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Writing about Population Research for Non-Scientists

Shannon M. Monnat

Population Reference Bureau
03/06/24



Why Write Research and Policy Briefs?

- It's fun!
- To break down barriers between academics and the public.
- Your dean, department, research center, parent, partner, etc. can use it to show off your work.
- Get timely findings out quickly.
- It can get your research into the hands of unexpected audiences and launch unexpected opportunities.
- IMPACT! It may be your best shot at someone paying attention to and using your hard work.

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RESEARCH BRIEF #108 January 23, 2024

Why is Food Insecurity High among U.S. Grandparents who are Caring for Grandchildren?

Madonna Harrington Meyer and Anna Delapaz

KEY FINDINGS

- Grandparents caring for grandchildren face numerous challenges with food security.
- Having low income, poor transportation, poor health and mobility increase the challenges of caring for grandchildren.
- Reinstating pandemic-era benefits for food assistance programs, improving access to healthy food would help many grandchildren nutritious meals.

A surprising number of grandparents who care for grandchildren experience food insecurity. Food insecurity ranges from worry about lack of food. Generally, the more care grandparents provide for their grandchildren, the more likely they are to be food insecure. One study found that 14% of grandparents providing care for their grandchildren reported food insecurity, a 4% increase from 10% in 2011. The United States must do more to address food insecurity, including providing fresh foods, and poor health and mobility.

This brief draws on the research project, *Food Insecurity among Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren*, by Colleen Hefflin and Madonna Harrington Meyer and Anna Delapaz, interviews conducted in 2021 with a sample of 60 and older who are below 130% of the federal poverty line.

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POLICY BRIEF #9 January 10, 2024

Waiving SNAP Interviews during the COVID-19 Pandemic Increased SNAP Caseloads

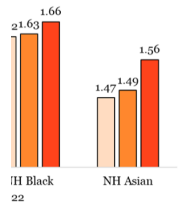
Colleen Hefflin, William Clay Fannin, Leonard Lopoo, and Siobhan O'Keefe

Food insecurity in the United States reached historically high rates during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, household demand for assistance provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increased substantially.¹ To facilitate access to SNAP during a global pandemic and the coincident economic crisis, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) granted state SNAP offices the option to waive the interview requirement - a potential administrative burden associated with the SNAP certification process. Local SNAP agencies could choose whether to adopt the interview waiver in states that administer SNAP at the county level.

This brief summarizes findings from a [recent study](#)² that used data from SNAP offices across 10 U.S. states that administer SNAP at the county-level to examine the impact of SNAP interview waivers on SNAP caseloads from January 5th to April 30th of 2021. We also investigated what factors were associated with county adoption of SNAP interview waivers, including county economic conditions, the demographic composition of the county population, the level of COVID-19 outbreak, and the county's partisan climate. Our analysis did not show clear support that any of these factors were systematically related to the adoption of SNAP interview waivers at the county level.

KEY FINDINGS

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government allowed local SNAP agencies to waive certification interviews to reduce the administrative burden associated with the SNAP certification process.
- Only 27% of county-level SNAP agencies chose to implement the interview waiver.
- Counties that implemented the SNAP interview waiver experienced an estimated 5% increase in SNAP caseloads compared to counties that did not.
- State and county SNAP offices should opt into SNAP enrollment waivers when provided during economic downturn.



Anxiety and Ethnicity, U.S., 2020-2022
Anxiety levels are measured on a scale of 0 to 100, and represent the mean score for each group. Higher scores represent higher anxiety. Averages are unweighted.
¹ Sociology PhD student in the Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs.

Nearly 75% of Local SNAP Offices Chose not to Implement Interview Waivers

We found a high level of local discretion in implementing the SNAP certification interview waiver. Only 27% of our sample county SNAP offices chose to implement the waiver. Most local SNAP agencies may have chosen not to implement the waiver because SNAP interviews are almost always conducted by telephone and therefore did not directly contribute to COVID-19 transmission.

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DATA SLICE #63 January 16, 2024

Asian Americans Have Relatively Low Anxiety but Experienced Large Increases in Anxiety between 2020 and 2022

Tianqi Zhou

Anxiety has harmful effects on physical health. People with chronic anxiety are at an **increased risk** of developing nervous, cardiovascular, digestive, immune, and respiratory system disorders. Asian adults in the United States have lower average anxiety levels than other ethnoracial groups. The mean anxiety levels in 2020 were 1.47 among Asian American adults ages 18+, compared with 1.60 among Hispanic adults, 1.60 among non-Hispanic (NH) White adults, and 1.62 among NH Black adults. However, Asian American adults experienced a notable increase in average anxiety levels between 2020 and 2022. Although their anxiety levels were still relatively low compared to other ethnoracial groups, the increase among NH Asian adults was statistically significant (p < .05). This increase in anxiety may be due to anti-Asian attacks and stigma during the pandemic, as well as the loss of community-based mental health services post-pandemic era.

Purposes of and Audiences for Research and Policy Briefs

- Translate and disseminate research findings in a publicly accessible and easily digestible format to help increase knowledge or prompt some type of action.
 - Enhance knowledge
 - Raise awareness
 - Change hearts and minds
 - Change behaviors
 - Influence policy debates
- Audiences
 - Policymakers
 - Practitioners
 - Reporters
 - Students
 - Uncle Bob (i.e., the general public)

Brief Structure - punchy, flashy, and simple

- Summarize the big-picture takeaway finding(s)
- Usually 2-4 pages
- Include short introduction of problem, 1-2 main research findings/visualizations, and implications for policy or practice

 Syracuse University Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs Center for Policy Research	POLICY BRIEF # DATE
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Title
Author(s)

First Paragraph: Your introduction (one paragraph) should grab the reader's attention by introducing the problem and explaining why it requires action. Why do you want people to pay attention to this issue? It should be concise and quickly get the reader interested in the problem. The first paragraph should answer the question: Why should my reader care about this? What is its connection to their everyday lives? This is the "hook."

Second paragraph: Briefly explain what you do in this brief. For example: "This brief uses data from X, Y, Z to examine, identify, describe blah blah blah." (do not go into detail about data and methods). USE 8 PT SPACING BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS AND SECTIONS.

Research Findings Catchy Heading 1

Describe your first main research finding and conjecture about explanations for your findings. Use catchy headings to separate discussion of main findings, if applicable. If you are presenting quantitative research, include reader-friendly tables and figures to illustrate your findings. If you are presenting qualitative research, supplement your findings with respondents' quotes.

Figures must use Sherman Sans font style and the SU color palette (available on page 23 of the SU brand guidelines: https://www.syracuse.edu/assets/documents/syracuse-university-brand-guidelines_07-29-202116-15-33.pdf). Be sure that your font size is large enough for a reader to see without squinting. 14 point is typically the minimum size.

KEY FINDINGS	
	Description of key finding (expand boxes downward as needed)
	Description of key finding
	Description of key finding
	Key implication stemming from findings

Research Findings Catchy Heading 2

Describe your second main research finding and conjecture about explanations for your findings.

Recommendations for Policy and/or Practice

Heading changes are recommended. Be provocative! Policy and practice recommendations should be short statements, stated clearly using action verbs. When writing recommendations, be realistic (What can policies reasonably accomplish?) The recommendations should follow logically from the findings presented in the sections above.

Data and Methods

Provide a brief, non-technical description of your data source and methods. 2-3 sentences are usually sufficient. Direct readers to the published paper for more methods detail.

References

Use numbers for references in text and in the reference list. References should be in APA style: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/general_format.html except that we do not include *doi*. Do not use reference management software (e.g., Zotero, Endnotes) because it makes it harder for us to make edits. Do not use the endnote or footnote function in Word. If you reference the same article more than once, use the original number assigned the first time you used the reference. Use RBG 247, 105, 0 for all [hyperlinks](#)

Acknowledgements

Note anyone who reviewed and/or helped you edit the brief. This includes Lerner Center staff. Acknowledge any funders.

Recommended Citation

Last Name, First Name. (Year). Brief title. Center for Policy Research. Policy Brief #. Accessed at: LINK. **CPR staff will complete this once the brief is finalized and ready for publication.**

About the Author(s)

Include one sentence with your position title, affiliation, and email address. Example: **Shannon Monnat** (gmonnat@svr.edu) is the Lerner Chair for Public Health Promotion, Director of the Center for Policy Research, and Professor of Sociology in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University (SU).


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RESEARCH BRIEF #104

June 6, 2023

Democratic Erosion Predicts Rising Deaths from Drug Poisoning and Infectious Disease

Jennifer Karas Montez, Kent Jason Cheng, and Jacob M. Grumbach

KEY FINDINGS

- Democratic erosion (particularly erosion in free and fair elections) in a U.S. state predicts rising deaths among adults 25-64 years.
- Democratic erosion most strongly predicts rising deaths from drug poisoning and infectious disease. It also predicts deaths from suicide and homicide.
- Strengthening democracy in all states may save thousands of lives each year.

Strong democratic functioning benefits population health.¹ International studies assert that strong democracies benefit population health by investing in peoples' education and economic wellbeing, reducing inequality, providing stability, reducing violent crime, fostering social cohesion, and more. In recent decades, democratic functioning has eroded in many U.S. states.² The erosion was pronounced for one aspect of democratic functioning—electoral democracy, which refers to free and fair elections.² Examples of erosion in free and fair elections include partisan gerrymandering, voter disenfranchisement, and weak campaign finance laws. Figure 1 shows how electoral democracy slowly (e.g., OK) or abruptly (e.g., NC) eroded in some states, fluctuated in others (e.g., MI), increased in some (e.g., AZ), or changed little (e.g., IA). The striking erosion of electoral democracy in some states may have contributed to the high and rising death rates among working-age adults.

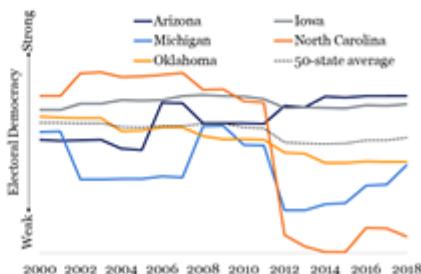


Figure 1. Trends in Electoral Democracy
 Data Source: Grumbach.²

This brief summarizes findings from our [study](#)³ examining how changes in electoral democracy in the 50 states predicted changes in the risk of death among adults ages 25-64 during 2000-2019. It used a measure of electoral democracy called the State Democracy Index.² It used vital statistics data on deaths from all causes and from heart disease, cancer, suicide, homicide, drug poisoning, and infectious disease.

Strengthening Electoral Democracy Can Save Lives

If a state were to strengthen its electoral democracy from a moderate level to high level, our study estimated that, within the next year, men's all-cause mortality would be 2.0% lower, as shown in Figure 2. If a state strengthened its electoral democracy from a moderate to very high level, men's all-cause mortality would be an estimated 3.2% lower. These differences are statistically significant. The benefit of strengthening democracy was mainly in reduced drug poisoning and infectious disease deaths. If a state strengthened its electoral democracy from a moderate level to a very high level, deaths from these causes may decline by an estimated 13%. Electoral democracy was also an important predictor of women's mortality, especially for drug poisoning and infectious disease, but also for suicide and homicide (see [published paper](#)).

If all states strengthened their electoral democracy from a moderate to very high level, over 20,000 working-age deaths could potentially be averted each year. To put this in perspective, 20,410 working-age adults died from cerebrovascular disease (i.e., stroke) in 2019.

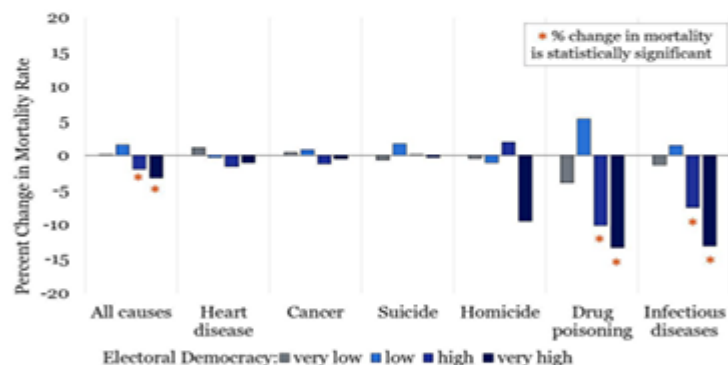


Figure 2: Change in Men's Mortality Rate One Year After their State's Electoral Democracy Changed from a Moderate Level to a Very Low, Low, High, or Very High Level, 2000-2019

Data Source: See [Montez, Cheng, and Grumbach](#).³

Our also study examined three ways that US states' electoral democracy may affect mortality—economic conditions, social conditions, and health behaviors. The most important explanation was social conditions. Specifically, democratic erosion predicted higher violent crime and incarceration rates which, in turn, predicted higher mortality.

State and Federal Laws Must Ensure Free and Fair Elections

In 2021, the Brennan Center for Justice warned that free and fair elections increasingly depend on which state a person lives and that this divergence will continue unless Congress acts.⁵ That same year, more than 150 scholars of U.S. democracy signed a document imploring Congress to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and, if necessary, suspend the Senate filibuster so that a simple majority would be necessary to pass it.⁶ The signatories warned that failure to pass it would “undermine the minimum condition for electoral democracy—free and fair elections—[and] have grave consequences not only for our democracy, but for political order, economic prosperity, and the national security of the United States as well.” To this list of grave consequences, our study adds premature death. Both state and federal efforts—such as banning partisan gerrymandering, improving voter enfranchisement, and reforming campaign finance laws—to restore and improve electoral democracy are urgently needed.

Data and Methods

Annual data on deaths by state from 2000-2019 are from the National Center for Health Statistics. Annual measures of electoral democracy by state from 2000-2018 are from the State Democracy Index (SDI). Our analyses predicted states' death rates from their SDI, controlling for annual measures of states' political party control, safety net policy generosity, union coverage, and the size of immigrant population, as well as stable differences between states.

References

1. Bolyky T.J., Templin, T., Cohen, M., Schoder, D., Dieleman, J.L., & Wigley, S. (2019). The relationships between democratic experience, adult health, and cause-specific mortality in 170 countries between 1980 and 2016: an observational analysis. *The Lancet*, 393:1628–1640.
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Acknowledgements

This project was supported by research grant R01AG055481 from the National Institute on Aging (NIA). The authors also acknowledge the services and support of the Center for Aging and Policy Studies at Syracuse University, funded by Center Grant P30AG066583 from the NIA. The content of the published study is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the views of the NIA.

Recommended Citation

Montez, J.K., Cheng, K.J., & Grumbach, J.M. (2023). Democratic Erosion Predicts Rising Deaths from Drug Poisoning and Infectious Disease. *Lerner Center Population Health Research Brief Series*. 227. <https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/227>

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**Children in Economically Disadvantaged
Households Have Lower Early Literacy
Skills than their Higher-Income Peers**

POLICY BRIEF #1
MARCH 22, 2023




Michah W. Rothbart, Colleen Heflin, and Gabriella Alphonso

Literacy is critical for numerous developmental outcomes and wellbeing among children, including academic performance, likelihood of graduating, behavioral problems, self-esteem, and health.^{1,2} Children entering kindergarten with high literacy skills are more likely to stay on track in school and perform well.^{3,4} Low literacy skills in childhood can also affect individuals into adulthood, with illiteracy connected to higher probabilities of unemployment and low-paying jobs, incarceration, and negative health outcomes.

Early literacy skills, including initial reading skills and decoding (i.e., matching sounds to letters and active efforts to understand printed works), are lower among children raised in low-income households.^{5,6} Because only low-income households are eligible for federal social income support programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL), participating in them can be used as an indicator of children's household economic status. However, the relationship between children's participation in these programs and their literacy skills when entering kindergarten had been unexplored until our research.

This brief summarizes findings from our recent paper published in [Children and Youth Services Review](#).⁷ We used administrative data on kindergarten cohorts entering Virginia public schools, including information on Phonological

KEY FINDINGS

	Children in households participating in more than one social assistance program, (including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], and Free or Reduced-Price Lunch [FRPL]) have lower literacy skills when they enter kindergarten than children in households participating in fewer or no programs.
	Literacy skills are highest among kindergartners that do not receive any of the social supports studied, followed by those eligible for school meals but that do not participate in the others, then those whose households participate in SNAP (but not TANF), and finally those whose households participate in TANF.
	Our findings suggest that federal and state governments need to provide more supports for TANF and SNAP households in early childhood to improve literacy skills for children with the greatest needs.

Awareness Literacy Screening for Kindergarten (PALS-K) performance, child race/ethnicity and gender, certified FRPL eligibility, and household TANF and SNAP participation to examine relationships between participating in these three cash and food assistance programs and literacy skills in kindergarten.

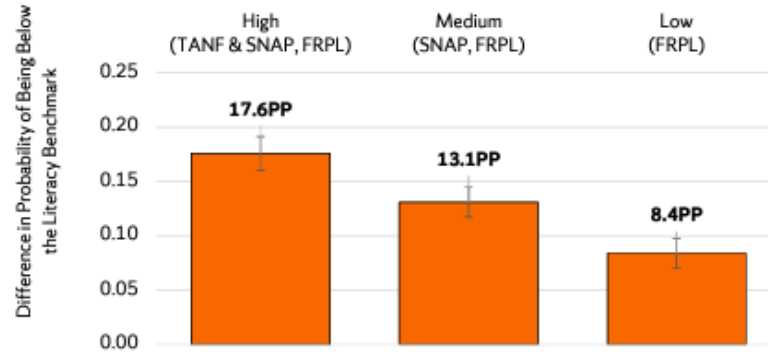


Figure 1: Children Participating in Multiple Social Programs are More Likely to Score Below the PALS-K Benchmark in the Fall of Kindergarten
Data Source: Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Department of Social Services Administrative Data, 2014-2017 (N = 296,433 first-time kindergarten students)
Note: PP=percentage points.

Children Who Participate in Social Programs Have Lower Literacy Skills than Those Who Do Not

Children participating in all three social support programs are more likely to perform below the benchmark literacy levels for kindergarten - by 17.6 percentage points (PP) - than their peers not participating in any of the programs (see Figure 1). Children participating in all three programs are also more likely to perform below the benchmark literacy level than those participating in only one program. Additionally, those participating in even one social program have a higher probability of performing below the benchmark literacy level than those who do not participate in any program.

These differences in literacy skills may reflect differences in economic burdens among households participating in social programs. Other notable differences that may impact literacy skills include the level of parental education, the number of adults in the

household, and the neighborhoods in which children live.⁸⁻⁹ However, our strategy of comparing students enrolled in the same kindergarten likely controls for some of these influences.

Addressing Economic Disadvantage Among Children is Critical for Improving Early Childhood Literacy

The literacy gaps we observed between children whose households participate in three federal social programs (SNAP, TANF, and FRPL) may reflect economic vulnerability in social program participating households. It has long been known that children from low-income households have lower literacy skills than those from more advantaged households. This disparity demonstrates a need to provide greater financial and educational supports for families participating in TANF and SNAP. While expanding the scope of social programs to include academic supports may address differences in early literacy skill development,

such interventions can be expensive. Therefore, targeting children who are most likely to have the greatest need is essential.

Data and Methods

Our sample included 296,433 first time kindergarten students attending 1,044 public schools in 135 districts in Virginia between 2014 and 2017. We used data on children's phonological awareness (i.e., matching sounds to letters and active efforts to understand printed works) and literacy scores in the fall of kindergarten in Virginia PALS-K. We also used data on eligibility or participation in cash and food assistance programs. We estimated patterns of literacy skills by program participation. Further details on our methods can be found in the [published study](#).⁷

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Acknowledgements

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Recommended Citation

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Example of Academic vs. Public Language

Academic Paper

- “This study investigates how the recent emergence of state preemption laws that remove local authority to raise the minimum wage has affected infant mortality rates. Using county- and state-level data spanning 2001 through 2018, this study models infant mortality rates as a function of minimum wage levels, controlling for confounders. The estimated model, combined with information on the timing, location, and level of preempted minimum wages, is then used to estimate the number of infant deaths that occurred in 2018 that could be attributed to state preemption of local minimum wage increases.”

Wolf, Monnat, & Montez. 2021. “Effects of U.S. State Preemption Laws on Infant Mortality.” *Preventive Medicine* 145.

Research Brief

- “This brief summarizes the findings from our recent study that examined how many infant lives would have been saved if states had not prevented cities and counties from raising their minimum wage.”

Wolf, Monnat, and Montez. 2021. “Allowing Cities to Raise the Minimum Wage Could Prevent Hundreds of Infant Deaths Annually.”

<https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/112/>

Example of Academic vs. Public Presentation of Findings

Academic Presentation of Findings

Table 3. Effect of Minimum Wage Preemption on Infant Mortality in 541 Large Metro Counties.

Counterfactual minimum wage	Baseline IMR	Counterfactual IMR	% reduction in IMR	Infant deaths attributable to preemption
\$8.75	6.1	5.8	4.2	393
\$9.99	6.1	5.7	6.4	605
\$10.60	6.1	5.6	7.5	708
\$11.70	6.1	5.5	9.4	892
\$12.80	6.1	5.4	11.4	1071
\$13.90	6.1	5.3	13.2	1247
\$15.00	6.1	5.2	15.0	1419

Wolf, Monnat, & Montez. 2021. “Effects of U.S. State Preemption Laws on Infant Mortality.” *Preventive Medicine* 145.

Public Presentation of Findings

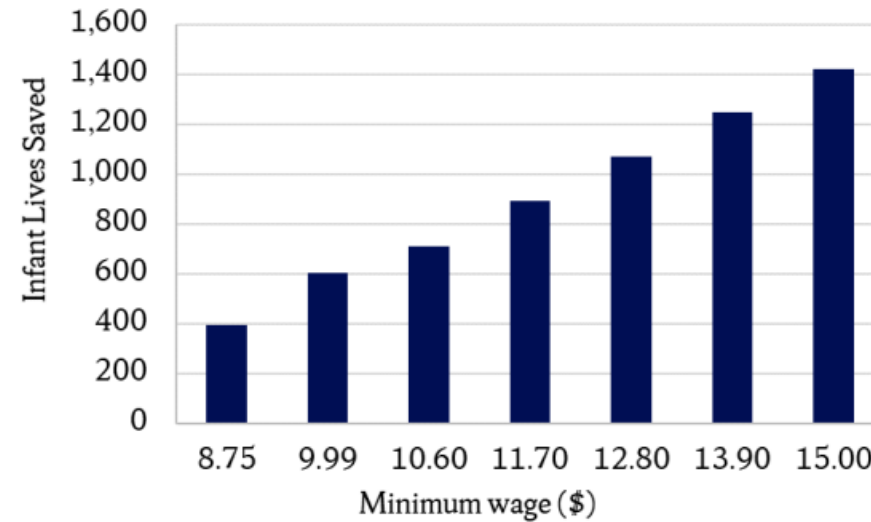


Figure 1. Infant Lives Saved Each Year if States Allowed Counties and Cities to Raise Minimum Wage to \$8.75 or More

Wolf, Monnat, and Montez. 2021. “Allowing Cities to Raise the Minimum Wage Could Prevent Hundreds of Infant Deaths Annually.”

<https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/112/>

Example of Academic vs. Public Presentation of Findings

Academic Presentation of Findings

Table 3. Logistic regression analysis of major depressive episode (MDE) by current parental and sibling military service status among 12–17 year old adolescents, pooled data from the 2016–2019 National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) (N = 48,211).

PANEL A: LIFETIME MDE										
	N ¹	%	[95% CI]	p	OR ²	[95% CI]	p	OR ³	[95% CI]	p
	MDE = 1									
Parent Currently in the Military										
Yes	391	20.6	[18.0–23.5]		1.10	[0.91–1.32]		1.11	[0.92–1.35]	
No	9340	19.9	[19.3–20.5]		–			–		
Sibling Currently in the Military										
Yes	521	24.8	[22.8–26.9]	***	1.36	[1.19–1.54]	***	1.36	[1.19–1.55]	***
No	9210	19.7	[19.1–20.3]		–			–		

London, Andrew S. (2021). “Depression and mental health service use among 12-17 year old U.S. adolescents: Associations with current parental and sibling military service.” SSM-Population Health 16: e1-e8..

Public Presentation of Findings

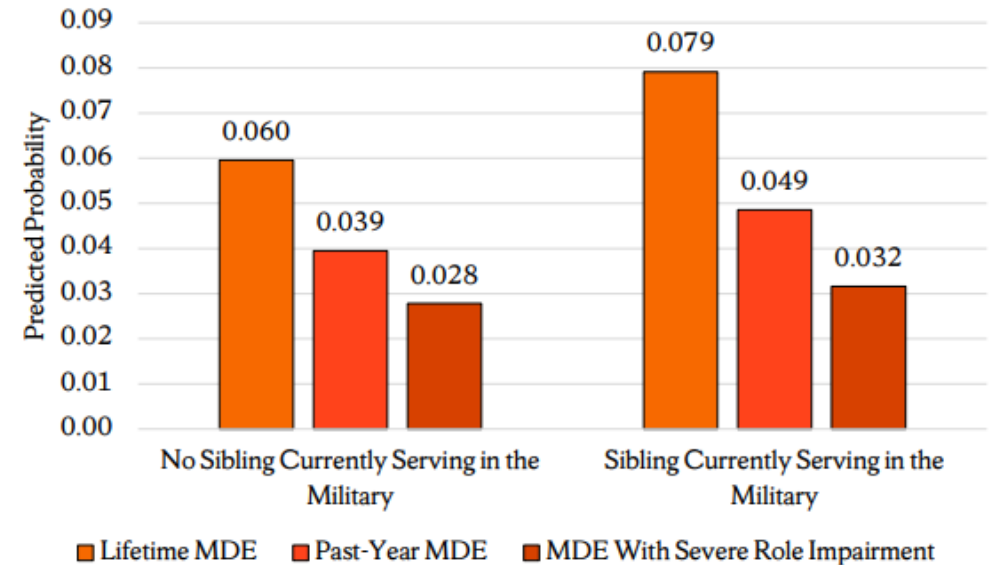


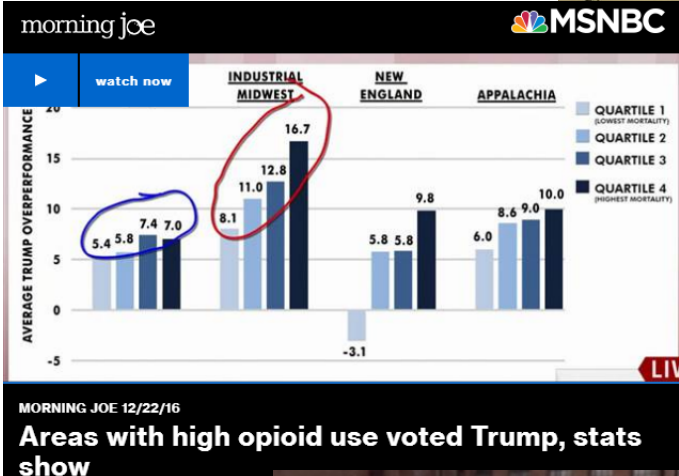
Figure 1: Predicted Probabilities of Lifetime Major Depressive Episode (MDE), Past-Year MDE, and Past-Year MDE with Severe Role Impairment among U.S. Adolescents (ages 12-17) by Older Sibling’s Current Military Service Status.

London, Andrew S. 2021. “How are Parental and Sibling Military Service Related to Adolescent Depression and Mental Health Service Use?”

<https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/157/>

Successes

- Media attention: NPR, CBS News, NBC News, New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, AP News, Forbes, National Geographic, Business Insider, and more
- Attention from policymakers
- Unexpected invitations and benefits



Successes

Forbes

Thinking Of Not Wearing A Motorcycle Helmet? Think Again

Tanya Mohn Contributor

That is the take-a-way of a [new study](#) released earlier this month in advance of Memorial Day weekend and the summer motorcycle season by the [Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion](#) at Syracuse University's [Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs](#).

NEWS

Covid-19 narrows long-standing Latino mortality advantage, study finds

Covid-19 killed Latinos ages 65 or older at 2.1 times the rate of whites in 2020.

Having killed [more than 1 million people](#) in the U.S., the coronavirus reshaped the nation's mortality patterns and the long-standing Latino mortality advantage, particularly among older Latinos, according to new [research](#) published Thursday by the [Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion](#) at Syracuse University.

The New York Times

'They Go to Mommy First'

How the pandemic is disproportionately disrupting mothers' careers.

A [Syracuse University research brief](#) examined data from the Census Household Pulse survey, conducted in late April and early May, and found that over 80 percent of U.S. adults who weren't working because they had to care for their children who were not in school or day care were women.

The World

WAER88.3

SU Lerner Center: Child Poverty Rates in Single-Mother Families Are Falling, But Gap Remains

WAER | By [Katie Zilcosky](#)
Published February 4, 2020 at 5:28 PM EST



But a research brief from Xiaoyan Zhang at the [Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion](#) in Syracuse shows that single mother family child poverty has been declining since 2014. Zhang used census data to plot and examine this trend as a part of her broader research in social determinants of health.