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The Social Worker in Juvenile Justice

The core purposes of a juvenile justice system should be young offenders' rehabilitation and recidivism prevention, while punitive motives should remain secondary. Consequently, although juveniles' incarceration is sometimes inevitable—mainly when they are guilty of violent crimes—it should not be a priority of the government. The money spent on correctional facilities can instead be allocated to programs promoting social work that facilitates juvenile delinquents' reintegration into society, their families' support, and community restoration. Social workers working alongside the justice system need to focus on family-based interventions that promote healthy relationships between young offenders' family members, empower families to have more agency in these interventions, and provide comprehensive educational and vocational training for juveniles.

Crime statistics are an indicator of a nation's wellbeing. Although the factors that have shaped juvenile delinquency are numerous and complex, scholars emphasize changing social structures of cities, shifts in labor markets, growing wealth disparity, and parental incarceration

as several of the most notable ones (Taylor 140-141). As evident from this list, the social structure of the United States, with its current wealth inequality and government-supported mass incarceration, is behind the prevalence of juvenile crime. For example, the disproportionate incarceration of the black population during the 'war on drugs' campaign of the 1980s led to the situation when many young people, especially among African Americans, had a parent in prison, which is a predictor of juvenile delinquency (Taylor 141). Likewise, recently released past offenders face difficulties finding employment and often re-offend merely out of a lack of legal options to make a living. In turn, children raised in their households are a risk group for juvenile delinquency. It is the government's responsibility to care for the lower-income disadvantaged populations, yet social workers act as a support system working with communities and families to help them heal.

The primary reasons behind a separate status for juvenile offenders within the justice system are the assumption that they are less responsible for the offenses committed due to immaturity and the belief that close contact with adult offenders can further push the youth toward crime. In contrast to the criminal justice system, the priorities of juvenile justice are rehabilitation and treatment due to its informal nature, individualized treatment of each offender, and the lack of criminal records, facilitating young people's reintegration in their communities (Taylor 136). Nevertheless, the United States has a more retribution-oriented approach toward juvenile justice as compared to most European countries. Historically, minors who committed serious offenses (for instance, murder or armed robbery) could be transferred to criminal courts

and treated as adults, yet the protocol has recently changed. After *Miller v. Alabama (2012)*, juveniles can no longer be sentenced to death or life in prison without the possibility of parole (Taylor 137). Overall, the goal of juvenile justice system is less punitive. It adopts several principles of restorative justice, such as restoration-promoting communication between the offender and his or her community as well as the offender and the victim.

Consequently, social workers play a crucial role in preventing juvenile crime, and a major part of their work consists of family-based interventions. Communication with the families of at-risk youth is a delicate process; therefore, most initiatives incorporating families are aimed at preventing recidivism instead of first-time offences. Nevertheless, adolescents reported by schools due to their antisocial behavior and concerning mental health state are a target of social work services as well. Empirical evidence supports functional family therapy (FFT)—a family-based intervention conducted in both clinic and home settings and targeting 11-18-year-old adolescents ("Clinical Model" par. 1). The proponents of FFT maintain that the roots of antisocial behavior lay in the relationship between young people and their family members. The program, with an average of 12 to 14 sessions over three to five months, consists of five major components: engagement, motivation, relational assessment, behavior change, and generalization ("Clinical Model" par. 1, 3). Each of the stages has different objectives and relies on a variety of techniques, yet the main idea behind the entire intervention is to respond to the family's needs and reshape members' behavior through a series of communication-promoting assignments based on cognitive-behavioral strategies.

However, in addition to specific structured interventions, social workers have to deal with the challenges that prevent juvenile offenders' families from helping the reintegration process and engaging in recidivism prevention. According to the data obtained from mental health practitioners, defense lawyers, and education advocates working with delinquents' families, the main barriers to families' active involvement in interventions are (1) the lack of economic resources; (2) the shame and the sense of positional inferiority in the relationship to the juvenile justice system; (3) the lack of power in the process; (4) the lack of opportunities to stay connected during incarceration; (5) the need for social workers' care to extend beyond the juvenile justice system; (6) the parents' need for comprehensive mental health support (Amani et al. 58-60). Given these factors, it appears that the juvenile justice system and social workers should offer families more agency in tailoring interventions to their unique needs and circumstances. It would both solve the power imbalance and help families meet the obligations of the intervention programs to the extent that their resources allow them. Besides, programs should involve more activities aimed at supporting families' psychological wellbeing.

Finally, social workers engage juveniles in vocational programs to help young people obtain meaningful, legal employment in the future and prevent recidivism as a result. The most demonstrative proof of the need for education- and employment-promoting training is the view of youthful offenders on such programs. The findings of the study conducted among juvenile delinquents show their overwhelming support for programs intended to help offenders get their high school diploma (85% of respondents) and teaching the youth a skill to increase

employability (88%) (Pealer et al. 140). A comprehensive approach is to combine education/vocational training with individual and group counseling to maximize the effects of the intervention. It would allow the juvenile justice system to target psychological and economic factors that contribute to delinquency. Concurrent interventions offered by social services working with offenders' families would complete the comprehensive recidivism prevention plan.

Overall, social workers are an irreplaceable part of the reintegration of juvenile offenders into society, regardless of whether or not they operate as a part of the juvenile justice system or separately. Social services conduct family-based interventions, such as functional family therapy, to create a trusting relationship between youthful offenders and their family members. Additionally, they provide vocational and educational training to help young people obtain the necessary means for legal employment and prevent poverty-based re-offending. Nevertheless, social workers often face difficulties that stem from a lack of resources in offenders' families and the punitive inclinations that remain prominent in the American juvenile justice system. Thus, the government needs to help their work with strictly reintegration-oriented policies and economic support for disadvantaged communities.

Works Cited

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