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neighborhoods where crime and violence become the norm.” Research may point to the benefits of decentralized housing for low income residents or a voucher system with accompanying real estate-like services. “For neighborhoods to exert an overall positive effect, they can’t exceed a threshold of 15% of its residents living below the poverty level. But other things might influence the impact of neighborhoods, such as social support and networks of friends and family,” Jessica said. “There is much we don’t know.”

In addition to neighborhood effects, Jessica researches the relationship between economic status and partner violence. Previous research suggested that a drop in income could precipitate an increase in partner violence. Jessica’s research, captured in a poster that won First Prize in a recent Wayne State University graduate exhibition, found that financial strain rather than simply income was a better predictor of violence. “It wasn’t a factor of how much people made,” she said, “as much as whether they could pay their bills. A drop in income, an unexpected expense, any strain on the finances might cause stress that would lead to increased violence. So training in financial literacy might be a big help in these situations.”

The chance to work on varied research projects across disciplines drew Jessica to the Wayne State program. A graduate student in the School of Social Work, Jessica is also a pre-doctoral trainee at MPSI and receives mentoring guidance from faculty in both areas. “I came here from Wyoming,” she explained. “I’m a first-generation college student, so there was a lot I didn’t know about how academia works and how to navigate the system. At MPSI, I’ve received extra support, wonderful office space, experts to consult with and a clear, built-in goal system.” She values the student-to-faculty and student-to-student encounters. “I’ve been to so many interesting presentations and brown bags with quality lecturers and time to interact. I am completely impressed with the program.”

Graduate studies are going so well that Jessica’s dream is to become a professor of social work at a research university, finding ways to empower vulnerable populations. “The mission and values of social work fit my personal and professional life,” she said. “I want to offer my research expertise to improve programs and policy analysis.” She is adamant that whatever research she conducts, it must have real-world value. “I don’t want it to stop at a journal article. I want to get it out on the street.” No doubt that street will be in a neighborhood that enhances the lives of its residents.