Envisioning Healthier Communities Through the Eyes of Mothers

Health Equity

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There's no better day than National Rural Health Day to announce PolicyLab's newest project: "Understanding the Role of Place in Health and Well-being for Rural Families – a Photovoice Project by Moms," our first rural-specific research project, which will be focused on social determinants of health for mothers and young children in rural Pennsylvania.

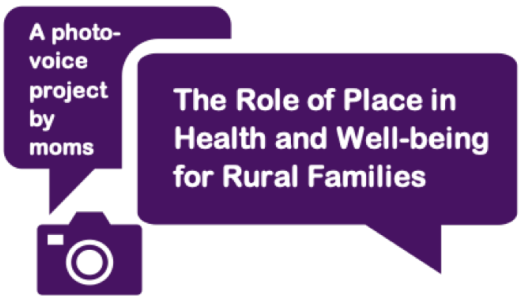
Investing in Rural Health

Research shows that infants born in rural areas, rather than cities or suburbs, are less likely to celebrate their first birthday. This inequity isn't rooted in individual risk behaviors or health care system factors, but in broad community socioeconomic disadvantage. Decreasing infant mortality in rural places requires rural-relevant policies and widespread structural investments in rural communities. **This project aims to understand and envision what those investments and policies could look like, at the local government level, through the eyes of mothers**. The experiences and ideas of mothers living in rural communities are central to re-imagining how local governments could better support the health of rural families.

Our interdisciplinary approach incorporates public health, regional planning, and local policymaking because research shows that local government investments in non-health care services, like transportation, public housing, environment and public safety, lower the risk of infant mortality.

Image-based Qualitative Methods

The project incorporates photo voice and story mapping, two community-based research methods that activate participants as researchers themselves, taking photos, mapping the images and narrating the meaning behind their perspective. Image-based methods can reveal more nuanced views about community conditions and causes of those conditions. These qualitative methods are useful in generating everyday conversations about place-specific conditions sometimes overlooked by policymakers. And, photos are often powerful tools for mobilizing social action. We plan to share images and interviews from the project online via a storymap of rural Pennsylvania that provides a public platform for participants to share stories about their communities.



Building Our Rural Portfolio

As we embark on a new project in rural maternal and child health, we are building on our previous research and longstanding statewide community partnerships, some of which have included rural communities. Our evaluation of Pennsylvania's home visiting programs highlighted how home visitors in rural communities were adapting to better support rural families. We used this research to support our response to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' request for information on improving access to maternal health care in rural communities. Furthermore, our new Pennsylvania Family Support Needs Assessment provides a statewide view of present conditions for families, serving as a foundation for projects like this one focusing on rural communities.

Policies and strategies to improve maternal and child health are more effective when informed by mothers with place-specific knowledge about their experiences. We are excited to launch this new project using participatory arts-based methods that provide an engagement platform for rural low-income mothers to share their experiences and advocate for the changes they want to see in their communities.

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