For the past decade, Karen Albright has studied and written about the health behaviors of socioeconomically disadvantaged populations and the barriers to their care. As a sociologist in the field of health, Albright makes connections between broader social forces and the ways that these populations interact with the U.S. health care system. She has studied a number of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, including low-income American Indians, low-income Latinos, residents of underserved rural areas and homeless Veterans.

According to Albright, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals and communities have been hit hardest by transformations in a number of systems and social institutions in America, including the health care system.

“Many feel they have been ‘left behind’ by the impersonal, bureaucratic, often highly technical systems that dominate modern life,” said Albright, assistant professor of sociology and affiliated faculty in the Graduate School of Social Work. “For many of these individuals, poor health care and, thus, poor health outcomes are a way of life, as is the experience of judgment and disdain directed toward them for the very fact of their poverty.”

For the past several years, Albright has been interested in how distrust of pharmaceutical medicine and/or Western health care systems affects health behaviors and outcomes.

“System distrust has been the focus of much of my recent work, and I am currently working on a book about how the dimensions of system distrust affect dynamics within and across the health care system,” she said.

Her book manuscript, currently under contract and titled In the Margins: Health Behaviors and System Distrust among the Socioeconomically Disadvantaged, explores three distinct dimensions of system distrust that contribute to engagement or disengagement with the American health care system among the poor: distrust of health providers, distrust of health and medical information, and distrust of the financial interests of the medical industry.

Data for the book were drawn from intensive engagement with Coloradans living in the aftermath of the economic transformations of the late 20th century, such as deindustrialization and diminished socioeconomic opportunity for the working class.

“My work suggests that distrust is a meaningful barrier to engagement with the health care system and to the amelioration of negative health behaviors among the socioeconomically disadvantaged,” said Albright. “In the Margins will be the first book to articulate and explore multiple dimensions of distrust relevant to the experience of this population.”

Much of Albright’s work has been concerned with exploring not only individual experiences with the health care system, but also potential solutions for improving care. Her research has involved the exploration of a variety of potential solutions, including collaborative efforts between public health entities and private practices, policy change across silos of care within the Department of Veterans Affairs, school based health centers, technological interventions and health literacy improvement efforts.

Prior to joining DU in 2015, Albright was on the faculty in the Department of Community and Behavioral Health in the Colorado School of Public Health at the University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus.
There she also served as the director of the Qualitative Research Core at the University of Colorado School of Medicine’s Adult and Child Consortium for Health Outcomes Research and Delivery Science (ACCORDS).  

“Working with and among scholars in medicine and public health strengthened my commitment to collaborative and interdisciplinary work, which I have come to believe is the most effective approach to identifying solutions to problems. Nonetheless, as a sociologist working in this realm, I am committed to the application of sociological insights to the study of health and the health care system—and, just as importantly, to the dissemination and implementation of sociological methods, theory, and practice.”

She is currently collecting data for a new project, in collaboration with Dr. Jean Scandlyn in the Department of Health and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Colorado Denver, on the distrust of science.

“This project examines belief about and distrust in the science of energy extraction and its relationship to climate change, environmental health, and social and community health in two communities with very different political economies: Floyd County, KY, an Appalachian community that has been dominated by the coal industry for generations; and Weld County, CO, which has seen a marked rise in fracking over the past decade,” she said.

Albright, who has a PhD in sociology from New York University and was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow in Health Policy at the University of California-Berkeley, believes that teaching and research are best when paired together.

“Teaching helps me to be a better researcher, just as conducting research helps me to be a better teacher,” she said.

“I believe that to teach effectively is to continually and consistently challenge and empower students. Teaching is not about demonstrating knowledge, nor is it solely about disseminating information; rather, I take it as my responsibility to encourage and support intellectual curiosity so that students can actively participate in and shape their own education.”