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Matejkowski J., Johnson T., Severson M. (2014). *Prison Social Work*, in: *Encyclopedia of Social Work*

## Literature review

The paper is an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, published and continuously updated online by Oxford University Press and the National Association of Social Workers Press (NASW). The authors are Jason Matejkowski, Toni Johnson, and Margaret E. Severson, three professors at the School of Social Welfare and the University of Kansas, and authors of many publications in the field of Social Work and its involvement with the criminal justice system.

In this review, I summarise the entry and make some comments about its content, as well as the way the ideas are exposed, and both its strengths and weaknesses.

## Summary

The entry starts exposing the historical involvement of social workers in correctional institutions in the United States. Although preprofessional social work took place in the late 1800s (mostly with juvenile offenders), it was not until a half century later that the debate about the involvement of social workers with criminal justice professionals to assist offenders was initiated by a publication of the Social Service Review. Approximately ten years later, in 1959, the publication of an educational curriculum for teaching correctional social work was a turning point in the history of this field, since this time job and training opportunities have increased for social work professionals and students. A 2004 survey suggests that approximately 2% of NASW members were involved in criminal justice practice at that time (it is unknown how many of those worked in prisons).

After the historical context, the researchers give a description of what is understood by prison and a specification of the types of institutions and detentions that are the subject of this entry. “Post-conviction, post-sentence facilities that operate under the authority of the state and federal governments. (...) We are talking about individuals who have been convicted of felony criminal offenses and sentenced to lengthy periods

of detention” (Matejkowski *et al.* 2014). It is also detailed that, in the worksheet, the issue is aborted by taking into account inmates in special situations as women inmates, inmates who are parents, and inmates with mental illness.

The next section talks about the prison population in the USA, and it shows some statistical data to give the reader an idea of the type of population the authors are talking about. The most important fact to note is the difference between the general population and the representation of the different groups inside the prisons. For example, racial and ethnic minorities are imprisoned in numbers that are disproportionate to their representation in general society. Also, prisoners are less educated, have higher rates of learning disabilities, are more loosely tied to the labour force, and have higher rates of poverty, alcohol and drug addiction, other mental illnesses, and severe mental illness than the general population. This shows that people inside the prison need social work intervention, as there is a high chance that a prisoner belongs to a socially vulnerable group that would need social assistance even without the situation of being in prison.

Then, the legal context of correctional social work is explained. Social worker tasks in prison can be summarized by three maxims: identify problems and, when needed, treat them; do so in a safe environment; and do so with a trained contingent of staff.

The confinement situation can cause prisoners to develop mental-health issues, so social workers need to identify and treat these issues in the context of prison. We must take into account that, unlike a “free person” (the article uses “free person” to refer to people who are not in the situation of being prisoners), a prisoner is not able to pay for health and mental health or modify his environment to improve his condition, so a prisoner with mental health difficulties requires the protection of the public system to improve. The well-being of the prisoner is a state responsibility, as the state has legal and physical custody over the prisoner and this gives the social worker power and control over the inmate, so the situation is different from that of treating a free person.

The performance of social work activities in prisons is complicated by the growing number of inmates with special needs. In the entry, the situation of women and incarcerated parents is exposed and analysed. When treating women, professionals need to take into account that a high percentage of them have histories of child and adulthood emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, so an intervention has to be done considering their traumatic experiences and also fighting against the systematic problem that they face. About the children with incarcerated parents, the authors expose different procedures that are done to take care of the relationship of the children with their parents that are in prison. In each case with women and children, a comprehensive evaluation is needed to manage the appropriate intervention for each person or family.

Then another vulnerable group in prison is addressed, inmates with mental health problems. They are overrepresented in American prisons. 10–25% of prisoners have serious mental health issues. Social workers must work to identify and support these people, as they are in a vulnerable situation inside the prison. It is widely known that suicide is one of the main causes of death in prisons, and mental health issues are most of the time the cause of suicide or self-harm behaviours. The social worker has to work

to identify and support these people, and can recommend to other prison workers how to treat and react in a crisis situation.

Finally, the entry talks about the post-prison experience and the parole situation. Parole is used as a phase between the prison and “the freedom”. However, parole agencies are usually ill prepared to address the treatment and support needs of their service populations. Parolees with mental health problems are more likely to recidivism than those without mental issues, that is, parole programs are rarely prepared to attend to their special needs. It is among the social worker’s tasks to provide parole boards with information about inmates’ risks and needs for release decisions and supervision plans.

Not much is said about the reintegration/rehabilitation/re-entry to the society after prison, but the authors manifest the idea that this is a process that must start the moment the offender enters the prison.

## Critical reflections

The main purpose of this article is to describe prison social work and the list of responsibilities that social workers involved in prison settings have. From my point of view, it is a fascinating issue since it is one of the many fields of application of social work, and maybe one of the most unknown. The authors select three specific populations with special needs inside the prisons: women inmates, inmates who are parents, and inmates with mental illness. On this basis, they analyse and expose the tasks, duties, and limitations of prison social workers.

When exposing the historical situation of prison social work, the authors offer some information about the beginnings of this profession that helps the reader to place it in a historical axis and thus to a better understanding of the topic. However, from my point of view, the data given about the number of social work professionals working in this field are insufficient, since it is not only inaccurate, but also not up-to-date (as it was from 2004, 10 years before the entry was published). I believe that a more updated data will help the reader better understand the situation of the current profession.

I find it very helpful that the authors dedicate a section to specify the type of prisoners the article is going to discuss, as well as the type of sentences (long ones) they face, since very different institutions and sentences can be understood by “prison” and could cause confusion if not detailed.

The article exposes a series of data in order to show how social groups and minorities are represented in prison contexts. Unlike the statistical data given in the first section of the article, I think that the charts that complement this explanation and on which it is based are a reliable and recent source (published by the King’s College in 2013, one year before the publication of the article) and help to understand the situation in the USA compared to other countries in the world. There are three charts that represent the different minorities addressed in the entry.

The sections dedicated to the legal context and the social work in prison have made me think about how important this profession is in such a difficult context. Also, the differences between social work practices outside and inside the prison are significant, as inmates are in a very specific condition that needs to be treated with special theory and practice, different from the one used with people outside the prison. In my opinion, the ideas are well exposed in these two long sections and explained with a vocabulary and writing style that are really easy to follow.

When talking about the perspective from which the treatment with women in prisons is based the authors make a reflection that I found interesting: The mental health problems that women can face need to be treated both in an individualized way, but most significant taking into account the systematic oppression over them. This was called an anti-oppressive practice (AOP) by Shoshana Pollack (2004). She describes it as a framework that “seeks to deindividualise client problems in order to see them within the larger social context of their lives”.

I would like to emphasise the number of different techniques and procedures exposed when talking about the situations where children have one or both of their parents in prison. These children are also victims of their parent’s sentences and, most of the time, end up in a socially vulnerable situation. Some techniques involve group therapy (with other children in the same situation), leisure activities, visits to their parents when possible, or videoconferences when it is not possible. Behind these activities, there are social workers leading an intervention to take care of the parent-child relationship and also to prevent the numerous risk factors that a child of incarcerated parents has to face.

Personally, I like the way the entrance criticizes the US penitentiary system, when talking about the situation of mentally ill people inside the prison: “Prisons are not well equipped to respond to the myriad needs of persons with mental-health problems”, one of the biggest problems is that “although self-harm attempts by inmates may indicate a psychiatric crisis, they tend to be interpreted as behavioural problems and treated as institutional infractions” (Matejkowski *et al.* 2014). This problem has been, and is still, a subject of debate for decades. Much research needs to be done to take care of mentally ill people who end up in prison, as it is very common for the pains of imprisonment to exacerbate rather than alleviate various forms of mental illness and psychological vulnerability (Haney 2017).

Another example of a critical attitude by the authors is when talking about the parole process. They manifest their disagreement with how normally managed in prisons and give some solutions that social workers could do in order to improve the opportunities of the parolees (especially those with mental health issues).

Overall, I think the entry fits perfectly with the channel that published it. Both the vocabulary and the writing style are very clear and understandable to people who are not experts on the topic. Although a lot of data is exposed, it is explained in a way that follows the thread of the article and does not interfere with the communication of the ideas.

Numerous references to previous studies on the topic are presented, mainly figures on the gender, ethnicity, age, mental conditions, etc. of the prisoners. This creates a solid theoretical basis on which the article is developed.

However, a weakness of the article would be the lack of future research proposals. In the following section two possible ways of studying based on this paper are presented.

## Further research

Although not explained in the article, I believe that more research in this field could be done treating the situation of other social minorities in prison, such as ethnic minorities and people of low economic status. In my opinion, social work in prisoners from these groups is an interesting issue and, for me, it is an open question that the current article leaves open.

In the present article, one of the biggest problems faced in prison is mentioned: suicide, self-injury and self-mutation. Researchers from different countries have analysed this issue. Some of the measures proposed “include rectification of overcrowding, smaller and more supportive regimes in prison, increased contact with family and community, avoidance of isolation, inmate watch programs, electronic monitoring, physical measures, and staff training programs” (Lloyd 1990: 25). Personally, I think more research is needed in that field to better understand it and create solid prison suicide prevention programs.

Moreover, I also find it intriguing the idea of reintegration/rehabilitation/re-entry, to which the article only dedicates one paragraph. I think this issue can be interesting from the perspective of the social worker.

## References

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