Research Profile

Using Economics as a Tool for Social Change – Andrew Houtenville

Andrew Houtenville, Research Director of the Institute on Disability and Associate Professor of Economics at UNH, grew up in a time of gasoline shortages, inflation and recession, a time when his mother converted their entire backyard into a garden for produce and they purchased sides of beef to share with the neighbors. Houtenville recalls eagerly watching the news, noting inflation rates and changing policies, developing a deep-seated passion for economics. Even in his youth, he recognized he was living in a policy-driven world, which begged the question: how to influence policy? Or better yet, how to create meaningful policy?

Houtenville always wanted a job that had meaning. “The tools that economics gives me to conduct policy analysis are a perfect fit,” he said. His unique position at UNH also seems to be the perfect fit - allowing him to teach but dedicate most of his time to research that will have real results for people with disabilities. “Here (at UNH), there is a mission beyond simply education and book science. It is a very service-oriented campus, which lends itself to my type of work. Our research maintains the principles of science, while providing value back to the community.”

The Institute on Disability researches the often underrepresented disability community. The grant-funded institute has a budget of almost $10 million and over 100 employees, building local, state, and national capacities to respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities and their families. For a relatively small organization, the Institute receives a substantial amount of external funding. Houtenville’s grant-writing background and persistence in unearthing funding opportunities for cutting-edge research has contributed to this success.

Houtenville was no stranger when he came to campus almost ten years after receiving his M.A. and Ph.D. in economics – he’d earned those degrees at UNH. In addition to fond memories (he met his future wife on the third floor of Babcock Hall), Houtenville was glad to return to UNH for many reasons. “It’s very accessible here. There aren’t a lot of layers of bureaucracy. You can always communicate.” Having added to his resume experiences as a research faculty member at Cornell University, post-doctoral research fellow at Syracuse University supported by funding from the National Institute on Aging, and working for a consulting firm in Washington, D.C., Houtenville returned to New England equipped to make change happen.

In addition to many groundbreaking projects, Houtenville and his colleagues have secured two prestigious Center grants, both for which he is principal investigator. Center grants are awarded to program directors and collaborating investigators, supporting long-term research and development projects. The most recently-awarded grant, establishing the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics (StatsRRTC), is a five-year, $4.3 million project funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research. This grant will support the collection of survey data to better identify the populations with disabilities and discover patterns and trends within them.

One hurdle this project is overcoming is the misconception that disability is a single, well-defined thing. There are many types of disabilities and it is difficult to identify them all, resulting in many people being underrepresented. Houtenville often quotes a friend by saying, “If you’re not counted, how can you count?” If portions of the disability community are not acknowledged, policies cannot be changed or created to help them. High quality disability-related data and statistics
are needed to support the needs of policymakers, service providers, researchers, educators, the media, as well as people with disabilities and their families. The StatsRRTC grant funds the analysis of current census surveys and how well they identify trends. It has allowed Houtenville and his team to develop web sites, phone apps, and a “disability compendium” – a resource that pools statistical data from various federal agencies. This will increase the accessibility of disability statistics, aiding legislative work and other related activities.

Data from much of Houtenville’s other grant-funded work support the assertion that people with disabilities are entitled to more opportunities than the current system offers. Houtenville believes that “the Social Security Administration’s programs and related policies are based on outdated ideas. It is a very paternalistic approach. There is no expectation that people with disabilities will work or participate.” Faced with this attitude, many people with disabilities can become stuck in a poverty trap: dependent on government funding, without the support they need to be integral, contributing members of society. “It’s all or nothing. You are either on the program or you’re off the program. There is no in-between.”

Houtenville focuses on modernizing the current systems to support, educate, and allow people with disabilities to integrate comfortably into their communities. “There’s a real movement to address early intervention: youth transitioning from school to work early on, or immediately connecting people who acquire disabilities later in life with employers in order to craft jobs to fit their situations.” Through concentrated statistical analysis, Houtenville expects to add to the evidence supporting the need for these changes to current policy.

When it comes down to it, it is about civil rights. Houtenville and his team are working to inform future policy and change for the underrepresented disabled population. By providing a thorough and accurate understanding of statistical data, Houtenville’s research is sure to make waves in a community ready for change.