

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN POLICE SETTINGS

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, scholars, practitioners, and members of the community have noted the expanding the role of police officers into social and medical issues (Cumming et al., 1965). Recently, there has been a call to evaluate the use of police in such settings and to consider using other service providers. Front-line support workers (e.g., social workers) are often at the core of these discussions as they are likely to be better suited for state-responses to public health issues. However, the degree of support for the expanded use of social workers in what is commonly perceived as a policing context is not well known. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that both policing and social work stakeholders will vary in terms of their views on future of policy and programming where their services are likely to intersect.

The purpose of this study is to explore the degree and nature of support from the perspective of persons who are likely to be the future practitioners. More specifically, this study explores the perceptions of criminal justice and social work students as they relate to real-world social work-policing tasks. Our study is not only timely given the current of context policing in the US, but it adds an important element to the growing body of evidence that may assist future decision makers.

METHODOLOGY

The current study utilize a cross-sectional design to analyze self-report data provided by university students. More specifically, participants (n=277) in this study were recruited from criminal justice and social work courses (those who were majoring in each of these domains) at a large public university in the American southwest in the spring semester of 2021. All students were compensated with course credit.

Demographic Questions and Vicarious Experience

Participants in this study completed a anonymous 62-item secure online survey. Survey items included degree of study, age, gender, and race (Hispanic Origin, White, Black, or Other). participants were asked if they had any close friends or friends or family members who have ever struggled with mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, ever been arrested, been employed in policing or social work (all coded 1 = yes).

Views on Crime and Police

Participants were asked how often they worry about crime and violence (1 = never, to 4 = often) and how well police have been performing (1 = very poor, to 5 = very good).

Police Social Work versus Police Roles

Using a representative selection of the various areas of work on which social work and police may partner (Patterson and colleagues, 2019), we created an 18-item social service task assignment checklist. Using a five-point Likert Scale, participants indicated their degree of support for social workers and/or police to respond to a given task. Scores of 1 indicated a task should only have social workers involved, 5 indicates that only police officers should be involved and a 3 represents a view that both social workers and the police are equally qualified. Five tasks were associated with mental health and substance use (MHSU), four were associated with domestic violence (DV), and nine were linked to crime-dominant policing contexts (CR). These items were aggregated based on these three classifications.

	Task	Social problem
1	Assessing a subjects need for psychiatric services for a mentally unwell person in a public setting.	MHSU
2	Evaluating suspects for mental health problems while in a local jail	MHSU
3	Crisis intervention for suicidal persons	MHSU
4	Transporting mentally ill persons to an emergency department for a mental health evaluation.	MHSU
5	Developing drug control strategies in communities that are known to have a drug problem.	MHSU
6	Providing emotional support to victims of domestic violence.	DV
7	Providing mediation services during domestic disputes.	DV
8	Assisting with the needs of victims of sexual assault	DV
9	Checking in on victims who have repeatedly been victims of domestic violence.	DV
10	Talking with high school students to understand the causes to juvenile delinquency	CR
11	Helping victims navigate the processes of the criminal justice system	CR
12	Investigating sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of children.	CR
13	Investigating elder abuse at a nursing home.	CR
14	Identifying potential youth gang members in areas of a city that is known to have a gang problem.	CR
15	Developing crime prevention strategies for the homeless and other high-risk populations.	CR
16	Processing evictions for public housing residents.	CR
17	Helping individuals who are at a heightened risk for being radicalized into a terrorist organization.	CR
18	Interviewing youth suspects who were believed to be involved in crime.	CR

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis used in this study was bootstrapping correlation and bootstrapping T-test with 5000 samples were used for data analysis. Bootstrapping involves using the statistical resampling method for estimating distributions and hypothesis testing. Bootstrapping analysis entails developing probability distributions from observed data and sampling from these distributions to estimate the sampling distributions inferred from the data source.

RESULTS

Vicarious Experience

- Vicarious experience with mental illness was significantly positively correlated with using social workers in situations with MHSU (r=.13, p=.008), DV (r=.19, p<.001), and CR roles (r=.20, p<.001).
- Students' prior experience with vicarious substance use was positively correlated with their perceptions of employing social workers in MHSU tasks (r=.12, p=.013), DV tasks (r=.15, p=003), and CR roles (r=.22, p<.001).
- Prior experience with vicarious homelessness was positively associated with perceptions of social workers in DV roles (r=.173, p=.001) and CR related roles (r=.10, p=.041), but not for MHSU (r=.08, p=.077).
- Prior experience with vicarious domestic violence was positively correlated with perceptions of social workers in roles for MHSU (r=.10 p=.043), DV (r=.10, p=.042), and CR (r=.20, p<.001).
- For prior experience with vicarious arrest, there was a significant positive correlation with assigning social workers to MHSU (r=.11. p=.026), DV (r=.13, p=.009), and CR roles (r=.18, p<.001).

The impact of views on Crime and Police

- Worry about crime was significantly negatively correlated with prior experience with vicarious arrest (r=-.11, p=.021), prior domestic violence (r=-.13, p=.009), and prior mental health (r=-.14, p=.006).
- Perceived police performance was significantly positively correlated with assigning MHSU, (r=.30, p<.001), DV (r=.234, p<.001), and CR roles to social workers (r=.329, p<.001).

Criminal Justice Versus Social Work

- The analyses showed that criminal justice students were significantly more likely than social work students to support assigning police over social workers to roles involving MHSU [t(275)=4.67, p<.001], DV [t(275)=6.08, p<.001] and CR [t(275)=8.88, p<.001] roles.

CONCLUSION

- Students with vicarious experience with mental health or substance abuse tended to perceive social workers as relevant for providing services related to domestic violence and traditional policing roles.
- Prior experience with homelessness was associated only with valuing social workers' involvement in domestic violence and traditional policing models.
- The findings concerning prior experiences with vicarious homelessness, domestic violence, arrest history, and law enforcement were more ambiguous.
- Prior experience with vicarious law enforcement on the other hand was not associated with valuing using social workers in MHSU, DV, or CR policing roles.
- Perceived police performance was linked to a positive perception of social work integration into policing.
- Worry about crime was also negatively associated with involving police social workers in traditional mental health or criminal justice-related roles, including drug control strategies or any form of a criminal investigation.
- CJ students were more likely to assign police to policing contexts rather than integrating social workers, compared to social work students' including social workers in policing roles involving mental health, domestic violence, and in traditional police duties including roles that police officers are not traditionally trained to conduct such as assessing subjects for psychiatric services and evaluating mental health.

REFERENCES

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