Fighting an emerging epidemic

Unacknowledged and unaddressed in many poor neighborhoods, crack cocaine use is becoming a major public health concern in Mexico City.

On one of the busiest streets of Mexico City’s Coyoacán district, Mario sells juice from a street stand. He works all day, then breaks down his stand, stores his materials, and goes home. He locks himself in his room and smokes crack cocaine. Mario has been using crack for about 16 years. Two marriages have come and gone, their collapse attributed to his substance use. Now he lives with his parents, who don’t bother him as long as he smokes in his room or on the roof.

“I don’t go out,” he tells the researchers. “I stay in my pad.”

CRACK | continued on page 10
New faculty member explores effects of social disadvantages

IT BECAME CLEAR to Jungeun Olivia Lee as a young child that some things in life just weren’t fair.

She saw how her aunt struggled as a divorced single mother to raise four sons in an impoverished neighborhood where health care largely consisted of a traditional healer who induced vomiting.

“Why in the world are people, through no fault of their own, have to battle social inequalities such as poverty and a lack of preventative health care?”

Driven by a desire to find solutions to those problems, Lee pursued a career in the social sciences, eventually moving to the United States to earn a master’s degree in social work from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a PhD in social welfare from the University of Washington.

Having recently joined the USC School of Social Work as an assistant professor, she continues to tackle major social problems that affect vulnerable populations across generations, including poverty, substance abuse, and health care.

“Right now we are living in an exciting period,” she said. “Researchers have the capacity to provide a scientific foundation for our efforts in social work.”

Jungeun Olivia Lee

Lee hopes to bring data from that study to USC and is currently writing a grant proposal to conduct another wave of data collection, in addition to surveying a new cohort of teen mothers. She is interested in exploring how health literacy affects teen pregnancy and health disparities in immigrant populations.

Many immigrants struggle to access health care due to issues such as low health literacy, she said. They may find simply enrolling in health insurance troublesome, given the complex jargon and length of the enrollment process.

“If you are a single mom and you have multiple jobs, you may have one hour and you don’t have high-speed Internet at home,” she said. “So you go to the library and sit in front of a computer and start putting all of this sensitive information, but it’s very likely that you won’t be able to enroll in a single visit.”

She ultimately hopes to develop health literacy training for clients or interventions at the organizational or policy level that will help service providers and government agencies ensure that individuals are able to access the care they need.

Lee said the large Korean immigrant population in Los Angeles drew her to the position at USC. She was also intrigued by the school’s strong emphasis on the capacity to provide a scientific foundation for social work to effect change, in addition to the university’s overall focus on inter-disciplinary research.

“I have a million different angles to my research and I can always name at least two different people who have a certain perspective on the same issue,” she said.

Beyond faculty collaboration, Lee is also excited to begin engaging with students, both in the classroom and her research lab. As the instructor of a research methods course this semester, she said her experience thus far has bolstered her belief in science as a solution to social problems.

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Project directors guide daily aspects of research

At its most lofty level, scientific research is a rigorous pursuit of intellectual curiosity.

It requires creativity, inventiveness, and a visionary understanding of the big picture. But the ability to bring that vision and innovation into reality is just as critical.

That’s where project directors enter the scene. These highly trained professionals are responsible for overseeing the everyday facets of research, from handling budgets and personnel to dealing with confidentiality issues.

“As a project manager, you are delegating and overseeing administrative tasks, managing the research and data collection process, presenting, and working with various stakeholders,” said Diana Pineda, project manager for a large research initiative at the USC School of Social Work.

The tasks of a project director often vary from research venue to another, but they typically involve handling the daily minutiae of research such as ensuring there are protocols in place for data collection and that data are managed in an efficient manner.

For Pineda, the job means overseeing a research team based in San Diego County that is exploring how schools and other community partners can support children from military families. She works closely with school districts and community partners to help implement and evaluate programs that address the socioemotional needs of students. She also helps develop surveys and collaborates with fellow researchers on the development of electronic applications for smartphones and other devices to help military-connected students who are transitioning between schools.

One of the benefits of working in a research environment such as the Hampton School—center for Science in the Human Services is the opportunity to share those kernels of wisdom with other project directors and researchers.

As the project manager of a 3-year project involving more than 117,000 children, and multiple universities and community groups, her responsibilities include handling the day-to-day aspects of three projects led by associate professor Ferid Mennen. She oversees all aspects of how data will be collected and managed, presentation, and working with various stakeholders who oversee the complex and varied day-to-day agendas of large-scale research projects at the USC School of Social Work.

Atuel emphasizes when sharing her experiences with students when teaching courses on research methods:

“You need to be open to surprises and see them in a positive light,” she said. “Atuel credits her work as a senior research associate at the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center in San Diego for her appreciation and understanding of the multifaceted nature of research.

“The scientific enterprise has three strands—intellectual, fiscal, and operational—that are inextricably linked to one another,” she said. “In a competitive funding environment, a good scientist is a good steward as well, especially of public resources.”

Because she has supported herself with research funding since she was 21, maintaining public acknowledgment of her research is a large part of how she views her work.

Ron Astor, who leads the multi-million-dollar projects that Atuel and Pineda help manage, said project directors need flexibility, strong communication skills, and the ability to pivot quickly when a problem arises and find other options that allow the project to progress. Astor emphasizes when sharing her experiences with students when teaching courses on research methods:

“You need to be open to surprises and see them in a positive light,” she said. “She trusts that I’m going to do them, and she appreciates the bird’s-eye view of the project she has in her current role.”

“When you are further from the data, what you lose is preciseness and gain in perspective,” she said. “That’s what is exciting for me, being able to see the big picture and how things are going to roll out from start to finish. I’ve had enough on-the-ground experience to know what needs to happen.”

Being open to change is one key lesson she learned from her previous work as a data collector, field coordinator, and study coordinator. The ability to pivot quickly when a problem arises and find other options that allow the project to progress is a necessary attribute for project directors, something Astor emphasizes when sharing her experiences with students when teaching courses on research methods.

“At times it can be challenging, but having a great team with open communication helps and knowing how impactful the programs can be for schools and their families is a huge reward.”

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“The big picture doesn’t help you very much if you don’t have good people who are very organizationally competent, understand the purpose of the research, and are able to hire and manage other people to handle the daily workload,” said Astor, who is the Lenore Stein-Wood and William S. Wood Professor of School Behavioral Health. “Without Diana and Hazel, these projects would not be possible. You have to have somebody with their skills and expertise.”

Some project managers are lucky enough to only be tasked with overseeing one research initiative, whereas others play a more nebulous role, shifting from one responsibility to another. Bill Monro, for example, handles the day-to-day aspects of three projects led by associate professor Ferid Mennen.

Although some project managers offer technical expertise in data analysis and research methods, Monro sees his role as more operational in nature. He seeks to give Mennen leeway to be creative and consider different approaches to her research while doing whatever he can to execute her vision.

“There’s a mutual trust and respect,” he said. “She trusts that I’m going to do what’s right. The hard part is sometimes you have a potentially awkward responsibility of telling your boss something is not possible. But because there is a lot of trust in the relationship, we can move from that toward a solution.”

Monro’s responsibilities include training research assistants, creating protocols for how data will be collected and managed, and interacting with community partners. That latter role is particularly challenging, he said, especially when the research project represents an intrusion into the daily lives of clinicians or clients.

During a project in which therapists had to collect data from their clients, he said the executive director of the participating agency offered a suggestion that has guided his work with community stakeholders.

“My employees will probably not collect the data because they want to have a good research project, but they might collect it for you,” the agency director told Monro. One of the benefits of working in a research environment such as the Hampton School—center for Science in the Human Services is the opportunity to share those kernels of wisdom with other project directors and researchers.

As project manager for a large research project based in San Diego County, Diana Pineda has to juggle multiple tasks related to administration, data collection, evaluation, and community collaboration on a daily basis.

As the project manager of a 3-year project that involved interviewing more than 1,000 homeless teens and young adults, Rhoades is...
Researchers to evaluate crisis hotline for sexual minorities

A new research project will explore the effectiveness of a popular suicide hotline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youths and provide guidance on how it can enhance its services.

Led by Assistant Professor Jeremy Goldbach from the USC School of Social Work, the one-year, $168,356 initiative will evaluate the Trevor Project, which offers a crisis hotline and chat and text messaging services to young LGBTQ individuals who are contemplating suicide.

“Suicidality among LGBTQ kids is between four and seven times higher than among their heterosexual peers,” Goldbach said, noting that an estimated 45 percent of sexual minority youths have seriously considered or attempted suicide. “It’s a disparity that demands attention.”

Considered the leading crisis intervention and suicide prevention provider for LGBTQ youths in the United States, the Trevor Project’s crisis team engages in more than 60,000 interactions with individuals between 13 and 24 years old each year. Goldbach and his colleagues, including Michael Marshall from the University of Pittsburgh and Sherre Schrager from Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, hope to find ways to improve the organization’s crisis and referral services for sexual minority adolescents.

In addition to offering suggestions for enhancements to the Trevor Project’s approach, Goldbach is hopeful that the project will lead to additional research initiatives and improve knowledge about how to mitigate the link between stressful experiences of LGBTQ youths and the disproportionate rate of suicide attempts in the population.

“I am particularly interested in the experiences of adolescents who don’t identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender but nonetheless are questioning their sexual identity. How do you recruit someone who isn’t out?” Goldbach said, referring to individuals who have not publicly disclosed their sexual minority status. “This is a group that has very little voice and we make a lot of assumptions about their needs. Until we understand the population, we are just working in the dark.”

A study by Assistant Professor Jeremy Goldbach will evaluate the effectiveness of a national crisis provider’s services for sexual minority by adolescents and young adults contemplating suicide.

Chinese clearinghouse finds new home

A clearinghouse for evidence-based practices has a new home in China.

Established in partnership with the USC School of Social Work several years ago, the Chinese Clearinghouse for Evidence Translation in Child & Aging Health is now based at Lanham University and is expanding in content and reach.

Emphasizing the importance of having strong scientific evidence to back up social work interventions and practices is critical to ensure social services are effective and beneficial, said Haluk Soydan, associate dean of research and director of the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services.

“It promotes social work as a profession and a science,” he said. “We are promoting high-quality evidence that supports practices they want to introduce and teach.”

In essence, scholars and practitioners can access more informed information via the clearinghouse’s website about the strength and effectiveness of certain social work practices. In addition to modules on child welfare and aging, the clearinghouse will soon feature guidelines related to translational research and academic publication standards.

Understanding how to translate research findings from Western nations to the societal and cultural context of China is the key focus of the third module, which is based in part on Translation and Implementation of Evidence-Based Practice, a book authored by Soydan and Lawrence Palinkas, the Frances L. and Albert G. Feldman Professor of Social Policy and Health.

“We’re not only talking about implementing translation and translation in our terms, which is from bench to trench or from the university to the agency,” Soydan said. “It’s from the West to China. You have this transcultural, transnational dimension.”

The fourth module will describe publication ethics and the technical aspects of developing academic manuscripts. Creating standards for research, practice, and publishing in social work will be essential in the coming decades, Soydan said, as China begins tackling looming issues related to its aging population, domestic migration, ethnic conflict, socioeconomic divisions, and other social problems.

The central government is planning to dramatically increase the number of schools of social work in an effort to build capacity to address those social issues, so ensuring that high academic standards are maintained is a major focus of the clearinghouse.

Soydan said in addition to developing the two new modules, clearinghouse leaders are investing time and energy into marketing the clearinghouse to schools of social work and service delivery agencies.

“I have been holding talks in China over the years and there are always people very much interested in evidence-based practices,” he said. “The more they know, the more they become interested.”

This type of scholarly exchange is encouraging to Soydan, who said he frequently gets requests from Chinese scholars to visit USC to learn more about Western methods of research and inquiry.

In fact, a former visiting scholar to USC, Zhenggang Bai, now works at Lanham University’s department of public health and helped relocate the clearinghouse from its original post in Chengdu. He also worked with Iris Chi, the Chinese-American Golden Age Association/Dr. Frances Wu Chair for the Chinese Elderly, to develop the clearinghouse.

“This exchange has a positive goodwill effect in a political global context with many challenges and hardship and threats of conflict,” Soydan said. “If they implement evidence-based practice and they see it works, there is a clear benefit.”

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New book explores sacred side of therapy

For many decades, therapists and clinicians have skirted the edges of religion and spirituality in their work with clients.

Perhaps they received the topic as too personal or felt uncomfortable discussing the sacred world.

By doing so, they may have overlooked the greatest source of resilience or the key to psychological issues among many of their clients. At least that’s the contention in Spirituality, Religion, and Faith in Psychotherapy: Evidence-Based Expressive Methods for Mind, Brain, and Body, a new book by Helen Land, associate professor with the USC School of Social Work.

“We are becoming more and more of a secular society, but I think this idea of what people hold as sacred, whether it’s religious or not, will always be useful,” Land said. “Everyone has some sort of philosophy of life and it doesn’t have to be connected to a deity or organized religion.”

Although spirituality has found its way into clinical practice in a general sense, typically viewed as a source of wellness for individuals dealing with trauma, death, or other difficult experiences, few clinicians truly delve into the sacred beliefs of their clients and how those beliefs influence their ability to cope with problems or may actually be causing those problems.

In her book, Land outlines various strategies to integrate three broad domains of sacred content into psychotherapy, particularly through the use of expressive methods such as art, movement, and music therapy.

“Often people are stuck in concrete thinking,” she said. “These kinds of issues—spirituality, religion, and faith—are very hard to put into words. Talk therapy has its limitations.”

Land’s interest in the sacred world as a potentially critical component of therapy for many individuals stems from her work leading support groups during the height of the AIDS crisis. During a research study on how individuals cope with the stress of caregiving for a loved one with AIDS, she noticed that many times these caregivers would not tell other family members or friends about the disease.

So how were they handling this tremendous personal burden?

“The thing that came up over and over again was, I turn to God or I pray,” she said. “Many people used these spiritual and religious coping strategies.”

Issues such as illness, death, and trauma often spur individuals to consider previously unacknowledged existential questions, Land said. Why are we here? What is a person’s essence? Her book is peppered with examples from her personal experience as a clinician that describe how people struggle with these quandaries in the wake of tragedy.

For example, she worked with a woman whose family had been killed by a drunk driver when she was a senior in high school, leaving her devastated and angry. In another instance, a woman in her 30s died from ovarian cancer, leaving behind her husband and 18-month-old daughter.

“It can be very disabling for people who are in mourning,” Land said, referring to the struggle to rectify their loss with their spiritual or religious convictions. “Some people would maybe deepen their spirituality and call on it. Other people would say they truly felt let down by their belief system.”

In Spirituality, Religion, and Faith in Psychotherapy (Lyceum Books), she describes a new assessment model she developed to help clinicians evaluate the sacred beliefs of their clients and how those beliefs influence their ability to cope with problems or may actually be causing those problems.

Ultimately, Land sees her book as a tool to help clinicians evaluate the sacred beliefs of their clients and how those beliefs influence their ability to cope with problems or may actually be causing those problems.

“The book has really helped me broaden my scope of practice,” she said. “I may have been able to articulate fairly well working with clients from my own faith, but I didn’t always use it. When I started writing, I began trying to see how these practices worked for people from other faiths.”

She is hopeful that other social workers and helping professionals will have a similar reaction to the book.

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Helen Land

As project manager of three grant-funded research initiatives, Bill Morey oversees a wide variety of daily tasks, from working with community partners to creating data collection protocols.

Determined how many interviewers are needed, how to reimburse research staff members for certain expenses, and whether an agency prefers that study participants receive cash or gift cards as incentives.

“In the beginning of any project, the [principal investigator] absolutely has to be hands-on,” she said. “They are making sure that their vision is going to be carried out. But once things get rolling and they trust the project manager, they can go back to the trillion other things that have built up in the meantime.”

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Helen Land

精神, 宗教, and 信仰 in Psychotherapy

Evidence-Based Expressive Methods for Mind, Brain, and Body

Helen Land

A new book authored by Helen Land, associate professor with the USC School of Social Work, offers guidance on how to incorporate spirituality and religion into clinical practice in a general sense, including research evidence that supports the use of these expressive practices, including research evidence that supports the use of these expressive practices.
an impoverished area of Mexico City, yet it seems less stigmatized in the Crack of an emerging epidemic.

versal access to antiretroviral therapy, testing, and other infectious diseases. assistant professor. “We started poking around and with crack users and trying to understand how a neighborhood in the bustling capital city, speaking had increased dramatically during the past 10 years.”

reach efforts rarely extend into their neighborhoods. In Mexico City or San Salvador or Managua.

intrigued, the research team tried to assess levels of crack use in Mexico City. But the organized crime networks are that crack was not a major issue among Latinos and their study participants said they had started using the United States were using crack cocaine,” Valdez said. “But all of a sudden there was this crack use in Mexico City seemed much more accepting of the practice. The drug appeared less demonized, its use less stigmatized.

compulsive use and your life just disintegrates. It’s highly addictive and once you start using cocaine in national surveys on drug use. So the researchers turned instead to sub- stance abuse treatment providers, whose data revealed an alarming trend. In 2003, only 8 percent of admissions were related to crack cocaine. Just four years later, that figure was approximately 40 percent.

$\text{\textit{Compared to the extreme moral panic that surrounded crack use in the United States in the 1980s, these communities in Mexico City seemed much more accepting of the practice. The drug appeared less demonized, its use less stigmatized. Despite a widespread belief that crack cocaine is highly addictive and leads to destructive behaviors, many individuals in the study were holding down steady jobs and self-regulating their drug use. That holds promise for a harm reduction approach to addressing crack cocaine use in Mexico City, an approach that focuses on alleviating the negative consequences of compulsive use and helping individuals find a balance.}}$

“One of the beliefs about crack cocaine is that it’s highly addictive and once you start using it, you rapidly move along this trajectory of compulsive use and your life just disintegrates in front of you. Does that pattern hold up in these populations in Latin America?”

Avelardo Valdez

With this population, it’s hard to get users to desist from using from one day to the next,” Cepeda said. “The harm reduc- tion component recognizes that these individuals are using, so let’s begin by giving them the tools and knowledge to reduce their behavioral risk.”

“With this population, it’s hard to get people to quit using from one day to the next,” Cepeda said. “The harm reduc- tion component recognizes that these individuals are using, so let’s begin by giving them the tools and knowledge to reduce their behavioral risk.”

To that end, she is testing a unique strategy to spread the word about the dangers of crack cocaine. Funded by a Grand Challenges Explorations grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, she is exploring the use of projection mapping, an emerging technology that casts two-dimensional images and animated text onto buildings and other large surfaces. Collaborating with Guillermina Natera-Rey, an associate professor with the USC School of Cinematic Arts, and partners at the Instituto Nacional de Psiquiatría Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz, she plans to create and project live action, text, and graphic animations in sev- eral Iztapalapa neighborhoods. These short and captivating messages will focus on so- called behavioral nudges designed to promote healthy behaviors such as HIV testing and treatment, offer tips for negotiation of safer sex and drug use practices, and describe the risks of chronic crack use.

“It’s a very innovative idea, wed- ding new directions in cinema and advertising with public health messages for marginalized popula- tions,” Valdez said.

A team of promotores, or outreach workers, will also be on hand to engage individuals who appear interested in the project and help them deliver more HIV risk reduction informa- tion, and encourage testing and treatment. Researchers plan to distribute safer crack use kits to people who acknowledge that

Researchers plan to distribute safer crack use kits to people who acknowledge that...
they smoke crack; these kits will include lip balm, hand wipes, condoms, brass metal screens, and pipes that won’t burn the mouths or hands of users.

Cepeda will interview approximately 50 people in the target neighborhoods prior to projecting the health messages, immediately after the project ends, and three months later to assess any changes in their knowledge of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, their sexual risk, and their drug use and addiction severity.

“Hopefully we can have some kind of impact before it gets out of control,” she said.

If the project is successful, Cepeda can apply for up to $1 million in funding from the foundation to expand her efforts.

The researchers are also pressing forward with a proposal to conduct a larger survey of crack use throughout Mexico City, hoping to validate some of their preliminary findings. They view their work as closely aligned with the broader global effort being led by USC President C. L. Max Nikias to develop research initiatives and educational collaborations in Central and Latin America.

“It’s very important to build partnerships at different levels, including research and higher education,” Valdez said. “We’ve never been in a better position.”

For more than a decade, he has led a summer training institute to support and advance the careers of students and new researchers interested in issues of substance abuse among Hispanic populations. One participant now heads the research department of Mexico City’s Instituto Para La Atención y Prevención de las Adicciones and has collaborated with Valdez and Cepeda on a needs assessment of drug treatment providers in one of the city’s boroughs.

Valdez hopes to share findings from that project and other initiatives with high-ranking officials when Nikias leads a USC delegation to the capital city this spring. If successful in Mexico, he also envisions developing comparative studies in other nations to the south to fully understand the crack use phenomenon.

“There is some work being done, especially in Brazil, but it’s not getting as much attention in other places,” Valdez said. “Certainly crack use has spread all over Latin America and it is a serious problem.”

USC hosts global summit on military research

by Claudia Bustamante

The nation’s nearly 22 million veterans and their families are confronted with difficult and enduring challenges, including high unemployment rates, homelessness, severe physical injuries, and untreated mental health concerns.

During a recent two-day summit held at USC, about 50 researchers from national and international universities gathered to discuss how research could help understand these and other critical issues.

Attendees included representatives from the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University, the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University, the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research at Cornell University, and the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Center’s Treatment and Services Adaptation Center for Resiliency, Hope and Wellness in Schools has received supplemental federal funds of $795,533 for the next two years. These funds, only awarded to three sites nationally, will be used by Marleen Wong, clinical professor and associate dean of field education, and her colleagues to further develop and evaluate innovative school-based interventions that address the needs of traumatized children and school staff. Wong has also been invited to Kobe, Japan, to open an international symposium commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Great Hanshin earthquake, which resulted in more than 6,400 deaths. Wong offered trainings in disaster response and trauma recovery in Kobe following the earthquake, relying on her experience leading a crisis response team for the Los Angeles Unified School District after the Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles. Steve Hydon, clinical professor of field education, has also been invited to the symposium to discuss secondary trauma among teachers.

One of the USC School of Social Work’s newest clinical teaching faculty members, Terence Fitzgerald, has published a new book titled _Black Males and Racism: Improving the Schooling and Life Chances of African Americans_. Drawing on extensive interviews with black men, Fitzgerald explores the persistence of racism in public schools and higher education in the United States. He also offers strategies and proposals to counteract structural racism and improve the lives of black youth.

A keynote address delivered by Haluk Soydan, associate dean of research and director of the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services, during the annual conference of the Institute of Human Sciences at Ritsumeikan University has been published in Japanese and English. The address focused on evidence-based practice in human services. This is the first time Soydan’s work has been published in Japanese and is reflective of increased collaboration and intellectual exchange with social work scholars in Japan.