W5001 Annual Report – Year Four (2025 – 2026)
Accomplishments

PRESENTATIONS
In the second year of W5001, over 70 in-person and virtual presentations were made to fellow researchers at annual meetings of professional associations, university seminars, and other research conferences, including the Rural Sociological Society, the American Sociological Association, the Population Association of America, the American Association of Geographers, the American Public Health Association, Association for Policy Analysis and Management, the International Association for Society and Natural Resources, and the Gerontological Society of America, among a number of other smaller regional conferences and meetings.

POLICY OUTREACH
Members consulted at the highest levels of federal policy as members of, or consultants for: the National Academy of Sciences Center for Health, People, and Places; USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, the Association of Population Centers; the Government and Public Affairs Committee of the Population Association of America; and AARP, among others.

Members conducted briefings, workshops and consultations to state and federal policymakers, extension officials, community organizations, and other stakeholder groups, including: the Federal Reserve Banks; Brookings-AEI Commission on Rural Prosperity; National Institutes of Health-Health Disparities Interest Group; the Rural Sociological Society; Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs; Utah State University Extension; Box Elder Summit; Planning for Growth while Preserving Community; Wisconsin Ideas Conference; University of New Hampshire Agricultural Extension Service; Iowa Farm Bureau; Merck Animal Health; Iowa Supreme Court; Iowa Department of Public Safety; Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation; among others. In addition to in-person or virtual briefings, members also prepared and published 18 policy briefs and reports.

MEDIA OUTREACH
Members communicated research findings to the public with over 42 interviews and Op-eds through many media outlets, including in the New York Times, Boston Globe, The Conversation, Washington Post, Des Moines Register, KCRG TV Cedar Rapids, River to River Iowa Public Radio, The Economist, Newsweek, Associated

Press, The Salt Lake Tribune, USA Today, Louisiana Considered, Full Circle Florida, National Public Radio, PBS Frontline, and Blue Ridge Public Radio, among others.

NEW FUNDING
Members received external funding to extend and build on research to meet project objectives. This included the following:

Kristina Brant (PI), "Regional Recovery Workforce Survey and Strategic Planning." Appalachian Regional Commission, subaward with FIRST Center ($25,414), 2026-2027.

Katherine Curtis "Research Understanding the Impact of Farm Labor Practices." PI. Graduate School Fall Research Competition, University of Wisconsin. (1/1/26-8/31/27), $54,134. (To complete a share of work from terminated grant: "Research Understanding the Impact of Farm Labor Practices." Co-PI (PI Jennifer Bair). USDA, FLSP. (6/1/24-12/31/26), $169,628 (subaward). Terminated.)

Edith-Marie Green. "Using Qualitative Research to Understand Loneliness, Cognition, and Aging in Germany." German-American Fulbright Commission. (€18,000) - 9/16/2026-7/15/2027

John Green. "Workforce Development Initiative in Sunflower County, Mississippi." Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi and Women and Children Health Initiatives, Inc. with prime funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. 07/01/2026-09/30/27. ($194,000).

Malia Jones (PI), "County-level connectedness and rural death rates during the COVID-19 pandemic." UW-Madison Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research. 9/2025-8/2026. ($54,190)

Paige Kelly (PI), "Rural Local Governments in Uncertain Times." USDA-NIFA-AFRI. ($591,900) - 4/1/26-3/31/29.

Shannon Monnat. National Institute on Aging (T32AG099823). Policy, Place, Population Health, and Aging (P3HA) Training Program. 07/01/2026-06/30/2031. ($1,313,675).

Jessica Schad (Co-PI) "GCR: Understanding and Interrupting Cascading Heat Failures Along the I-10 Corridor." (Co-PI), National Science Foundation Convergent Research ($3.3 million), 2026-2031

AWARDS

Eileen E. Avery. 2026. Provost's Award for University Citizenship in Service. University of Missouri.

Kristina Brant. 2026. Educational Curriculum Package 2nd Place National Winner and 1st Place Eastern Region Winner, National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Matthew M. Brooks. 2026. COSSPP Early Career Research Achievement Award. College of Social Sciences and Public Policy, Florida State University.

Matthew M. Brooks. 2026. J. Michael Armer Faculty Teaching Award. Department of Sociology Florida State University.

Shelley Clark. 2026. Faculty of Arts Distinction in Research Award in the Social Sciences, McGill University

Katherine Curtis. Buttell-Sewell Professor. Dept. of Community & Environmental Sociology, College of Life Sciences, UW-Madison.

Edith-Marie Green. 2025. Three-Minute Thesis Competition Communicator Badge from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Graduate School.

John Green. 2025. Rural Renewal Research Prize. Rural Renewal Initiative, Oklahoma State University.

Paige Kelly. 2026. Excellence in Instruction Award, Rural Sociological Society.

TEACHING

Eileen Avery: 114 undergraduate students taught, 4 PhD non-chair

Kristina Brant: 1 PhD chair, 1 PhD co-chair, 1 MS chair, 9 PhD non-chair, 1 MS non-chair

Jacinda Dariotis: 13 PhD students taught, 4 PhD chair, 1 MS chair, 6 undergraduate

students (research interns), 8 high school student researchers

Matthew M. Brooks: 113 students taught, 1 PhD chair, 3 MA chair.

Katherine Curtis: 44 graduate students taught, 8 PhD Chair, 3 MS chair

Leif Jensen: 11 students taught, 1 PhD co-chair, 7 PhD non-chair

Kenneth Johnson: 18 students taught, 1 PhD Chair, 2 M.A. committees (non-chair).

Malia Jones: 335 undergraduate students taught, 2 PhD co-chair, 1 PhD non-chair, 2 MA non-chair

Paige Kelly: 32 undergraduate students taught, 23 MS/PhD students taught. 1 PhD chair, 1 MS chair.

J. Tom Mueller: 1 MPH chair, 1 MPH committee member, 1 PhD chair

Peter Nelson 90 students taught, advised 5 independent project/thesis students

David Peters: 97 undergrad students taught, 1 PhD chair

Jessica Schad: 2 PhD chair

Tim Slack: 303 students taught, 2 PhD chair, 4 MA chair.

Alex Theophilus: 35 undergraduate students taught (University of Montana-Western and Utah State University)

Mildred Warner: 20 MS/PhD students taught, 2 PhD chair, 5 MS Chair.

DISSERTATIONS

Natassia Bravo, Aug 2025. Public Values and Multilevel Governance for Broadband Infrastructure: A Study of State Policy and Community Planning, (Cornell University).

John C. Canfield. 2026. Title: Crossing the Boundaries of Capitalism and Community: Multistakeholder Networks and Collaborative Conservation in Montana's Northern Great Plains. (University of Wisconsin-Madison, Katherine Curtis, Co-Chair)

Tyrus Parker, June 2026. Title: A Period and Cohort Analysis of Sustained Fertility Decline in the United States. (University of New Hampshire; Kenneth Johnson, Chair)

Jennifer Oliveira, May 2026. Medicaid Expansion and Latino Mortality in the United States: Disparities, Heterogeneity, and Political Context. (University of Kansas Medical Center, J. Tom Mueller Chair)

Sara R Ronnkvist. 2026. Title: Post-disaster Migration in the United Sates. (University of Wisconsin-Madison, Katherine Curtis, Chair)

Michael S Topping. 2026. Title: The Place-Based Origins of Cognitive Aging. (University of Wisconsin-Madison, Katherine Curtis, Co-Chair)

Impacts

Over the course of the study year, members of W5001 impacted science and society in numerous ways. We report our impacts in-line with our study objectives:

Objective 1: Describe recent U.S. rural population change and the components of these changes, and investigate the roles of recent population health, environmental, and policy shocks and stressors in driving these changes

- This year, RPRN members completed Rural America in the 2020s: Shocks, Stressors, and Successes, the fifth volume in the Rural Sociological Society's decennial series and forthcoming from the University of North Carolina Press. Edited by network members Shannon Monnat and John Green, the volume assembles twenty-one chapters—many authored or co-authored by network members—into the discipline's authoritative ten-year synthesis of rural North America. Its organizing framework maps directly onto W5001's core objectives: it distinguishes acute shocks (COVID-19, the opioid epidemic, economic dislocation) from chronic stressors (population loss, infrastructure decay, institutional erosion) and shows how the two interact and compound across demographic, environmental, economic, and institutional domains, while also documenting underrecognized successes such as immigrant revitalization, renewable-energy development, and community-led resilience. In doing so, the book moves past deficit-focused narratives to establish that rural America is not a monolith but many rural Americas, each with distinct vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities. Written as federal data systems face mounting threats, it serves at once as a benchmark assessment of the decade and a research and policy agenda for the years ahead, translating RPRN's collective scholarship for students, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

- At the request of a nonpartisan commission focused on the future of rural America, a briefing was prepared on population trends and characteristics in the Delta Region of Mississippi, making use of data tools and publications developed by the broader W5001 multistate group, along with original analysis. The presentation addressed population decline through out-migration and shifts in economic well-being, with insights on needs and assets used to inform dialogue among commission members.

- New research conducted on the differential impact of COVID and its aftermath on rural demographic change was presented at a Federal Reserve

Bank's event titled "Investing in Rural America," giving timely science-based knowledge about rural demographic change to an audience of policymakers, planners and others interested in the future of rural America. This research was also presented to staff of the New Hampshire Agricultural Extension Service and was the basis for three new peer reviewed articles, three academic presentations, and contributed to two research briefs about New Hampshire demographic change.

- New research on how to bridge the digital divide in rural areas focusing on local community development and planning strategies in the face of various state policies and a shifting federal policy landscape led to a new book, Bridging the Digital Divide in the US: Planning Innovative State and Local Approaches, being published by Routledge, open access, in 2025.

- Researchers documented the changes to population growth since 2020 among Florida counties. During the pandemic (2020-2022) population growth was highly concentrated in the state's traditional retirement destinations in large metropolitan areas, but since (2023-2025) growth in these places has largely reversed and population growth is most found in the state's rural and exurban areas. These results were published in The Conversation and led to several interviews with local and Florida-focused media outlets.

- Network members presented data and facilitated discussion on two contentious population issues to stakeholder groups not typically served by land-grant universities. The first issue being falling birth rates across the US; and the second being growing international migration and the sharp drop in 2005. Presentations were given to the National Pork Producers Council, the Midwest Farm Bureau Executive Committee, and to the Hutchison Center Annual Business Conference at Hillsdale College. For some groups, presentations were followed by facilitated discussions on the reasons for falling birth rates and/or the implications of immigration restrictions. Discussions focused on countering misinformation, but also policy priorities to effectively address the issues.

Objective 2: Describe shifts in rural economic well-being (i.e., poverty, livelihood strategies, income, housing, infrastructure) in the context of recent population health, environmental, and policy shocks and stressors and identify linkages between economic wellbeing and population dynamics, policies, and institutional responses.

- The National Wellbeing Survey (NWS), which is directed and used by members of this group, completed its fifth annual wave this year, extending an annual, nationally representative series of U.S. working-age adults (ages 18–64) that now pools to nearly 33,000 respondents across more than 1,700 counties. The survey's deliberate nonmetro oversample (roughly 27% of respondents, versus about 13% of the U.S. working-age population), its dual rural classification measures (county classification and self-reports), and its state and county geographic identifiers make it one of the few public data resources capable of supporting both rural–urban and within-rural analysis of health, economic wellbeing, and place-level and policy contexts. Available to the research community through ICPSR, the NWS has been downloaded over 15,000 times, and is increasingly used by teams beyond the RPRN—including the Interdisciplinary Network on Rural Population Health and Aging (funded by the National Institute on Aging), that names it as a priority dataset. As each successive wave becomes publicly available, the resource's value compounds, enabling the broader research community to track how rural people and places are faring through the shocks and stressors of the 2020s.

- Jensen continued collaborative research with Slack and others analyzing the 2024 and 2025 waves of the NWS to document the prevalence and correlates of participation in informal work activities in rural and urban America. Findings indicate that informal work is common, particularly in non-metropolitan areas, with the greatest differences related to informal activities associated with access to natural resources or the out-of-doors. Jensen also continued research with Tracey Farrigan (ERS, USDA) analyzing Current Population Survey data to document the importance of Social Security Income for alleviating poverty among older Americans, an ameliorative effect that is greater in non-metropolitan areas.

- As Co-PIs, Jensen and Monnat continued to provide leadership for the NIA-funded Interdisciplinary Network on Rural Population Health and Aging (INRPHA). Through a pilot grant program, didactic webinars and other

mechanisms, INRPHA promotes new research on rural health and aging. Our multistate project was the genesis of INRPHA that continues to benefit project members.

- Collaborative research this year examined how different forms of natural resource dependence and amenity-driven development affect wellbeing in rural communities. Research on short-term rentals documented concerns about housing availability, affordability, neighborhood turnover, and social connection in high-amenity rural places, while work in Utah's coal country identified chronic stress and social disruption associated with economic and community transition. These findings were shared through peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, research briefs, and a mental health and community-engagement event in Price, Utah with over 100 attendees, connecting research with Extension professionals and local service providers. Together, this work helps communities and institutions better anticipate the housing, mental health, and social consequences of economic and environmental change and develop responses grounded in residents' experiences.

- To help advance a model workforce development initiative offered by a philanthropic foundation, nonprofit, and community college partnership, analysis was conducted of livelihood challenges and opportunities in the Mississippi Delta, a region facing population decline. The work is being used to enhance institutional responses to changing economic shocks and stressors in this largely rural region with the potential to inform strategies for other regions as well.

- Community satisfaction, especially with the built environment and associated services, was explored through survey data. National and regional analyses focusing on the association between satisfaction and age were conducted to help inform multiple constituencies, including Cooperative Extension specialists and community development professionals associated with the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Findings suggest the importance of understanding the needs and interests of community residents at different ages across the lifespan to inform rural livability initiatives.

- 40 Undergraduate geography students at Middlebury College collaborated with the Better Middlebury Partnership (BMP), a local nonprofit focused on enhancing the well-being of Middlebury residents and businesses. The

students interviewed businesses, nonprofits and other community organizations to identify Middlebury's valuable assets as well as unique challenges faced by specific sectors. Students synthesized their findings and reported results back to the BMP who will use this information to shape their conversations with constituents.

- Research on the impact of fiscal stress on local government finance and expenditure from 2007-2017 generated a new publicly accessible database of county area local government finance that is now open access in the Cornell Library repository https://doi.org/10.7298/YFAG-8098

Objective 3: Investigate how recent shocks and stressors affect trends in rural population health, disabilities, and health disparities across the lifespan and how communities and institutions respond to and adapt to these challenges

- Research on aging-related healthcare changes during periods of upheaval with a focus on perception of societal shocks as threats in rural and urban communities across the state of Wisconsin, using the example of advance care planning during the pandemic, was presented to legislators at the Wisconsin State Capitol.

- Continued conducting both national-level and place-based research (predominantly in the Intermountain West) on changes in high amenity rural communities that focuses on understanding the factors impacting community wellbeing. This work led to direct partnerships with community organizations that will help lead to research-informed policy and planning decisions.

- Through the Utah People and Environment Poll, our interdisciplinary team produced timely, representative evidence about how Utahns understand and respond to environmental change. This year, we published a policy brief showing broad public support for affirming the rights of Great Salt Lake and shared related findings with researchers, practitioners, and community leaders at the Great Salt Lake Issues Forum. By translating survey findings into accessible policy briefs and public presentations, this work gives state and local decision-makers evidence they can use to develop responses that better reflect Utahns' priorities while strengthening public understanding of the social dimensions of environmental change.

- At the request of Wisconsin state legislators, a policy memo on strategies for improving healthcare quality reporting, which in turn improves health outcomes, was prepared and presented at the Wisconsin State Capitol. The policy suggestions, which leveraged colorectal cancer as a proof-of-concept example, are especially important for rural Wisconsinites, who make up roughly 20% of the state's population and are exposed to restricted provider access, long travel times, and limited access to clinical trials and other novel treatments. The recommendations could also be applied to other rural contexts.

- Over the past year, network members shared research findings related to rural working-age mortality with three high-value audiences spanning policy, federal research funding, and the public. One presentation was on rural-urban and within-rural differences in working-age mortality trends and causes at the Brookings–American Enterprise Institute Commission on U.S. Rural Prosperity's invited symposium—a bipartisan convening whose published proceedings feed a comprehensive national strategy for rural prosperity slated for release in 2027. Another briefed NIH program officials on priorities for the federal rural health research agenda and made the case for maintaining a robust, accessible federal data and research-funding infrastructure. Through a Rural Sociological Society webinar on the current policy landscape, we also reached a broad professional and public audience with analysis of how recent federal actions—Medicaid reductions, the new rural health fund, and cuts to federal research and data infrastructure—are likely to affect population health in rural communities. Collectively, these presentations informed policymakers, federal funders, and the public about the scale of rural health challenges and the policy choices that will shape it. They advanced the network's objectives by documenting how recent policy and population-health shocks are reshaping rural health and health disparities, and by informing the decisions of those positioned to respond.

- Research from network members on rural mortality during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the evidence available to researchers, public health practitioners, and policymakers for identifying and responding to persistent rural health disparities. This work has documented how excess deaths and deaths of despair vary across the rural-urban continuum, examined whether hospital closures contribute to local mortality, and identified substantial county-level variation in death-certification systems that can affect the quality of mortality surveillance. A publicly available data

brief on death-certification systems translates these findings for applied users, helping communities and institutions better interpret rural mortality data and identify structural factors contributing to rural health disadvantage.

- As part of a multi-disciplinary research team, members conducted new research related to objective two of the W-5001 agenda by examining how environmental stressors may impact human health in amenity areas proximate to inland lakes in rural areas of New England and the Great Lakes. We found that using demographic data on housing density to augment widely used satellite imagery provides a better representation of land cover and settlement patterns proximate to inland lakes in rural amenity areas. Our research documents that a substantial share of the forested shorelines of inland lakes contains "hidden" high density housing. This research enhances both our capacity to examine the effects of human settlement on lake water quality and the impacts of water quality on the health of people residing near rural lakes. The research has produced one peer-reviewed article and one research brief to date. The research team is continuing to investigate the linkage between this enhanced measure of human settlement patterns proximate to lakes and the incidence of cyano-bacteria blooms, which present significant health risks to human populations.

- Collaborated between Rural Population Research Network colleagues exposed student scholars participating in summer fellowship focused on community development and leadership to research and understanding of rural population data. This included journal readings, invited speakers, and book chapters. Insights were used to inform student research and service projects.

- Network members worked with AARP to track progress in community livability from 2014- 2024 on the 7 domains of livability: housing, neighborhood, transportation, health, environment, social inclusion and opportunity. We found that rural areas lag on health but do better on social inclusion. We found that communities which joined the AARP age-friendly network of communities showed more improvement in these metrics than other communities. A popular report and journal article were published and we shared this work through a webinar with AARP.

- Network member, J. Tom Mueller, published a new book *The Case for Rural America* with UNC Press that details the history, trajectory, and possible

futures for rural America. After publication, Mueller spoke on the findings from his work to a variety of different groups working on issues facing rural American communities.