties were, in turn, associated with higher academic dysfunction. Further, the effect of PTSD symptoms on academic dysfunction was strongest for partnered women compared to the other three groups and was due to a greater influence of family problems on partnered women’s academic adjustment.

Fredman and colleagues theorize partnered women’s tendency to “tend and befriend” when under stress may make them especially susceptible to the negative impacts of relationship problems on other areas of their lives, including academic functioning. According to Fredman, “Partnered women who are already struggling with the effects of posttraumatic stress and its impact on their relationships may be working extra hard to manage those relationships, leaving less time and fewer emotional resources to devote to their studies.”

In the future, Fredman would like to expand the project to determine which aspects of student veterans’ close relationships are most closely associated with academic success or challenges and to develop and test interventions that simultaneously improve PTSD symptoms, interpersonal relationship adjustment, and academic functioning.

“Our ultimate goal is to develop interventions that can be delivered during critical transitional periods, such as the college years, that can serve as a unique window of opportunity to help trauma survivors address these difficulties so that they can fully benefit from their education and lead happier and healthier lives,” said Fredman.

Other Penn State researchers on the project include Amy Marshall, Associate Professor of Psychology; Yuning Le, Graduate Student in Human Development and Family Studies; Keith Aronson, Associate Director of SSR and the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness and Senior Research Associate in Biobehavioral Health; Daniel Perkins, Professor of Youth and Family Resiliency and Policy and Principal Scientist and Founder, Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness; and Jeffrey Hayes, Professor of Education and Psychology.

This research was supported by SSR and Fredman’s Karl R. Fink and Diane Wendle Fink Early Career Professorship for the Study of Families.

Steffany Fredman, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Human Development and Family Studies
D
iprose decades of educational reform and legal efforts, many U.S. schools remain experiencing increasing segregation, with 10 percent of public schools serving both minority and high poverty students. A Supreme Court decision in the 1970s called for the merger of city and suburban districts to further desegregation. Now, a Penn State researcher is looking at how student assignment policies may be impacting the diversity of public schools.

According to Erica Frankenberg, Population Research Institute Affiliate, Associate Professor of Education and Demography, and Co-director of the Center for Education and Civil Rights, the new generation of school choice policies adopted in response to legal decisions may actually be increasing school inequities, despite their goals of maintaining integrated schools. “The current student choice policies do not take race into consideration, but it is unclear whether or not they are creating diverse schools,” Frankenberg explained. “In order to avoid many of the perceived legal risks in adopting policies based on race, many school districts now use socioeconomic status in assigning students, which may not be as effective for racial integration.”

Historically, student assignment policies were meant to reduce segregation and enhance diversity, however current student choice policies and how they affect diversity in an era of increasing segregation hasn’t been analyzed. “Maintaining and improving school integration is important, as previous research has shown that students of all races who attend diverse schools demonstrate higher academic achievement in reading, language, mathematics, and science,” reported Frankenberg.

In order to avoid some districts in pursuing Integration, in 2009 the federal government funded 11 school districts to restructure their student assignment policies, including Jefferson County, Kentucky. In her study, Frankenberg analyzed the use of a new race-conscious student assignment policy being used in Jefferson County.

The 100,000-student school district was previously comprised of mostly black and white students, but in the last decade, Jefferson County doubled in Latino student enrollments. The district also includes students from both low-income and wealthy white students, but in the last decade, Jefferson County doubled in Latino student enrollments. At the same time, analyses of Census data demonstrates relatively high segregation of black, white, and Latino students, with even higher levels of segregation than under alternative assignment scenarios such as neighborhood schools or socio-economic composition and strong policy design, the school district is the best-case scenario for this type of analysis. If we found that Jefferson County was failing to create racially and economically diverse schools, then these policies wouldn’t be able to achieve diversity goals in any school in the country,” Frankenberg said.

Frankenberg evaluated data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data from 2006 to 2013, which provides annual school-level information about students, teachers, and expenditures, as well as agreed upon common core and socio-economic composition of student body. Frankenberg supplemented this information with data from the school district for the years 2011 and 2013, along with information provided by the students’ kindergarten applications.

She found that Jefferson County’s newer approach to school assignment has resulted in steady enrollment growth with no evidence of flight by white or affluent students to private schools or neighboring school districts. The schools in the district remain considerably diverse, and while there is evidence of a slight growth in racial assignment, Jefferson County’s policy is more effective than most, with segregation levels remaining considerably lower than most large school districts. “I found that diversity in student assignment in the district was increasing and while white black student integration fell. Integration of low-income and middle-class students remained a priority and the district to go back to neighborhood schools,” Frankenberg explained.

Frankenberg suggested that along with Jefferson County’s student assignment policies, the history of the school district may have also played a role in her findings. “Jefferson County has a long history of integration,” which is part of the Supreme Court’s legacy of Brown vs Board of Education and the implementation of school desegregation. Although Jefferson County fiercely fought school desegregation in the 1970s, they voluntarily continued their integration plan once court oversight ended in 2003.

Using student application data from 2014, Frankenberg compared the segregation of students within the district under several other common methods of assigning students that are not necessarily focused on diversity. She found that students were segregated, the district’s managed choice policy rather than under alternative assignment scenarios such as neighborhood schools or extending every child’s first choice of school. “Such a simulation provides real-time evidence about how district policy design relates to student composition, and was especially valuable this past school year when the state of Kentucky was threatening to pass a neighborhood schools bill that would force the district to go back to neighborhood schools,” noted Frankenberg.

According to current population project results, there will be no racial or ethnic majority in the U.S. in a few decades, so it is important to that the new student assignment policies lead to improved student outcomes in the midst of this diversity. “Education allows young people to have increased prejudice and higher dropout rates, with significant implications for the United States’ social and economic health. The new generation of school choice policies must be sustainable and effective,” Frankenberg said.

Frankenberg’s research was supported by the William T. Grant Foundation, and the Population Research Institute.

Erica Frankenberg, Ph.D, Associate Professor, Education and Demography

School choice policies may impact segregation and diversity of public schools

Strategic Research Themes

Social Disparities

Dissemination and Implementation Science

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