

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.

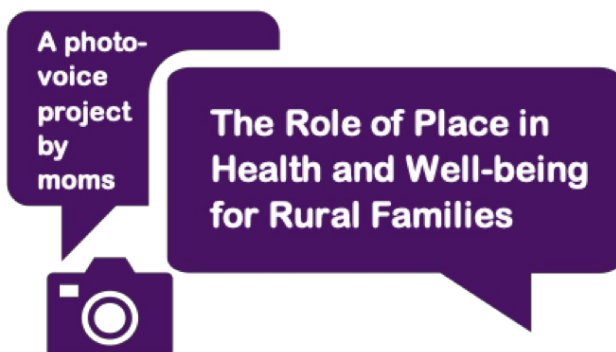
Investing in Rural Health

[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.



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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