“We have a lot of irons in the fire with DMH right now,” said John Brekke, the school’s Frances G. Larson Professor of Social Work Research. He said the relationship has proven mutually beneficial and is largely positive, particularly when researchers take the time to understand the needs of a mental health system like DMH.

“The benefit for anyone in academia is they get to partner with a real-world system of clients, staff, and administrators who are tackling huge public mental health problems,” he said, adding, “But we have to contribute to solving the problems that DMH prioritizes.”

A few years before Marv Southard came on board as its director in 1998, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health suffered a serious blow to its research endeavors when a subject in a joint study with UCLA committed suicide.

Reeling from the unfortunate incident in the following months and years, the department became reluctant to enter into research-related partnerships. “We dipped our toe in but we weren’t really very robustly engaged,” Southard said.

But the 2004 passage of the Mental Health Services Act, a state law that increased funding for county mental health programs and set measurable statewide treatment goals, created a mandate that county officials track health outcomes, assess the effectiveness of interventions, and adjust programs based on their findings. In essence, it marked a renewed focus on evidence-based practice.

Southard, a clinical social worker by training, sought to revamp the department’s relationships with local research institutions, including the USC School of Social Work. “We came to believe we really had a responsibility to find out what actually worked,” he said. “That’s where our need for better clinical practices dovetailed with our need for translational research.”

During the past five years, the partnership between the school and L.A. County Department of Mental Health (DMH) has blossomed, with approximately eight to 10 tenure-track faculty members currently engaged in studies with public treatment clinics or contracted service providers.

I am pleased to deliver a new issue of Hamovitch P.I. to our readers that highlights some of the innovative activities of our faculty. The stories featured here reflect the research excellence and passion of our faculty in advancing social work practice in the service of those most in need.

Haluk Soydan, Ph.D.
Director of the Hamovitch Center

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“Adolescent men who engage in sex with other men are incredibly vulnerable in terms of the stigma they face. They are so profoundly undersupported in their community.”

Dorian Traube
Assistant Professor

Crafting solutions for vulnerable groups

AROUND THE TIME Dorian Traube began her stint as a frontline social worker in a New York clinic for children infected with or affected by HIV, effective antiretroviral therapy had become increasingly available and accessible.

Gone was the tacit understanding that these children would spend their short lives in and out of hospital beds. Emotionally and educationally delayed as a result of their circumstances, they faced a challenging future cluttered with psychosocial stumbling blocks.

Traube, now an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work, loved working at the clinic but felt ill-equipped to address the changing needs of her clients.

“I was really frustrated with the level of evidence-based practices available for working with that population,” she said.

Mentored by renowned social work professor Dr. Edward Mullen, she completed her dissertation at Columbia University on the relationship between a child’s mental health and their mother’s HIV status as a predictor of adolescent sexual health behavior, and helped developed modules to address the psychosocial needs of children affected by HIV in a small village in Tanzania.

That experience proved valuable after she received her doctorate in 2006 and moved to Los Angeles, where she discovered the population of HIV-infected children was minimal. She knew she wanted to continue her efforts to find innovative solutions for high-risk groups, and began to seek out populations that seemed to lack societal support.

It quickly became clear that young men who have sex with men face a similarly complex array of environmental risk factors and social cognitive processes that often lead them to abuse substances and take sexual risks.

“They are so profoundly undersupported in their community,” Traube said. “Many of them are actually thrown out of their homes and wind up in the child welfare system or homeless.”

The correlation to child welfare led Traube to connect with Michele Kipke, who heads the Community, Health Outcomes & Intervention Research (CHOIR) program at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. The group had already developed strong ties with service providers in the region and had gained the trust of gay teens.

With funding from the National Institute of Drug Abuse, Traube began exploring the risk factors and coping strategies employed by young gay men in relation to substance abuse and sexual risk taking.

“One of the unique things that has come out of that work is this idea that adolescent men who engage in sex with other men are incredibly vulnerable in terms of the stigma they face,” she said.

Risk factors

Gay teens are often bullied in school, even if they don’t openly identify themselves as gay, and face homophobia, discrimination, and other social pressures. A recent rash of suicides among young gay men led to the advent of the “It Gets Better” campaign, which seeks to promote a sense of optimism for the future among adolescents facing harassment.

While she views its pursuits as laudable, Traube said the campaign is not sufficient for the “day-to-day” existence of gay teens. Additionally, few venues in Los Angeles, much less the nation, cater specifically to young gay men, she said.

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and as a result they often frequent older-age venues such as clubs and bars in an attempt to engage with their community. “They are around people who are drinking, using substances, and that impacts their ability to make good decisions,” she said.

Unprotected sex between men accounts for 80 percent of new HIV cases, and increasing infection rates and risky sexual behavior among young men have been linked to stimulants such as methamphetamine.

But sexual risk is just one potential obstacle for the population, Traube said, calling for a greater effort to provide intervention programs and organizations that cater directly to gay teens and seek to address the wide array of societal issues they face. She found that the bulk of interventions for gay men in general are community-level programs, while those focused on gay youth are typically designed to encourage the use of condoms or testing for HIV. Research has shown that individual or group interaction is more effective with teens than community-level interventions.

In addition to developing new interventions, Traube would like to see a stronger focus on adapting evidence-based programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults for use among LGBT youth, as well as improved school-based services and economic incentives for the development of venues that cater to gay youth.

**Finding her path**

Although Traube has found passion in her current pursuits, a career in social work wasn’t always in the plans. After a childhood spent on the East Coast and in Southern California, she attended UC Berkeley and graduated magna cum laude with a degree in dramatic arts dance and American studies.

An interest in public health prompted her to look into graduate programs, but she reconsidered after several friends with master’s degrees in public health told her they were having trouble finding employment. Traube’s mother, who holds a master’s degree in social work, suggested looking into social work programs with a health focus.

After being admitted to Columbia University, Traube moved to New York and planned to pursue a career in dance, with social work as a side pursuit. “Within six months of my social work training, I realized it was truly what I loved,” she said.

She completed her master’s degree in social work in 2001 and spent time as a social worker in the pediatric HIV clinic at New York Presbyterian Hospital before entering the Ph.D. program. Traube also served as a research fellow at Columbia’s Mailman School of Public Health and the Mount Sinai School of Medicine (where she was mentored by renowned professor Mary McKay), as well as a research analyst with Mount Sinai’s Division of Health Services Research.

As her research career continues, Traube plans to focus on child welfare and the prevention of behavioral problems among adolescents, with a particular focus on the disconnect between child welfare systems and substance abuse treatment programs.
[lecture]

Cloning results

A clinical psychologist by training, William Shadish always felt an affinity with statistics and research methodology.

In the early 1980s, when he began exploring the world of research design, much of the thinking on a particularly vexing question had been purely theoretical. Researchers assumed there was a way to employ a quasi-experimental design and get the same results as a study conducted with an experimental design.

“But it was just a guess,” Shadish said. “We’ve tried to move farther away from a guess and toward the fact that there are actual conditions under which nonrandomized experiments can replicate randomized ones.”

During a recent guest lecture at the USC School of Social Work, the founding faculty member and professor at UC Merced provided insight into his somewhat arcane field of study. The world of statistics and methodology can seem daunting to the uninitiated, but Shadish melded simple examples with clear, precise language to offer intriguing details of his groundbreaking research.

The premise is fairly straightforward. Randomized trials—those in which subjects are randomly assigned to various treatments or a control group—can often be costly and inappropriate in certain circumstances.

Allowing only half of a study population to receive a court trial in an exploration of the justice system, for example, might lead to more than a few constitutional repercussions.

Therefore, researchers often have to employ quasi-experimental designs, in which subjects might choose which treatment to receive or are placed in groups based on nonrandom characteristics. While some may be costly and inappropriate, researchers must employ these quasi-designs to get the same results in certain circumstances.

Experimental design.

As a study conducted with an experimental design and get the same results as a study conducted with an experimental design.

The world of statistics and methodology can seem daunting to the uninitiated, but Shadish melded simple examples with clear, precise language to offer intriguing details of his groundbreaking research.

“You're marching into this really stringent environment at the [National Institutes of Health] and we have the overarching university expectation that we're going to get these types of dollars, so it's a pretty daunting process,” said Julie Cederbaum, an assistant professor who started her research career with the USC School of Social Work in 2009.

For Cederbaum and other young researchers at the school looking to gain a foothold in the field, one man has made a world of difference. With decades of experience on proposal review committees and his own success in securing federal funding, John Landsverk has proven invaluable in his role as mentor to the school’s junior faculty.

Given that he is also the director of a renowned research consortium on child welfare he directs in San Diego.

“His experience with understanding the potential of young researchers is quite rare,” said Haluk Soydan, director of the school’s Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services. “It looks very simple to someone else, but it is very decisive for their professional life.”

In addition to Landsverk’s mentoring role, an official partnership between the USC School of Social Work and the research consortium directed by Landsverk—the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center—includes initiatives to develop federally funded research on child mental health care in Los Angeles County, support the school’s graduate education program in San Diego County, and improve the exchange of ideas and data between the two institutions.

Despite his significant involvement in the social work field, Landsverk never pursued the topic during his studies as a young man. Instead, he earned a doctorate in sociology from the University of Minnesota and began teaching.

[news]

Young researchers benefit from mentor

IN THE HIGH-STAKES battle for federal research funding, it’s tough for a young faculty member to find an edge.

Mastering the politics and process of grant writing is an acquired skill, and can be a serious stumbling block for burgeoning researchers. Not only are reviewers looking for a logical and sound proposal, but the concept must be original and innovative.

“We’re marching into this really stringent environment at the [National Institutes of Health] and we have the overarching university expectation that we’re going to get these types of dollars, so it’s a pretty daunting process,” said Julie Cederbaum, an assistant professor who started her research career with the USC School of Social Work in 2009.

For Cederbaum and other young researchers at the school looking to gain a foothold in the field, one man has made a world of difference. With decades of experience on proposal review committees and his own success in securing federal funding, John Landsverk has proven invaluable in his role as mentor to the school’s junior faculty.

Given that he is also the director of a renowned research consortium on child welfare, a senior scholar at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, and professor emeritus at the San Diego State University School of Social Work, it’s clear to see his skills are in high demand. When leaders at the USC School of Social Work came in contact with him through his work at the research consortium, they quickly recognized his talent and brought him on board as a senior consultant.

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Although he enjoyed the experience, he soon became fascinated with public health and research, and left his teaching position to conduct postdoctoral studies in mental health and psychiatric epidemiology at UCLA. “I found academia a little boring,” Landsverk said. “I found that I liked conducting research of a very high level of complexity and sophistication.”

About 20 years ago, federal officials with the National Institute of Mental Health announced an initiative designed to develop robust research programs in schools of social work. With his strong background in statistical analyses and quantitative studies, as well as his growing interest in mental health issues, Landsverk seemed tailor-made for the project.

Recruited to develop a program focused on child abuse and neglect with a specific emphasis on foster care-related issues, he quickly brought together the initial elements of what would become the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center (CASRC).

Physically located in San Diego at Rady Children’s Hospital, the center is actually a consortium of more than 100 researchers and staff from universities and service agencies throughout the country. From the start, CASRC has embraced multiple disciplines, from clinical psychology and social work to pediatrics, statistics, and anthropology—all brought to bear on issues surrounding child abuse and neglect.

The problems are staggering; children in foster care face high rates of developmental and mental health problems, and their parents often struggle with their own substance abuse and mental health issues. An estimated 5 to 20 percent of children need some form of mental health care, but only a third of those receive help.

“I’m not so interested in why bad things happen to [children], but what they do about it and what services are there to help them deal with it,” Landsverk said.

Beginning in the late 1990s, he started following cohorts of children as they progressed through the foster care system. The research led to an intervention that taught foster parents how to respond effectively to behavioral problem; as a result, children were less likely to be disruptive or unstable, and more likely to reunite with their birth parents.

Landsverk’s interest in proven, real-world solutions led him to help develop the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), which features effective programs and interventions for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers.

Soydan, who also had a hand in developing the clearinghouse, called Landsverk the “intellectual engine” of the CEBC. In addition to that project, Landsverk is involved in many research programs throughout the country, including a federally funded center on research methods and an interdisciplinary network of researchers and managers seeking to improve mental health services for children through the implementation of evidence-based practices.

CASRC itself has proven to be a breeding ground of sorts for future researchers at the USC School of Social Work. Lawrence Palinkas, Concepcion Barrio, and Michael Hurlburt are among those on the faculty who participated in the research consortium.

In recent months, Landsverk also attended a faculty retreat held by the school, offering his advice as the faculty and administration begin to reform the school’s research structure. “His advice again has been very, very valuable,” Soydan said.

Despite his widespread interests and responsibilities, he remains accessible and responsive to young researchers at the school. When Cederbaum began fleshing out her ideas for several grant proposals, Landsverk walked her through the process, providing ongoing feedback and guidance on what review committees look for and how to tailor her projects to improve her chances of success. Throughout their interaction, he maintained a warm, emotive, and supportive attitude.

“He’s amazing,” Cederbaum said. “He embodies what a mentor is and should be.”

As the field of social work has grown enormously, the amount of federal funding has leveled off. The recent economic downturn has only heightened the ever-increasing level of competition for federal research dollars. A decade or two ago, Landsverk said roughly 1 in 5 proposals would receive funding.

“Now it’s down below 1 in 10 and its sinking,” he said, adding that the challenge only spurs him on. “It’s a kick. I like competition.”

The 70-year-old said his family and friends often ask him why he hasn’t retired, and his answer is simple.

“I keep working because I love it,” he said. “I’m having a good time. I love what I’m doing and I feel good about it.”
stressed a key factor: carefully selecting and controlling for covariates, or variables that might influence the outcome.

When he controlled for all covariates, he found that the nonrandomized results closely mirrored those in the randomized trial. But he also discovered that including only a few variables in the analysis resulted in a similar outcome.

Finding the right covariates to include, he reasoned, is the key to replicating randomized results in a nonrandomized study. Using common sense and past research when deciding what variables to consider is critical, Shadish said, but interviewing participants about why they chose one treatment over another is also extremely helpful.

He described one study in which students were asked whether they would rather go to a co-ed school or a single-gender school. When asked why they overwhelmingly chose co-ed schools, the boys in the study said they were afraid they would become homosexual in a boys-only school.

“[The researchers] would have never known that if they didn’t ask them,” Shadish said.

Offering his thoughts following the lecture, USC School of Social Work professor Lawrence Palinkas invoked a classical maxim: “garbage in, garbage out.” In order to avoid “garbage,” or poor results, as output, researchers must put a lot of effort into preparing their studies. With sufficient forethought and preparation, he noted, the gap between results of nonrandomized and randomized studies can be significantly narrowed.

[ news ]

New professors strengthen research profile

Four new professors are joining the USC School of Social Work faculty this fall, bolstering the school’s profile in the areas of child welfare and maltreatment, sociology, gangs, substance use, and social policy.

A team of researchers from the University of Houston—professor Avelardo Valdez, research professor Charles Kaplan, and assistant professor Alice Cepeda—are bringing a wealth of expertise in the social and public health consequences of drug use and violence among high-risk populations.

“Dr. Valdez and his research team bring several decades worth of accumulated research experience on drug use consequences, drug addiction treatment, and gang activities, especially among Latino populations,” said Haluk Soydan, director of the Hamovitch Center. “The Valdez team is also well established in Mexico and is looking into expanding some of its research projects into other Latin American countries.”

They are joined by new assistant professor Emily Putnam-Hornstein, who gained recognition for her work on child maltreatment at UC Berkeley.

“We are also thrilled by the addition of Dr. Emily Putnam-Hornstein,” Soydan said. “Within hours of joining the center, she started preparing a proposal to bid for a prestigious Injury Control Research Center grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If awarded, this center grant will be the first of its kind at the Hamovitch Research Center.”

Valdez holds a bachelor’s degree in social work and a master’s degree in urban affairs from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, as well as a master’s degree and PhD in sociology from UCLA. As a student in the 1960s, Valdez became interested in social movements and community organizing, and spent several years as a community activist and labor organizer in Milwaukee, Miami, and New York.

“I was attracted to social work because of the social justice orientation, especially compared to other disciplines,” Valdez said.

Following his doctoral studies, he spent 22 years at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the past decade as a professor at the University of Houston’s Graduate School of Social Work. During his early academic career, he focused on teaching classes and conducting research on Mexican-origin populations and other minorities. As a Fulbright Fellow in Mexico City, Valdez taught courses and conducted research among highly marginalized urban communities where substance abuse was common. The experience sparked his interest in the connection between context and culture, and drug use and HIV/AIDS, and he quickly delved into related research with a particular focus on cities in the Southwest and along the U.S.-Mexico border.

“I saw there was very little research in that area, so I sort of carved my way into the field,” he said, adding that his biculturalism and unique perspective gave him a deeper understanding of the relationship between Mexico and the United States.

As Valdez began acquiring federal grants to pursue his research, his interests spread to youth gangs and other vulnerable populations such as injecting heroin users and sex workers, although he maintained an overarching focus on the role of social environments in risk behaviors and long-term health.

One particular study focused on gang members in their late teens in San Antonio. After an initial interview in 1995, Valdez and his team

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have traced their path through drug use, crime, violence, and incarceration, representing one of the first longitudinal studies to examine the social and health consequences of the gang lifestyle.

The longitudinal study is being transferred to USC, and Valdez hopes to develop similar pursuits in Southern California. His team also has plans to develop a research cluster on drug and social policy at USC.

A medical sociologist by training, Kaplan holds a degree in political science from Tulane University and a master’s degree and doctorate in sociology from UCLA. He has sought a balance between social work, sociology, and social epidemiology during the course of his prolific research career exploring the patterns of drug use and treatment strategies.

Kaplan became interested in drug abuse and addiction, then a nascent research field, after receiving additional training in biomedical research at UCLA.

Europe was just beginning to experience the effects of the heroin epidemic when he accepted a position with Frankfurt University after a brief stint at Rutgers University. In addition to exploring the spread of heroin in Germany, he studied various treatment standards and drug policies throughout Europe, eventually exploring various community approaches and residential treatment care methods in what was then the largest funded research project in Europe on drug addiction. During his time in Europe, Kaplan held positions at Erasmus University, where he established the Addiction Research Institute, and Maastricht University.

Despite spending much of his academic career in Europe, Kaplan was nudged back to the United States when the U.S. government had expressed interest in supporting research on drug use and minority populations. Kaplan also met Valdez, then a professor at University of Texas at San Antonio. “We hit it off and started to collaborate,” Kaplan said. He began spending summers in Texas, eventually transitioning to University of Houston with Valdez. Appointed associate dean of research, Kaplan began to enhance the university’s research profile while exploring the social epidemiology of drug use and its health and social consequences among minorities and special populations, such as evacuees from Hurricane Katrina and gang members.

At the USC School of Social Work, he is taking on a similar role as research professor and associate dean of research. In addition to his administrative duties, Kaplan is keen to continue exploring the preclinical patterns of drug use with his colleagues, including the emergence of crack cocaine in Mexico City and the impact of the drug wars on Latino communities.

Similar to her colleagues, Cepeda has a strong educational background in sociology. She earned a bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in sociology from the University of Texas at San Antonio, as well as a doctorate in sociology from the City University of New York. As an undergraduate, she became interested in drug use issues among Mexican American populations after working at a research center conducting substance use surveys with adolescents.

“The driving factor was the inequities, the disadvantages associated with substance use among primarily poor, urban Mexican American populations,” Cepeda said.

As she pursued her doctorate, Cepeda began working with older populations, including aging Mexican American heroin users and sex workers along the U.S.-Mexico border. She is also a coinvestigator on a study exploring the emergence and spread of crack cocaine use among Latino populations in Mexico City, a topic that has yet to be explored in detail. By developing an understanding of the problem as it emerges, Cepeda is hopeful that drug treatment and prevention services can be better targeted to address the root of the issue.

In her new role at USC, she is interested in focusing on issues affecting Latina immigrant women in high-risk environments, in addition to expanding her research to other Latino subpopulations, such as Central Americans.

“As researchers, we tend to clump Latinos into one group,” she said. “Getting into the nuances of each specific population is critical.”

Additionally, Cepeda said she is looking forward to working with the diverse faculty at USC and transforming her social epidemiology research into a foundation for intervention and prevention services.

The fourth new member of the faculty, Putnam-Hornstein holds a degree in psychology from Yale University, a master’s degree in social work from Columbia University, and a PhD from UC Berkeley. As a researcher, she prefers to take a wide-angle view rather than focusing on sample groups. While working at UC Berkeley’s Center for Social Services Research, she helped collect and analyze data on every report taken by child protective services in California. But Putnam-Hornstein envisions an even wider reach, and is stepping into her new role at USC with big plans to expand the dataset.

During her undergraduate studies at Yale, Putnam-Hornstein became involved with the Bush Center for Child Development and Social Policy and developed an interest in child maltreatment research. After graduating and spending time as a case worker for teens in foster care, she earned her master’s degree in social work and began considering doctoral programs.

She quickly found herself drawn to UC Berkeley’s vast collection of information; instead of sample data, the university has access to details about everyone in the state of child maltreatment statewide. “These are the actual children and families that are affected,” she said.

While impressed by the dataset, Putnam-Hornstein quickly found ways to improve its reach. She secured access to 4.3 million confidential birth records and 25,000 death records, and set about linking them to child protective services data. Her next step is to convince state officials to provide emergency room and hospital records, which will give investigators an even wider view of the trajectory of maltreatment and provide insight into where resources should be targeted. “The data are just sitting there, waiting to be linked,” she said.

She envisions developing a summer training institute at USC to provide guidance to researchers and students interested in working with the UC Berkeley data. Her long-term goal is to develop a greater understanding of the context surrounding child maltreatment in order to identify and provide assistance to at-risk families before maltreatment occurs.
from page 1

A new study has found that researchers with the USC School of Social Work authored some of the profession’s most cited journal articles during the past decade.

Five publications penned by researchers at the school ranked in the top 100 articles cited between 2000 and 2009, according to a study published in the British Journal of Social Work.

“I knew the article was cited very often, but I didn’t realize it was that influential,” said Michèlle Mor Barak, a professor and director of the Ph.D. program at the USC School of Social Work. Coauthored with then-doctoral students Jan Nissly and Amy Levin, her analysis of the causes of burnout and turnover among social workers involved in child welfare and other human services ranked fourth on the list in terms of citations per year.

“Over the years, we’ve overlooked the importance of taking care of the social workers who are providing services to disadvantaged populations,” Mor Barak said. “To me, it was an encouraging sign that an article that examines the causes for the high turnover in our profession and focuses on how social workers deal with burnout and case overload received that much attention. We cannot provide good services to our clients if we don’t take care of ourselves.”

Published in 2004 in Social Service Review, the article had been cited 158 times at the time of the recent study, averaging nearly 18 citations per year. Other highly cited publications included an article on parent training programs in child welfare authored in part by assistant professor Michael Hurlburt that ranked 27th, and an article on mental health services in black churches written in part by the new state policies have better integration of individuals with severe mental illness into both the mental health community and the larger community.

Although the research team is now in the midst of compiling and assessing the data, preliminary results indicate that those enrolled in an intensive treatment model created by the new state policies have better health and life outcomes than those with similar diagnoses who received usual care.

“The outcomes were very encouraging for the metrics we were looking at, which were increase in employment, decrease in homelessness, decrease in incarceration, and decrease in psychiatric hospitalization,” Southard said. Such studies allow the department to create a feedback loop that results in constant improvements to treatment programs, he continued, adding, “From my perspective, that’s the primary value of the research.”

In recent years, the USC School of Social Work has sought to enhance its research profile by developing clusters in specific areas of study, such as serious mental illness, child welfare, and homelessness. Although there is a clear tie between DMH and the serious mental illness research cluster headed by Brekke, there are also growing connections between other areas of focus.

“There is a lot more interest in developing linkages between the Department of Health and the Department of Mental Health,” Brekke said, adding that child development and homelessness are closely tied to health issues. “Pretty much all of the clusters that we are currently beginning to support are likely to have involvement with the Department of Mental Health.”

One major project involving another segment of the school is a three-year pilot intervention being tested by the military social work program through the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families. Southard said the pilot program is slated to begin this fall, and will involve devising services that respond specifically to military veterans and their families.

He explained that in previous decades, mental health officials felt that the Veterans Administration (VA) was responsible for providing mental health services to returning veterans.

However, it became clear that not all soldiers are eligible for federal services, while others may choose to seek services outside of the VA system due to stigma or other factors. As a result, DMH service providers have started accepting military veterans as they would any other county resident, creating a

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and that are congruent with their mission.”

As the largest public mental health system in the country, DMH serves more than 210,000 clients of widely varying ethnic and racial backgrounds with an annual budget of more than $1.6 billion. In addition to running 75 of its own program sites, it jointly operates more than 100 sites with other county departments, hospitals, and jails, and contracts with more than 1,000 providers to offer a wide spectrum of mental health services.

The department is expected to provide services in 17 different languages, serve as the primary source of mental health care for those who don’t have insurance or can’t afford services, and provide major disaster and crisis response for the entire population at no charge. Through the Mental Health Services Act, county officials are also expected to focus on prevention and early intervention programs.

“That is giving us, in turn, an entrée to be a better provider of integrated care, to integrate services with physical health and substance abuse treatment in preparation for health reform in 2014,” Southard said.

The implementation of the new state law is also fodder for a major study being led by Brekke and several other local researchers, including Joel Braslow of UCLA and Kathleen Daly, the deputy director of DMH.

The goal of the five-year, federally funded study is to understand how the new policies affect client treatment and outcomes, staff practices and morale, and mental health services.

Researchers embedded themselves in treatment clinics for three and a half years, surveying officials, staff, and clients. In particular, Brekke is interested in the integration of individuals with severe mental illness into both the mental health community and the larger community.

“The benefit for anyone in academia is they get to partner with a real-world system of clients, staff, and administrators who are tackling huge public mental health problems. But we have to contribute to solving the problems that DMH prioritizes and that are congruent with their mission.”

John Brekke
Professor

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www.usc.edu/socialwork/research
duty to tailor services to the unique needs of returning soldiers. In addition to devising a training program for staff in the mental health system, the research team plans to convene a consortium of veteran-serving agencies in the public and private sectors to develop a unified approach to treatment. The intervention being developed involves inviting veterans and their families to an overnight retreat to learn about reintegration into society, group therapy, social support, and how to connect to ongoing services.

“We want to see if we can do something as the troops return involving them and their families that lessens the likelihood that the negative effects of combat stress will change their lives,” Southard said. “If it works, it will be a major piece of translational research.”

Other projects include an ongoing research partnership with the Clinical and Translational Science Institute; an effort by Brekke and professor Kathleen Ell to train “peer navigators,” or those with personal experience in the mental health system, to help guide patients with mental illness and health issues; and a professional development program that places master’s students at DMH agencies to integrate theory and practice, prepare them for work with the seriously mentally ill, and increase their chances of gaining employment in public mental health systems.

The USC School of Social Work is also joining with DMH to host the 7th International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health (pathways2013.com) for the first time in the United States in June 2013, a well-recognized gathering of scholars and researchers that will focus on closing the gap between research and practice. Southard said he is hopeful that community partners will be able to highlight specific success stories, such as a wellness center in Highland Park, a youth drop-in center in the San Gabriel Valley, and the Mental Health America Village in Long Beach, one of the premier sites for integrated mental health services.

The department is also working with researchers to develop models for integrating health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment, he said, adding, “We’re hoping some of those will be mature enough to show off by 2013.”

Another collaborative enterprise linking USC with DMH as well as UCLA is known as the Center for the Study of Public Mental Health, which seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the recent state policies on mental health treatment. The center is also tasked with examining Los Angeles County’s efforts to transition to a recovery model, which focuses on not simply controlling symptoms and ensuring compliance with medication but a more holistic approach.

“That doesn’t mean their illness goes away, but recovery in the sense that somebody manages their illness in a way that allows them to have a normal life,” Southard said.

The School of Social Work is among the leading institutions in terms of studying and implementing the recovery model, added Southard, whose connections to USC include a stint as a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Keck School of Medicine.

As the Department of Mental Health ramps up its research-related activities—an area that is expected to grow even more with a new stream of funding dedicated to partnerships with academic institutions—Southard said the USC School of Social Work will play an important role in developing translational research opportunities and improving mental health treatment outcomes throughout the county.

“I think the relationship has been strong for some time, that it has been growing even stronger recently,” he said, “and that is a really great thing for both institutions.”
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by associate professor Karen Lincoln that hit 25th on the list.

Haluk Soydan, director of the school's Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services, and associate professor Devon Brooks each penned articles that ranked 66th and 87th, respectively.

The study examined 79 social work journals published during the past decade and determined the 100 most cited articles in terms of citations per year. In highlighting the most influential articles published in the past decade, the authors argued that the study provides a window into the priorities of the social work profession.

To that end, the authors noted that evidence-based practice and translational research was a significant topic of discussion in many of the articles, suggesting the link between research and practice is a growing issue for the social work profession.

The USC School of Social Work has placed an increasing emphasis on translational and evidence-based research in recent years, and researchers at the school have been closely involved with several online clearinghouses that highlight effective, proven social work interventions.

The full list as well as the study, titled “Influential publications in social work discourse: The 100 most highly cited articles in disciplinary journals: 2000-09,” is available online at the British Journal of Social Work website.

[leadership]

We are proud to share the news that Marilyn Flynn has accepted an offer to serve another five-year term as dean of the USC School of Social Work following an extensive review by faculty, staff, and students. "Under Dean Flynn's leadership, the school has established itself as one of the most innovative schools of social work in the world," said Elizabeth Garrett, USC provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. "She has devoted particular attention to broadening the school's portfolio of social sciences research aimed at solving pressing problems, as well as increasing opportunities for doctoral students."

[staff]

Kendra Suh has joined the USC School of Social Work as the new associate director of the Center for Asian-Pacific Leadership. Suh previously served as director of programs at Asian American LEAD, a non-profit that works with underserved Asian American youth. Her new responsibilities include program development and operations, as well as aiding the center's mission to create educational opportunities for emerging leaders, improve cross-cultural communication, and nurture mutual cooperation among professionals of different cultures.

[accolades]

Marleen Wong, assistant dean and clinical professor of field education at the USC School of Social Work, has been selected to advise the federal government on public health matters as a member of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Advisory Council.

During the three-year term on the 12-member panel, Wong will address issues ranging from prevention, treatment, and recovery support services, including substance abuse, mental health, trauma, military families, and health reform.

[grants]

Julie Cederbaum, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work, recently received two grants focusing on the disproportionate effect of HIV and substance use on young black men and adolescents. A $700,000 federal award, of which $200,000 is earmarked to USC, will enable her to explore the effectiveness of a media intervention—a serial drama that will be screened on Los Angeles Metro buses—designed to increase HIV testing among black youth. A second grant, for approximately $100,000, will support a project to evaluate mother–son communication strategies as a deterrent to tobacco, alcohol, and substance use among young black adolescents. Both awards are from the National Institutes of Health and will span two years of research and analysis. Visit the USC School of Social Work website for more details.