

# SOCIAL RESEARCH: Taking university expertise to the people



Jim Lytle

Linda Southward and Dr. David Curtis, president of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, prepare materials for use in an oral health assessment of preschool children in the Delta.

**D**etermining the needs of Mississippians and the resources available to meet those needs is important in establishing MAFES research goals. Scientists at MSU's Social Science Research Center (SSRC) help provide the necessary data for MAFES social research, as well as the infrastructure for conducting projects with social impact.

A current MAFES-supported project at the SSRC is a study of how communities in the upstream and downstream watersheds of the Upper Pearl River Basin can cooperate in water resource management.

SSRC research scientists conducting the study include Domenico Parisi, Michael Taquino, Steven M. Grice and Duane A. Gill.

The SSRC research team has developed an innovative technique that maps the functional boundaries of Mississippi communities using geographic information systems (GIS). Having the entire watershed and communities mapped together helps determine the land use and other characteristics of the area. It also helps show how the use of water resources in one community of the watershed impacts other communities that share the same river basin.

As part of their research, SSRC scientists also collect data from many state and local agencies. To meet their reporting needs, various agencies collect data on land use, the workforce and other economic and human resource characteristics of communities, counties and the state. By

bringing together all of this information, the SSRC scientists can paint a much better picture of how communities can better serve their residents.

MAFES support is helping SSRC researchers to use their data collection skills to help individual communities implement welfare reform by providing detailed information that will allow communities to tailor welfare-to-work programs to meet the needs of their low-income citizens.

Other MAFES supported projects at the SSRC are focused on ways to improve health care, especially among children, in rural areas of the state.

## *Getting kids off to a healthy start*

Approximately 30 percent of Mississippians are 18 or younger, and that segment of the rural population faces some unique health problems, including those related to obesity, oral health care, child poverty, tobacco use, and behavioral disorders.

MAFES researchers with the Family and Children Research Unit at the SSRC study child health care practices that can help improve health now and in the future.

A two-year grant from the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality is providing support to improve children's oral health care in low-income areas of the Delta.

In this project, MAFES social scientist Linda Southward is leading an impressive group of health researchers that includes scientists from the Center for Child Health Research of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Department of Diagnostic Sciences at the University of Mississippi Medical Center's School of Dentistry, Columbia University School of Dentistry and Oral Surgery and the Children's Dental Health Project in Washington, D.C.

The grant is helping create a research network of child care centers to conduct oral health assessments of preschool children in the Delta.

### ***Survey Research Unit celebrates 21 years of service to scientists***

In 2003, the SSRC's Survey Research Unit (SRU) entered its 21st year of performing surveys to help scientists achieve their research goals.

During the past two decades, the technology may have changed, but the unit's commitment to service in support of research has not, according to Wolfgang Frese, a research fellow and coordinator of the SRU.

"When I arrived at Mississippi State, scientists at the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station were doing survey research in rural sociology by interviewing farmers and rural residents in several counties throughout the state in order to get a 'representative' sample," he said. "Individual scientists were collecting survey data every three or four years. This meant that each researcher had to start the data collection procedure from scratch."

The SRU arose from the need for a central survey facility for scientists—a service that scientists could "hire" and use in the data collection process. Today, interviewers use computerized telephone systems to record data instead of pencils and paper, but the tradition of serving scientists continues.

The surveys conducted by the SRU are numerous and varied. The unit generally conducts at least 15 phone surveys a year, and has, to date, performed almost 200 surveys. The technology has evolved greatly over the years, and what began as a seven-person, pencil-and-paper operation is now a 20-person computerized data collection system. Having access to these facilities has allowed researchers to explore a number of different areas. The SRU performs some surveys on a routine basis to evaluate changes among Mississippians and the nation in areas such as traffic safety, timberland expenditures, health practices and vocational rehabilitation consumer satisfaction.

About half of the surveys conducted by the SRU are for MAFES scientists and related to agriculture or rural development.

When discussing the benefits of having an SSRC facility dedicated exclusively to the purpose of surveying, Frese emphasized the spirit of service that pervades the SSRC. "We support other scientists in getting their research done," he said.



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Telephone surveys put the SSRC's Survey Research Unit in touch with hundreds of Mississippians each year.



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