

# **From California to Kenya and back again: Lessons from a journey in global health**

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*GloCal Career Development Series*  
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# Outline of talk

- Background & training
- Research in Kenya
  - Unexpected results
  - Dissemination
  - Subsequent work
- Tenure track → Back to the UC!
- Final thoughts & discussion



# Education & career trajectory

## Academic Training:

- MPH, Epidemiology, USF
- PhD, Applied Anthropology (Bio-Cultural Medical Anthropology), USF
- Postdoctoral Fellow, Global Public Health, UCSD

## Doctoral and postdoctoral research

- Love & risk in Tijuana, Mexico

## GloCal & tenure track positions

- Kisumu, Kenya
- OSU & UCR

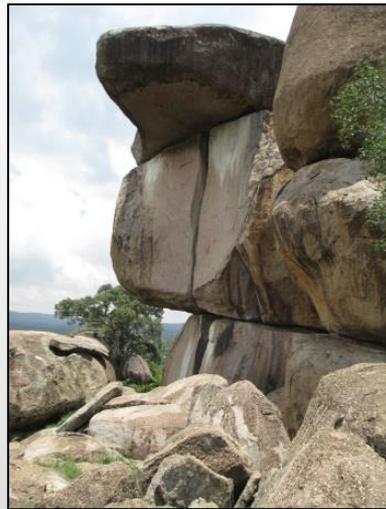


# Mexico-U.S. border

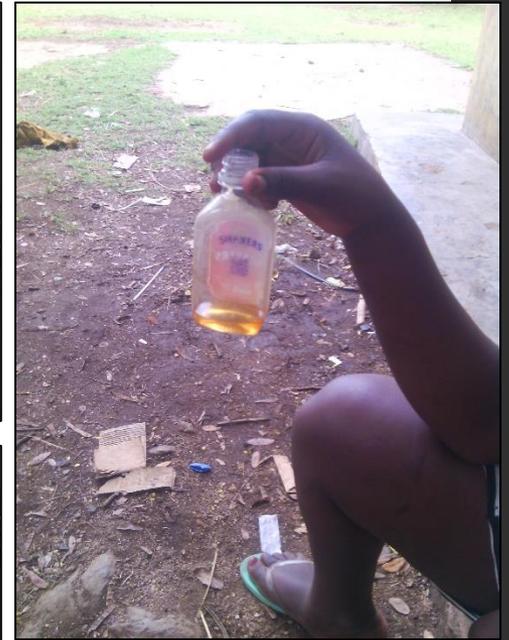


<http://ajphtalks.blogspot.com/2015/07/q-with-jennifer-syvetsen-of-ohio-state.html>



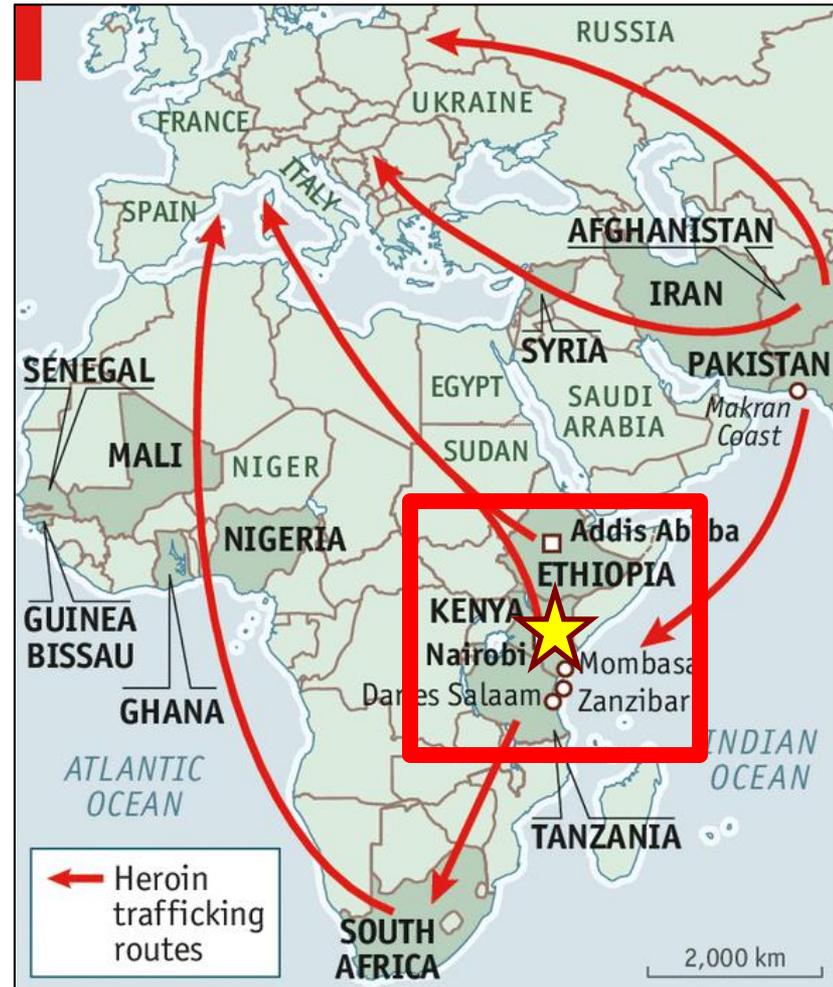


# Kisumu, Kenya



# Africa & the global drug trade

- African continent always part of global trade routes
- Growing importance of East African heroin trafficking routes
- Injection drug use & HIV risk in Tanzania & Kenya → *Global Health response*



Heroin trafficking routes via East Africa

# Specific aims



- 1) To use ethnographic methods to describe the social and cultural contexts of injection drug use
- 2) To conduct surveys to examine injection practices & HIV risk behaviors of people who inject drugs (n=151)
- 3) To use in-depth interviews for context & explore the role of mobility and migration in the diffusion of injection drug use into Kisumu (n=29)

# Ethnographic fieldwork

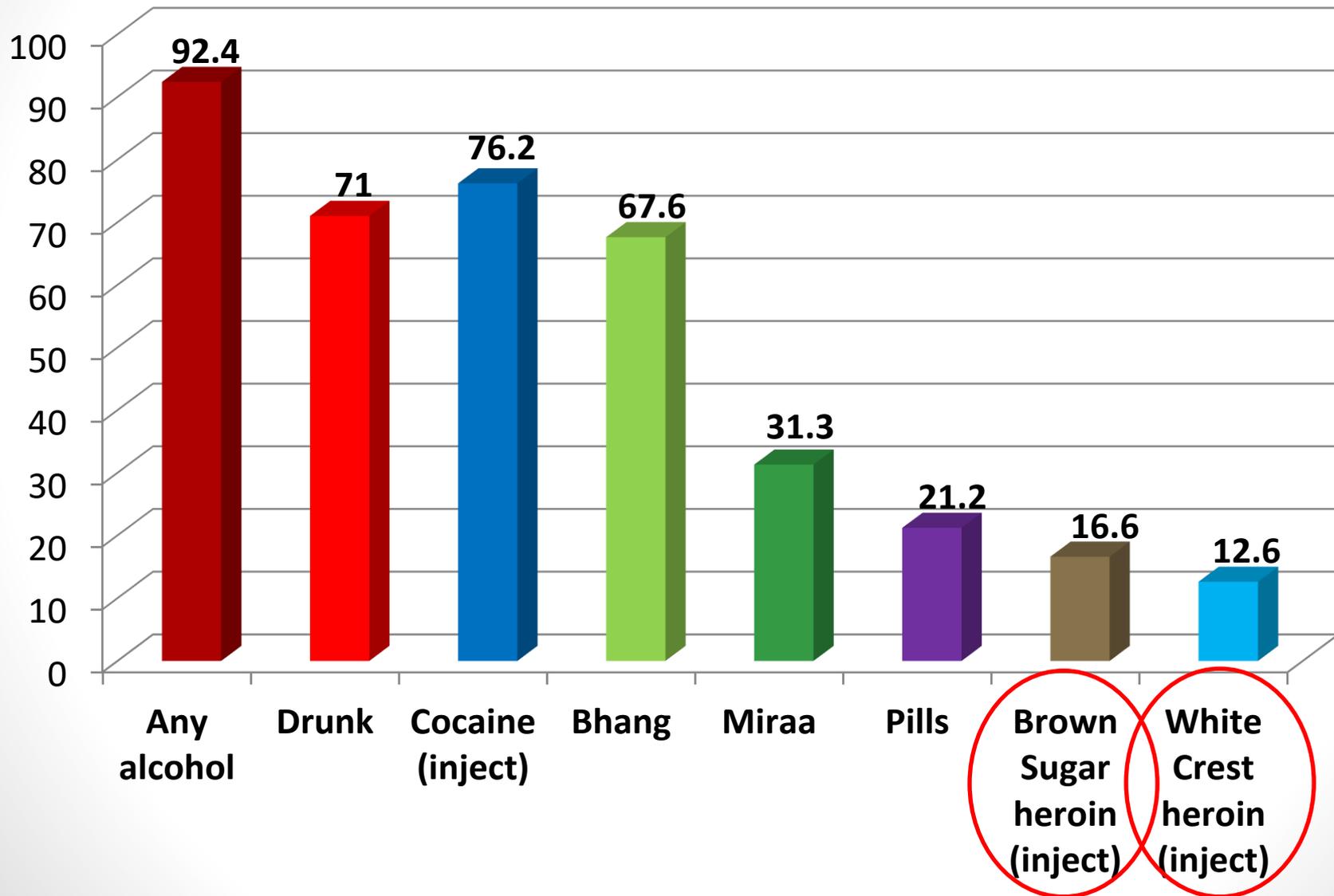


Scenes from around Kisumu (bottom left – clockwise): community clean-up days with Impact (for good will to communities); a syringe used for injection; a client receives injection help.

## Selected sample characteristics, n=151 (n, %)

	Female, n=24 (%)		Male, n=127 (%)		Total, n=151 (%)		<i>P</i>
Age (mean)	26.1		29.3		28.8		.02
Nyanza entire life	23	95.8	62	48.8	85	56.3	<.001
High school education	9	37.5	76	59.8	85	56.3	.04
Steady partner	9	37.5	88	69.3	97	64.2	.003
Kids at home	19	79.2	51	40.2	70	46.4	<.001
HIV+	10	43.5	17	14.7	27	19.4	.001

# 30 day alcohol & drug use, n=151 (%)



# Emergence of injection

- ~ 40% first injected outside of Kisumu
- Social connections, drug supplies throughout Kenya ...
- Stress, idleness, morale, peers ...
- Variety of effects of drugs, “cocaine” ...



*It's like am covering my eyes, I mean there are bigger problems exceeding the drug... - Jabril, 25*

*“Some of these friends who injected ... belonged to the new generation. I was sure that I would be like them once I started injecting their drugs.” – Seth, 24*

# Where to share our results?

**Who do we want to reach? What do people need to know?**

- Collaborative (e.g., with Research Assistants)
- Present results back to communities → *next steps*



Disseminating results of injection drug use study to IRDO, 2014

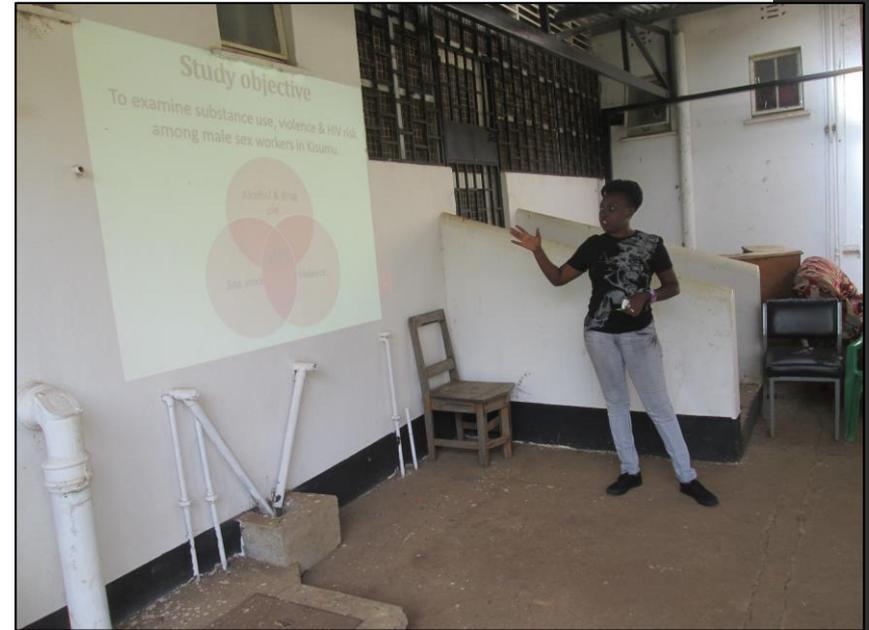
# Where to share?

## Dissemination in Kenya -

- **Overview** (KEMRI/CDC in Kisumu; stakeholders meeting in Nairobi)
- **Gender disparities** (University of Nairobi HIV/STI annual meeting)
- **Needle & Syringe Exchange** (UCSF Semi-annual forum in Kisumu)

## Global conferences -

- International Society for the Study of Drug Policy, Belgium
- International AIDS conference, Durban, South Africa
- Anthropology conferences



# Thoughts from people who inject drugs...

If you people cannot help us, then it means everything, including this town will go down with young men who are resourceful and their resource goes to waste because of drug injection. How can you people help us? -Jacob, age 29



We should have a specific place for IDUs. I will go because I feel at home with them... However, our group is still hiding. Show some love and start by providing some syringe and needles. We will make it. - Emily, age 33

# Results – from sharing research

- Evidence to national policymakers = funding for first syringe services program in western Kenya
- Increasing recognition of need for services → MAT clinic in Kisumu





Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Drug and Alcohol Dependence

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/drugalcdep](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/drugalcdep)



Short communication

### Evidence of injection drug use in Kisumu, Kenya: Implications for HIV prevention

Jennifer L. Syvertsen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kawango Agot<sup>b</sup>, Spala Ohaga<sup>b</sup>, Steffanie A. Strathdee<sup>c</sup>, Carol S. Camlin<sup>d</sup>, Eunice Omanga<sup>b</sup>, Petronilla Odonde<sup>b</sup>, Grace Rota<sup>e</sup>, Kelvin Akoth<sup>e</sup>, Juan Peng<sup>f</sup>, Karla D. Wagner<sup>g</sup>



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo)



Research paper

### An ethnographic exploration of drug markets in Kisumu, Kenya

Jennifer L. Syvertsen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Spala Ohaga<sup>b</sup>, Kawango Agot<sup>b</sup>, Margarita Dimova<sup>c</sup>, Andy Guise<sup>d,e</sup>, Tim Rhodes<sup>e</sup>, Karla D. Wagner<sup>f</sup>



# Making drug use safer for those who are hooked

TUESDAY OCTOBER 25 2016



The harm-reduction programme aimed at reducing the spread of HIV and hepatitis among addicts. PHOTO| FILE| NATION MEDIA GROUP

## Continuing neglect of people who inject drugs

In the wake of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem, which did not explicitly mention harm reduction in its outcome document,<sup>1</sup> Louisa Degenhardt and colleagues highlight one aspect of the human cost of the global response for people who inject drugs in the public health context.<sup>2</sup> The rise in disease burden of HIV, hepatitis B virus (HBV), and hepatitis C virus (HCV) attributed to injecting drug use between 1990 and 2013 is reflective of the lack of success in supply and demand reduction approaches, combined with the struggle for legitimacy faced by harm reduction programmes and the fact that they remain unavailable in more than half of countries worldwide.<sup>3</sup> The four-times increase in disability-adjusted life-years, mainly due to increased mortality, results from a two-decade-

previously untouched by heroin, such as Kisumu in Kenya.<sup>6,7</sup> Global numbers of people who inject drugs, as estimated by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, WHO, and UNAIDS, have plateaued in recent years but data are not available from many countries with some evidence of heroin use.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore crucial that efforts be refocused on evidence-based prevention and treatment programmes.

Degenhardt and colleagues' calculations of the population attributable fraction of injecting drug use for HIV, HBV, and HCV support the idea that a comprehensive approach to prevention, including needle and syringe programmes and medically assisted treatment, could achieve much to reduce virus transmission.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the burden from hepatitis C could be substantially reduced by effective prevention programmes.



Behmat.Graf/AP/PressAssociation Images

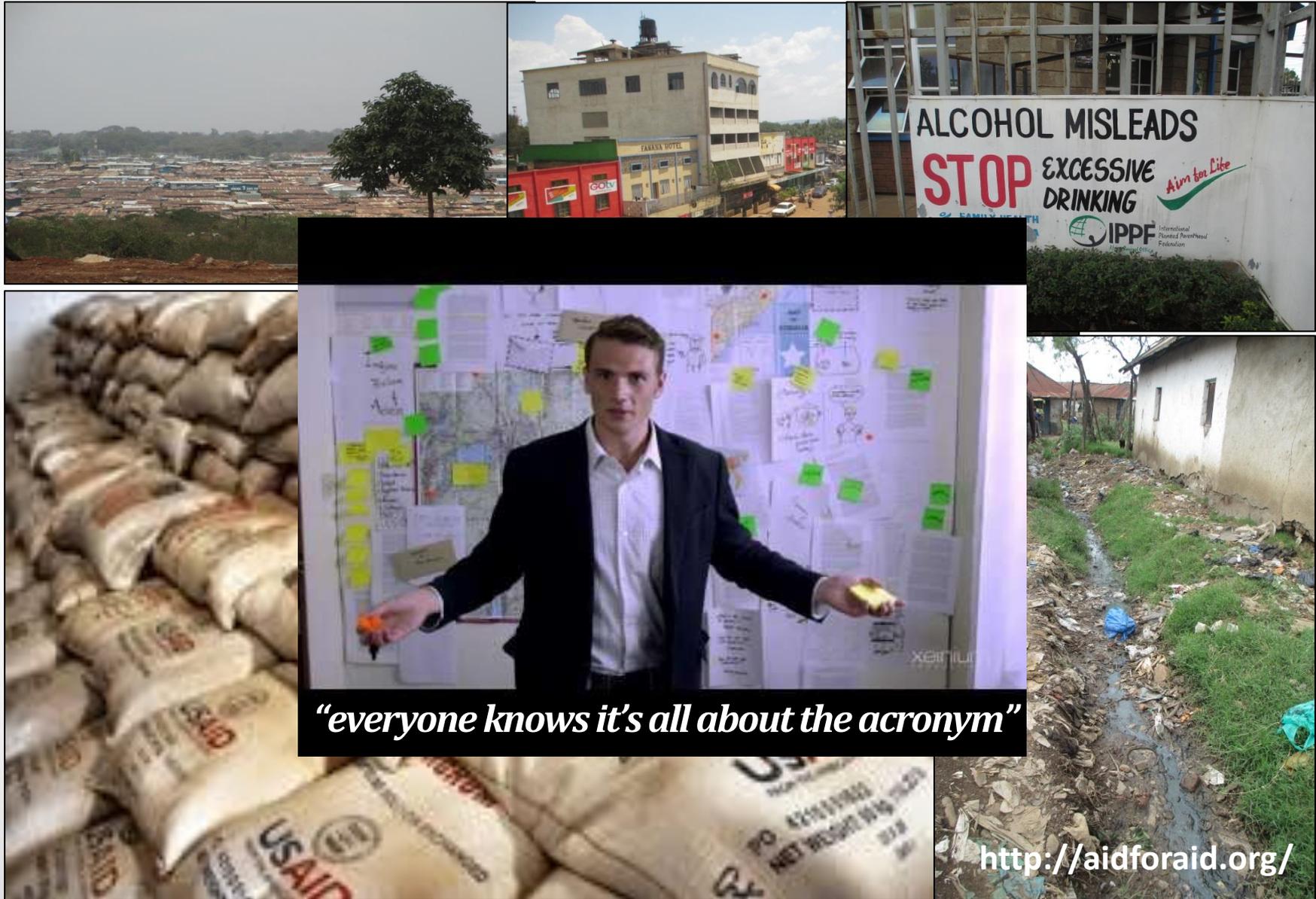
Lancet Infect Dis 2016

Published Online  
September 20, 2016  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(16\)30374-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(16)30374-7)  
See Online/Articles  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(16\)30325-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(16)30325-5)

# “On-the-ground” results in Kisumu



# “The Samaritans”



*“everyone knows it's all about the acronym”*

<http://aidforaid.org/>



Full length article

You can't do this job when you are sober: Heroin use among female sex workers and the need for comprehensive drug treatment programming in Kenya



Jennifer L. Syvertsen<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Kawango Agot<sup>c</sup>, Spala Ohaga<sup>c</sup>, Angela Robertson Bazzi<sup>d</sup>

Bazzi AR et al. *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 2019, 22:e25266  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jia2.25266/full> | <https://doi.org/10.1002/jia2.25266>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PrEP and the syndemic of substance use, violence, and HIV among female and male sex workers: a qualitative study in Kisumu, Kenya

Angela R. Bazzi<sup>1</sup>, Kelly Yotebieng<sup>2</sup>, Sophie Otticha<sup>3</sup>, Grace Rota<sup>4</sup>, Kawango Agot<sup>3</sup>, Spala Ohaga<sup>3</sup> and Jennifer L. Syvertsen<sup>5\*</sup>

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NAVIGATING THE SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH WITH VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

By Jennifer L. Syvertsen and Andy Guise

Revealing Violence

Ethnographic research has the power to unveil multiple forms of violence. Violence may be structural,

individuals' subjective experience and misrecognized as a natural part of world order. In this way, individuals from business "tycoons" to heroin "junkies" unconsciously perceive that they deserve their positions within social hierarchies. Following Bourdieu, symbolic violence has proven a useful organizing framework in scholarship

with a person injecting who assailed his impractical advice to use bleach in favor of his own street knowledge that water adequately rinses syringes (indeed, the "irrational" was eventually evidenced as highly rational: use of bleach was later shown to be more likely to increase HIV risk). Such well-intended messages enact symbolic

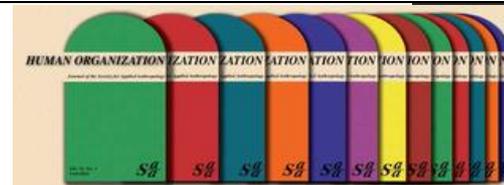
The social life of PrEP in Kenya (<http://somatosphere.net/2019/the-social-life-of-prep-in-kenya.html/>)

By Jennifer L. Syvertsen (<http://somatosphere.net/author/jennifer-syvertsen/>)

This article is part of the series: A 'Critically Applied' Approach to PrEP (<http://somatosphere.net/series/a-critically-applied-approach-to-prep/>)

I have perhaps an unpopular position to declare: Although pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is an enormous biomedical breakthrough in the prevention of HIV, it also symbolizes much of what is wrong in current global health practice.

Manuscript Accepted!



On a beautiful Saturday morning in Kisumu, Kenya, more than 50 people gathered under the covered patio of a health services organization for a community dissemination event on our research with gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (hereafter abbreviated to MSM). My two Kenyan Research Assistants and I carefully planned the event and invited all of our participants, key community stakeholders, and allies of queer communities<sup>1</sup> to provide feedback on our qualitative study with MSM who engage in sex work. Like many global health research projects in Kisumu, my work was funded under the auspices of HIV prevention and care. Specifically, we examined how substance use and violence interacted to shape HIV risk and engagement in care among men who sold sex to other men. The dissemination event was organized as a way to assess the validity of our analysis and elicit feedback. We wanted to ensure that we understood the unique issues that men face and identify service gaps to address their health needs.

# Post-Fellowship research in Kenya

- Qualitative study of HIV risk with female & male sex workers
- Collaborative research – substance use & mental health among HIV+ patients
  - Social networks: engagement & retention in care
- Capacity building in research methods, data analysis, writing, local dissemination → *new ideas*



# Tenure track career challenges

Ohio State University



→ University of California, Riverside



**GloCal fellows: Getting into the trenches for global health research**

by Andy Evangelista - September 1, 2017

They are bright and creative investigators, highly committed to improving world health.

But what makes some UCGHI GloCal Health fellows special is their street smarts and ability to get into tough communities and engage the people hardest hit by physical and social ills.

In Kisumu, in the western Nyanza region of Kenya, Jennifer Syvertsen interviewed people who inject drugs and drug peddlers where HIV risk is already too high.

**Back at UC, but still having global impact**

by Andy Evangelista - May 14, 2018

Last fall, Jennifer Syvertsen settled into her new job as assistant professor of anthropology at UC Riverside. But she is still in close touch with her research collaborators in Kenya and thinks often of mentors who shaped her interest in global health.



Courtesy of Jennifer Syvertsen

Syvertsen, a 2013-14 UCGHI GloCal fellow, was the first scientist to study patterns of injection drug use and HIV risk in Kisumu, Kenya, which has the country's second highest HIV prevalence. Her research on patterns and factors influencing injection drug use in a new market along a major heroin trafficking route left a mark. After her team shared their study findings with scientists and policymakers at a national stakeholders meeting, one non-governmental organization pledged support for the first needle exchange program in western Kenya.

Prior to her appointment at UC Riverside, she served on the faculty of Ohio State University. However, she is not a stranger to California, as Syvertsen was a post-doctoral fellow at UC San Diego and conducted dissertation research on HIV risk among female sex workers and their intimate partners in the Mexico-US border region. That experience opened the door for her to apply to the GloCal fellowship and expand her research in new directions.

- UCGHI news features
- GloCal Traineeship Advisory Committee
- Co-developed & taught online modules in UCGHI *Global Mental Health* course
- Designed & about to teach first undergraduate *Global Health* course at UCR!

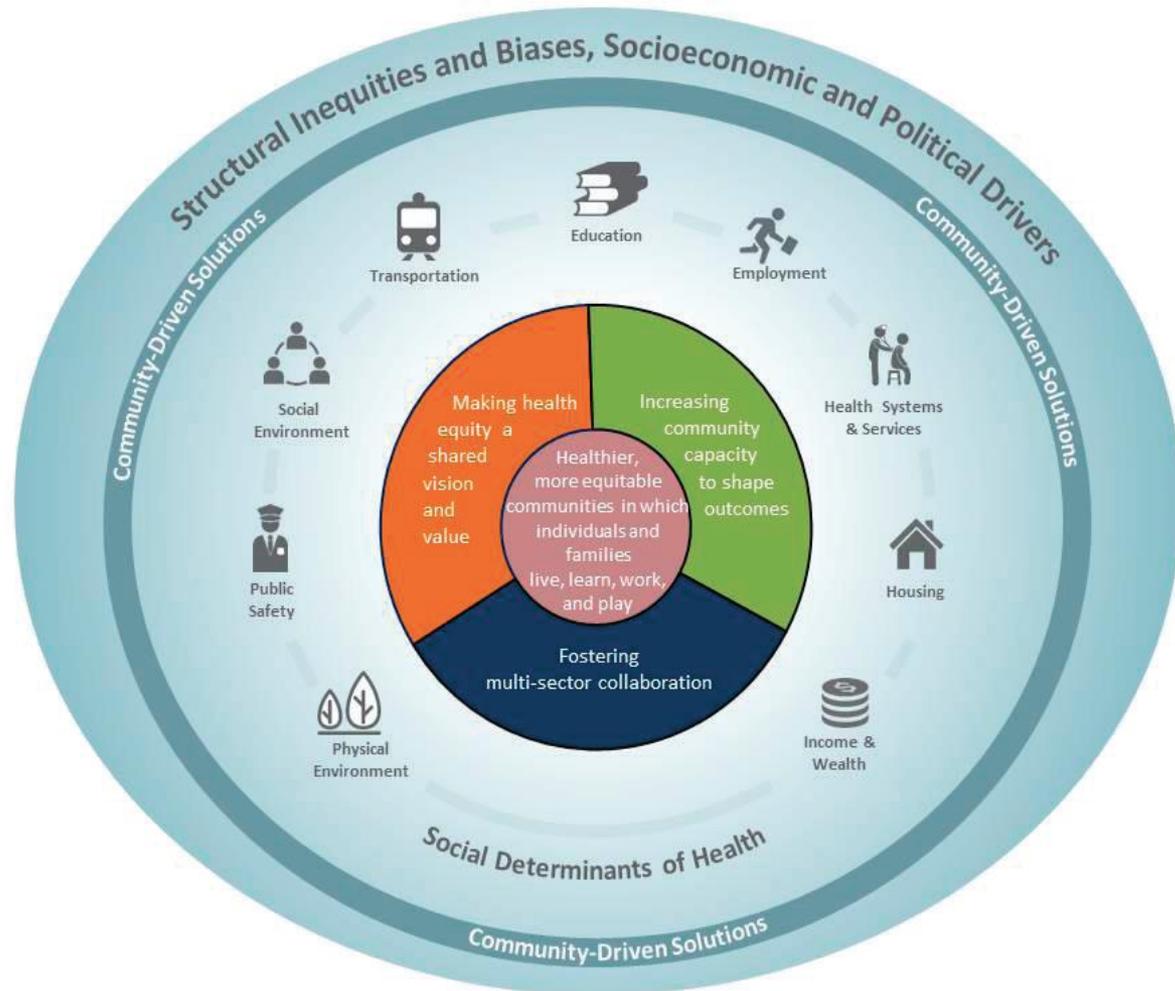
# Center for Health Disparities Research

## **HDR@UCR mission:**

Create a rich interdisciplinary, diverse, and collaborative environment for health disparities research, infusing community-engaged research methods into the academic culture ... The Center aims to move UCR toward national leadership in health disparities research, education, and training, and to inform the dialogue on health disparities.

# Community Engagement & Dissemination Core

*Shifting the focus from research “on” to research “with” communities*



# Final thoughts

- Your research may not work out exactly as planned, but that's OK → *learn from the unexpected*
- Community engagement & relationship building is key
- Disseminating your work is important – especially to communities
- Practice critical global health

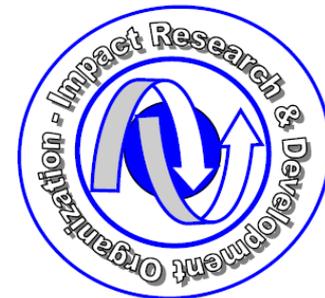


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**Thank you/asante sana/erokamano!**

**Contact me: [jsyverts@ucr.edu](mailto:jsyverts@ucr.edu)**