R D R C   N e w s

The latest in retirement and disability research

RETIREMENT AND DISABILITY RESEARCH CENTER

University of Maryland, Baltimore County

SSA funds six new RDRC research projects!

By Finn Teach

The U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) has awarded funding for six new retirement and disability research projects sponsored by our University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) Retirement and Disability Research Center (RDRC). This RDRC is one of six research centers in the country supported by SSA. Our focus is on promoting equity in retirement and disability research, which is reflected in the topics we have chosen and who is doing the research. We are proud to include minority serving institutions (MSIs) among our research partners.

New Research Projects	Principal Investigators
Parental Caregiving and Economic Security of Retirement-Age Adults across Gender and Race/Ethnicity	Jennifer Caputo, Westat
Retirement Security of Low and Middle Income Black and White Older Parents: An Investigation of Wealth Disparities and Transfers Throughout the Life Course Impacting Economic Stability in Older Age and Use of SSA Programs	Tatjana Meschede, Brandeis University and Laurie Nsiah-Jefferson, University of Massachusetts, Boston*
COVID-19 in Adults with Disabilities: Disparities in Prevalence, Health Care Access and Use of Services and Employment Outcomes	Zoë McLaren, Nancy Miller and Mir Usman Ali, University of Maryland, Baltimore County*
Beneficiary Challenges and the Role of Benefits Counselors	Sangeeta Tyagi and Marji Erickson Warfield, Brandeis University
Promoting Employment Success for Autistic Adults: A Mixed Methods Study	Joanne Nicholson and Ian Moura, Brandeis University
Examining Transportation Barriers to Work Among Disability Applicants	Jeffrey Taylor, Westat

* Denotes MSI; For full abstracts of all projects, visit the RDRC website.

What's New

OUR NEW PROJECTS

Learn about the latest round of SSA research funding.

OUR EQUITY FOCUS

Learn how our RDRC team and research topics reflect our commitment to equity principles.

FELLOWSHIP AND DISSERTATION GRANT PROGRAMS

Check in on undergraduate fellowship and dissertation studies.

SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

Take a deep dive into two of our current research projects.

Our Equity Focus

By Annaka Paradis

Our Center's mission, *Promoting Equity in Social Security Programs across the Lifespan*, focuses on ensuring fair access to and participation in retirement and disability programs for underserved communities. Equity means addressing barriers faced by marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, rural residents, and those with limited healthcare access, to name a few.

Using the *We All Count Data Equity Framework,* we prioritize community voices and structural fairness in every stage of our research—from framing questions to sharing results.

In Year 2, we're expanding our network of partners, including advocates, service providers, and program participants, to amplify diverse perspectives and inform dissemination efforts. Our research focuses on:

1. **Equity in access to Social Security Retirement and other SSA programs for under-recognized and underserved segments of society**: Examining barriers created by the intersection of personal circumstances and program policies.

2. **The intersection of health, access to healthcare, and equitable SSI/DI program participation**: Exploring challenges with healthcare access as a barrier in disability determination and employment, including Long COVID's impact.

3. **Disparities in SSI/DI program access and participation**: Using community-based approaches to understand applicants' experiences.
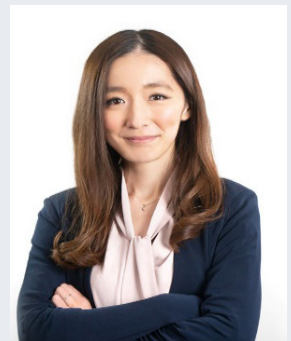
To learn more about our work and research, visit our website. Together, we're advancing equity in Social Security for all.

Fellowship and Dissertation Programs

By Nancy Miller

In 2024 seven **doctoral students** were supported with dissertation grants from the School for Public Policy at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University.

One of those students is **Masami Tabata-Kelley, MBA, MA**, a Ph.D. candidate at Brandeis University. Her study is titled "**Identifying Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Future Trajectories of Older Adults with Serious Illness Using the Future Elderly Model**."

In this study, Tabata-Kelly will use a model called the Future Elderly Model to estimate future differences in health and social needs among seriously ill older adults from different racial and ethnic groups.

Learn more about her research project, as well as other **dissertation and undergraduate research fellowships** here.

Want to keep in touch?

By Finn Teach

There are several ways that you can learn about RDRC research, and other relevant retirement and disability research news. Sign up to receive our **newsletter** quarterly by email. Or follow us on **LinkedIn**, where we post weekly.

Do you have suggestions for the next newsletter? Contact Melanie Keys at MKeys3@umbc.edu

Spotlight on Research

A deep dive into RDRC projects. Go ahead, nerd out.

Study Title: COVID-19 in adults with disabilities: Disparities in prevalence, health care access and use, and employment

Lead Researcher: Zoë McLaren, Ph.D., with colleagues Nancy Miller, Ph.D., and Mir Usman Ali, Ph.D., University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

About this Study: This study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people with disabilities, continuing long-standing health care inequities. The study aims to estimate the incidence of COVID-19 among adults with disabilities, the prevalence of post-COVID conditions, and how COVID-19 impacts health care access, use, and employment. The research will compare adults with severe disabilities, less severe disabilities, and no disabilities, considering factors like income and race.

Data and Methods: The study uses 2019-2024 data from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), a survey that collects information from U.S. households through in-person interviews. The NHIS includes questions about COVID-19 and post-COVID conditions, as well as health and disability measures.

Dr. McLaren and her colleagues will analyze the data using advanced statistical techniques. These methods will help address complex problems, such as removing biases from the data and accurately estimating population parameters.

Zoë McLaren

Dr. Zoë McLaren is a health economist who uses rigorous statistical methods, including machine learning, to develop evidence to guide health and economic policy. Dr. McLaren is known for using new data sources and creative methods to solve important health equity issues. Her work includes figuring out how poverty affects health and vice versa, estimating accurate population data despite biases, and using machine learning to produce reliable evidence to solve complex problems.

Want to learn more about RDRC projects and researchers? Visit our website here.

What's Next: Dr. McLaren and her colleagues will determine the prevalence of COVID-19 and post-COVID conditions among adults with disabilities, and examine their impact on activity limitations, health care access, and employment. The research will compare adults with severe disabilities, less severe disabilities, and no disabilities, considering factors like income and race. When the study is complete, it could help inform policies that help people with COVID-19 and post-COVID conditions get the health care and employment support they need.

Spotlight on Research

A deep dive into RDRC projects. Go ahead, nerd out.

Study Title: Barriers to mental health and substance use disorder treatment for persons with disabilities in SSA programs

Lead Researcher: Cindy Thomas, Ph.D., Institute for Behavioral Health, Heller School, Brandeis University

About this Study: This study examines how people with disabilities receive treatment for substance use disorders (SUD) and mental health disorders (MHD), focusing on whether there are differences in the quality and access to care between those covered by SSA programs and those who are not. It aims to identify barriers to high-quality treatment, such as stigma, income inequality, and accessibility issues, and how demographic factors like gender, race, and type of disability affect treatment.

Data and Methods: The study will use 2019 Medicaid data from over a dozen states, including information about eligibility and all health care claims. This data, kept at Brandeis University, will be linked with the CDC's Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) to understand different communities. Researchers will identify people with SUD and various disabilities, look at their medical and pharmacy claims, and evaluate the quality of their treatment. The study will compare the care quality for those enrolled in disability programs to those who are not, using national performance measures. The researchers will use advanced techniques to see how SSA enrollment affects treatment quality, considering different personal and clinical factors. The study will also find out what factors predict enrollment in SSA programs to identify possible barriers.

Cindy Parks Thomas

Cindy Parks Thomas, Ph.D., is a professor and the Associate Dean for Research at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management. She focuses on health reform, pharmacy policy, insurance benefits, and addiction medicine. Dr. Thomas studies healthcare access, how people use health services, and healthcare spending. She also looks at state coverage programs, Medicaid, Social Security, and new medicines. In behavioral health, she researches new treatments for substance use disorders and develops quality measures. Her work has been published in top journals like JAMA and the New England Journal of Medicine.

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Preliminary Results: Data from over 20 states shows that people with physical or developmental disabilities and SUD often don't get SSI benefits from Social Security. The amount of benefits they get can be very different depending on the state they live in.

What's Next: Dr. Thomas will investigate possible reasons why some people get different amounts of SSI benefits. She will look at patient characteristics of (such as a demographic characteristics or health status) and system characteristics (such as access to care or quality of care). The results will not fully explain why some people get more or less benefits, but they will uncover any associations (relationship patters) between factors and benefits. The team is especially interested in whether the quality of SUD care for people on Medicaid is different whether or not they get SSI benefits.