Welcome

The School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill presents “Strategic Research,” a new quarterly magazine that will highlight new research projects, findings, and related efforts by the School’s faculty, students, and collaborative partners.

The School’s Office of Strategic Research Priorities (OSRP), led by Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development Sheryl Zimmerman, will publish each issue in collaboration with the School’s communications team.

In this first issue of “Strategic Research,” OSRP provides an overview of the eight programmatic areas of research within the School:

- Care Needs and Services for Older Adults
- Evidence-Building in Child Welfare
- Family Relationships and Interpersonal Violence
- Health and Behavioral Health
- Human Services Outcomes and Response to Human Trafficking
- Services and Interventions for Justice-Involved Persons with Mental Illness
- Social Research Methods and Data Analytics
- Well-Being and Service Delivery to Marginalized Populations

You’ll also find an overview of the School’s Global Social Development Innovations center, which celebrates its first anniversary this month.

Research Highlights for Fall 2018

From August 2018 through October 2018, six social work faculty have received awards for nine new projects as principal investigators, totaling $4.6 million.

Dr. Will Hall, Dr. Todd Jensen, Dr. Paul Lanier, Dr. Gary Nelson, Dr. Tonya Van Deinse, and Dr. Sheryl Zimmerman will lead projects beginning this academic year, addressing the needs of populations that include sexual minorities, military families, persons with developmental disabilities and their guardians, probationers who have severe mental illness (and the probation officers who work with them), persons being treated for opioid abuse, and older adults receiving long-term care.

Our Research

From asset-building to violence prevention, our faculty are at the forefront of research to improve people’s lives. The scope of our faculty’s research expertise is encompassed in eight programmatic areas.

Our faculty use advanced research methods to inform, develop, and evaluate practice and policy interventions to promote social change. The research reflects key social work values, including a focus on empowering others and developing evidence to improve care and quality of life.

UNC School of Social Work faculty are committed to using rigorous methods and novel approaches to find lasting solutions to society’s most challenging issues. In addition, they recognize that communities — the organizations and the people within them — are vital research partners in strengthening the well-being of individuals and families.

Further, our faculty are committed to ensuring that social workers and other practitioners, as well as organizational and policy leaders, have timely access to the information needed to innovate and improve their policy and practice.
Program on Care Needs and Services for Older Adults
Dr. Sheryl Zimmerman, Coordinator

Research in the Program on Care and Services for Older Adults focuses on enhancing the health and well-being of older adults, their families, and their caregivers by examining, developing, and evaluating care and services. Research addresses care needs in a range of areas, including Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, functional status, medical and mental health, death and dying, and housing. Studies investigate older adults' needs, and the extent to which those needs are met with care provided in home, community, assisted living, and nursing home settings. Sample intervention projects and clinical trials include those to help family caregivers respond to dementia-related issues; to help assisted living staff provide more person-centered care; and to help nursing home staff reduce unnecessary medication prescribing. Working collaboratively with researchers in the UNC Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research and in medicine, public health, nursing, and allied health professions, these researchers' efforts ensure that care, services, and policies for older adults are informed by a strong evidence base and feasible across settings of care.

Program on Evidence-Building in Child Welfare
Dr. Mark Testa, Coordinator

Faculty-led research in the Program on Evidence-Building in Child Welfare focuses on issues that affect children's well-being such as poverty, abuse and neglect, foster care, adoption, child protective services, and services designed to protect children and encourage family stability. Researchers in this program explore innovative, novel ideas for addressing the persistent "wicked problems" that defy ordinary solutions, and finding solutions to the Eight Grand Challenges of Child Welfare:

- Reversing the adverse effects of child maltreatment on brain development
- Harnessing the natural motivations of parents and kinship caregivers
- Synthesizing research evidence on the effects of out-of-home care
- Sustaining family continuity after legal permanence
- Strengthening the voice of youth
- Linking well-being measures to administrative data
- Attracting private investments and using performance contracts
- Preparing the workforce

For more information, see the Institute for Wicked Problems of Child Welfare website: http://wickedproblems.web.unc.edu/

Program on Family Relationships and Interpersonal Violence
Dr. Rebecca Macy, Coordinator

Researchers exploring Family Relationships and Interpersonal Violence aim to promote positive family relationships in the changing landscape and complexity of family structures. These issues are examined through interdisciplinary research and collaboration with community partners and key stakeholders. One area of research in this program examines parenting structures, parenting styles, and related individual and family outcomes, while other areas examine the prevention of interpersonal violence and development of trauma-informed treatment interventions for survivors of violent victimization. Examples of current projects include developing innovative housing solutions for survivors of intimate partner violence and their children, developing tailored domestic violence interventions for women with mental illnesses, enhancing parenting in the context of intimate partner violence, enhancing the cultural competency of domestic violence services, and preventing dating/sexual violence among youth.

Program on Health and Behavioral Health
Dr. Sarah Verbiest and Dr. Lisa Zerden, Coordinators

From postpartum care to substance-use disorders, research conducted by faculty in the Program on Health and Behavioral Health centers on improving the understanding of psychosocial factors that affect physical, emotional, and behavioral health-related conditions, and how to address them. Faculty explore ways to improve the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities through research that untangles the underlying etiology and mechanisms of adverse health outcomes, including health disparities.

Their research focuses on the social determinants of health and using research evidence to develop interventions to foster resilience, mitigate exposure to risk, promote equity, and maximize prevention. Some substantive areas of focus include obesity, integrated models of care, perinatal health, and children with special health care needs.
Program on Human Services Outcomes and Response to Human Trafficking
Dr. Dean Duncan, Coordinator

Research in the Program on Human Services Outcomes and Response to Human Trafficking aims to improve the effectiveness of human services to ensure optimal outcomes for children, youth, and adults. This work uses “big data” from human services programs to build longitudinal datasets that follow participants over time and focuses on analyses on promoting evidence-based governance in human services programs. Projects also use sophisticated techniques to link data between systems such as child welfare, juvenile justice, health, and education to assess cross-system involvement and measure outcomes in multiple domains. Some recent projects examined the factors that affect long-term employment outcomes of former foster youth, investigated racial/ethnic disparities in the child welfare system, and improved human services management. In addition, several researchers in this program are involved with Project No Rest, a statewide project increasing awareness and prevention around human trafficking by developing, testing, and validating screening instruments and assessment tools to help identify potential victims, confirm trafficking, and create service plans.

Program on Services and Interventions for Justice-Involved Persons with Mental Illness
Dr. Gary Cuddeback, Coordinator

Researchers working in the Program on Services and Interventions for Justice-Involved Persons with Mental Illness consider the complexity of factors that affect the health and mental health of individuals with severe and persistent mental illnesses, especially those who become involved in the criminal justice system and/or who have chronic physical health problems. In addition to focusing on improving behavioral health and criminal justice services, research in this area aims to improve practices across the continuum of the criminal justice system, including courts, jails, prisons, and probation/parole. Recent projects include an examination of the reasons released inmates do not use mental health services, a trial to improve services in mental health courts, and a study of the combined challenges of criminal justice outcomes for persons diagnosed with both mental illnesses and substance use disorders.

Program on Social Research Methods and Data Analytics
Dr. Din Chen, Coordinator

Faculty in the Program on Social Research Methods and Data Analytics are leading the social work profession in developing and implementing new, advanced statistical methods to harness the power of burgeoning data. Faculty in this program have expertise in the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, including measurement development, causal analysis, Bayesian methods, social interventions, econometrics, and geographic information systems (GIS) mapping. They provide consultation and support within and outside our School and University for all phases of the research process, including formulating plans for participant recruitment, data collection, data management, and dataset construction. To promote the use of advanced methods in social science research, the Program on Social Research Methods and Data Analytics hosts workshops and seminars that are open to students and faculty from across campus. Faculty scholarship related to data analytics includes numerous publications on statistical causal inference, clinical trial biostatistics and biopharmaceutical applications, meta-analysis, Bayesian methods, and other topics.

Program on Well-Being and Service Delivery to Marginalized Populations
Dr. Mimi Chapman, Coordinator

Through research and scholarship, faculty in the Program on Well-Being and Service Delivery to Marginalized Populations promote the well-being of vulnerable individuals, groups, and populations pushed to society’s periphery by discrimination, prejudice, bias, or systemic racism. Faculty’s reflective research practices consider their own attitudes, assumptions, privilege, and status while creating interventions based in rigorous science. The goal of the research is to develop evidence-based and empirically informed interventions to build the capacity of marginalized groups in ways that not only promote self-determination and community but also create mechanisms to promote equity and inclusion. Sample research projects focus on individuals struggling to find housing because of mental illness, and adapting treatments for depression/anxiety that directly address marginalized identities. Additionally, faculty projects are examining the attitudes of high-intensity professionals who work with marginalized groups (e.g., new immigrants or refugees) to explore how those attitudes impact marginalized persons’ access to and engagement with systems such as health care, education, or law enforcement. Faculty in this program use a range of methods and have collaborations across the UNC-CH campus, ranging from the Ackland Art Museum, the Departments of Social Psychology and Art History, the Schools of Nursing, Public Health, Medicine, and Law, and many others.
Global Social Development Innovations

Global Social Development Innovations (GSDI) is a UNC center based in the School of Social Work, whose mission is to create innovative interventions, build knowledge, produce evidence, and, in collaboration with local stakeholders, shape policy toward the well-being of marginalized populations globally.

Key efforts of this center address economic security, workforce development, financial inclusion, social protection, health, and education.

Team members include Dr. Gina Chowa, center director; Dr. David Ansong and Dr. Rainier Masa.

GSDI has a cadre of local, national, and global research, implementation, and funding partners and houses a data hub that serves as a nexus point for sharing research data.

Among other global locations, GSDI researchers and affiliates conduct ground-breaking social-economic research in India, Kenya, and the Philippines.

For more information, see the GSDI website: https://gsdi.unc.edu/