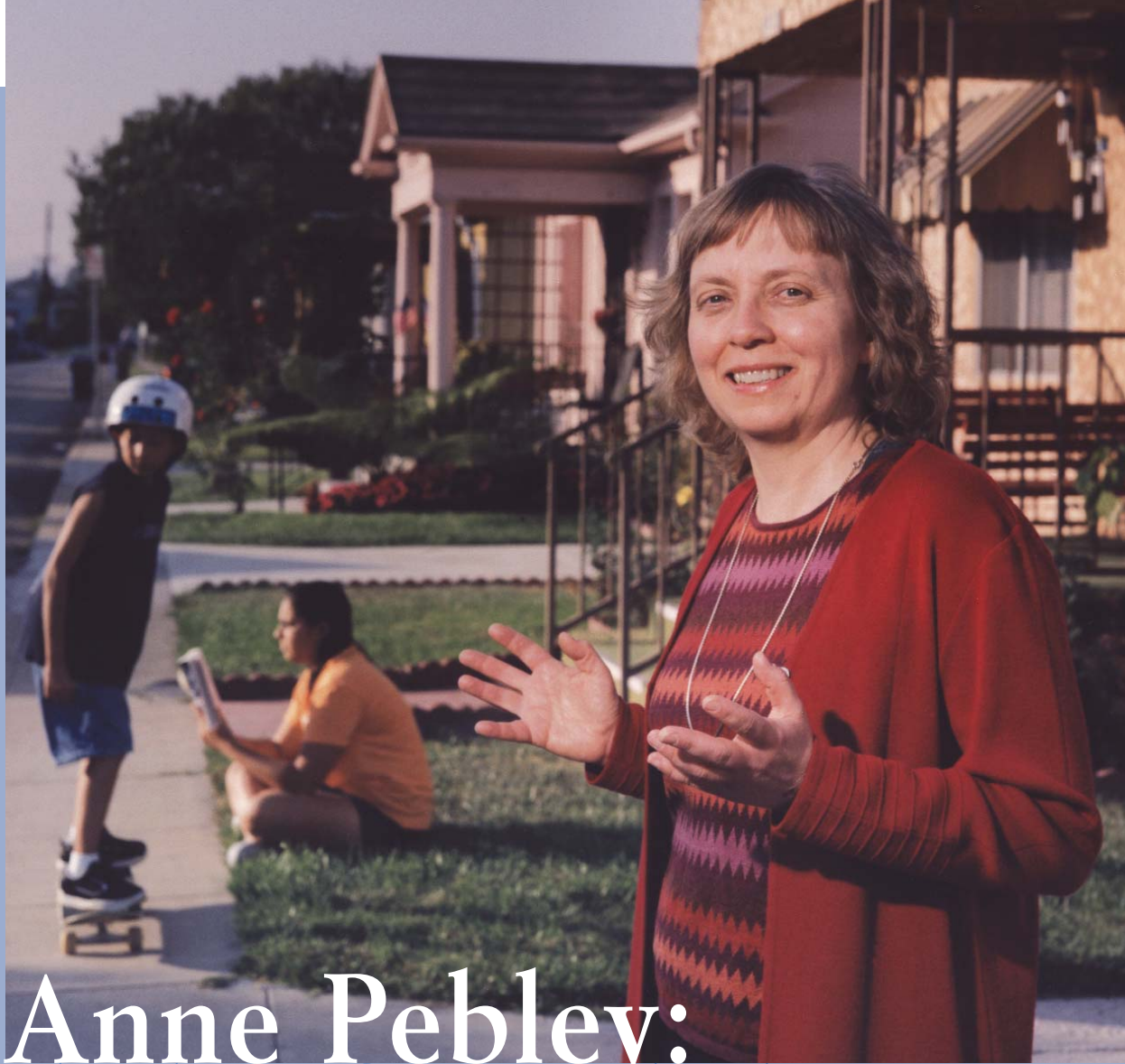


**POPULATION
DEMOGRAPHER
EXAMINES THE
EFFECT OF SOCIAL
AND POLITICAL
FORCES ON
INDIVIDUAL
BEHAVIOR AND
WELL-BEING — AND
STUDIES WAYS TO
ENSURE POSITIVE
CONDITIONS.**



Anne Pebley: Big Thinking for Local Change

The online version of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines *demography* as "the statistical study of human populations especially with reference to size and density, distribution, and vital statistics" – which, to the uninitiated, may seem at odds with the study of neighborhood conditions and their influence on individual behaviors and health outcomes. But Dr. Anne Pebley views her role as director of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (LA FANS) as perfectly consistent with her expertise as a demographer and holder of the endowed Fred H. Bixby Chair at the UCLA School of Public Health.

LA FANS is an analysis by RAND and UCLA researchers of 65 neighborhoods in L.A. County, focusing on the impact of the surrounding environment on children's health, social development, school performance, stress and other variables. The first wave of the survey was recently completed and the data are being analyzed.

The research stems from a widely held view that neighborhoods are where social interventions should occur. "The idea is that if you're trying to improve the life of one child at a time, you might not have as much impact as if you change the environment in which the child lives," Pebley explains. The movement afoot in Los Angeles to create neighborhood councils and service planning areas raises questions that are being addressed by Pebley's team: What defines a neighborhood? What impact does improving the immediate environment have on residents? What specific improvements have the most impact, and what aspects of well-being do they affect? "Understanding these issues is crucial to cost-effective policy intervention," Pebley asserts.

LA FANS examines terrain that is at the heart of Pebley's research interest, which is focused on the effect of the social and political environment on individual behavior and well-being. "Individuals are not isolated, despite the feeling you might get from the ideology prevalent in the United States," she says, smiling. "The environment in which we function may have a much bigger impact than we typically would like to think on our behavior and on our health – economic, mental and physical."

Indeed, Pebley explains, to view demography only through the lens of global trends is to miss the drivers of those trends. "I'm interested in what's going on at the macro level," she says. "But if you want to understand the process that leads to population growth and change, you have to also conduct research at the micro level."

Pebley's career course was launched in graduate school at Cornell University, where she enrolled in a master's degree program in international development. The focus was on agricultural economics, nutrition and demography of population; the last captured her interest, particularly at a time – the 1970s – when population growth rates in poor countries were at unprecedented levels. "It seemed to me you had to understand these underlying demographic processes if you wanted to make any difference in the world," she recalls. In a career that has taken her to a number of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa to conduct her studies, Pebley's interests have diverged toward related issues, including children's health. One major focus of her work has been on social and political determinants of health behaviors and outcomes in developing countries. Pebley continues to publish results of research she started in rural Guatemala in 1990 on how parents and expectant mothers decide among health care providers – ranging from biomedical professionals to the more traditional providers common in the indigenous villages – for pediatric and reproductive care. The research has captured the interest of the country's Ministry of Health. "If pregnant women in these communities are going to midwives rather than physicians, as a policy-maker you want your focus to be on providing the best possible training for midwives," Pebley explains.

After 14 years on the faculty at Princeton University and six as director of the Population Research Center and senior sociologist at RAND, she joined the full-time faculty at the UCLA School of Public Health in 1999 as professor and Fred H. Bixby Chair. The endowed chair supports research, teaching and service in the population field. Last year, the foundation gave a large new gift to the school that helped establish the Fred H. Bixby

Program in Population. "The Bixby Program is critical to our goal of expanding research, training and service in the areas of family planning, reproductive health and population," says Pebley, who serves as chair of the program's steering committee. "We are very grateful for the fund's continuing support."

In 1998, just before being named to the Bixby Chair, Pebley served as president of the Population Association of America, the national professional organization for demographers, sociologists, economists, public health professionals and others interested in research and education in the population field. That year she delivered an address on a topic that was receiving little attention among her peers: the relationship between population policy and environmental consequences. Concern about the environment had moved to the periphery of demographic research ever since the 1960s, when many were predicting that rapid population growth would soon lead humans to exhaust natural resources and face environmental collapse. Pebley's warning of the potential impact on health and mortality of environmental change – from global warming and air pollution to land-use trends – is now being heeded by a growing number of researchers.

Pebley conveys that message to UCLA students each fall in her sought-after Population Change and Public Policy course. "I love teaching that course, because it forces me to stay up to date on what's going on, and to think about these issues," says Pebley, who was honored by the Public Health Students Association as Professor of the Year for the Department of Community Health Sciences in 2002. Being around students – particularly given the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of the School of Public Health's – is invigorating, she says. "They think about things in ways I never have. I always learn a lot from them."

For Pebley, the ability to constantly learn about matters of concern to her is half of what makes her work rewarding; the other half is the knowledge that what she learns can be used to improve people's lives. "I guess you could say that, like most people in academia, I am infinitely curious," she says. "Researchers have a tremendous luxury in the sense that we can, to a certain extent, follow our interests. But at the same time, when I work with people in the community through my research and volunteering, I am reminded that these are real issues affecting real people, that we don't have a lot of money to spend on public policy and we have to be very strategic in how we spend it. I would like to think that what I do has a positive impact in guiding such decisions."

"Individuals are not isolated. The environment in which we function may have a much bigger impact than we typically would like to think on our behavior and on our health."

—Dr. Anne Pebley