As a trained social worker with experience counseling individuals who have lived through trauma, Jackie Blachman-Forshay, MPH ’13, knew when she arrived at the Mailman School that she wanted to research traumatic events.

Today she is doing exactly that as an integral part of the Syria crowdmap project, an unprecedented crowd-sourcing effort that tracks and publicizes incidents of rape and other forms of sexualized violence in the war-torn nation.

The opportunity unexpectedly presented itself earlier this year. While scrolling through the Department of Epidemiology’s Twitter feed, Jackie came across an article about trauma authored by associate professor of epidemiology Dr. Karestan Koenen for Women Under Siege, a human rights group that sponsors the Syria crowdmap.

The project was widely covered by outlets such as The Atlantic, Reuters, and the BBC and was the subject of testimony in front of the United Nations Security Council by Women Under Siege director Lauren Wolfe.

Although Jackie says she knew very little about Syria when she started working on the project, she has long been interested in the issues that underlie the conflict, like trauma and sexualized violence.

Growing up in the East Bay Area as the daughter of parents who also studied social work, she became aware at a young age of the issues surrounding sexual politics. At 14 she volunteered in San Francisco at a syringe exchange programs for sex workers.

“I loved working with that population and wanted to continue it,” she says. As an undergraduate at New York University’s School of Social Work, she interned at an AIDS service organization in Harlem that dealt with clients with substance problems and severe and persistent mental illnesses.

The job was as satisfying as it was stressful, requiring Jackie to work three full days a week on a client caseload while balancing coursework.

She began to take an interest in the "why" behind what she encountered and started considering public health. Not long after, she was diagnosed with cancer, which put a very real perspective on her future area of study.

"I was thrown into a medical system that I hadn’t been personally involved in,” she says.

Around this time, Jackie began working as a research assistant at NYU’s Center for Health, Identity, Behavior, and Prevention Studies (CHIBPS) on a qualitative study of HIV-positive men over age 50 and an investigation into the cognitive functioning of methamphetamine users.

Currently she is working for CHIBPS on a longitudinal study into the interplay between sexual risk taking, substance use, and the mental health of young men who have sex with men.

Jackie chose to concentrate in epidemiology at Mailman because she believed it would teach her practical research tools that she had not been exposed to as an undergraduate.

Her experience with the Syria crowdmap represents real world epidemiologic data gathering and analysis. For the project, she identifies, edits, and codes hundreds of brutal accounts of sexualized violence using various social media such as YouTube, Twitter, and running Google searches.

This method has been used in the past to track infectious disease epidemics—such as the recent cholera outbreak in Haiti, but Women Under Siege believes it is the first to use these tools to track sexualized violence.

"The Syria project is epidemiology but not in a traditional sense,” says Jackie.

Women Under Siege cannot independently confirm the hundreds of reports they have gathered, such as a video on YouTube of a woman describing her rape, but based on geographic patterns, they have established that sexualized violence is being used as a “common tactic” by Syrian forces against rebels.

Crowd sourcing does have some advantages over other methods of gathering data.

“We can reach out to people at their level. I may not go to the police and report what happened to me. I may be more comfortable sending an anonymous text message saying this happened,” she says.

According to Dr. Koenen, “Jackie’s commitment and dedication to the Syria project has been extraordinary. Her background in both epidemiology and social work enables her to make a unique contribution to the project in both analyzing and presenting the data and proposing how the data can be used to inform interventions. We could not have done it without her.”

Inspired by the experience, Jackie hopes to eventually use a Geographic Information System program to map locations of sexualized violence overlaid with locations of killings to identify regions of Syria affected by wartime trauma, and she plans eventually to apply to a PhD in epidemiology with a focus on trauma research.

“What I hope I can keep in mind is that epidemiology is about populations and that’s still people with individual stories,” she says.