

## POLICE SOCIAL WORK CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

Police social work is back to revitalization as there has been a growing demand for collaboration between police departments and social workers to intervene in mental and behavioral health crisis calls. Police departments usually deal with social control strategies and social workers primarily work on the social rehabilitation of individuals. This article describes the challenges and opportunities of police social work and offers models for strategic partnerships and collaborations. The paper also describes the significance of teaching police social work courses in programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and encouraging social work students to do their practical education in police departments or work with police officers in crisis response teams.

**Keywords:** Police social work, collaborative strategies, policing

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Police Social Work is a unique and evolving field. It is not just a term but a dynamic collaboration that may involve police departments employing social workers. This field has a rich and significant history, with social workers and police officers working in partnership since the early 20th century. The unique nature of this field, with its blend of social work and police officer, makes it a truly fascinating and respected area of study.

Police departments serve as gateways to our communities. They are intimately familiar with key informants and community leaders, a vital aspect of their work. While their primary duty is to apprehend those involved in criminal activity, their role extends far beyond this, encompassing a diverse range of responsibilities. Recognizing this context is crucial for understanding the urgent and necessary collaboration between social workers and police officers in addressing the complex elements that police officers encounter daily.

In the current discourse about police departments, adopting a 'solution-focused approach' for the future is crucial. This approach involves the police department, an agency grounded in its geographic area, recognizing the need for collaboration with other professions to address society's many complex challenges. The development of Police Social Work is a vital part of this approach, as the Police Social Worker may act as a change agent, working closely with police officers and inviting other professionals to address the multiple needs in most communities. If embraced, this proactive and collaborative approach could assist the police departments in co-building sustainable community transformation in communities that lack access to resources for safety and survival.

When viewing the past, society has sequentially dealt with various societal problems one at a time. When getting out of the forest and viewing a particular problem globally, it becomes clear that many factors affect those experiencing a given problem. For instance, focusing on reducing the suicide rate may involve not only addressing mental health professionals but also the whole community working together. When applying a sustainable co-building model, professionals and citizens unite to bring about the intended community transformation. Police officers and police social workers assist in gathering information on community needs and asset assessments, and from the information gathered, many associated problems will emerge. Community members are asked to join the effort by joining committees that work on issues. The community will priority list the problems with the most pressing problems first. A yearly plan will be developed and monitored to determine the program's effectiveness. As the problem stabilizes, next year will involve addressing other issues on the priority list. Exploring community needs and assets may result in a reduction in the suicide rate and will reveal other disparities that obstruct access to needed resources.

Although this discussion of police departments may seem out of touch, this vision embraces the future development of the police department mission as a gateway to the communities it serves. Police officers are among the primary change agents in society, and the citizens of their communities overlook this vital quality. While police officers arrest people who break the law, the next step is to address the causes of criminal activity. The police officer, as a change agent, is a principal expert in assisting police social workers, other professionals, and stakeholders to examine and address the causes of criminal activity and provide recommendations for prosocial responses to reduce crime. While entertaining this future vision, addressing the situation and the potential for current circumstances is essential.

This article will focus on a police social work model that could be more easily established during this time while continued reflection and discussion about the police department of the future continue to unfold. Developing a foundation upon which to expand the province of police departments, police work, and police social work requires a fusion of the many elements of police work in association with police social work. Beginning to develop holistic protocols and associations with police officers, police social workers, and communities will lead to new insights about how to better serve all neighborhoods and jurisdictions within the communities they serve.

The current circumstances include several components of services offered to communities by police departments and their officers. Social workers and police officers are frequently called upon for crisis interventions. The two professions have an extensive history of working together, yet their education and training differ significantly. Since both professions deal with crises in all areas of their jurisdiction, they often respond to underprivileged and poor individuals and their communities (Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Patterson & Swan, 2019; Patterson, 2022; Roberts & Springer, 2007).

There have been mixed discussions about the significance of social work education incorporating collaborative law enforcement content into the curriculum. Thus, partnerships and collaborative strategies can be more productive if social workers have the requisite education and practical experience to work as police social workers in police departments. In their line of duty, police officers enforce the law, arrest offenders, and occasionally perform

social service-related functions, such as doing welfare checks, assessing individuals for suicidal behavior, referring citizens to social service agencies, and referring to diversion and related services. This article will examine the challenges and opportunities of police social work and propose a holistic police social work model that will explore establishing a police social work department as a component of the police departments.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Police social work is one of the emerging fields of practice in social work (Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Patterson, 2012, 2022). There have been many definitions of police social work (Barker, 2014; Patterson, 2012, 2022; Tregar, 1975). However, researchers attribute the concepts of social police work and police social work to August Vollmer (Patterson & Swan, 2019). Civil service regulations outline the criteria for hiring police social workers with an academic degree in social work (Patterson, 201b).

### 2.1 History of Police Social Work in the United States

Police social work emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century as policewomen worked in several urban police departments (Patterson, 2012; Roberts, 1976). In 1915, twenty-five states “employed policewomen who were paid from police appropriations” (Roberts, 1976, p. 295). By the “1930s, over five hundred policewomen were employed by approximately two hundred police departments in large cities throughout the United States” (Roberts & Springer, 2007, p. 126). Policewomen provided social services while the policemen patrolled streets and performed “other duties traditionally associated with law enforcement” (Roberts, 1976, p. 294). Thus, “police social work was synonymous with police women’s bureaus working in protective and preventative roles with women and young girls” (Roberts & Springer, 2007, p. 126).

In the 1950s, there was a decline in the employment of police social workers due to changes in political leadership, misconceptions, pervasive sexism, and the lack of desire by male administrators to provide the requisite funding for hiring policewomen who worked predominantly as social workers (Roberts & Springer, 2007). Policewomen had to deal with criticism from the public as they were perceived to be weak and lacked candor in executing their jobs, especially in police departments dominated by men (Roberts, 1976; Roberts & Springer, 2007).

In the 1980s, the focus shifted from rehabilitation to punishment. With this change, social workers withdrew from involvement in the criminal justice system, specifically police social work. The need to provide a mutual understanding of training has been documented between police social workers and police officers. The social work curriculum should focus on police social work that combines social work in the context of police agency practice (Roberts, 1978).

Robert further suggested that programs teach social work skills to those primarily interested in law enforcement and then teach social workers skills necessary for the criminal justice setting. Four main areas that could be vital to students include (a) causes of crime and delinquency, (b) delinquency prevention and control, (c) police administration and leadership, and (d) human relationships. Police social workers should have in-service training that will include human behavior in the social environment, abnormal psychology, racism (systemic and institutional),

crisis intervention theory and techniques, delivery of services, social policy, and many other valuable courses (Robert, 1978).

In the last two decades (2003-2023), the roles of social workers and police social workers within police departments have become essential because police officers may be assigned to calls that require social services responses, mental health crises, and other behavioral health issues (Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Patterson, 2022; Patterson & Swan, 2019). Police officers often address community issues, family violence, marriage problems, noise pollution and ordinances, and many other emergency responses and are very effective in doing so (Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Mignon, 2012; Patterson, 2004, 2012; Patterson, 2022; Roberts, 2007). Police social workers can provide services to clients referred by police officers, continuing education for police officers that include stress management, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse, and provide a range of services for police officers and their families. Police social workers can also assist victims with orders of protection, referrals, information about pressing charges, or transporting the victim to a domestic violence shelter.

Police departments have primarily engaged in many ways of enforcing the law with stringency and determination. According to Manning (1995), police officers have been “assigned the task of crime prevention, crime detection and the apprehension of criminals” (p. 98). Manning observes that police officers make many assumptions, and some include heavy-handedness to control people so that they do not break the law and stronger punishments to deter criminals from reoffending. Many of these strategies led to distrust among many people, and in the 1990s, the U.S. Department of Justice established the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). According to the COPS Office

...community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systemic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime. (COPS, 2014, p. 3)

Since 2013, the COPS Office has provided microgrants in partnership with state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies to develop, pilot, and demonstrate projects in a real-world setting. Kappeler and Gaines (2015) acknowledge that community policing was a substantive reform in American police departments. Before this, there were many names for police engagement with communities, “it was called foot patrol, the Neighborhood Policing, Neighborhood-Oriented Policing, Community-Oriented Policing, Community-Based Policing, or Community Policing” (Kappeler & Gaines, 2015, p. 90). According to Irvin (2020), police officers should revert to the old ways by initiating interactions at the basic level. Irvin, (2020) states “the modern “police station” is the patrol car, and it is urgent” (para. 2) that police officers get out of their cars and interact with community members, and if they cannot then they can wave to demonstrate that they are part of the communities in which they serve. Thus, building connections, partnerships, and collaborations with community members is vital as “people are the police department’s most valuable resource and should be treated as valuable partners in the policing process” (Irvin, 2020, p. 91).

## 2.2 Current Status of Police Social Work

Police departments are renewing their interest in partnering with social workers. Many police departments are hiring police social workers, such as in Eugene, Oregon, Denver, New York City, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Campbell, KY, Deerfield, and Ramsey County, NJ (Borum et al., 1998; Dean et al., 2000; Eiland, 2022; Logan et al., 2024; Patterson, 2008; Rodgers, 2006). Many locations note the micro, mezzo, and macro dimensions of police and police social work as the range and depth of services are being placed in employment job descriptions. Reviewing the past relationships with social work and police organizations reveals that over time, there has been an increased population, more complex societal challenges, and social and economic disparities (Jenkins et al, 2011, Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Watson & Fulambarker, 2012). Table 1 outlines the various tasks police social workers use in their line of duty.

**Table 1 Police Social Work Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Tasks**

Micro	Mezzo	Macro
Adolescent Services	Assist Officer in Crisis	Advocate in Court
Case Management	Conflict Resolution	Advocacy
Child Abuse	Consult with Officers	Attend Community Meetings
Crisis Intervention	Deescalating	Community Relations
Diversion Programming	Domestic Violence	Community Builder
Domestic Violence	Juveniles	Community Outreach
Elder Abuse	Mediation Services	Conduct Public Education
Follow-up	Mentoring Youth	Follow-up with Officer Referrals
Homeless Services	Mobile Crisis Team	Grant Writing
Intake Assessments	Officer and Family Self Care	Implementation of Sustainable Community Development
Juveniles	Partner with Officers	Officer Training
Mediation Services	Peer Programming for Youth	Policy, Laws, Legislation
Mental Illness	Prevention Programming	Program Planning
1. Assessment	Short-term Therapy	1. Development
2. Service Management	Suicide Prevention	2. Implementation
Mobile Crisis Team		Supervised by a Social Worker and Police Officer
Officer Self Care		Victim and Family Services
Record Keeping		
Referral for Services		
Screen and Triage		
Screening		
Short-term Crisis Services		
Suicide Prevention		
Transportation to facilities		

### 2.3 Challenges to the Fusion and Integration of Police Social Work

There is a growing development of Police Social Work. It is time to adequately fund police departments and allow the police to realize their essential mission in every city, town, and

village more fully. Police officers act as primary change agents in society; this is a benefit of Community Policing. Police officers develop relationships with key informants in various neighborhoods and communities. As change agents, police officers hold the keys to accessing concerned citizens for police social workers, other professionals, and stakeholders to examine and address the causes of criminal activity and provide recommendations for prosocial responses to reduce crime. In addition, they are the experts who can be beneficial in assisting with gathering citizens to examine community needs and assets. They can introduce citizens who can help organize community transformation. When organizing communities, it is critical for citizen ownership and willingness to participate in the transformation of their community.

### **3.0 TWO MODELS OF POLICE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

#### **3.1 Model 1. Integrative Police Social Work Practice Model**

This model has been implemented and includes BSW and MSW-trained police social workers (Logan et al., 2024). This elegant model focuses on intentional partnerships, trust, and communication to establish resilient relationships among all stakeholders and supportive professionals in the community. Logan and colleagues observe that Jane Addams advocated for children and juveniles in the court system in 1899 (Logan et al., 2024). This model was developed to recognize the importance of a sustainable intervention model attending to the cultural environment in which police social workers serve. An integral part of this model involves internship programs with the police department and social work programs at the local university. This sustainable internship association involves students, social work educators, and law enforcement professionals. This generic model aims to support the development of police social work internship arrangements nationally. The internship components of this model may be helpful for police departments and social work internship placement offices to provide job tasks that could assist in developing job descriptions and related policies (Logan et al., 2024).

This practice model uses the term “forensic” social work interchangeably with “police social work.” There is a growing acceptance of police social work as a distinct area of practice that includes several forensic social work elements and consists of sustainable community organizing practice. The Integrative Police Social Work Practice Model includes community engagement that includes community activities such as meetings, planning events, and acting as a liaison between police and the community (Logan et al., 2024). In this model, police social workers partner with providers to create new services to address gaps and address disparities that reduce entry into the criminal justice system and reduce recidivism rates.

Logan and colleagues (2024) discuss the intricacies of supervising interns in the police social work setting. The internship office supervisor must agree with the police department regarding the association of onsite supervision by a police officer. Since BSW and MSW interns will be placed in the police department, different criteria and liability issues are involved. The implementation of the model suggests the importance of confidentiality as postulated by Watson and Fulambarker (2012) about the significance of police departments collaborating with mental health practitioners to address their calls safely.

Interns would benefit from a comprehensive approach to exploring the police department's environment and organizational culture, engaging in training that includes role-playing with police officers (Logan et al., 2024). This deliberate practice coaching relationship builds the

intern's confidence, develops trust and professional relationships with police officers, and allows the intern to feel comfortable asking questions and welcome in the police department setting. In addition, opportunities are offered for interns to debrief and support each other during peer support group supervision. The Social Work & Law Enforcement (SWLE) Network allows police officers and police social workers to engage in the sharing of resources and support. As of the publication of their article, this Integrative Police Social Work Practice Model is currently being used by four police departments and eight schools of social work and includes both BSW and MSW students (Logan et al., 2024).

This model transforms the understanding of the importance of police departments and police social workers' partnership opportunities. However, it also provides social work resources to develop police department services to their communities. This fusion and partnership of community change agents have the potential to conceptualize community issues from a global perspective, thereby imagining how to engage all citizens in co-building sustainable community transformation. Importantly, this collaborative effort holds the promise of reducing crime and providing access to community resources that do not exist, instilling a sense of hope in the potential of the model.

### **3.2 Model 2. Holistic Police Social Work Department**

This proposed model would work with a police department and university collaboration or in geographic areas without a university. It would involve service learning, social work course assignments, and internship placements in social services, clinical services, and sustainable community development with a university partnership. This model advocates for establishing a Police Social Work Department within the police department. The police social work department would be a separate department under a police social work administrator who would manage the social services, clinical social workers, and community development offices. Police social work services would be staffed by BSW or generalist social workers. Licensed Clinical Social Work-level social workers would provide clinical services, and BSW and MSW professionals would staff sustainable community development services.

In partnership with police officers, the police social work departments may engage in a range of activities to provide social, economic, health, and mental health services and community-based participatory research opportunities to assess the needs and strengths of the adjoining community and assess, plan, and implement sustainable programs to transform the community by removing barriers that prevent citizens from having access to needed resources.

This addition to the interface between the police department and its jurisdiction joins the change agent expertise of police officers and police social workers into a partnership where citizens may join in transforming their communities. This model allows all parties to collaborate on meaningful and sustainable community change. It includes all voices in the community to share and build an inclusive environment, thereby reducing crime, addressing the survival and safety needs of the community, and bringing together citizens from all parts of the community to celebrate their local distinctive strengths.

The Police Social Work department would include BSW and MSW social workers who will collaborate with police officers and community partners to address all citizens' social service, mental health, and sustainable community development needs (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Police Social Work Department: Social Services, Clinical Services, and Sustainable Community Development**

Social Services	Clinical Services	Community Development
BSW Social Workers	MSW/LCSW Social Workers	BSW & MSW Social Workers
Advocacy Case Management Follow-up Services Homeless Services Intake Assessments Mentoring Youth Partner with Officers Prevention Programming Referral for Services Screening Transportation Victim Services Work with Families	Clinical Social Work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Assessment</li> <li>➤ Diagnosis</li> <li>➤ Referral</li> <li>➤ Short-term Treatment</li> <li>➤ Management Services</li> </ul> Suicide Prevention Screening and Triage Mobile Crisis Team Referral Mediation Services Conflict Resolution Crisis Intervention Officer Self-Care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Assist Office in Crisis</li> <li>➤ Consult with Officer</li> <li>➤ Trauma Care</li> <li>➤ Officer Family</li> </ul> Deescalating Domestic Violence Volatile Officer Situation Anger Resolution Services Work with Families	Advocacy Community Development Community Action Teams Community Assessments Community Meetings Grant Writing Officer Referral Follow-up Officer Training Organize Key Informants Policy Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Laws</li> <li>➤ Legislation</li> <li>➤ Advocacy</li> </ul> Public Education Solution-Focused Groups Stakeholders Meetings

**3.3 Implications for Police Social Work Practice**

There is no doubt that police social workers have pertinent roles to play in police departments, especially since many community members call police departments first when they have emergencies. The literature demonstrates the overlapping roles and intervention strategies of police officers and social workers. Therefore, since their roles overlap, integrating criminal justice content into social work will prepare social workers to work as police social workers (Lamin & Teboh, 2016; Patterson, 2012, 2022; Roberts, 1976).

The two models discuss a holistic, sustainable co-building community transformation approach that offers significant improvement in expanding the police social work function. They support a holistic, integrative model that includes the Micro, Mezzo, and Macro dimensions of social work practice (refer to Table 2). The BSW and MSW. While Community Development is considered a Macro practice level, it must use Micro and Mezzo elements to reach sustainable co-building community transformation goals successfully. The tripartite umbrella of social work practice allows for close association with police personnel to foster social and economic changes in communities, reducing economic, health, and mental disparities and developing social support networks that assist police in their primary role to protect and serve citizens.



This will lead police personnel to expand their role as change agents in collaboration with police social workers, other providers, and community stakeholders.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined police social work and the various ways or roles social workers can play in and with police departments. During this confluent period of construing the multidimensional aspects of police departments and revisioning the many strengths that are underused in police departments. This intersection in time allows for discussion about the potential of police departments to transform the communities in collaboration with police social workers who may serve as mediators who work with police departments and engage citizens in co-building sustainable community transformation. The re-grounding of Police Departments and increasing the role of change agents of police personnel in collaboration with police social workers will reduce crime and develop sustainable community transformation. Police social workers can mediate and manage community development as police personnel partners.

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