

DATA RESEARCH: Generating opportunities for



Jim Lytle

SSRC research scientists, L-R, Steven Grice, Michael Taquino, Domenico Parisi and Duane Gill.

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ARTHUR COSBY, SSRC DIRECTOR

Statistical data probably don't mean a lot to a single mother struggling to raise two children in the Mississippi Delta on the income from a minimum wage job. Analysis of statistical data by scientists at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center may, however, help her obtain the healthcare and other services her children need, or even a better paying job.

The data—including the number and type of jobs available in specific locations, workforce information, availability of healthcare and childcare services—are being collected as part of the effort to reduce the dependence on welfare in some of Mississippi's poorest communities. The work is supported by MAFES and through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Research Initiative to study welfare-related data in the Southeast.

“In 1996, Congress replaced previous welfare legislation with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF,” said SSRC research scientist and project coprincipal investigator Domenico Parisi. “TANF provides monthly cash assistance to poor families with children under age 18, but there is a five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance.”

The goal of TANF is to move families from welfare to work, but in some areas, including much of the Mississippi Delta, finding employment providing enough income to support a family can be difficult.

“The state is doing a good job of trying to overcome the barriers TANF recipients face in finding employment within the four-year time limit and in accessing healthcare and other services,” Parisi said. “What we're doing is providing information that will help various state agencies make better use of resources available to their clients.”

In addition to Parisi, the project team includes SSRC research scientists Duane A. Gill, Steven M. Grice and Michael Taquino. Much of the raw data they work with are obtained with the assistance of Mississippi Department of Human Services data manager Chris Christmas. The research team also includes personnel at MSU's Southern Rural Development Center under the leadership of director Lionel J. Beaulieu and Penn State University associate professor of rural sociology and demography Diane McLaughlin, who serves as coprincipal investigator.

The goal of the project, Gill said, is to bring together information currently available, but scattered through a multitude of agencies.

“Various agencies collect data on land use, the workforce and other economic and human resource characteristics of communities, counties, and the state,” he said. “By collecting and putting this information into a useable form, we can help communities better serve their residents.”

The scientists began their work in 1999 by interviewing 1,500 community leaders across the state about what they need to promote economic development.

The SSRC data collection effort also has led to working relationships with the Mississippi Development Authority, the Mississippi Department of Human Services, the Mississippi Department of Health and North Mississippi Health Services.

The Mississippi Development Authority is using information generated by the SSRC project to help attract businesses to locations in the state with available workers who match their needs, according to deputy director Wanda Land.

Mississippians

“The data provided by the SSRC is helping us create a unified system to recruit businesses to the state,” she said. “This is especially helpful with our mission of assisting laid-off workers to find new employment because we’re getting information on where there are pockets of skilled or trainable workers.”

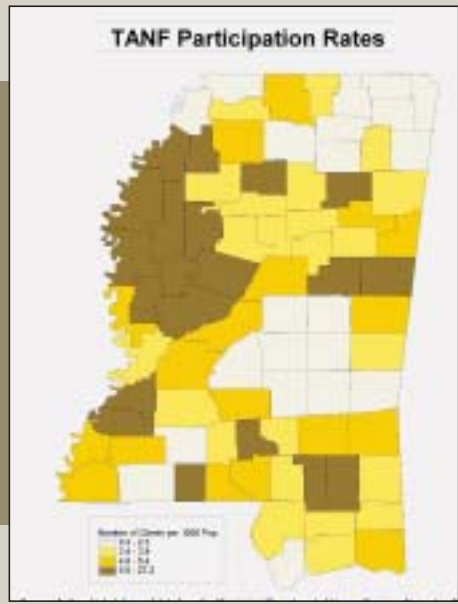
The researchers are building a statewide community database that will be available via the Internet. The information will include population figures and employment data, as well as the availability and location of healthcare and other social services.

Once the database is online, it will be available to the public and can help individuals with locating employment opportunities or social services, as well as mayors and other local leaders in planning programs for their communities.

“We don’t limit our study to political boundaries, such as county lines,” Gill said. “This allows us to use geographic information systems to produce maps and other information that helps all the communities in an area recognize that they have common social and environmental interests.”

The project is the first of its type at the statewide level, and as such is receiving national attention.

“What we’re learning here in Mississippi about collecting and making available social and environmental information will likely become the model for other states,” Parisi said.



For more than half a century, scientists at MSU’s Social Science Research Center have conducted research on social, economic, political, human resource and social-environmental problems facing the state, nation, and world.

Support from MAFES is helping the center target ways Mississippi communities can better provide services and environmental quality to their citizens.

SSRC research units receiving MAFES support include the Survey Research Laboratory, the Monitor Laboratory, the Evaluation and Decision Support Laboratory, the Family and Children Research Unit and the Unit for Community and Environmental Research.

“Although each has a specific research agenda, they all work toward improving the quality of life in Mississippi,” said SSRC Director Arthur Cosby.



Marco Nitovich