

CHALLENGING CARCERAL SOCIAL WORK AND THE STRUGGLE FOR ABOLITION

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*Network to
Advance
Abolitionist
Social
Work*

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

The Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work (NAASW), formed in 2020, strives to amplify a practice of social work aimed at dismantling the prison industrial complex (PIC) [1] and building the life-affirming horizon to which abolition aspires. In the spring of 2021, we launched a national survey of social work to understand more about how social work(ers) perpetuate and/or are complicit in criminalization and how social work(ers) are engaging in abolitionist work. We recognize “social work” to include all workers who identify with the field — from social service workers to organizers, clinicians to policy makers, and those with and without social work degrees or licenses.

Collaborators within NAASW developed a multi-method survey including questions with both open and close-ended answers, and made it available online through our social media channels and website, with full participant anonymity. We are grateful for the over 400 participants who took the time to thoughtfully share experiences and perspectives through their survey responses. The goals of the data project were to highlight points of contact between social work(ers) and carceral systems, and to collate major tensions social workers are wrestling with — whether they identify as abolitionist or not — in assessing the impact and meaning of their work with communities.

We organized themes across all questions using a systematic qualitative coding process. In doing so, we were struck by the thoughtfulness and complexity of answers to the following four questions on which the bulk of this report focuses:

- Does any part of your work ask that you monitor or surveil the people and communities that you serve?
- Do you think social workers should work with law enforcement?
- How does your place of employment limit abolitionist values, practices, or policies?
- How do you create opportunities for abolitionist values, practices or policies in your work?

1. Critical Resistance, "What is the PIC? What is Abolition?"
<https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>

KEY FINDINGS



01 — Community Monitoring and Surveillance

Major points of surveillance identified include drug testing, mandated reporting, working in settings with high security presence, providing services for people mandated to be there, working with parole, and via client eligibility screening.



02 — Employment Limiting Abolitionist Values

Commonly repeated themes include mandated reporting, private and public funding sources dictating services, the non-profit industrial complex, relationship preservation with partners/state actors, hospital welfare checks, eligibility requirements/screening, and organizational cultures of white saviorism.



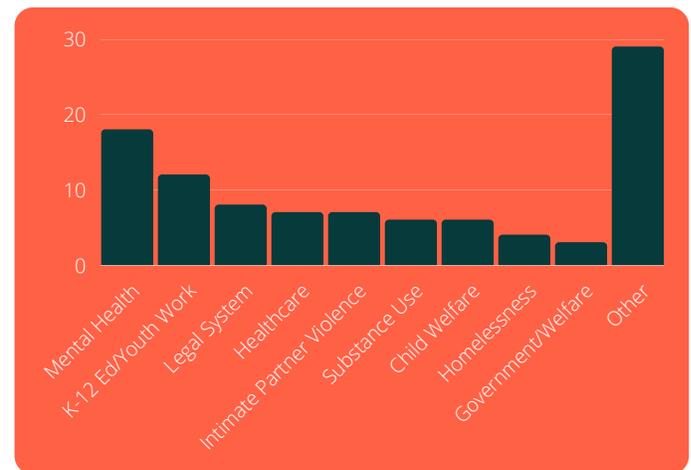
03 — Opportunities for Creating Abolition at Work

The four major, recurrent themes across responses about opportunities for abolitionist values at work include: staff trainings and political education, conversations with coworkers, techniques for not incriminating clients (e.g. vague case notes), and lobbying for crisis de-escalation plans which avoid collaborating with the police or child protective services.

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

In total, 428 people responded to the survey representing 44 U.S. states, Washington DC, and 5 Canadian provinces, as well as India, Australia, and Kenya.

Over half hold an MSW degree, and an additional 22% were in a BSW or MSW program at the time of their survey response. A total of 10% of survey participants work in social service fields without a social work degree. Survey participants identified their area of work out of a set of provided options, and represent wide-ranging fields, with the largest two groups being Mental Health (18%) and K-12 Education/Youth Work (12%). This report highlights major themes within those areas as well as from participants working in the Legal System (8%), Hospital/Healthcare (7%), Intimate Partner Violence (7%), Substance Use (6%), the Family Regulation/Child Welfare System (6%), Homelessness (4%), Government/Welfare (3%) and Law Enforcement (2%).



Half of all participants were between the ages of 25-34, 13% between 18-24, and 25% between 35-44. The remaining 12% of participants represent workers between 45 and 74 years old, with one participant each in both the 75-84 and 85-94 age brackets.

Of all participants, 81% identify as abolitionist, although this survey did not utilize a set definition of abolition and we recognize a wide range of definitions may have been used by those taking the survey.

In response to an open-ended identity question, participants opted to share information about their identity markers in a range of ways, with some choosing not to disclose at all. A majority of participants, 69%, include white or white-passing as an element of their identities. A wide range of additional racial, ethnic, and transnational identities were represented such as Mexican-American, Black, immigrant, southern, Lakota, and more. Women represent the largest percentage of participants, with 290 (68%) listing woman, female, or she/her as an identity marker. Fifty-two participants (12%) listed non-binary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, or gender-expansive as an identity marker, while only 20 (5%) of survey participants listed male as an identity marker. A third of participants (30%) identify as queer.

Available sources of demographic and other data about who is represented in the social work field include the Council on Social Work Education and the U.S. Census Bureau, both of which utilize narrow definitions of who is a social worker as well as close-ended gender, race, ethnicity, and identity metrics. [2] [3] Given these mismatches in style of information gathering, we are not able to fully assess the extent to which this set of survey participants is, or is not, a representative sample of workers in the field. However, in regards to whiteness and womanhood our data set seems very representative, with a majority of participants describing themselves as holding those intersecting identities.

This is a particularly salient data point of note, as we cannot understand social work without a racial and gender analysis deconstructing the field's historic and contemporary composition as majority white and female.

As the next sections will show, a wide range of perspectives about the possibilities, and impossibilities, of actualizing an abolitionist social work were shared through this survey project. Social workers from different regions, fields, identities and age describe examining, struggling with, and pushing back against the ways their work criminalizes communities. Those who have long interrogated this relationship, those who are establishing these connections for the first time, and those in places in between described experimenting with opportunities for abolition in even the most entrenched carceral systems.

2. Data USA (2017). Social Workers. <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/social-workers#about>

3. Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity (2020). Findings from Three Years of Surveys of New Social Workers. <https://www.cswe.org/CSWE/media/Workforce-Study/The-Social-Work-Profession-Findings-from-Three-Years-of-Surveys-of-New-Social-Workers-Dec-2020.pdf>

HOW DOES SOCIAL WORK MONITOR AND SURVEIL THE COMMUNITIES IT SERVES?

The survey encouraged participants to reflect on the ideologies that inform their social work practice, as well as their specific social work contexts and job responsibilities. The wide range of fields of social work greatly informed participant responses, with some working far outside criminal legal systems and others working directly within them. However, the majority of participants revealed troubling aspects of their work while also interrogating the relationship between their values and the realities of their jobs.

"[Mandated reporting] criminalizes poverty and makes systemic issues into individual ones by victim-blaming and routing people into the carceral system"

Regardless of whether participants identify as abolitionist or not, over 40% believe that part of their work is to monitor or surveil the people and communities that they serve. The field with the highest percentage is child welfare at 81%, with K-12 education/youth work not far behind at 74%. Major points of surveillance reported include drug testing, mandated reporting, working in settings with high security presence, providing services for people mandated to be there, working with parole, and via client eligibility screening. One participant working in child welfare shares several of these in their response: "We regularly collect urinalysis or other drug testing from clients. When we receive new reports many folks will investigate a client's social media in the early phases of work. I am a mandated reporter."

Just over half of all participants, 53%, believe their work criminalizes communities. The most common form of criminalization identified is mandated reporting. One participant explains, "It criminalizes poverty and makes systemic issues into individual ones by victim-blaming and routing people into the carceral system-- plus separating families and disrupting attachment." Other responses pointed to their work within the legal system, and common defense strategies in court settings as a contributing factor to criminalization: "This is complicated for my role. I feel like my role as part of a defense team attempts to keep people from being further entangled in the criminal legal system. But I think defense teams also criminalize people—especially people we don't represent. We do it with other people tangentially involved in the cases (witnesses, alleged victims)."

Additional responses spoke of a general lack of root problem-solving or work towards alleviating poverty as contributing to the criminalization of communities. A set of responses called attention to the absence of trauma-informed care and of crisis de-escalation plans that don't rely on law enforcement in their work settings, with many participants citing their employer's policies of working with the police.

Revealingly, 17% of participants identifying as abolitionist, also responded that social workers should work with the police. Answers

that elaborated on this position shared two primary reasons. The first, expressed by 35 people (8%), is a belief that collaboration can reduce harm. From this viewpoint, one social worker writes: "We are part of the same system. We can't just not work with them and then act like that absolves us of the problems in our own field. Also if I have the opportunity to be at a meeting police are at and intervene legislatively or through community contacts instead of having them take the lead, I will."

The second reason, expressed by 47 participants (11%), stems from a perception of having no other choice for the time being: "Should there be viable alternatives in the community I serve then law enforcement should not be engaged with, but as of yet such supports just do not exist. Personally, I exhaust every other option before interacting with law enforcement." One comment encapsulates both viewpoints succinctly: "I wish we didn't have to. But it scares me to think about what would happen if we weren't involved in the system."

Of the 83% of abolitionists who said social workers should not work with police, major themes include beliefs that the police are beyond reform, that any collaboration further legitimizes the PIC thereby impeding abolitionist progress, and that working with law enforcement is in direct violation of the social work code of ethics. The argument that collaboration with police violates the code of ethics, shared by 10 participants, is concisely explained by one public defender social worker: "[we] are charged with striving to 'end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice.' Aligning our profession with law enforcement, a system that historically and systematically perpetuates racism and violence against black and brown people, is in direct conflict with our code of ethics." One participant hits on several of these arguments while explaining how social work-police partnerships are ineffective: "It's just not going to work in most situations. The police have more power so they will always hold the cards in terms of how a situation is going to end. Then these programs will fail, and the answer may well be, ok we tried and it didn't work so let's go back to policing as it was."

HOW DO SOCIAL WORK EMPLOYERS LIMIT ABOLITIONIST VALUES?

Across all fields of social work many themes repeatedly show up in the responses to this question including: mandated reporting, private and public funding sources dictating services, the non-profit industrial complex, relationship preservation with partners/state actors, hospital welfare checks, eligibility requirements/screening, and organizational cultures of white saviorism.

Mandated reporting consistently presents challenges across most fields of social work, with participants sharing struggles related to its racist and anti-Black roots, how vaguely the laws are written, the criminalization of poverty, and its failure to keep children safe. A social worker in the field of youth sexual health care and HIV prevention connects all these points in explaining their experience as technically being a mandated reporter: "It's all challenging. It's largely ineffective, doesn't serve its function (to protect vulnerable children), funnels disproportionately Black and indigenous children into the racist and oppressive child welfare system, and criminalizes their families for being poor. **Having worked with youth in the sex trades, including youth experiencing sex trafficking, child welfare systems do not do anything to protect youth they KNOW are in danger and can take concrete action to protect."**

On the theme of funding limiting the quality of work that can be done, one mental health worker describes, "We are required to coordinate with law enforcement and we are mandated reporters. We are overseen by county, state, and federal structures." Similarly, a youth worker connects their organization's funding structure with surveillance: "Our primary funding source requires a huge amount of personal information about each client, which is invasive and shaming for many young people. Because of the requirements of our funders, the 'outcomes' that we work towards are incredibly narrow, and do not provide sufficient space for fully, holistically supporting young people."

Another youth worker laments their organization's racist cultural values and funding structure: "The org has a very white savior vibe and my higher ups don't want to 'rock the boat' with our conservative Christian donors. Same donors wouldn't sit at a table with our clients. It's infuriating."

Six separate social workers in healthcare settings shared the common occurrence of welfare checks. One explains: "If there is concern of violent/traumatic abuse by a patient or caregiver, we call police authorities for a welfare check and/or immediate intervention." These police collaborations appear to be hospital policy, and are initiated by social workers assigned to patients.

A social worker for their local government's "homeless hotline" draws a connection between eligibility screening and surveillance, particularly as it discriminates against immigrants and those without documentation: "The requirements to get into the program include making sure the client is not 'over income'. The funding assistance is means-tested, and it is assumed that the case manager must ensure that the 'most deserving' get funding. If clients do not submit to this surveillance or adequately comply with it, they are excluded from funding. Additionally, this program completely excludes those that do not have photo ID, or a social security number."

HOW ARE SOCIAL WORKERS CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ABOLITIONIST VALUES AT WORK?

Participants had wide ranging beliefs about the possibilities for abolitionist pathways at their work. Some express gratitude at working outside of traditional carceral systems and the independence to approach their work through embodied abolitionist values, while others lament a lack of possibility given their setting. However, the majority land somewhere in between, living and working within the tensions that so often arise when we begin to imagine the potential of an abolitionist social work practice. They are organizing in ways big and small to push their co-workers, teams, and agencies towards creative solutions to building safety without policing communities themselves, or relying upon the police.

The four major, recurrent themes across responses about opportunities for abolitionist values at work include: staff trainings and political education, conversations with coworkers, techniques for not incriminating clients, and lobbying for crisis de-escalation plans which avoid collaborating with the police or child protective services.

A mental health clinician explains techniques they've developed in their abolitionist efforts at their work to disrupt or minimize the harm of sharing case notes with police: "I do not offer any information about my clients to probation or law enforcement. I stop my clients when I think they are about to tell me something I am mandated to report and allow them to decide whether they want to continue sharing information. I initiate conversations about the harms of policing within the organization I work for." A supervisor for a team of social workers who are part of a legal team providing representation for parents affected by the family regulation system offers: "We attempt to limit our power, our gatekeeping, and we have fully abolished any reporting to government systems." Another worker in the area of substance use shares their strategy of "giving vague or generous notes about clients to legal entities, documenting sessions in ways that could not incriminate them in court if records are subpoena'd".

Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work

Challenging Carceral Social Work and the Struggle for Abolition

Participants offered several suggestions for alternatives to not calling or collaborating with the police in the workplace. These include suggestions for formal organizational policies for crisis response as well as everyday resistance to involving the police at the individual level. A family advocate at a children's advocacy center explains for those who answer the helpline calls, "we are firm in our commitment to not calling the police and make sure that callers know at the start of the call that as long as they use a false name or don't tell us any identifying info, even our mandated reporting won't touch them. We actively provide alternative justice materials and offer ourselves as 24hr support advocates. It's such a hard line to walk."

Many workers have advocated for these techniques to be made official organizational policy, or included in staff trainings. Repeatedly, participants are calling on their organizations to offer trauma-informed de-escalation trainings to eliminate reliance on law enforcement. One person working with people who are experiencing homelessness explains the dire need: "we are not fully trauma informed and many staff are not trained to de-escalate crisis situations which results in calls to law enforcement for 'help' and often leads to an arrest and re-traumatization of clients."

For participants working directly within or adjacent to carceral systems, many admitted struggling with how to answer this question. Some talked about the need to take space for themselves to process day by day, while others discussed taking opportunities for reflection and conversation with co-workers, or finding a community outside of work to unpack their experiences. An assessment and referral specialist in the field of mental health shares that they are "still working on it. Right now my team is very much the opposite of this so it involves me deconstructing the little bits and pieces of my day after each shift."

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS ABOLITION

For those, social workers and others, who may be reading this report and wondering what implications these findings hold for your practice, we encourage you to lean into these questions. Social work has a long and troubled history complying with tremendous state violence against poor, Black, Indigenous, and other oppressed communities. Grappling with these truths may require a re-orientation to your work, finding new opportunities in other fields or with new agencies. It may spark a re-engagement where you already are and the encouragement to create novel ways of embedding abolitionist ideals into practice.

In closing this report, we invite you to consider the following questions and to continue posing your own:

Are there specific areas where you feel stuck right now?

What possible pathways exist in your own practice towards abolition?

Where do you draw the line for yourself in complicity with carceral systems?

As our survey participants reveal, there aren't uniform answers to these questions. However, that is **not** to say that all answers are right answers. As an abolitionist group, we hold to be true that any answer must be grounded in divestment from prisons, policing, surveillance, and punishment. This necessarily includes the interrogation of deeply held, socially-constructed beliefs that legal systems rooted in the carceral logic of punishment produce positive outcomes. Such systems include criminal, family, housing, and immigration courts, as well as police officers and policing social workers/case workers. Social workers, even those strongly identifying with abolitionist values, continually face challenges working within, outside of, and adjacent to legal systems and law enforcement structures. Our hope at the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work is for social workers to face these challenges head on. To continue pushing boundaries, encouraging conversations, and engaging in the work of creating the conditions necessary for abolition in our workplaces, in our communities, in our families and in our relationships.

There is no one place to get started, but we must start somewhere. Speak up, find your people, and advocate for a social work unrecognizable from its current form.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

Critical Resistance, "What is the PIC? What is Abolition?"

<https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>

Data USA (2017). Social Workers. <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/social-workers#about>

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