Researchers at the UConn School of Social Work harness their expertise to attack some of the greatest problems facing individuals, families, and communities. A selection of projects are highlighted in this newsletter.

“This has been a year of considerable research growth and scholarly productivity for the School of Social Work,” says Associate Dean for Research Michael Fendrich. “Our strong partnerships with three Connecticut state agencies — the Office of Early Childhood, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services — continue to inform the implementation of services and programs that are critical to the well-being of the people of Connecticut.

“Drawing on a steadily increasing base of extramural grant funding support, the scholarship produced by our faculty addresses some of the most critical problems of the day: immigration resettlement, prison reentry, the opioid crisis, child maltreatment, violence and trauma, racism, environmental justice, and grief and loss.”
Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Addressing Problem Drinking Among Young Adults

Supported by a $690,000 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism grant, Michael Fendrich, professor and associate dean for research, has teamed up with Crystal Park, professor of psychology, and Beth Russell, associate professor of human development and family sciences, to develop interventions to address escalating drinking patterns among young adults. Most alcohol prevention-interventions with young adults have focused on peer influences. Fendrich says he and his colleagues are taking their research in a new direction: “We’re thinking a lot of problematic drinking may be a function more of how people handle stress.” During the three-year study conducted at UConn, they aim to develop and evaluate skills people can use to cope with distressing emotions without relying on alcohol. “We’re excited about a promising new approach to an issue that has been fairly intractable,” says Fendrich.

Analyzing Pathways to Overdose — and Through Addiction

Associate Research Professor Hsiu-Ju Lin and Dr. William Becker at Yale are assessing the role of FDA-regulated substances in fatal and nonfatal overdoses. “Little is known about particular prescribed medications and the pathways of these medications to abuse by patients or diversion to other users,” Lin says. Linking datasets from various state agencies is allowing the team to discover how prescribing practices are associated with overdoses and how to prevent them.

Lin is working on multiple federally-funded projects related to the opioid crisis. She also is co-investigator with Yale’s Dr. Emily Wang on a National Institute of Drug Abuse-funded study of the effectiveness of the Transitions Clinic Network, a program that matches people with opioid use disorder who are released from incarceration with peer health care workers who themselves were formerly incarcerated.

Broadening Our Understanding of Grief

Professor Alex Gitterman recently co-authored two articles that expand understanding of grief and how social work can help people deal with it. “Grieving for the Loss of Place, its Familiarities and the Accompanying Associations and for the Loss of Precious Time and Associated Opportunities” appeared in Families and Society.

“The literature on grieving mostly focuses on loss of loved ones,” says Gitterman. “We suggest that it’s a much broader concept. Losing a home, becoming uprooted through natural disasters, losing time to drug addiction — there is mourning for that too.”

Published in Clinical Social Work Journal, “Ambiguous and Disenfranchised Grief: An Overlooked but Critical Need for Social Work Intervention,” examines grief when a loved one is alive but no longer present, such as with an Alzheimer’s patient.

Child Welfare Services/Child Development

Tracking Family Treatment Court Outcomes

As a member of the National Family Treatment Court Standards Advisory Group, Assistant Professor Margaret Lloyd helped write best practice standards for family treatment courts. Over the next four years, through a grant from the National Institute of Justice, she will help the state of Oklahoma measure how well courts are implementing the standards and their impact. “We’ll be looking at how long the parent stays in treatment, and whether they and their child reunite after the child has been in foster care,” says Lloyd.

Simultaneously, Lloyd is working on a project funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that examines an Oklahoma family treatment court program designed to strengthen parent-child bonding in families with children aged 0 to 5. Early findings have been promising. “No infants born to parents who have been through the program have been born substance-exposed, and we are seeing much faster reunification trajectories,” reports Lloyd.

Supporting the Care of Children and Families Across Connecticut

In a groundbreaking collaboration, the School of Social Work last year joined with the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood (OEC) to create the OEC-UConn Performance Partnership. The new evaluation center draws on the expertise of UConn researchers to implement data-driven policy-making in support of the OEC’s coordinated system of care.

“We’ll be tracking the well-being of children and families across the state as well as the performance of the OEC office and its programs,” says Assistant Research Professor Kathryn Parr, who directs the partnership from the UConn side. “Ultimately what we’re doing with this partnership is putting the expertise of UConn in service of the public good.”
Improving Outcomes for Young Adults

Nate Okpych, assistant professor of social work, studies older youth in foster care. As program director for the longitudinal CalYouth Study, he evaluates California state law AB 12, which in 2012 extended the age limit for foster care from 18 to 21. The study tracks 727 young people who were in foster care at age 17, interviewing them every two years through age 23. Analysis of the age 21 interviews indicates a wide range of benefits, including increased high school graduation and college enrollment rates and reduced homelessness.

In a second project, Okpych is collaborating with a researcher at Western Michigan University to study the effects of social network formation on college persistence among foster youth, who historically have low graduation rates. “We think the connections youth make on campus are going to affect persistence,” he explains. “Who do they turn to for emotional support? Who do they turn to for information and guidance? Who do they turn to for academic support?”

Delivering Better Child Welfare Services

Under the leadership of Co-Directors Brenda Kurz and Patricia Carlson, the UConn School of Social Work’s Performance Improvement Center (PIC) works closely with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) and its community partner agencies to evaluate services offered to families of children at risk for further maltreatment. “The goal is to enhance access, service quality, interventions, and outcomes,” says Kurz, associate professor and MSW program director. From an initial focus on the Community Support for Families program within the Connecticut DCF’s Family Assessment Response (FAR) track, PIC has broadened its work to encompass all of FAR and, more recently, the state’s Investigation Response track as well. Some 186,598 families have been served by the two tracks since PIC began its evaluation.

Immigration, Refugees, and International Social Work

Studying Refugee Resettlement in the United States

The team of Kathryn Libal, associate professor and director of UConn’s Human Rights Institute, Scott Harding, associate professor and associate dean for academic affairs, and S. Megan Berthold, associate professor and director of field education, is conducting qualitative research on the politics and practices of voluntarism and refugee resettlement in the United States.

Working with programs in Connecticut, Kentucky, New York, and Utah, they are examining the strengths and challenges of scaling up a new model of refugee resettlement that relies on community co-sponsors rather than refugee resettlement organizations alone. Of particular interest, says Libal, are the “motivations of the volunteers, their perceptions of the resettlement program, and the meanings they attribute to the work.”

The next phase of research will focus on “how resettled refugees perceive volunteer engagement and supports during the first few years of their residence in the United States.” The team’s contributions to literature on refugee resettlement and other dimensions of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers include chapters in a new book by Berthold and Libal, “Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the United States: Interdisciplinary Perspectives” (Praeger), and a chapter by Harding and Libal in another contributory volume on community sponsorship of refugees globally.

Exploring International Partnerships

Rebecca Thomas, associate professor of policy practice and director of the Center for International Social Work Studies, coordinates a joint academic program exchange between UConn and Yerevan State University in Armenia. For the past five years, Thomas has taken SSW students to Armenia to conduct research on issues related to international development, poverty, and migration, as well as the role social work can play in helping refugees achieve economic and social security. “We’ve been focusing on Syrian refugees of Armenian descent who have been moving back to Armenia as a result of the war in Syria,” says Thomas. She explores the reverse migration in her article “Returning Home: the Experiences of Resettlement for Syrian-Armenian Refugees into Armenia” in the Journal of International Migration and Integration.

Among other projects, she also recently co-authored with Professor Emeritus and Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor Lynne M. Healy “International Social Work: Professional Action in an Interdependent World,” (3rd Edition), forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Looking After Older Adult Immigrant Populations

The research interests of Rupal Parekh, assistant professor, include late-life immigration, social isolation, and how built and natural environments impact the health and well-being of older adult immigrants. One current project in Arlington, Texas, funded by a consortium within the Department of Transportation, examines the social networks of Vietnamese older adults who are dependent on grown children for transportation. “When people have less mobility, it impacts their ability to have meaningful relationships,” says Parekh. “So you see people experiencing social isolation and everything that comes with that. It’s really all connected.” She and her team are currently trying to expand the work to Hartford, where they have received a letter of support from a senior center serving Puerto Rican clients.

Training Cambodian Health Care Workers to Treat Diabetes Patients

Supported by a grant from UConn Health Research Excellence Program, S. Megan Berthold, associate professor and director of field education, and co-PIs Julie Wagner (UConn Health) and Thomas Buckley (School of Pharmacy) have partnered with Connecticut-based Khmer Health Advocates and the Cambodian Diabetes Association in Siem Reap, Cambodia, to address an ongoing diabetes epidemic.
in Cambodia. In response to a critical shortage of healthcare workers, Cambodia has developed a system of community health workers called village health support guides (guides). Using tablets, U.S.-based community health workers (CHW) provide remote training and support to the Cambodian guides. In turn, the guides deliver a validated “Eat, Walk, Sleep” cardiometabolic patient education curriculum and provide routine follow-up to diabetic villagers. After six months, Berthold and colleagues measured CHW, guide, and patient outcomes to evaluate the feasibility of peer-to-peer training with telehealth. Preliminary findings are encouraging, reports Berthold, with patients showing significantly decreased A1c levels (improved blood glucose levels) and blood pressures after six monthly face-to-face meetings with the trained Cambodian guides.

Community and Student Engagement and Training

Expanding Voter Participation to Improve Community Well-being

“Communities that vote have higher rates of education, they report higher rates of health and well being, and they also have higher earnings,” says Tanya Rhodes Smith, instructor in-residence at the School of Social Work and director of the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work. With help from a grant from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, the Humphreys Institute is providing support and resources to organizations that want to integrate voter registration, education, and outreach into their service delivery. It also is expanding its work with UConn students. “We are trying to build this really strong foundation and connection to social work practice that voting is an appropriate intervention, an ethical and effective intervention at all levels,” says Rhodes Smith.

Gaining Insight on Social Media Conflict

In her work on adolescent violence prevention, Caitlin Elsaesser, assistant professor of social work, looks at environmental factors that contribute to community violence. Of particular interest to her is the fast-moving world of social media, where digital conflicts can sometimes erupt in on-the-ground incidents. “Prevention workers tell us how much they hear about social media playing a role in youth violence,” explains Elsaesser, “but there is no real data to help get a sense of the prevalence of these events.” With funding from UConn’s Research Excellence Program and the Institute for Collaboration on Health, Intervention, and Policy (InCHIP), she and colleagues are working with Hartford youth to develop and test ways to measure the experiences related to social media conflict. “Young people are the experts in their experience, and we view them as critical partners in this process,” says Elsaesser.

Creating Resources for Students to Enhance Environmental and Social Justice

Recipients of a UConn Initiative on Campus Dialogue (ICD) grant, co-PIs Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, associate professor and BSW program director; Kim Campbell, MSW, extension assistant professor; Margaret Lloyd and Rupal Parekh are organizing a program to train undergraduate students in dialogue facilitation skills and provide them with opportunities to incorporate dialogue into a class on environmental justice. Called Student-Led Circles of Justice (SLCJ) the project is a Hartford campus initiative. Also on the Hartford campus, co-PIs Ann Marie Garran, associate professor, and Milagros Marrero-Johnson, MSW, director of strategic programming, have received an ICD grant to create a webinar about how to recognize and address microaggressions when they occur in the classroom. The webinar will be coupled with an intergroup dialogue session that focuses on the practical application of ideas discussed in the webinar.

Examining Community-Labor Alliances

For a new book, Professor Louise Simmons is looking at coalitions of community organizations and labor groups around the country and how they tackle economic justice issues. Multidisciplinary in outlook, the project touches on issues relevant to urban and labor studies as well as social work. “It’s a very intersectional set of issues,” says Simmons. “Economic justice issues and how they relate to racial justice, gender justice, immigrant rights. What I try to do is put some of these concepts into a vocabulary that relates to social workers.”

Training Culturally Competent Practitioners to Work with Children with Disabilities

Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States, yet they have the lowest autism diagnosis rate. One reason for the discrepancy, says Cristina Wilson, associate professor in the School of Social Work and research director at the UConn Health University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, may be lack of access to culturally competent specialists who have the ability to use Spanish-language screening tools. Wilson recently received, as co-PI with Mary Bruder of UConn Health, two five-year grants from the U.S. Department of Education to train students at the MSW and Ph.D. levels to focus on children with disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable populations. “These grants will ensure that an interdisciplinary group of fully credentialed personnel will have the necessary skills and knowledge, including cultural competence, to be successful in serving high needs infants and young children and their families,” says Wilson.

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