

SOCIAL SCIENCE PIONEER PUBLISHES BREAKTHROUGH TEXTBOOK

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LIKE MANY ACTIVISTS, Julie Cwikel believes that it is not enough to study the interaction of social problems and public health, but that one must use that knowledge to develop ways to improve health and well-being.

A pioneer in the field of social epidemiology, Prof. Cwikel is leading the way to bridge two formerly distinct fields that examine many of the same problems – social science research and public health.

A professor of social work and founder and director of the Center for Women's Health Studies and Promotion at Ben-Gurion University, Prof. Cwikel recently published a groundbreaking textbook, *Social Epidemiology: Strategies for Public Health Activism*, which combines the methodologies of the social sciences and public health, and includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods and analyses.

"For the most part, researchers have studied determinants of health, such as poverty, gender and age – which can yield useful information," Cwikel told *Impact*. "My approach emphasizes that these factors can be both determinants of health and the very conditions that we need to study and change," she said.

The bottom line for Cwikel, who is American by birth and in the United States this summer as a scholar-in-residence at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute for Research on Women at Brandeis University, is that health of individuals, groups and society is intrinsically linked to social structure and problems. Violence, infectious diseases, child abuse, and drug abuse are related to society's overall trends, not just to individual behavior. Prof. Cwikel's new book teaches how to study the connections between society and health, and use that understanding to promote health.

Applying such an interdisciplinary approach to a range of problems, Cwikel and her team examined health issues of trafficked sex workers in a number of Israeli cities, with the goal of getting the women – who are often smuggled into Israel from the republics of the former Soviet Union – better healthcare.

"We may not have halted the trafficking but the work we did was instrumental to getting the women better treatment, healthcare and legal advice, while persuading the government to stem the influx of sex workers," said Cwikel, who has spoken before the Israeli Knesset on this issue.

Another ongoing and long-term project is the Mother-to-Mother program, which pairs new mothers who have little social support with volunteer mothers who visit them weekly at home for at least a year. This program originated in Jewish Family and Children's Services in Boston.

"Over years, we've seen that mothers who receive intensive, one-on-one support have kids who, much later, do better in school, have better communication skills, less drug abuse, and less high-risk health behaviors," said Cwikel. She is seeking to expand the Mother to-Mother program to development towns around Beer-Sheva, and to train nurses and social workers to work with high-risk mothers, such as victims of domestic violence, and those who abuse drugs.

"Creating new knowledge in women's health is part of what I do. But I also believe that when the empirical evidence is already there, we need the skills and confidence to become effective public health activists for the good of families and the children of today who will become the leaders of tomorrow."



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