Overview

Certain populations in the United States bear a disproportionate burden of disease—especially preventable chronic diseases. Racial and ethnic minorities, rural and low-income communities, individuals with disabilities or low literacy, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals tend to experience disparities in health care and outcomes. These groups are included in PCORI’s definition of underserved priority populations, and we support research that can reduce disparities in health and health care for these groups.

By definition, health disparities are a reflection of social inequality. Health programs that aim to mitigate this inequality, such as efforts to educate patients and clinicians and improve self-management of chronic conditions, are not one size fits all. To tailor interventions to groups, we need to know in detail why certain programs work and for whom and in what settings they are effective.

This information is needed urgently—if interventions are not reaching underserved groups, then we risk widening the current gap in health care and outcomes.

Through our research portfolio, PCORI is helping to generate this information. More than half of PCORI’s funded projects examine ways to better prevent, diagnose, and treat illness among underserved populations. One of our primary strategies to ensure that funded projects are examining ways to better prevent, diagnose, and treat illness among members of underserved populations.

In August and November of 2013, PCORI hosted regional workshops in Memphis and Albuquerque to identify high-priority research questions that address health disparities across multiple communities. The issues discussed at the workshops guide our research agenda.

Marcia Gullatte-Owens of the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Nursing poses a question during the workshop in Memphis.

FAST FACTS

PCORI’s authorizing legislation requires that our research take into account “the potential for differences in the effectiveness of health care treatments used with various subpopulations.” They include a broad range of underserved populations.

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interventions effectively reach—and benefit—underserved populations is by partnering with patients, caregivers, researchers, clinicians, insurers, policy makers, and other key stakeholders. PCORI engages these partners in the entire research process—from project planning to dissemination of findings. PCORI Regional Workshops are one important channel for engaging healthcare stakeholders in comparative clinical effectiveness research. Last spring and fall, PCORI hosted workshops in Memphis, TN, and Albuquerque, NM, to educate stakeholder and researcher communities about our research and forge partnerships. To see patient-centered outcomes research in action, some participants also visited a PCORI-funded project in each region. PCORI may host additional regional workshops across the United States in the future.

What We Heard

The Memphis and Albuquerque workshops each drew more than 120 participants from diverse communities. Attendees included primarily researchers, patients, caregivers, patient/caregiver advocacy organizations, clinicians, health systems, and training institutions. There were also some purchasers, payers, local industry representatives, and policy makers. At the workshops, participants discussed their most significant healthcare challenges and those of their communities. Participants submitted research questions for PCORI’s consideration. These included:

- What are the benefits of implementing mental health education programs through a religious organization, as opposed to a clinical setting?
- What are the benefits of having depression screening and intervention in primary care practice versus referring patients to external sources for care?
- What are the best interventions for early dementia among elderly in nursing homes?
- How can community-based participatory research be used in rural areas to decrease incidence of sexually transmitted diseases?
- For patients with dual chronic conditions, does a clinical events manager improve delivery of care?

LEARN MORE

PCORI Research Projects

Addressing Mental Health Needs of Rural African Americans
pcori.org/pfaawards/addressing-mental-health-needs-of-rural-african-americans/

Reducing Health Disparity in Chronic Kidney Disease in Zuni Indians
pfaawards.pcori.org/node/20/datavizwiz/detail/42743

From the PCORI Blog

Strength Is in the Networks: Memphis Regional Engagement Workshop
pcori.org/blog/strength-is-in-the-networks-memphis-regional-engagement-workshop

Patient-Centered Outcomes Research from A(Albuquerque) to Z(uni)
pcori.org/blog/patient-centered-outcomes-research-from-albuquerque-to-zuni

“It is important for community members to be part of the Zuni project because medical issues affect the well being of each member of the community and impact family members. Given the high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide in this area, reduction of harm could occur if people felt they had more control over their medical issues. Positive engagement with the community should, hopefully, have a community-wide positive effect.”

Barbara Lambert, Program Director, Reducing Health Disparity in Chronic Kidney Disease in Zuni Indians
What We’re Doing

To address needs of underserved populations, PCORI has included “Addressing Disparities” among its five National Priorities for Research. The Addressing Disparities program seeks to fund research targeting six populations: racial and ethnic minority groups; low-income groups; residents of rural areas; individuals with special healthcare needs, including individuals with disabilities; patients with low health literacy/numeracy and limited English proficiency; and LGBT persons. As of December 2013, the Addressing Disparities program had funded 31 studies focusing on these communities (see graph below). Through a targeted funding announcement, the program also supports eight projects on uncontrolled asthma in African-American and Hispanic/Latino populations.

Addressing health disparities is critical across all PCORI programs. Funding announcements note the importance of including priority populations. PCORI has funded more than 50 projects that address underserved populations. Altogether, such programs represent more than half of PCORI’s portfolio (91 of 175 PCORI-funded projects, excluding pilot studies and methods and infrastructure projects).

“We’re moving from doing research on members of a particular group to doing research with them. They’re involved in that process from the very beginning, helping us come up with the questions and helping us frame how we should be posing those questions to the community. So, for example, when we said, ‘We’re going to talk about mental health,’ we were immediately told, ‘People are going to think that’s for crazy people.’ So, we need to say something like ‘emotional wellness,’ instead.”

Tiffany Haynes, Co-Investigator, Addressing Mental Health Needs of Rural African Americans

PCORI Projects Addressing Needs of Underserved Populations
One of the ways that PCORI selects topics to consider for targeted funding announcements is through the activities of our multi-stakeholder Advisory Panels. Those panels have already recommended several research areas relevant to underserved groups, including comparing the effectiveness of:

- treatments for heart attacks among racial and ethnic minorities
- health interventions to reduce major vascular events among the economically disadvantaged, including racial and ethnic minorities and rural populations
- telemedicine and/or increased use of non-physician practitioners (i.e., nurse practitioners and physician assistants) on improving mental health outcomes in rural populations
- care delivery models (e.g., local hospital care, trauma center care) on improving trauma outcomes in rural areas
- multi-level interventions on reducing disparities in perinatal outcomes.

### Future Research Possibilities

We will continue building a portfolio of research projects relevant to underserved populations, with a focus on understanding what interventions work in specific settings and with specific populations. We will also continue to consider relevant topics suggested through regional workshops, such as those in Memphis and Albuquerque; submitted through our broad funding announcements; and prioritized by our multi-stakeholder Advisory Panels.

We are dedicated to generating information, through the work we fund, to help underserved populations make better, more-informed health care decisions.