

# SSRI Working Group on Social Science Research on Rural Population Health (SSRRPH) 2024 Symposium | Event Summary & Next Steps

## Background:

The SSRI Working Group on Social Science Research on Rural Population Health (SSRRPH) facilitates and bolsters rural health research among the social sciences at Penn State, with particular attention to the structural and social determinants of rural population health. The SSRRPH Working Group does so through two aims:

- Aim 1: Host annual symposia for those in the Penn State community who are actively engaged in social science research on rural population health to form, grow, and implement research collaborations.
- Aim 2: Establish an infrastructural foundation and core group of collaborators to lead efforts to secure extramural funding for new research on rural population health.

A motivating goal of the working group is to ultimately support an extramurally funded Center for Rural Population Health at Penn State, providing the infrastructure for Penn State to serve as a hub for rural health research in the U.S.

## Summary of 2024 Symposium:

*Participants:* The first annual symposium was held on January 24<sup>th</sup> from 3:00-5:00pm in Henderson Living Center. Attendance included 38 in-person participants and 9 Zoom participants from over 20 departments and 8 colleges at Penn State. Participants had active research agendas on rural health or were interested in expanding their research to include rural health. Participants also had a collective interest in interdisciplinary partnerships that would leverage the strengths of the social sciences to examine the role of social and structural determinants of rural health.

*Symposium Structure:* The symposium included remarks from SSRI Director Deb Ehrenthal; a presentation by Leif Jensen that set the stage for social science research on rural health; flash talks from six Penn State faculty doing research in this area (Alexis Santos, Kristina Brant, Florence Becot, Jennifer Kowalkowski, Joel Segel, Jennifer Moss); a presentation on best practices for doing research with rural populations from Kristina Brant and Kathleen Sexsmith; and breakout discussions across 8 tables (and 1 zoom room) about advancing this area of research at Penn State; and a review of resources available to support new research (SSRI (inc. PRI Computation and Spatial Analysis Core); the Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education; Extension; CTSI; the Interdisciplinary Network on Rural Population Health and Aging; and the PA Office of Rural Health).

## Synthesis of Table-Level Discussion:

Page 2 of this document lists a summary of findings from the notes taken by scribes at each of the breakout session tables at the event.

## Next Steps for the Working Group:

Based on the Working Group's original goals paired with a review of these findings, we are prioritizing the following over the next 12 months:

1. The original Aim 2 of applying for extramural funding to lead to a Center for Rural Population Health at Penn State. This Center will help provide the infrastructure needed to 1) support collaborative research among faculty that span downstream and upstream determinants of rural health, 2) provide training and mentorship for scholars interested in pursuing this research, and 3) develop a robust stream of research that advances knowledge and helps establish Penn State as a vanguard for rural population health research.
2. Host coffee hours once a month for faculty interested in pursuing or continuing this research. These events will focus on 1) developing collaborations, 2) sharing resources and best-practices, and 3) highlighting the importance of research on the social and structural determinants of rural population health.

**Founding Working Group Members:** Danielle Rhubart (PI), Leif Jensen (Co-I), Kristina Brant (Co-I).

## Summary of Common Themes Discussed

### Based on your work and experiences, what research questions and topics need to be prioritized in advancing knowledge on the structural and social determinants of rural health?

- Understanding the effects of policies and programs on rural health and the social determinants of rural health
- How food access and food costs translate into nutrition and health in rural contexts
- Rural mental health/behavioral health and suicide prevention
- Rural dental health and its intersections with other health outcomes
- The diverse experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in rural America
  - More fine-grained research on the intersection of race, ethnicity, sexuality and rurality
- Women's health and women's health care access in rural areas (in light of Dobbs decision)
- Unauthorized immigrant health and healthcare utilization in rural America
- Farm workers (and their families), occupational safety, and OSHA
- Identifying problems *and* solutions
- Moving from "access to health care" to focusing on "access to health" (Social and structural determinants of health)
- How to effectively study the structural determinants of health (e.g., racism, policies)
- Ethical issues at the intersection of health - issues related to colonialization of rural America, the *extractive nature of research* that builds on a history of extractive industries and processes creating distrust in rural areas.
- Improving how communities are engaged in research (co-generation of research), how findings are shared and used to give back, how to build sustainable and reciprocal research partnerships with communities.
- Other related topics commonly discussed
  - Fractured healthcare systems in Central PA
  - Lack of a Centre County Department of Public Health

### What assets does Penn State have for advancing knowledge on social and structural determinants of rural health?

- Strong infrastructure for cross-collaboration and interdisciplinary work
- Institutional framework for supporting efforts for extramural funding
- SSRI and other institutes
- Substantial relevant expertise to contribute to this work
- Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health
- Commonwealth campuses
- Other groups mentioned: Children's Center, Extension, Survey Research Center, CTSI/CHEER, Medical School (rural track)

### What resources do researchers need for advancing knowledge on the social and structural determinants of rural health?

- Better support and tools for "research to practice" within the social sciences
- More transportation options (e.g. reaching rural communities, bringing rural residents to campus for research studies)
- Developing more "street cred" for those researchers who are outsiders AND to establish a Penn State presence that does not feel "helicopter-ish" (e.g. one and done).
- A forum for regular interaction among researchers
- A more effective way to search what researchers are currently engaged in
- Senior mentoring for junior scholars seeking first-time extramural funding
- Desire for additional statistical consulting
- Desire for more training/support for mixed methods projects