

# Insights

FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY UNDERTAKINGS AND ACCOLADES

## The Think-and-Do Tank

Darren Spielman is the executive director of the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University-Camden. Sarah Allred, the institute's faculty director, is an associate professor of psychology at Rutgers-Camden. They are photographed in front of a mosaic at Cathedral Kitchen, a nonprofit organization based in Camden for which the institute is conducting an evaluation.

In its twin roles as research enterprise and policy advocate for southern New Jersey, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs is a vital regional ally.

Since its founding in 2000, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University-Camden has been addressing public policy issues that have a significant impact on southern New Jersey through applied research, community engagement, and organizational development. In using extensive research initiatives and burgeoning local partnerships, the Walter Rand

Institute wrestles with topics like population health, public safety, criminal justice, and economic disparities between northern and southern New Jersey. Darren Spielman, the institute's executive director, and Sarah Allred, the institute's faculty director and an associate professor of psychology at Rutgers-Camden, discuss the issues that are important to the institute, which is named for New Jersey State Assemblyman and Senator Walter Rand, who was a resident of Camden and an advocate for the region.

— Nick DiUlio

**RUTGERS MAGAZINE:** Describe why the Walter Rand Institute is invaluable to the southern New Jersey region?

**DARREN SPIELMAN:** We've grown into a truly sophisticated research operation and a trusted community partner with deep relationships throughout the region. We describe ourselves as a think-and-do tank. We're really familiar with the difference between actionable information and information that's gathered to just sit on a shelf. We actually do stuff.

**RM:** What are some recent examples you're proudest of?

**DS:** We've facilitated juvenile delinquency-prevention coalitions in Cumberland and Burlington Counties. In Cumberland, for example, the first countywide juvenile delinquency-prevention effort in the state has reduced juvenile arrests by 44.5 percent since 2009. And we're working with the Camden County Correctional Facility on multiple efforts, supporting the development and eventual evaluation of an opioid-user diversion program. Our unique value comes from putting out original research about South Jersey, providing objective information about the region, and also doing sophisticated evaluation. There are not many entities out there looking at this region because, frankly, it's very much a tale of two states when it comes to South Jersey.

**SARAH ALLRED:** We also differ a little from the more traditional academic research going on at Rutgers. The goal of academic research is to further a body of existing knowledge, but our goal is to take the latest research techniques and figure out how they are applicable to community action.

**RM:** Why do you think it's "a tale of two states"?

**DS:** You have a difference in the way economies and demographics are structured. Back in the 1950s when New Jersey had a thriving industrial economy, they [north and south] were more similar, but when industry and manufacturing collapsed, the north was in a stronger position to recover economically. With its proximity to New York City, it had a more diverse economy already, and North Jersey could feed off that. Meanwhile industry went away down south and you had a real struggle. The glass industry, for instance, disappeared and there was nothing to take its place. South Jersey also gets the short end of the stick when it comes to the distribution of state and federal resources, which we brought attention to with our two recent research studies, "Is South Jersey Getting Its 'Fair Share' of Public Goods?" and "Our Piece of the Pie: The Distribution of State Funds to Municipalities Across New Jersey Regions."

**RM:** What was the impetus for those two studies, and what were some of the most interesting findings?

**DS:** Everyone has this emotional sensation about South Jersey getting fewer resources, so we figured, why don't we actually get some data to see if the numbers back up our intuition? The "Fair Share" study looked at the distribution of state resources in city budgets. We found that counties in South Jersey get less state money and state resources than comparable counties in North Jersey.

**SA:** It's pretty remarkable that when you control for things like density of population, property values, and education level, the differences are still there. Even in two equivalently sized counties with a similar population and education level, the south gets less money from the state. The "Piece of the Pie" study was our follow-up, which looked at state aid applied directly to municipal budgets. Michael Hayes, an assistant professor of public policy at Rutgers-Camden, conducted this one, and the big takeaway was that if you look at funding to municipalities in aggregate, there's not a huge difference. However, the most economically distressed municipalities in the south are getting roughly 33 percent less aid than equally poor municipalities in the north. And that gap has been increasing over time.



According to Darren Spielman and Sarah Allred, the great strength of the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University-Camden is that it not only conducts research and analysis but acts on the information to effect change in communities throughout southern New Jersey.

**RM:** Why do these disparities exist?

**DS:** Our research can show the effect, but it doesn't posit the cause that creates this. We took one shot and looked at voter participation, but there was no difference there.

**RM:** Is anyone else working on that?

**DS:** Right now, there's no systemic look at this. People feel like, at the end of the day, this is probably the result of long-term differentials in the north-south power structure in Trenton. Some elected officials are using these studies in budget discussions.

**SA:** I would guess that at least some part of the discrepancy is not purely a phenomenon local to New Jersey, but part of the broader phenomenon throughout the country where rural areas seem to have difficulty with particular problems not addressed through funding, like the prevalence of the opioid epidemic in rural areas, for instance.

**RM:** What role has the institute played in exploring the opioid epidemic in South Jersey?

**DS:** Of the eight New Jersey counties with the highest opioid overdose death

rates, seven of those are in South Jersey. If it were a cross-country race, sadly, we'd be winning. So, one thing we're doing is working now with the Camden County Correctional Facility on an opioid-user diversion program. This is a project to help divert folks coming into the correctional system away from formal charges and get them health care instead of their being incarcerated.

**RM:** What drives you both in the work you do with the institute?

**DS:** I've dedicated my career to serving in such a way as to help improve the lives of the most vulnerable. I also have deep South Jersey roots. So, this opportunity to do good work in a region I care deeply about is just incredible. As challenging as the work is, it's really creative and exciting. To learn about these topics and to also see the outcomes with actual people is really fulfilling.

**SA:** My background is in science. Up until a year and a half ago, I had a very traditional research career route with no social impact whatsoever. But I decided during the extreme partisanship of the last presidential election that I wanted to get involved on a more actionable level. I ended up in this position using the scientific, quantitative skills I have, but in a very different and applied way. It's been a really amazing experience to be able to do work using science that has a direct benefit to the community.

**RM:** Why is it important to focus on the quantitative aspect of the issues facing South Jersey?

**SA:** The kind of work we do is work that has a *qualitative* impact but also needs to be grounded in *quantitative* science. You need to be able to back it up with the numbers. And, sometimes, you see things from the numbers you never would have guessed with your intuition.

**DS:** Objective information is the coin of our realm. We're trying to do good stuff and produce good information.