

2021

The Occupational Experiences of Social Workers in Corrections

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Lissette Lucero Lopez

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

The Occupational Experiences of Social Workers in Corrections

by

Lisette Lucero Lopez

MSW, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014

BSW, Trinity Christian College 2012

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2021

Abstract

Social workers who practice in corrections settings are faced with dilemmas, burnout, contrasting values between their profession and organization, and a lack of educational training. However, because of the small percentage of social workers that practice in the correctional setting, there is a gap in knowledge of the occupational experiences of these social workers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections using Niklas Luhmann's system theory, which suggests that the world includes a system and its environment. Data were collected through phone interviews with 10 to 15 master's level social workers who have practiced in corrections within the past 5 years. Participants were recruited from Midwestern jails in the United States. Thematic qualitative analysis led to five themes: client service barriers, barriers faced by social workers in the correctional setting, improvement recommendations for social work curricula, how social workers define success, and systemic barriers and systemic success. These findings can guide social work practice through improving social work education, social worker training, client services, and community resources. Potential implications for social work practice and for positive social change include reforming correctional institutional policies to become more rehabilitative, criminal justice laws and sentencing, and policies that impact people involved with the criminal justice systems.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to God who gave me the strength, courage, and perseverance to complete my doctoral social work journey. I also want to dedicate this study to my parents, Oscar and Fabiola Lucero who gave me the support and ambition to continue my academic pursuits. My parents came to the United States in the early 90's from Durango, Mexico with a dream to give my older brother Giovanni and I an opportunity for a better life. Due to my parents' guidance, love, and support, I was able to accomplish this great feat. I also share this triumph with my husband Sergio Lopez who believes in my dreams and aspirations even when I doubt myself. To my son Sergio Alonzo Lopez, who was born during the process of this study, you are loved more than you will ever know, and you can achieve anything you set your mind to. Finally, to the people impacted by the criminal justice system and their families; you have taught me so much about social work. You inspire me to push for social justice and to challenge oppression. I hope that you can reach every goal that you set to achieve despite your adversities.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Walden University for helping me to accomplish becoming a Doctor of Social Work. The rigor and adaptability of the Doctor of Social Work program made this dream possible for me. Thank you to my chair Doctor Alex Casiano who gave me so much confidence and guidance throughout this whole process. Dr. Casiano always answered my calls, email, and texts with support and thoughtfulness. It was inspiring to be guided by a Latino social worker. I could not have asked for a better chairperson. Thank you to my second committee member Doctor Jaegoo Lee, who reviewed and helped to enhance my qualitative research process. Thank you to University Research Reviewer Doctor Nancy J Campbell. Thank you to Program Director Doctor Debora Rice who helped me to identify the topic for my Doctoral Capstone while at my Walden residency.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge the social workers who participated in this study and the social work profession. Your passion and dedication do not go unnoticed. This is a profession of service and care, where every interaction makes a difference. Please continue to advocate fearlessly on behalf of clients.

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.” -Jane Addams

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Social workers practice in interprofessional settings where social work is not the dominant profession. These settings include criminal justice systems such as jails, prisons, and courthouses (Sweifach, 2015). Social workers who work in criminal justice settings are met with unique challenges (Young, 2015). Social workers are faced with the dilemma of meeting their clients' needs while following the strict rules of correctional institutions. Criminal justice social workers also experience ethical stress due to the inability of being able to base their practice solely on social work values (Fenton, 2015). Further, these social workers function in diverse settings such as mental health services to correctional populations, conducting risk assessments, and providing services to victims and offenders, which creates unique challenges (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Social work principles and values are ideal for practice; however, the demands on social workers can result in job burnout and/or vicarious trauma (Wilson, 2016).

In addition to the unique challenges social workers face in correctional settings, a study from 2007 showed that only 1% of social workers indicated criminal justice as their primary area of practice (Young, 2015). This low figure translates into a lack of evidence regarding correctional social work, as most studies focus on the forensic aspect of social work or have been conducted in other countries such as England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, and India. Furthermore, this small percentage of social workers who practice in the correctional setting creates a gap in knowledge of the occupational experiences of these social workers. To address the gap in knowledge, this study used a qualitative research design. Exploring the gaps in the occupational experiences of social workers can lead to

potential positive social change implications in correctional social work and to prepare future social workers. These implications include being able to better address ethical dilemmas, decrease burnout, increase effective practice, inform social work curriculum, and improve policies for clients in correctional settings (Young, 2015).

Section 1 includes a problem statement followed by the purpose statement and research question. Then follows the nature of the doctoral project and the significance of the study. Next, the theoretical/conceptual framework is discussed and then the values and ethics. In the review of the professional and academic literature the major areas related to social work in corrections are identified and explored including the gaps in literature regarding the experiences of social workers in corrections.

Problem Statement

Social work is a human rights profession that is crucial in advocating for the welfare of detained people and their human rights. However, advocating for human rights becomes secondary to the mission of correctional institutions to maintain security and compliance (Jarldorn, 2019). Social workers who practice in criminal justice settings are thus met by many challenges to practicing ethical social work (Young, 2015). The guiding principle of correctional philosophy, which is retribution, contrasts with the social work guiding value of dignity and worth for all. Often in forensic social work there are conflicting ethical obligations where several frameworks need to be used to resolve dilemmas. This calls for more specialized ethical guidelines for practice than those prescribed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).

Additionally, the experience of ethical stress has been reported by criminal justice social workers. This stress is related to how much agencies rely on manualized work with offenders and how the agency prioritizes public protection/risk assessment. Ethical stress is also related to the perception of poor ethical climate demonstrated by high workloads, lack of procedural supervision, poor management skills, and lack of attention to welfare and social justice values (Fenton, 2015).

Working in the criminal justice system also exposes social workers to the possibility of job burnout and vicarious trauma. Job burnout in social workers is linked to workload, control, values, fairness, reward, and community. Further, social workers in correctional settings are prone to work with clients who have experienced trauma such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, war, and natural disasters. Social workers learn how to have empathic responses so they can see their client's world from the client's viewpoint while remaining objective (Wilson, 2016). But this can turn into vicarious trauma, which occurs when professionals take on the client's stress, vulnerabilities, and victimizations (Wilson, 2016). A key characteristic of vicarious trauma is when the professional experiences a shift in how they view the world in the areas of safety, trust, and control (Wilson, 2016). Though social workers are responsible for their own self-care, organizations play a role in support their staff through services and trainings.

Despite the need for more social workers in criminal justice (Matejkowski, Johnson, & Severson, 2014), they are underrepresented in the criminal justice field due to these challenges along with value conflicts between the criminal justice and social work

professions, lack of social work training in this specialized field, and perceived limited effects of interventions with adults in the criminal justice system (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Exposing social work students to course work and field education in criminal justice can increase the likelihood that they will practice in criminal justice upon graduation (Scheyett et al., 2012). It is also important to address the gap in knowledge of the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. For this study occupational experiences will be defined as how the social workers define success in their work, on the job challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting. To address this gap in knowledge regarding the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections, this study used a qualitative research design. Data were collected through phone calls and Zoom interviews, to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. This study aimed to interview 10 to 15 master level social workers who have practiced in corrections within the past 5 years. A total of 14 social workers were interviewed, which helped answer the research question: What are the occupational experiences that social workers in corrections encounter in this specialized field of social work? This doctoral study addresses a lack of research on the experiences of social workers in correctional settings. This study helped to identify ways that social workers define success in corrections, identify challenges and ethical conflicts, and define competencies that are needed to practice in this specialty area of social work.

Social workers have defined different occupational experiences that translate into success in correctional social work. Though working in this complex system can be challenging, it affords opportunities for promoting social justice such as restorative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and being able to bring an awareness of the impact of race, culture, and poverty to institutions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Social workers are instrumental in advocating for better conditions of confinement both physically and in terms of services. In terms of tangible success, social workers provide needed services, reduce recidivism, improve inmate behavior, reduce suicide attempts, help meet educational goals, have success in court, and improve detainees' relationships with family. Intangible outcomes include goals that have not been accomplished until the detainee reenters into the community (Young, 2014). The ability of social workers to prioritize conflicting responsibilities, compromise, and strategically advocate, strengthens their ability to practice in the criminal justice system (Young, 2014).

One barrier to these successful social work experiences is that in criminal justice settings, safety and security are most important which places the needs of clients and provision of services last (Young, 2014). But implementing the NASW Code of Ethics is not always straight forward in punitive environments. Ethical challenges primarily result from conflicting demands and needs of the organization and the client's needs (Young, 2015). This leads to feelings of guilt because they cannot act in accordance with their values (Fenton, 2015). Forensic social workers are especially vulnerable to ethical challenges while working with conflicting criminal proceedings, working in institutional settings, and interacting with a blind justice system (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).

The unique challenges experienced by social workers calls for more specialized ethical guidelines than those set forth by the NASW. Social workers' core mission is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with special attention to needs of people who are vulnerable oppressed and living in poverty (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Competencies beneficial to social workers in criminal justice settings include being credible, respecting the inherent dignity and worth of others, having cultural awareness and being genuine. Beneficial personal traits include being persistent, self-aware, and passionate about the work (Young, 2014).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

The nature of this study was a qualitative research design since the main goal was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. Qualitative research is grounded on the methodological pursuit of understanding the ways that people view, approach, and experience the world and make meanings of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Snowball and purposive sampling were used since they are helpful in exploratory research and consist of study participants referring other participants in the field (Young, 2014). Qualitative, individual, semi structured interviews were more suitable to exploring experiences of social workers than a quantitative design due to the complexity of capturing how social work is practiced in corrections (Young, 2014). Qualitative analysis is helpful when the perspectives of insiders are explored on a topic to be able the understand the concepts that shape those perspectives (Padgett, 2008). Qualitative research was thus consistent with exploring occupational experiences of social workers in corrections since it focuses on context, interpretation, subjectivity, and

representation of the researcher as a key aspect of the inquiry process. As the researcher I was the primary instrument shaping the research process, methods, data, and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Significance of the Study

This study fills a gap by exploring the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. The social work field is a complex adaptive system with interrelated parts; conducting a study on the experiences of correctional social workers will impact researchers, educators, practitioners, and the systems involved (Stringfellow, 2017). Exploring how social workers meet the needs of the population and engage in social action provides insight into avenues for improving social work practice (Cox & Augustine, 2018). Exploring the core values that guide social workers can inform the improvement of interventions and therapeutic programs in correctional settings (Jarldorn, 2019).

Social work education offers limited opportunities for students to specialize in working with people who are currently or that have been previously incarcerated. However, social workers are highly needed in criminal justice setting since detained people are among the most marginalized population; they are overwhelmingly people of color and are more likely to have problems with mental health, substance use, poverty, education, and homelessness (Franke et al., 2017). This study provides research that can encourage social work programs in creating and updating curricula that prepares social work students to work in complex systems such as corrections (Our Lady of the Lake

University, 2020). Information gathered from this study can also be used to mold social policy and legislative action in criminal justice settings (Wilson, 2010).

Although research of the criminal justice field is plenty, there is a lack of research from the social work perspective (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Recent changes such as several new texts of social work and criminal justice and the formation of the National Association of Forensic Social Workers suggest that social work is beginning to refocus on the criminal justice field (Scheyett et al., 2012). Exploring the gaps in the occupational experiences of social workers can lead to improvements in correctional social work and to prepare future social workers. Potential positive social implications include being able to better address ethical dilemmas, decrease burnout, increase effective practice, inform social work curricula, and improve policies for clients in correctional settings (Young, 2015).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

I used systems theory to understand the occupational experiences of social workers in in criminal justice settings. The social theory describes the society itself rather than being an empirically verifiable hypothesis (Mattheis, 2012). Further, the theory suggests that the world is made up of a system and its environment (Borch, 2011). The theory poses that each society is divided into separated (sub)systems such as the legal, political, educational, and scientific system. Social (sub)systems are structures that maintain in a complex environment a less complex, meaningful context invariant and are in turn able to influence actions.

Luhmann's social systems theory is based on four essential elements: communication, autopoiesis, differentiation, and structural couplings (Mattheis, 2012). Luhmann indicated that communication is not necessarily aimed at obtaining consensus but instead leads to understanding (Probert, 2013). Each social system consists of infinite communication. Communication is the basic unit of observation for the assessment of the operations of social systems. Social systems are also made up of multiple events that change quickly; thus, society and all its subsystems are autopoietic, self-producing communication. Various systems are connected through structural couplings. There is strict and clear differentiation of autopoietic systems and their environments. Structural couplings describe inter-systemic relationships and the most important instrument. These couplings have a double effect; they produce inclusion and exclusion simultaneously (Mattheis, 2012).

Luhmann acknowledged that conflict does arise among systems. The solution to problems of conflict is loose couplings instead of tight ones. When systems are loosely coupled, it is easier to isolate conflicts, and the systems are more stable than highly coupled systems (Probert, 2013). A system view of an organization is necessary to address performance issues in organizations. Organizations are made up of interconnected units that impact the performance of other systems within the organization. To be successful organizations must work together toward a common goal (Ritzman, 2016).

Luhmann's systems theory emphasizes important aspects of social work such as organizations, roles, goals, and direction on how to implement services (Kihlström,

2012). Systems theory focuses on the environment where an individual develops and is an important component of human behavior and social environment courses in social work education. Systems theory is related to human rights and focuses on the responsibilities of humans and governmental entities to protect these rights (Steen, 2018). System dynamics principles help to guide advancement in social work through researchers, practitioners, educators, and the institutions to which they are associated with (Stringfellow, 2017). Using Luhmann's systems theory allowed me to understand the occupational experiences social workers face in the different systems that interact through social work in criminal justice settings.

Values and Ethics

The focus of this study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. Those involved in the criminal justice system often are part of one or more vulnerable populations. The Code of Ethics is designed to help professionals to resolve conflicts when professional obligations conflict or ethical uncertainties arise. But social workers may be faced with complex ethical dilemmas that do not have simple solutions (NASW, 2017). The mission of social work is rooted in a set of six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, important of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). All the core values are applicable to correctional social work practice; however, social justice is the guiding value in this area of social work and the secondary value would be dignity and worth of the person.

Under the value of social justice, social workers must advocate for social change especially on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people. But the predominant

correctional philosophy of retribution in criminal justice collides with social work values of dignity and worth for all (Young, 2014). Social workers treat all people respectfully while being aware of individual and cultural differences, seeking to promote clients' self-determination and capacity to change and address their own needs. They also seek to address conflicts between client interest and the broader societies interests in a socially responsible manner (NASW, 2008). To uphold the dignity and worth and people in correctional settings social works respect the inherent dignity and worth of a person. However, this is challenging in a correctional setting because offenders are under the custody of the correctional setting and have few choices that they can make. Social workers are also working where an organization's mission is defined by people who are not social workers (Young, 2014). In correctional settings social workers collaborate with officers, medical staff, educators, attorneys, and other disciplines. Social workers advocate for the needs of their clients with all these disciplines by requesting medical services on their behalf, writing court reports on their progress, advocating for visits, and psychological treatment. There are times when social workers are met with resistance to advocating for detainees; however, the social work values propel social workers to adhere to respecting the dignity and worth of the person no matter who the person is or what crime they are accused of.

Social work values are evident in this study in the exploration of the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. Social workers practicing in correctional settings are often in ethical binds due to different reporting requirements at their work setting. Institutional policies often require social workers to report drug use, sexual

activity, and threats to security even when they are disclosed in therapeutic settings. These reports can lead to discipline or sanctions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). This study supports the values and principles of the NASW by exploring how social workers define success in their work, what challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting. Social workers can practice the value of social justice and the principle of challenging injustice by participating in molding social policies and taking part in legislative action that impacts the justice system and offender (Wilson, 2010). At the micro level social workers can advocate for changes in their organization that focus on the rights and needs of the population. In upholding the value of dignity and worth of a person led by ethical principle of social workers respecting the inherent dignity and worth of a person, they can treat offenders/clients with respect. They can also provide education to new social workers in the field and different disciplines in the correctional setting. They can work toward correctional philosophies that are more in line with social work values include rehabilitation and restoration in correctional social work (Young, 2014).

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Articles that were selected in relation to social workers working in correctional settings and their occupational experiences are described here. The keywords searched were *criminal justice and social workers, social work in corrections, correctional social workers, corrections and social work education, systems theory, jails, prisons, corrections, qualitative research, social work, incarceration, prison social work, and forensic social work* in the databases SAGE Journal, ERIC, Google Scholar SOC Index,

and Thoreau multidata base. Journals were selected through a search of the Walden Library and Google Scholar. When conducting a search through EBSCO the first keywords words were *social work* or *social workers*, the second keywords were *corrections* or *prison* or *jail* or *criminal justice*, which yielded 19,198 results. The search was then limited to peer-reviewed scholarly journals from 2012 to present, which narrowed my search to 6,223 articles. A third keyword was added, *United States*, which narrowed the search to 2,274 articles. Articles were also selected from references found in articles read. These articles were selected based on being relevant to criminal justice social work and being conducted in the United States within the past 5 years. There was an abundance of research on criminal justice and the needs of offenders; however, there was a lack of research on the experiences of social workers, especially in the United States.

Social Work in the Criminal Justice System

An increase in the incarcerated population since the 1980s has created a demand for the set of professional skills that social workers bring to correctional settings (Matejkowski et al., 2014). High recidivism rates and rising public costs of crimes are also increasing the demand for social workers in criminal justice settings (Young, 2014). More than 11 million adults are detained in prison and jails throughout the world and the imprisonment rates of the poor and working class continues to increase (Jarldorn, 2019).

Jails are run by local jurisdictions such as cities or counties, and prisons are run by states and federal governments; these are the two most prevalent correctional facilities where social workers may work. Other facilities include juvenile detention facilities,

military prisons, and immigration detention and civil commitment centers. Social workers may also be employed with courts serving as expert witnesses (Our Lady of the Lake University, 2020). Social workers who practice in corrections are working in an interprofessional practice since social work is not the dominant profession. Interprofessional practice requires the building of professional skills, values, and knowledge across disciplines (Sweifach, 2015).

Social workers' core tasks of delivering interventions and therapeutic programs become secondary to prison compliance measures and data entry (Jarldorn, 2019). Prison social workers assess new inmates, develop treatment plans, provide therapy, groups, referrals, and monitor inmate progress (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Social workers enter helping relationships with a presumed expertise, which is based on professional training in knowledge, values, and skills designed to help people transform their lives and systems. It is possible to engage in restorative work in prisons only if social workers allow themselves to be guided by their clients as leaders in their goals and needs (Campbell et al., 2020).

Additionally, forensic social work is a specialization of social work that works with criminal proceeding, criminal offenders, victims of crime, and other systems of justice. Forensic social workers function in diverse settings providing mental health services to correction populations, conducting risk assessments, and administering victim or offender services. This range of roles creates unique challenges to forensic social workers (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).

Regardless of their role, legal context is important for social workers practicing in corrections since their services occur in the context of power and control. In the corrections system the institution has legal and physical custody of inmates, which impacts the inmate's rights to health and mental health care. Inmates rely on correctional staff such as social workers to provide constitutionally adequate treatment (Matejkowski et al., 2014). But licensed social workers in criminal justice settings hold power and privilege to diagnose clients, which can then influence the rights of these vulnerable people. Clinical decision can influence decisions on medical and clinical treatment services. Social workers in forensic settings must learn to critically assess ethical risks and liability (Prescott, 2019).

Experiences of Social Workers in the Criminal Justice System

As social workers interact in systems, they are met with challenges to practicing ethical social work. There are colliding values between criminal justice and social work such as retribution, which contrasts with dignity and worth (Young, 2015). Social workers working in interprofessional settings thus face unique stressors, pressures, and challenges such as role ambiguity, marginality, and value conflicts. These lead to conflict and burnout and pose obstacles in service delivery (Sweifach, 2015).

One issue that social workers face is that funding and resources for programming in prisons and jails is generally insufficient, and there is inconsistency in programs and a relative low rate of success (Franke et al., 2017). Although correctional policies support the use of volunteers providing direct services, it is often a lengthy negotiation with bureaucracy to get inside program wings of correctional institutions. Once inside of a

prison, programming can be delayed due to lengthy prison protocols. Prison relative restorative justice relies on the partnership and approval of correctional administrators (Campbell et al., 2020).

One of the biggest challenges that forensic social workers face is practicing effectively in an adversarial legal system. Modern social work practice is also becoming more focused on box checking, number crunching, and on spending time documenting events (Fenton, 2015). The degree of flexibility in how they choose to work with clients has decreased over time. Social workers have reported that risk and public protection work is the primary concern, whereas promoting welfare is secondary (Fenton, 2015).

Social workers also face the ethical challenge of weighing the needs of offenders against those of the justice system. Social workers are often put into legal and ethical binds due to reporting requirements mandated by the agency, local, state, and federal law ((Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).). Policies often require social workers to report drug use, sexual activity, and threats to security even when reported in therapeutic settings. This can result in incarceration or sanctions to the clients. Other problematic areas for forensic social workers include issues of informed consent while working with involuntary and court mandated clients, conducting research with a vulnerable incarcerated population, and utilizing treatment modalities' that may be new or ineffective (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Social workers can take on this challenge by participating in molding social policy and legislative action (Wilson, 2010).

Related to these ethical challenges is ethical stress, which involves the approach to the actual work with offenders and to what extent the agency relies on manualized,

programmed work (Fenton, 2015). Other concepts related to ethical stress include the degree to which the agency prioritizes public protection and risk assessment and the ethical climate being perceived as value poor demonstrated by high workload levels, procedural supervision and managerialism, and lack of attention to welfare, helping, and social justice values (Fenton, 2015).

Though social workers work tirelessly with clients to help them improve their life situation despite ethical dilemmas, they may experience job burnout or vicarious trauma. Professionals working with victims of trauma often have issues that are displayed through personal efficacy and increased emotional and physical concerns (Wilson, 2016).

Additionally, workplace bullying is being reported to human resource professionals at high rates in correctional settings. Repeated exposure to bullying on the job are linked to negative impacts in areas such as health, job attitudes, and productivity (Ritzman, 2016).

Criminal justice settings can be challenging for social workers initially, but it can be rewarding and have many opportunities for promoting social justice (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Social workers can introduce topics like restorative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and an awareness of the impact of race, culture, and poverty to institutions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).

Social Work Ethics and Values

Social work ethics help to define the social work profession and provide guidelines for finding solutions to social work dilemmas (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). But social workers in corrections face uncommon ethical challenges and dilemmas that make it difficult to promote individual rights and protect confidentiality

(Matejkowski et al., 2014). Social work's value base is characterized by helping people with their problems and by promoting social justice (Fenton, 2015). However, the centrality of blame, punishment and control within the penal system raise concerns on whether it is possible for practitioners to operate in ways consistent with social work (Campbell et al., 2020). This can lead to guilt because social workers cannot act in accordance with their values (Fenton, 2015).

In addition to these conflicts, due to a range of roles for forensic social workers, there is a need for more specialized ethical guidelines than those set forth by the NASW. Frequently in forensic work there are conflicting dilemmas where several frameworks need to be used to resolve these dilemmas. Most professional ethics are limited to protecting patients from unscrupulous practitioners; however, social work ethics extend beyond other professions with a strong social and economic justice component (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Further, the NASW ethical code provides a framework for which social workers to practice, but there is a lack of content that relates to the topic of self-care. The social worker must not let issues such as personal problems, psychosocial distress, legal problems, or mental health interfere with their professional judgement; the social worker is responsible for monitoring their own professional fitness and seeking professional help when needed (Wilson, 2016).

Criminal Justice System in the United States

The United States has the highest rates of mass incarceration than any other Western country, long sentences, racial discrimination, and discrimination among people of low socioeconomic status. The United States leads the world in incarceration rates

with 25% of the world's incarcerated people (Cox & Augustine, 2018). In 2011, U.S. state and federal prisons were home to 1.5 million prisoners, and there are approximately 2.3 million people in prisons and jails (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Prisons are predominately occupied by men with 6.7% of the population being made up of women. Racial and ethnic minorities are also incarcerated at higher rates than their representation in society (Matejkowski et al., 2014).

The design of the criminal justice system in the U.S. is grounded in law-and-order rhetoric as well as a public sentiment about punishment for crime that is fueled by politics and the media (Willison & O'Brien, 2017). Fear driven policies that were adopted in the 1970s has led to criminal justice supervision rates higher than most nations. The effects of criminal justice go beyond incarceration since people with felony convictions become excluded from housing, education, social service, and voting opportunities (Pettus-Davis, 2012). The overuse of solitary confinement is another issue of concern at correctional facilities. The death penalty sets the United States apart from any other country and keeps us in the top seven countries with the most executions. As of April 2017, 1,452 people have been executed nationwide since 1976 (Cox & Augustine, 2018).

Vulnerable Populations Involved in the Criminal Justice System

The field of social work advocates for vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, which are highly overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Inmates present with a range of social, psychiatric, medical, and learning needs (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Over 2 million adults were incarcerated in the United States in 2014, and another 4.7 million

were on probation or parole. These prisoners are overwhelmingly people of color who are more likely to have problems with mental health, substance abuse, poverty, education, work, and homelessness (Franke et al., 2017). Disadvantaged groups represented in the criminal justice system also include women, inmates with mental illness, minority groups, the impoverished, inmates with limited education, veterans, substance users, the elderly and those who identify as LGBTQ (Matejkowski et al., 2014).

The number of women in prisons has increased by 50% since 2000, whereas for men it increased by 18%. This increase has been linked to sentencing policies and drug crimes. To understand women's criminalized behaviors, there must be an exploration of their experiences of violent victimizations, poverty, and marginalization (Willison & O'Brien, 2017). Between 1986 and 1996 the number of women in prison for drug offenses rose by 888% (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Prison Nation is a framework conceptualized by Beth Richie to understand the structures of social control that contribute to the increased incarceration of women and the consequences that follow. There is a need to reduce women's trauma experiences of violence, support family development and reintegration, and promote alternative community-based sanction for increased community safety (Willison & O'Brien, 2017).

Other vulnerable incarcerated populations include those in poverty, racial groups, and veterans. Nearly half of all the prisoners in the United States in 2004 were in poverty at the time of their arrest, and the rate of homelessness is four to six times that of the general population (Pettus-Davis, 2012). More than 2.7 million children have a parent in jail or prison, which has been linked to aggression, delinquency, anxiety, and depression

in children. African American children have a 25.1% risk of having a father incarcerated compared to 3.6% of White children (Pettus-Davis, 2012). More than 60% of U.S. prisoners are from racial or ethnic minority groups; African Americans make up 12% of the general population; however, they make up half of the prison population (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Further, the incarceration rates of veterans rose by 53% from 1985 to 2000. Veterans are more likely to have committed a violent crime to someone they knew especially a relative, they serve longer sentences, and are older upon incarceration. A quarter of veterans in jails had a mental illness and more than a third had a history of alcohol abuse (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

Additionally, approximately 20% of inmates in jails and 15% in prisons have a serious mental illness. These illnesses include schizophrenia, schizoaffective, major depression, bipolar or a brief psychotic disorder (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2014). In 2013, three of the largest county jails in the United States were acting as the largest mental health facilities despite their limited programming (Franke et al., 2017). Los Angeles County Jail, Chicago's Cook County Jail, and New York's Riker's Island housed more mentally ill individuals than any psychiatric hospital in the United States. Mentally ill detainees usually have longer length of stay in jails and prisons because they find it more difficult to under prison and jail rules. Housing them is more expensive due to an increased staffing need and psychiatric medications. They are also more likely to commit suicide while in custody than non-mentally ill inmates (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2014).

Qualitative Research

Social workers practice in an array of criminal justice settings and qualitative research can be utilized to explore the way they experience the world. Qualitative research is based on the methodological pursuits of understanding the way that people see, approach, and experience the world. According to authors Ravitch & Carl (2016), this type of research tries to interpret how people make meaning of their experiences and the phenomena in it. Qualitative research focuses on context, interpretation, subjectivity, and representation of the researcher as a key aspect of the inquiry process.

Coding is one way to analyze qualitative research. In qualitative inquiry a code is often a short word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, essence-capturing, and/or attribute to a portion of language based or visual data. Data can consist of interview transcripts, field notes, journals, survey questions, drawings, or videos. Coding is done in cycles to further categorize and identify patterns in data. Coding is not a precise science rather an interpretative act, where each research may code the same data set differently (Saldaña, 2013).

Throughout the coding process patterns begin to emerge which lead to codes being categorized into themes. The process involves identifying themes with relevance specific to the research topic, research questions, and the theoretical framework. Thematic qualitative analysis states, that the material as a whole is understood by studying the parts, but the parts cannot be understood except in relation to the whole (Saldaña, 2013). It is important to document the steps taken during the coding and thematic analysis to establish rigor in the study.

Creswell (2007) identified eight strategies for establishing rigor and recommended that qualitative studies use at least two of them. The strategies include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, reflexivity, member checking, thick description, and external audits. Prolonged engagement requires a researcher spend enough time in a setting developing trust and relationships, understanding different perspectives, and co-constructing meaning with members of the setting. Persistent observation requires a researcher to identify the characteristics in a situation that are most relevant to the practice problem and focus on them in detail. An audit trail is another technique for creating confirmability in qualitative research. It is a record of the steps taken in the process of the research project from beginning to end (Barusch et al., 2011). Research attempts to determine the relationship between knowledge and practice through demonstrating rigor, validity, and reliability. Rigor in qualitative research is often achieved through a detailed explanation that allows for replicating the study. The ability to replicate a study is often not possible or appropriate in qualitative research (Roberts et al., 2019).

Social System Theory

This study will be guided by Niklas Luhmann's Social System Theory. Luhmann assumes that there are social systems. The world is cut into two which are made up a system and its environment (Borch, 2011). Niklas Luhmann has a specific understanding of the term theory, according to him a theory is not an empirically verifiable hypothesis but rather a self-description of the society itself. Social theory describes the society itself.

Luhmann outlines that each society is divided into separate subsystems such as the political, legal, education, and scientific. This social systems theory is based on four essential elements: communication, autopoiesis, differentiation, and structural couplings (Mattheis, 2012).

There are many systems in social welfare that interact which is why systems theory perspective aligns with social work. Luhmann's systems theory is focused on existing systems and institutional order which is produced and maintained by communication described as codes (Kihlström, 2012). Communication is the basic unit of observation for assessing the operations of social systems. The theory describes society and all its subsystems as autopoietic, self-producing communication. Systems are connected through structural couplings. Structural couplings describe inter-systemic relationships and are the most important instrument. These couplings are permanent and exist if a system permanently presupposes characteristics of its environment and relies structurally on the very same. These couplings have a double effect they produce inclusion and exclusion at the very same time (Mattheis, 2012).

Many systems are present in social welfare and are structured by codes. Luhmann's systems theory emphasizes functional aspects of social work that include roles, goals, organization, and directions on how to deliver services (Kihlström, 2012). Systems dynamics principles can guide social work innovation. Innovation does not mean developing new tools or methods it is often applying existing ideas in new contexts (Stringfellow, 2017).

Systems theory focuses on the environment where an individual develops and is an important component of human behavior and social environment courses in social work education. Systems theory is related to human rights and focusses on the responsibilities of humans and governmental entities to protect these rights (Steen, 2018). Human rights are pivotal in social work values, this includes the rights of clients as well as all humankind. Research on the human rights philosophy and its representation in social work curriculum is studied by human rights perspectives and have been included into social work courses at the abstract and practice levels. A model for integrating human rights into the examination of systems that make up an individual's environment are included in social work literature (Steen, 2018).

The field of social work is a complex adaptive system where interrelated systems components include researcher, practitioners, educators, and the agencies they are associated with. What researchers' do change the behavior of practitioners and education, which then change the actions of researchers. The responsibility of solving complex problems does not fall only on the social work field. Different types of partnerships and collaboration need to be developed such as transdisciplinary partnership, partnerships with communities, clients, and practitioners. The unique skills of social workers include being able to navigate power imbalances, a strong mission, and a history of engagement with communities (Stringfellow, 2017).

Improving the Criminal Justice and Social Work System

The history of social work and criminal justice is lengthy and everchanging. In 1841, John Augustus, a part time social worker and shoemaker, convinced the Boston

court to release certain offenders to his custody allowing him to supervise them as an alternative to incarceration. In 1899 the first juvenile court was founded in the U.S. through the support of Jane Addams. The relationship between social work and criminal justice became closer when the Chicago police department began to employ social workers (Scheyett et al., 2012).

In 1973, the NASW addressed criminal justice issues at its delegate assembly, where a platform was adopted to do the following (Scheyett et al., 2012):

1. Work for increased alternatives to incarceration.
2. Advocate for new large-scale institutions for adults or juveniles by countenanced and that large scale juvenile institutions be phased out in 5 years.
3. Encourage greater emphasis on sound community treatment programs for offenders.

Unstable relationships between criminal justice and social work have been linked to value conflicts between the two professions, limited perceived effects of interventions with adults in the criminal justice system and a lack of social training in this specialized field. Policies based on fear that were developed in the 1970's turned the United States into a carceral state resulting in the increase of supervision rates (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Under President Reagan the administration shifted criminal justice philosophy from a rehabilitative approach to a more punitive one. At the same time the social work profession moved away from the field of criminal justice due to the following (Scheyett et al., 2012):

1. A perceived or real lack of effective practice skills and rehabilitative treatment for offenders.
2. Tensions between the philosophies of social work and corrections.
3. A lack of training for work in criminal justice setting provided in school of social work.

In social work literature there are concerns about the tenuous connection between social work and criminal justice. There is a call for reinvigorating the relationship. This lack of connection has been attributed to conflicting ideologies regarding treatment versus punishment along with a lack of social worker interest in this practice population (Scheyett et al., 2012).

Recent changes suggest that social work is beginning to modestly refocus attention on criminal justice. Evidence includes several new texts in social work and criminal justice, the growth of forensic social work, the formation of the National Association of Forensic Social Workers and a journal in 2011, and new NASW practice section on social work and the courts (Scheyett et al., 2012). New and veteran social workers are becoming more interested in the criminal justice system. Although there is plenty of research on criminal justice there is a lack of research from the social work perspective (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

For social work and criminal justice to improve their practice outcomes there must be a focus on interprofessional practice. A positive interprofessional partnership is built upon elements of collaboration such as trust, respect, confidence, accountability, coordination, cooperation, autonomy, and assertiveness (Sweifach, 2015).

Preparing Criminal Justice Social Workers for the Field

Social workers are needed but infrequently involved in criminal justice systems. One way to increase the number of social workers in criminal justice is by exposing students to work in these settings. Exposing social work students to course work and field education in criminal justice increased the likelihood that they will practice in criminal justice upon graduation (Scheyett et al., 2012). Social work education offers limited opportunities for students to specialize in working with people who are currently or were recently incarcerated. It is critical for social work curricula to prepare social work students to work in complex systems such as corrections (Franke et al., 2017). According to Our Lady of the Lake University (2020), Master of Social Work program, the very core of social work is the principle that every human being has inherent dignity and worth; this includes the 2.2 million men and women who are incarcerated in the U.S.

A career in prison social work is challenging but critical for pursuing inmate rehabilitation, prison reform, and reducing incarceration rates. Social workers have an opportunity to play a role in correctional policy, operations, reentry, prison practices, prison conditions, family services, mental health, substance abuse counseling, probation management, job, and life skills (Our Lady of the Lake University, 2020). Studies found that the biggest challenge to placing students at criminal justice settings is finding an MSW supervisor on site. The second most common barrier is lack of student interest combined with anxiety in such a field placement. Other challenges include bureaucratic regulations such as security clearance, criminal justice lack of interest in social work, and financial barriers due to lack of funding or stipend or economic insecurity in criminal

justice settings. Findings suggest that the use of financial incentives may recruit more students (Scheyett et al., 2012).

In preparing social workers to practice in corrections the profession must take a preventative stance to education future social workers on the negative effects of job burnout and vicarious trauma. This education beings in social work education programs but must continue through ongoing training on self-care offered by organization and professional bodies (Wilson, 2016). Social workers must learn to advocate for themselves just as much as they advocate for their client so they can maintain a proper work and personal life balance.

Gaps in the Professional and Academic Literature

Through the review of the academic literature, it was discovered that there is a lack of research in the United States on the experiences of social workers in criminal justice settings. A study done by the National Association of Social Workers in 2007, found that only 1% of social workers indicate criminal justice as their area of practice (Young, 2015). There is a dearth of evidence in the scientific literature regarding correctional social work since most studies focus on the forensic aspect of social work or have been completed in other countries such as England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, and India. Furthermore, because of the small percentage of social workers that practice in correctional settings there is a gap in knowledge of the occupational experiences of social workers.

The presence of social workers in corrections is necessary because they provide change for the incarcerated, their families, communities, recidivism, and correctional

policies. Social work education offers limited opportunities for students to specialize in working with those who are incarcerated. However, social workers are highly needed in criminal justice setting since prisoners are among the most marginalized populations (Franke et al., 2017). This study provides research to social work programs in creating and updating curricula that prepares social work students to work in corrections.

Although research of the criminal justice field is plenty there is a lack of research from the social work perspective (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

Summary

Social workers practicing in criminal justice settings are met by many challenges (Young, 2015). The core beliefs of social workers, to advocate for human rights becomes secondary to the mission of correctional institutions to maintain security and compliance (Jarldorn, 2019). Social workers practice in diverse interprofessional settings where social work is not the dominant profession such as jails, prisons, and courthouses (Sweifach, 2015). A study done by the National Association of Social Workers in 2007, found that only 1% of social workers indicate criminal justice as their area of practice (Young, 2015). Furthermore, because of the small percentage of social workers practicing in corrections there is a gap in the knowledge of their occupational experiences.

Often in criminal justice social work there are conflicting ethical obligations where several frameworks are needed to be used to resolve dilemmas. This calls for more specialized ethical guidelines for practice than those currently prescribed by the National Association of Social Workers (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Social workers in correctional settings experience ethical stress that is caused by high workloads,

procedural supervision, managerialism, and lack of attention to welfare and social justice values (Fenton, 2015). Working in the criminal justice system exposes professionals to job burnout and vicarious trauma. While social workers are responsible for their own self-care organizations play a role in supporting their staff through services and training (Wilson, 2016).

According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), the Code of Ethics intends to set guidelines for social workers to conduct their work professionally. The mission of social work is rooted in a set of six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, important of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). All the core values are applicable to correctional social work practice however social justice is the guiding value in this area of social work and the secondary value would be dignity and worth of the person.

Exploring gaps in the knowledge around social workers occupation experiences can lead to improving correctional social work and preparing future social workers to work in this area. These improvements include being able to address ethical dilemmas, decrease burnout, increase effective practice, inform social work curriculum, and improve policies for clients in correctional settings (Young, 2015). Increasing the number of social workers in criminal justice settings can be achieved by exposing social work students to work in criminal justice settings. Exposing students to coursework and field education in criminal justice settings increases the likelihood that they will work in criminal justice settings upon graduation (Scheyett et al., 2012).

This study was guided by Niklas Luhmann's Systems Theory which poses that the world is cut into two, a system and its environment (Borch, 2011). The theory focuses on existing systems and institutional order, produced, and maintained by communication. The theory emphasized important aspects of social work such as organizations, roles, goals, and direction on how to implement services (Kihlström, 2012). Systems theory is related to human rights and focuses on the responsibilities of humans and governmental entities to protect these rights (Steen, 2018).

This study contributes to the social work field by filling a gap in exploring the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. It explains how social workers take action to meet the needs of the population and engage in social actions, which will inform social work practice (Cox & Augustine, 2018). Social work education offers limited opportunities for students to specialize in working with those who are incarcerated. However, social workers are highly needed in criminal justice setting since prisoners are among the most marginalized populations (Franke et al., 2017). This study will provide research to social work programs in creating and updating curricula that prepares social work students to work in corrections. Although research of the criminal justice field is plenty there is a lack of research from the social work perspective (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

This purpose of this study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. For this study occupational experiences were defined as how social workers define success in their work, on the job challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in correctional settings. To address the gap in

knowledge around the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections this study will use a qualitative research design. Data were collected through phone calls and Zoom audio interviews with 14 master level social workers who graduated from a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited program and who practiced in corrections within the past 5 years. The research question was: What are the occupational experiences that social workers in corrections encounter in this specialized field of social work? The next section discusses the research design and data collection methods.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Social workers who practice in criminal justice settings are met by many challenges (Young, 2015), such as meeting their clients' needs while following the strict rules of correctional institutions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). The experience of ethical stress has been reported by criminal justice social workers, which is related to high workloads, procedural supervision, managerialism, and lack of attention to welfare and social justice values (Fenton, 2015). Working in the criminal justice system also exposes social workers to the possibility of job burnout and vicarious trauma (Wilson, 2016). However, there is a need for more social workers in criminal justice settings (Matejkowski et al., 2014). The purpose of this study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections, which may help understand how to improve their experiences working in the criminal justice system.

Section 2 of this study includes the social work practice problem, the research question, and what was addressed in the study. The study's design and methodology are also described. I outline the data collection methods as well as the concepts and outcomes that compromised the data. This section also includes a description of the participants in the study, the data collection tools/instruments, and the nature of any existing data related to the research problem. I also describe the sources of data collected along with how the data were analyzed to answer the research question. In the Ethical Procedures section, I address the IRB approval process, informed consent procedures, methods used to ensure ethical protection of participants, and measures for protecting collected data.

Research Design

Social Work Practice Problem and Research Question

Social workers are instrumental in advocating for better conditions of confinement both physically and in terms of services. But social workers experience challenges while working in criminal justice settings. Though the NASW Code of Ethics (2017) sets forth standards and principles to guide social work behavior, implementing these ethics is not always straight forward in punitive environments (Young, 2015). Social workers face ethical challenges from trying to meet the demands of the organization (e.g., safety and security) as well as their clients' needs (Young, 2015). Forensic social workers may work with conflicting criminal proceedings, working in institutional settings, and interacting with a blind justice system (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). This calls for more specific guidelines to address ethical challenges in criminal justice settings.

This doctoral study was needed because there is a lack of research on the experiences of social workers in correctional settings. Though there is research that has been conducted on forensic social work practice, correctional social work is specific to work in prisons and jails. There is also a lack of research on correctional social work from the social work perspective in the United States. The purpose of this study was thus to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections, answering a single research question: What are the occupational experiences that social workers in corrections encounter in this specialized field of social work? For this study occupational experiences were defined as how the social workers define success in their work, on-the-

job challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting.

Study Design and Overall Methodology

This study involved a qualitative research design to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. Qualitative research is used to understand how people view and experience the world and make meanings of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research helped explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections because of the focus on context, interpretation, subjectivity, and representation as part of the inquiry process.

The researcher is the primary instrument shaping the research process, methods, data, and findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were collected through phone calls and Zoom interviews to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. This study consisted of 14 master's level social workers who practiced in corrections at Midwestern jails within the past 5 years and hold a master's in social work from a CSWE-accredited institution. Participants were recruited through snowball and purposive sampling because of their use in exploratory research (Young, 2014). Social media sites Facebook and LinkedIn and participant referrals were used. Phone calls and networking with social work colleagues was used to communicate with potential participants. All interviews were conducted by me and were semistructured with predeveloped open-ended questions, leaving room for modification and exploration of related topics. Qualitative, individual, semistructured interviews helped capture the complexity of social work in correctional settings.

Operational Definitions

The following operational definitions were key aspects of this qualitative exploratory study.

Master's level social worker: An individual who has completed graduate education from a CSWE-accredited school of social work.

Corrections: Institutional corrections are places where persons are housed in secured correctional facilities (Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). This can include jails which host offenders for short terms or prisons that serve as a long-term confinement facility. Private correctional facilities operate under contracts for a wide variety of local, state, and federal agencies such as the U.S. Armed Forces or U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Jail inmates: Offenders who are confined in short-term facilities that are usually administered by a local law enforcement agency and are intended for adults but at times hold juveniles before or after adjudication (Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, n.d.). Jail inmates usually have a sentence of less than one year or are pending a trial, awaiting sentencing, or transfer to other facilities for a conviction.

Occupational experiences: How a social worker defines success in their work, on-the-job challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting.

Methodology

Prospective Data

The study data were collected through phone calls and Zoom audio calls, to gain an understanding of the phenomenon. Interviews were conducted with master level social workers who graduated from a CSWE-accredited school and practiced in corrections within the past 5 years. Participants were recruited through social media sites Facebook and LinkedIn and through participant referrals. Networking was conducted through phone calls and text messages with social work colleagues to identify potential participants. IRB approval was obtained, and a consent form was completed with all participants prior to data collection. Interviews were conducted and audio recorded by me, with participant consent.

The variables of this study included how the social workers define success in their work, on the job challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting. The theoretical framework for this study was systems theory and is based on four essential elements: communication, autopoiesis, differentiation, and structural couplings (Mattheis, 2012). Other related terms included *master's level social worker*, *corrections*, *jail inmates*, and *occupational experiences*. Finally, data collected from the master's level social workers provided insight into the occupational experiences they face in correctional settings.

Participants

The target population for this study were social workers who had a master's in social work degree from a CSWE-accredited school. Participants also practiced in a

correctional setting in the past 5 years and were recruited through social media sites Facebook and LinkedIn and through participant referrals. Phone calls and networking with social work colleagues were used to communicate with potential participants. The sample population aligned with the study questions in that the purpose is to understand the occupational experiences faced by social workers in correctional settings.

To recruit study participants, I posted a social media post on Facebook and LinkedIn to reach candidates from the sample population. I also contacted social work professionals. In addition, people who have connections with candidates from the sample population were contacted. Since I had practiced social work in corrections, I had connections with people who fit the parameters of the study. I requested that interested study participants contact me via email or phone call.

The goal of the study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. The participants recruited for this qualitative study were recruited through snowball and purposive sampling. Snowball and purposive sampling were used since it is helpful in exploratory research and consists of study participants referring other participants in the field (Young, 2014). I made efforts to include participants with varying years of experience practicing in correctional and criminal justice settings. Data obtained from participants can be used to inform social work education, training, and policies.

Instrumentation

The survey utilized with the target group was based on the following areas of exploration: how social workers define success in their work, on the job challenges they

face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting. The following is a sample of the questions posed to study participants.

1. How do you define success in your work and provide examples?
2. What goals have you helped your client reach that equate to success?
3. What changes have you been a part of at the correctional setting that equate to success?
4. What are some examples of times you felt unsuccessful in correctional social work?
5. What are some barriers that you face as a correctional social worker with clients?
6. What are some barriers you face with staff?
7. What are some barriers you face with resources?
8. What are barriers that you face with policies?
9. What social work ethical conflicts have you experienced in the correctional setting?
10. How have you struggled to uphold the NASW Code of Ethics in a correctional setting?
11. How have you succeeded in upholding the NASW Code of Ethics in a correctional setting?
12. What advice would you share with a social worker trying to become involved in correctional social work?

13. What improvements would you like to see in social work curricula relating to criminal justice social work?

Data Analysis

This study utilized coding for qualitative analysis. Qualitative analysis is helpful when the perspectives of insiders are explored on a topic to better understand the concepts that shape those perspectives (Padgett, 2008). The complexities of providing social work practice in a criminal justice setting would not be effectively captured through quantitative measurement (Young, 2015). Data collected during participant interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. I reviewed the transcription for accuracy and the transcript was emailed to participants for accuracy. Data collected during interviews were kept on a password protected document and computer that was locked in my home office.

In qualitative inquiry a code is often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns summative or significant attribute for a portion of language based on visual data. A code is a research-generated construct that symbolizes data and assigns interpreted meaning to each individual datum for future purposes of pattern detection, categorization, or theory building (Saldaña, 2013). I used the coding manual for qualitative researchers by Saldaña (2013), as a guide for coding. Coding is done in cycles to further categorize data and identify patterns. Themes can be an outcome of coding, they are a phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit processes (Saldaña, 2013).

Thematic qualitative analysis states that the material is understood as a whole by studying the parts, but the parts cannot be understood except in relation to the whole. The

process involves identifying themes with relevance specific to the research topic, research questions and the theoretical framework (Roberts et al., 2019). The data for this study consists of audio transcripts from semi structured interviews that were conducted by phone or Zoom call. Coding was done manually through Microsoft Excel since the software provides good organization. Coding categories were drawn from the data keeping the research question in mind and the transcripts were reviewed for emerging themes.

Research attempts to determine the relationship between knowledge and practice through demonstrating rigor. Creswell (2007) identified eight strategies for establishing rigor and recommended that qualitative studies use at least two of them. The strategies include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, reflexivity, member checking, thick description, and external audits. Rigor in qualitative research is often achieved through a detailed explanation that allows for replicating the study (Roberts et al., 2019). Rigor was attained in this study by providing a detailed explanation of my methods allowing for the replication and application of my findings. This is also known as an audit trail which records the steps taken in the research process from beginning to end. I also attained rigor in the study through persistent observation; this requires a researcher to identify the characteristics in a situation that are most relevant to the practice problem and focus on them in detail (Barusch et al., 2011).

Ethical Procedures

IRB approval was obtained for this qualitative research study on March 17, 2021.

The approval number was 03-18-21-0975850.

Informed Consent Procedures

Informed consent procedures included study participants receiving an electronic informed consent document that described the purpose of the study, their participation in the study, and how their information will be protected and reported. The informed consent highlighted participants right to refuse participation in the study and that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the data collection process.

Participants were asked to review the consent form and reply with the words “I consent” via email, to participate in the study. Consents were stored on my password protected laptop, in my locked home office. Participant identification was kept until all data collection was complete. Additionally, all personal identifiable information was concealed, and only cumulative data were used in all documents and presentations.

Ethical Protection of Participants

IRB approval was obtained prior to recruitment or collection of any data from potential study participants. IRB approval was obtained March 17, 2021. Study participants were provided with an informed consent via email. Informed consents informed participants of their rights, the voluntary nature of their participation in the study, and the risks and benefits to them. To protect the privacy of participants personal information was removed from any written survey documentation.

Nature of Data, Access, Protections and Dissemination

All efforts were made to protect the identity of participants. However, study data were not anonymous since I needed to contact participants for additional information. Each study participant was assigned a numerical code that was kept on a master list. The master list corresponded to their surveys and any other written correspondence. Once data collection efforts were completed, the master list with personal identifying information was destroyed. Study data were stored in my locked home office. The data were entered into a password protected Microsoft Excel document, on a password protected computer. The study findings were disseminated in written documents and presentations, without the inclusion of any personal information. The study data may be used in future studies, for teaching, and/or for training while maintaining privacy.

Summary

The lack of research on the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections in the United States is a problem for the focus of rigorous scientific study. Although, there is research that has been conducted on forensic social work practice correctional social work is specific to work in prisons and jails. Social workers are essential in criminal justice settings to advocate for better conditions of confinement and services for inmates. Social workers experience unique on the job challenges while working in correctional settings such as ethical conflicts, burnout, and vicarious trauma. They also accomplish success through changing policies, providing services, informing practice and training other social workers. The purpose of this study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections.

This study utilized a qualitative research method. A total of 14 social workers with a master's in social work degree from a CSWE-accredited school and practiced in corrections at Midwestern jails within the past 5 years, were recruited as study participants. Participants were provided with an informed consent prior to beginning data collection. The identity and personal information of study participants was confidential and only group analyses will be reported in study findings, documents, and presentations. The study data were analyzed through qualitative coding analysis. I attempted to attain credibility, trustworthiness, and validity in this study by providing a detailed explanation of my methods allowing for the replication and application of my findings. This concludes the study design and data collection section. The following section is the presentation of the findings.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

Social workers who practice in correctional settings are faced with dilemmas that usually do not occur in other social work settings, as they have to follow the policies of the correctional institution while meeting client needs (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). The rising number of incarcerated people has led to a demand for social workers in corrections (Matejkowski et al., 2014), but as few as 1% of social workers have indicated they work in criminal justice as their primary area of practice (Young, 2015). This low figure translates to a gap in knowledge of the occupational experiences of these social workers, which this study addressed.

Section 3 of this study includes data analysis techniques and findings. In the Data Analysis Techniques section, I will provide an overview of the timeline for data collection, data analysis process, validation procedures, and study limitations or problems. The Findings section contains characteristics of the sample population, an analysis of the findings, how the findings answer the research question, a discussion of how the findings impact the social work practice problem in this study, and any unexpected findings.

Data Analysis Techniques

Time Frame for Data Collection and Recruitment

I received Walden IRB approval on March 17, 2021, and recruitment for this project began March 20, 2021. I posted a flyer on LinkedIn and Facebook. I also contacted social work colleagues who would be able to share the flyer with potential study participants. The geographic region that was targeted for this study's recruitment

was jails in the Midwest United States. Once contacted by participants, I provided a detailed explanation via phone and a consent form was sent to potential participants via email along with sample interview questions. This allowed potential participants to decide whether they were comfortable with the questions and study. Participants consented to the study by replying with the words “I consent” to the consent form email. In the email with the informed consent, dates and times to schedule the phone interview were included, along with a choice for a phone or Zoom call. Each participant responded with dates and times that would accommodate their schedules. A calendar invite was sent through outlook from my Walden email account for the interview. A reminder was sent the day of the interview to participants.

There were 14 individuals who responded, and 14 were interviewed. The data for this study were collected between April 1, 2021, and April 11, 2021. Interviews took place through phone call or Zoom and were audio recorded with the participants’ consent. Participants were 14 master’s level social workers who graduated from a CSWE-accredited school. All the social workers practiced in corrections (jails) within the past 5 years. The consent form and sample interview questions were emailed to each participant. Every study participant received a \$5 digital gift card of their choice to Dunkin Donuts or Starbucks.

Data Analysis Procedures

I used coding for qualitative analysis, which is helpful when exploring insider perspectives of the study topic (Padgett, 2008). Once each interview was completed, I transcribed the audio recording verbatim on Microsoft Word. Each transcript was in a

separate Word document with demographics, and each person was coded as Interviewee 1–14. Once I completed the transcript, it was emailed to the respective participant so they could review it for accuracy, clarification, edits, or omissions. Once the study participant responded with their input, the transcribed interview was printed and reviewed.

Next all interviews were organized into one Microsoft Word document. Once printed I compiled all off the interviews and began coding line by line with pen, paper, and a highlighter. This process took approximately 2 weeks. I used the coding manual for qualitative researchers by Saldaña (2013) as a guide for coding. In qualitative inquiry, a code is often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns summative, significant, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data. After coding each interview, I entered the codes into Microsoft Excel through first cycle coding. First cycle coding can range from a single word to a whole paragraph (Saldaña, 2013). I created a column for the question, interviewee number, code, category, and theme. I began to find patterns in codes and grouped codes that were similar into categories. Microsoft Excel allowed me to use filters to find duplicates and sort out how many codes, categories, and themes I had. I was also able to color code the themes. Categories were then placed under five major themes. I ended up with 1,459 unique codes, 32 categories, and five themes from 96 pages of interview data.

After coding, categorizing, and theming the data, I went through the individual interviews a second time and highlighted direct quotes and phrases that were meaningful and impactful to the study subject. I connected the quotes to one of the five themes to use in the study as in vivo quotes, or verbatim quotes (Saldaña, 2013). I highlighted and

labeled which theme each quote connected to in Microsoft Word. In vivo coding can be used with almost any qualitative data but especially by beginner researchers in learning how to code data and accurately capture the participant's voice.

Validation Procedures

One of the cornerstones of qualitative research is trustworthiness of research results. The validation procedures that were used in this study included member checking—a technique for exploring the credibility of results (Slettebø, 2020). The interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and sent to participants for feedback. Participants reviewed their transcripts by email and provided feedback and clarification. I also provided a detailed explanation of the methodology, data collection, and analysis process, which allows for replication of the study (Roberts et al., 2019). This is also known as an audit trail, which records the steps that were taken in the research process from beginning to end. I also used persistent observation to identify characteristics in a situation that are applicable to the practice problem and focus on them in detail (Barusch et al., 2011).

Limitations

Limitations of this study include that it cannot be generalized due to the use of purposive and snowball sampling (see Young, 2014). The study is also a small qualitative study of 14 participants that was conducted with social workers who have practiced at jails in the Midwest United States. The data may not be applicable to other jails in the United States. However, this study may be useful in identifying challenges and successes for the targeted Midwestern correctional facilities. The results of this study may also

impact future research. Another limitation is researcher bias, which can occur not only due to selective collection and recording of data but also during the process of analysis and interpretation (Saldaña, 2013). A researcher's familiarity with the field may lead them to overlook certain uncertainties and nuances in collected data due to their inherent understanding of the research setting. However, familiarity with the setting can be useful for validating responses and findings (Slettebø, 2020).

Findings

Characteristics of the Sample Population

Recruitment for this study focused on master's level social workers who graduated from a CSWE-accredited school. Participants practiced social work at Midwestern United States jails within the past 5 years. A total of 14 social workers were recruited and interviewed via phone call or through Zoom call. Demographics are documented below in narrative format to protect the confidentiality of participants by avoiding matching age, gender identity, cultural background, year graduated with MSW, and 5 years of correctional social work practice. Job titles were not asked in the interview to maintain participant privacy confidentiality.

Participants identified their gender identity as 13 females and one male social worker. The ages of participants ranged from 23 to 52 years of age, and the average age was 32.7 years. Seven participants were in their 20s, three were in their 30s, four were in their 40s, and one was in their 50s. Reported cultural backgrounds included two Black Americans, five Caucasians/Whites, four Latinas/Latinos, two Asian Americans (South Asian and Filipino), and one biracial African American/White. Number of years since

graduating with a master's in social work ranged from 1 to 26 years, with an average of 6.7 years. Number of years practicing correctional social work ranged from 1 to 26 years with an average of 4.5 years. Participant experience and positions varied from case management, substance use, mental health, crisis work, and linkage/reentry social work.

How the Findings Answer the Research Question

Social workers practicing in correctional settings are met with unique occupational challenges and experiences. After a systematic analysis of the data, five major themes emerged. These five themes defined barriers, successes, and suggestions for improvement to correctional social work curricula and practice. The primary themes include client service barriers, barriers faced by social workers in the correctional setting, social workers define success, improvement recommendations for social work curricula, and systemic barriers and systemic success. Under the five major themes, 32 categories emerged, which helped answer the research question: What are the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections? See Table 1 for an outline of the categories and themes.

Table 1*Major Themes and Categories*

Client service barriers	Barriers faced by social workers in the correctional setting	Social workers define success	Improvement recommendations for social work curricula	Systemic barriers and systemic success
Barriers faced by clients	Administration/policies	Client services/behavioral change	Combining social work and criminal justice in classes	Correctional institution policies barriers
Client engagement	Client services	Code of Ethics	Field experience	Correction institution policies successes
Criminal charges	Code of Ethics	Feeling appreciated/ job satisfaction	Increase/ recruit social workers	Covid-19
Mental health	Job supplies/resources	Policy change	Reflexivity classes	Criminal justice system/laws
Community Resources	Lack of training/confidence	Positive multi-disciplinary work	Specialty supervision/training	Discrimination/minorities
Programming	Staff/colleagues	Qualities Reentry Supervision/training/support		Reentry resources Social worker advocacy

Theme 1: Client Service Barriers

A primary theme that emerged in the study and that answered the research question was that social workers encountered several client service barriers in the correctional setting. There were 149 out of 1,459 identified codes that related to client service barriers. Client service barriers included barriers faced by clients, client engagement, criminal charges, mental health, community resources, and programming.

Barriers Faced by Clients

“Barriers faced by clients” emerged as a code 20 times in the data. Participants described barriers that clients faced such as substance use issues, relapse, recidivism, institutionalization, and client commitment. Participant 5 summarized the following as a barrier: “when working at women’s residential facility they did drug drops and when someone relapsed, and we could not catch it in time. They could not come to us and felt like they had to lie about it.” Participant 6 noted, “working with clients who did not see being in jail as a big deal. The client not thinking that anything is wrong with their lifestyle.” Participant 1 identified,

the barrier of lack of follow through from clients. Making a lot of arrangements and helping clients with a lot of things but they don’t follow through for many reasons. It could be addiction, or they are just not in that head space or level of commitment that is required.

Barriers to Community Resources

Barriers to community resources were discussed by participants 11 times in the data. These barriers include access to resources, lack of transportation, program criteria,

inequality, and financial struggles. Participants identified a lack of the following: housing, medical insurance, programs, and financial support in the community as a barrier. For example, Participant 11 stated, “It feels like resources are purposely invisible to some groups of people or agencies because there is a target group who they are for.”

Participant 14 worked in jail and prison settings and summarized,

in the prison and jail when women are leaving the prison there are resources, but they have no transportation. So, when they leave, they have to take a cab, bus, or train and that all costs money. Although there are a lot of resources once women or men get released, they must decide, “am I going to spend my time or money to travel to a meeting or am I fine on my own?”

According to Participant 2, “housing is always a tough one because people do not have money and there is a shortage of housing when it is available.” Participant 1 stated,

many patients have trouble scheduling appointments or they may not have active medical insurance or benefits. Patients have a lot of trouble maneuvering services on their own they need a lot of help a lot of hand holding and a lot of help. Some programs that we work with have specific criteria, like there is one program that only takes people on public aid.

Barriers to Providing Programming to Clients in the Correctional Setting

Barriers to providing programming to clients in the correctional setting appeared 35 times in the data. Barriers to programming included access to curriculums, handouts, technology, space, program standards, and writing supplies. For example, Participant 8 stated, “a lot of clients did not have access to pens, to write what I needed them to right

for a journal affirmation project. So, they could not to the assignment.” Participant 7 summarized,

we had a lot of books available but for some of the newer books or to show a movie, it had to go through the whole screening process. Being able to bring things inside the jail that were great resources, they just had to be vetted or go through extra approval, which made it seem like you did not want to do it. I remember specifically wanting to do some type of incentivizing with the women like a reward, but I was not able to because it involved food and giving things that were outside of being given normally to detainees.

Participant 2 stated,

there is a huge limitation in materials for treatment such as handouts and things that can be incorporated in individual and group therapy. We could not have things like staples or paper clips; not having the stuff you need to do your job made it hard, like access to a printer and office space was a real problem.

Participant 6 noted, “an emphasis on more reentry curriculums since most curriculums are focused on behavioral aspects.” Participant 4 added, “there is not a set curriculum for group programming. I think it is just kind of up to every area to maintain resources and develop them further and make them available.”

Barriers to Client Engagement

Barriers to client engagement emerged 62 times with study participants. Barriers included building trust and rapport, group participation, commitment, mandated programming, and motivation for change. Participant 5 stated,

general engagement levels, you did not know what you were walking into because you were not there overnight, and a lot happens overnight. It was hard to get them to trust me without having an informal approach. At times building rapport in that way was tough all around to maintain those boundaries, without having to double down and physically put that in there.

Participant 7 indicated, “lots of times, combative clients also when you make an extensive discharge plan, and the client does not uptake or it fell through”. Participant 1 further noted, “the clients many of them, don’t have the motivation to implement some positive changes. So, we can’t really do everything for them. Many times this is why, when treatment and programs are court ordered, you think that the patient is obviously obligated in a way to follow through.” Participant 13 noted, “engagement is complicated through cultural barriers. Recently more clients from an Arabic background are involved in programming at the jail. As a woman (herself), they may be disrespectful based on their own belief that women are inferior to men. Language barriers are also a challenge since the staff and me do not speak Spanish, or other languages to be able to provide mental health, community resources and programming in their native language.”

Criminal Charges and Criminal Background

Criminal charges and criminal background are another barrier to client services which emerged 15 times in the study data. Participants shared that criminal charges and background affect client eligibility for programs, employment, housing. Criminal charges were also discussed by participants as being stigmatizing to clients. Four participants discussed obstacles related to providing services to clients charged with sex offenses.

Participant 9 summarized, “a lot of organizations or employment didn’t want to work with inmates just because they have that in their background.” Participant 1 noted, “one of the biggest challenges social workers face is finding suitable programs for the people we work with because the people we work with is a population that is usually not perceived in a positive light. It is a population that many people don’t want to work with. A population/group of people we always have a lot of trouble with is usually the sex offenders and those that need to register in the community. There are people who get a house arrest mandate but there is only one place in the city that accepts people with that background”.

Participant 4 further noted, “one thing that was always difficult for me was a bias on my behalf, with working with individuals who had sex charges: criminal sexual assault charges of minors. That kind of thing particularly in respect to minors. It was always a resurfacing issue in working with individuals who had sex charges with minors and just to be able to. Often too, that is why me and many other people try not to even know what the charge is but at a certain point it becomes unavoidable.” Participant 3 stated, “pedophiles I had a really hard time with. It was hard because for one they are probably not going anywhere because of what they did and not crushing their spirit.”

Participant 11 noted, “there is a barrier in what I can actually help them get a hold of, because of post incarceration, probation/parole, is that criminal record that people carry around, poses a lot of barriers to health care, mental health care, and employment. It is a stigma and a general material barrier that clients carry, plays into the trust role that

they can find housing or a job, but they have a record and that is usually in the fine print to qualify.”

Mental Health Issues

Mental health issues and resources related to mental health emerged 6 times from participants in the data. Participants described that clients in the correctional setting experience mental health issues related to severe mental illness and trauma. Participant 4 summarized, “the level of mental illness that people are grappling with sometimes, it does not allow them to be receptive to the care that you would like to provide for them. I think another issue is having a trauma informed approach with people because you have so many people in corrections, especially in women’s divisions, who have history of sexual abuse and physical abuse. I often felt that it was borderline unethical to have a man running that unit.

Theme 2: Barriers Faced by Social Workers in the Correctional Setting

The second primary theme that emerged in the data was barriers faced by correctional social workers in the correctional setting. These barriers emerged in 516 out of 1459 codes. This theme was discussed the most in the study. The barriers most identified by participants included: administration/policies, client services, code of ethics, job supplies/resources, lack of training/confidence, and staff/colleagues.

Barriers with Administration and Policies

Barriers with administration and policies emerged in 126 codes with participants. These barriers include social work being viewed as unnecessary, security processes, institutional rules, lack of oversight, supervision, and mandated overtime. Participant 14

noted, “some of the barriers that I’ve always faced even as an intern in this type of setting, you find a lot of people, you know mostly officers or managerial people, that didn’t come from a social work background that really don’t think that you’re doing anything beneficial”. Participant 6 added, “there are times where I guess the social service aspect doesn’t seem as important in the grand scheme of things within corrections, kind of like my position isn’t seen, as necessary. Also adjusting to going through security, and then just realizing that it is part of your everyday. What you can wear and what you can bring inside and not having your phone. Kind of that disconnect that you have from the outside world for those 8 hours when you are at work is a real thing.”

Participant 2 indicate, “management that had a certain vision for how things would be run there, as far as mandated overtime. That made it a difficult environment for some people. For me I really did not have a problem, but they should have been more equal across the board with everyone. The aspect of playing favorites was shown with management and staff.”

Participant 4 noted, “I don’t know exactly what the policy is, but I think across the board there should be different visitation policies. Especially with respect to those who have children.” Participant 2 further noted the following ethical dilemma that conflicted with correctional policy, “like simple things like can you give this letter to my child for Christmas. That leaves a sour taste because you have to say no to them, but you know it’s the holidays and you want them to get the letter so that puts you in a tight spot. I think this particular system is in place that doesn’t allow you to go above and beyond.

You cannot use your heart in that situation you have to use your logic and reason. As a social worker, you feel morally obligated to take that letter and give it to that family member or put the stamp on yourself, but protocol does not allow that so that is a huge dilemma there.”

Participant 3 stated, “it was frustrating to me at times, and I have gotten into arguments to be honest with my colleagues, with officers even administration in terms of you wanting to advocate more and just kind of being shut down. Having supervision, we didn’t have supervision at the jail to be honest. We didn’t have social work supervision all our leads were psychologists”. Participant 1 summarized, “supervision, the only bit of a difference in that is we work under the direction of a chief psychologist, so sometimes we don’t get the supervision from our own profession like maybe we should, and other places do provide that. The way our team works is that we really try to rely on each other and troubleshoot with each other We use each other’s knowledge and expertise to try to put out all the fires, because we don’t really get that from an administrator or a supervisor”. Participant 4 indicated, “They also noted a barrier with administrative support and lack of accountability on behalf of when something went wrong. Where is the debriefing in terms of, why did it go wrong? How can we do better?”

Barriers to Providing Client Services

Barriers to providing client services emerged 36 times in the data. Barriers included access to clients, unknown discharge date, physical incidents, lockdown, medication noncompliance, severe mental illness, and sexual harassment. Participant 10 noted, “the limit on what you can do with them and how often you can see them. You can

meet with them as many times as you want but they could be discharging the next day or they could be there for a few more weeks. The unknown of how much you can get done or of pushing them too hard.” Participant 14 stated, “the ability to be there for them in the way a normal counselor or therapist would be because they are in a controlled environment. Not being able to respond if they are in lockdown or when they are in crisis because maybe the officer is saying no one is coming out or you can’t talk to them right now”.

Participant 2 stated “when behavior modification didn’t work and there would be more incident reports and confrontations with CCDOC staff. Non-compliance of medication would frustrate me, and the client would say what for? I will be serving time anyway and that would feel like a sense of failure. When they would decompensate and have to be sent to the psych unit that was a difficult pill to swallow as a clinician because it’s like is it my fault. You have to be strong of mind and strong of spirit because it can break you down. Especially if you worked in the psych units like I did, you get to see the real deal in there. You sometimes will literally get a piece of it under the door. They literally will throw little things at you that I won’t say on record. The feces thrown and things like that you get to see that it is the real deal. The smell and the sight of the place. I would caution people to really think about it because it takes a strong stomach to see what you see in there and hear what you hear in there.” Participant 3 added, “the behaviors of the client the guys who would masturbate that would be a barrier for sure.”

Code of Ethics Barriers

Code of Ethics barriers emerged 158 times in the data. Barriers that conflicted with the Code of Ethics included advocacy, confidentiality, cultural awareness, competence, boundaries, and dignity and worth of a person. For example, participant 9 stated, “not dealing with some things from my own personal beliefs or personal background.”

Participant 1 noted barriers to confidentiality, “we do respond to a lot of family phone calls we have to always explain to families how we definitely need consent from patients to be able to release information so that gets really tricky to because we want to assist with their questions, we try to assist in general terms that sometimes gets a little tricky. With correctional staff sometimes, people feel free to comment or give opinions on certain things and sometimes they are not the most motivating and positive opinions. It gets tricky because you want to maintain some level of confidentiality with patients, but it is very, really difficult with correctional staff around other patients everywhere.”

Participant 7 indicated, “they are detainees first and clients after. I think the idea of cultural competence or humility was lacking with correctional officers and staff. The issue with boundaries, there is time where you could relate or countertransference because you saw yourself or a family member in that role and it was difficult seeing this is the other side the lived experience when you are working with them.” Participant 2 noted, “confidentiality, sitting in a hallway was an ethical dilemma since everyone is listening.”

Participant 14 stated, “there are a lot of double-edged swords at a correctional facility. Your training and mental clarity, making sure that you know your there for a reason, and to withhold your social work background and not be complicit. No, I don’t want them in a cell. I want to make sure that I am not falling complicit to a correctional setting that is more desensitized and dehumanized. You know being that therapeutic relationship for them. I would never want a social worker to feel that they have to become a guard, but there are good officers, but there are a lot who are desensitized and do not have the training. Once a social worker gets into that mentality, they do more harm than good.”

Participant 13 noted, “I would say sometimes with working in law enforcement and being a social worker, always wanting to advocate. Like if I want to keep a participant in the program and they are struggling due to their mental illness or their barriers, but then the Lieutenant or Sergeant says, no I want them out. There is nothing I can do about it.”

Barriers to Job Supplies and Resources

Barriers to job supplies and resources were coded 23 times in the data collection. Barriers that pertained to job supplies and resources included writing supplies, hygiene supplies, and technology. Participant 8 summarized, “we were told only donations were acceptable. This was a big problem because basic things like pens and paper should be available so they could do what they need to do to participate in programming.” Participant 3 stated, “not having access to cell phone in the jail. It would have made my access to clients much easier, to look up resources for clients.”

Lack of Training and Confidence

Lack of training and confidence emerged as a barrier to participants in 60 codes in the data collection. This included feeling like they failed clients, feeling unprepared, and lacking training or confidence in themselves. Participant 5 stated, “I was working myself so much more at a personal level. I felt disappointment and failure when I realized I didn’t have the energy to give to the clients what they deserved at times. Being heard at times because officers know what happens more than us but didn’t feel right pushing them to do what I wanted at the time. Participant 6 noted, “I felt unsuccessful when I would feel myself getting really frustrated running groups. I remember that being a tough thing for me and made me feel like I was not doing a good job.

Barriers to Working with Staff/Colleagues

Barriers to working with staff/colleagues emerged 113 times in the data. Participants identified these barriers as unprofessionalism, burnout, complacency, poor training, safety concerns, ethical dilemmas, and low work ethic. Participant 3 stated, “so, honestly some of the struggles I had personally were with my colleagues who were not able to keep an open mind in regard to our clients. I think a lot of people come to the jail with a pre-conceived notion of what quote on quote criminal behavior is, but they don’t always take into account like the trauma that people have experience the life stressors, violence, family issues. Again, working with some of the officers who didn’t care that I was a social worker. Turnover at the jail is huge, that was hard for me because it’s a hard place to work.” Participant 2 shared barriers with colleagues, “medical and mental health was challenging because staff exhibit being too comfortable there and not being willing

to carry their own weight and not wanting to be team players at times. That was a hard thing to accept, low work ethic.”

Participant 8 noted, “with security going into the jail it was instigating because coming from a Muslim perspective I wear a scarf. One officer who had made a comment, “Oh, make sure you check her bag”, and they were checking it and he made a side comment, and he was ashamed because I heard him, and he made a face like “oh, I wasn’t supposed to say that.” It was a little different to endure the side comments but overtime as they got used to me it got better. Also, be mindful of how you talk about people because these are human beings, they are not some robots.”

Participant 11 stated, “that lack of empathy from officers was a barrier. I am not sure if true burnout is the issue but actually a lack of empathy from folks that are not in the right field, and it presents as burnout. A lot of staff who are going into the social service field, there is a lack of empathy because we get to go home and walk out of the facility and be quote on quote regular people. We don’t have to usually carry around the baggage that our clients have to carry around. There is a lack of personal boundaries, lack of understanding, and a power dynamic. It can be no empathy and treating someone like a caged animal to offering personal numbers, clothing, and housing. It is very confusing to clients receiving services and incarcerated”.

Participant 14 stated, “that the biggest barrier is when correctional officers don’t believe that social work can make a change for anyone.” Participant 7 added, “specifically with correctional officers there was this power differential this fight for power and control. I felt like this was a problem and even trying to verbalize, while the

correctional officers see them as detainees, in this role as a social worker, seeing them as clients. Participant 12 further noted, “I ran into barriers with correctional officers a bit. Generally, it felt like we were working against each other, some of them. It felt like some of the correctional officers were against the idea of it being a treatment setting or trying to be a treatment setting as well.” Participant 13 noted, “I would say primarily this will fall under competency, with the officers. Again, I know their first goal is always security and I understand that, but there is lack of training for working with clients who are not only in a program but are suffering for mental health and substance abuse.”

Participant 4 summarizes a barrier regarding safety, “then there are other times when the culture of a certain division, or the culture of a certain group of correctional officers, really becomes not only a barrier but a danger to your personal safety. I have worked in almost every division in the jail and in one particular division the culture is, um dangerous. It is a dangerous culture. I was there for a while, and it is the kind of culture where the tormenting not only of detainees but of civilian staff is entertainment for them, so that type of torment. I was locked into an interview with a maximum-security detainee. Meanwhile, it was a danger to me a danger to the detainee. In terms of setting up a situation, in terms of if he would have wanted to, he could have acted out and caught another charge.”

Theme 3: Social Workers Define Success

The following theme was the second theme most discussed theme by participants. Data for this theme emerged in 479 out of 1459 codes. Categories that were identified as relating to success included client services and behavioral change, code of ethics, feeling

appreciated/job satisfaction, policy change, positive multidisciplinary work, qualities, reentry, and supervision/training/support.

Client Services and Behavioral Change

Client services and behavioral change were identified as a category relating to success in correctional social work. This category emerged in 203 codes in the data.

Examples of success included creating innovative programs, increasing motivation/hope in clients, positive behavioral change, and a decrease in negative behaviors. Participant 8 summarized, “To get the affirmation journal thing going, for them to write out how they were feeling every day, that was one of my biggest goals and I did achieve that.”

Participant 11 further noted, “it looks for me like based on interactions and the level of hope and motivation that the client gains through our time together. It’s really hard to measure that but talking to the client and their perspective on what a future can look like I think is very telling of progress in treatment and professional relationships.” Participant 11 stated, “for success it would be helping the clients meet their goal, whether it’s just getting resources to that goal. Also helping meet specific goals such as working on depression, anxiety, or anything like that.”

Participant 5 summarized, “it was more so on an individual therapy type level, we did a lot of groups, but I wasn’t able to build rapport in that way.” Participant 14 added, “implementing new types of groups: art therapy, emotional regulation, and a gardening program.” Participant 7 further noted, “for me I felt success in making treatment plans and seeing the attitude and motivational changes behind the services and their drug and alcohol addiction. So, kind of seeing them progress through the stages of change in terms

of their own recovery.” Participant 12 added, “I honestly define success as day to day while I was there, good conversation, good groups feedback. Making connections or watching some of the women make connections”.

Participant 2 summarized in this way, “when working with patients there and you see progress in their behavior, like less physical altercations due to like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or Behavior Management Therapy. A decrease in negative behaviors, less physical encounters with the officers not only with fellow inmates.” Participant 4 added, “I think success is anytime you get the sense that a client or patient that you’re working with was able to that their burden was alleviated in some way in interacting with you.”

Upholding the Code of Ethics

Upholding the Code of Ethics was identified as a success by social workers and was discussed 85 times in the data. Upholding the Social Work Code of Ethics was identified through examples of professional boundaries, confidentiality, releasing client records, establishing trust and rapport, right to determination, and placing clients first.

Participant 4 stated, “just always being mindful about what your professional goals are, and by that, I mean the standards of your profession not your career advancement. Adhering to the values of social work and your own personal values. I will be upfront and honest, there were certain things that it be demanded to be done a certain way, if I felt it was unethical, I didn’t do it. But I feel like, especially the nature of social work is, if your put in a position of having to be unethical then it’s time to go.”

Participant 11 indicated, “success is protecting her own professional boundaries and understanding there is only so much that she can do in a professional role that will protect me and the client. I created a healthy and appropriate professional space where they feel like they can ask me for help without asking for my personal time, money, or things that happen outside of the professional setting.” Participant 6 indicated, “Face Book and not contacting them outside of here and that kind of thing. Like even that clear line that, yes, I will contact you from my office because of my position, we follow up to see how you are doing but that is strictly to talk about your progress in the community and nothing else.”

Participant 12 noted, “I always tried to remember to lock the things twice for the files, so everything stayed confidential. So, I tried to keep as much as I could in the file folders that were safe behind locks and not just kind of sitting out around, unless we had a key for one of the drawers”. Participant 1 further noted, “As far as releasing records and knowing all of the policies as much as possible. Kind of working where the clients are and not imposing our own values on them. I don’t think of how we can compromise that. We definitely exercise it; it is an automatic thing now.” Participant 13 added, “always putting the client first and giving them the right to determination.”

Participant 3 noted, “the first would be definitely having a positive working relationship with the detainee. Building rapport and establishing trust and having them feel confident of you taking care of them. One example, a registered sex offender, he was displaced because he couldn’t stay there anymore, he didn’t register and update his address and it landed him back in the jail. He had a traumatic brain injury and a ton of

trauma. He was at the jail because he basically violated his parole and he had no income, nowhere to go. So basically, I found him, I would call it at a halfway house. I say all that because had I not being able to build the rapport, build his trust, there is no way that all would have worked out.”

Feeling Appreciated and Job Satisfaction

Feeling appreciated and job satisfaction was a category that emerged 24 times in data related to success. Examples of this category included gaining client trust, successful program initiatives, positive interactions with clients and staff, and recognition from administration and clients. For example, participant 9 stated, “I guess success would be when the inmates were really comfortable working with you, and you could see when they were actually happy. When they would appreciate you. An example would be when they would ask if you weren’t there. Where is she? Is she coming back? Is she okay? So, when they start caring for you, I feel like that’s a way of knowing I’m doing something right.”

Participant 4 indicated, “I had come up with this idea to work on projects with them. They were art projects that they would make and send it to women in another division. So, you always had to be careful when there was correspondence it is technically not allowed to correspond with people in another division. But it was done in such a way that we were able to do it as a group it went through a security check through our administration and corrections people. It was very successful, and it resulted in me being one of the persons selected as employee of the month.”

Policy Change

Policy change was identified as a success in correctional social work 7 times. Examples of policy change were education around marginalized populations. Participant 11 summarized, “in terms of education working to destigmatize and decriminalize young people of color of low socio-economic status. That begins in the home, at school, with professionals all over. If we begin to destigmatize and decriminalize people of color, I think we will see a drastic decline of folks who are in corrections.”

Positive Multidisciplinary Work

Positive multidisciplinary work emerged as a category for success 33 times in the data. Examples of positive multidisciplinary work include collaborating and communication with correctional officers, medical staff, court staff, and social service colleagues. Participant 1 stated, “it has to be done through your multidisciplinary team you cannot do it alone. So were talking about the correctional piece, about the nursing piece, were talking about the other players that may be even outside of the jail. To work with the team inside to help the patient transition out. I really cannot do it by myself and when the patient connects with that outside program that’s how I define success.”

Participant 6 summarized, “officers for the most part have been great and very understanding of the program so that hasn’t been an issue.” Participant 13 added, “there is an officer that the participants were familiar with because he bridges the gap between officer and detainee. He bridges that gap with mentoring the men.” Participant 2 further indicated, “when it came to correctional officers it was more about boundaries. You don’t tell me what to do as a social worker, I don’t tell you what to do as a CO (correctional

officer). We learned to balance that out and respect each other. It was basically achieved through communication and just drawing a line you know.” Participant 3 indicated, “I would probably say a monthly interdisciplinary committee at the jail. You know I really didn’t know many people on the corrections side, so like forming those relationships was really cool to and working together.”

Qualities

Qualities emerged as a category in the data relating to success 53 times. Qualities that social workers recognized as a link to success included being nonjudgmental, supportive, firm passionate, patient, confident, strong minded, and self-aware of privilege and biases. For example, participant 5 summarized, “knowing what you are walking into as much as you can. Also checking your privilege at the door because it is sort of like it goes without saying, you have the privilege of walking in and out of those doors and most people that you will come across don’t.” And Participant 9 noted,

to really put aside my own personal values and opinions and really focus on just doing my job and me helping the inmates as much as I can. To realize that I can’t do everything and just kind of be okay with that. To understand where they are coming from and not be judgmental and be as supportive as I can.

Participant 14 summarized, “you got to have a lot a lot of patience, remember you have to have a lot of confidence in yourself. I’m trying to make this a human interaction not a disciplinary interaction. You put that hat on at the door and you hang it up when you leave.” Participant 2 further noted, “you have to have a particular, I’m not going to say a hard heart, but there has to be a little hard spot in your heart to muster that type of

environment because there is minimal reward in it.” Participant 3 added, “some of the clients can be really good at pushing and testing. I did not want to be favoring and doing things for clients that I would not do for others.”

Reentry

Reentry was discussed 56 times during data collection as related to success in correctional social work. Examples of reentry include successful referrals, linkage, and discharge planning. Participant 7 indicated, “a lot of it was planning discharge planning was the most successful whether they went inpatient or outpatient.” Participant 6 further noted, “being able to successfully give different resources to the detainees that they utilize once they are outside of the jail. Those were the two biggest things employment and substance use treatment. Participant 2 indicated, “leaving with a plan, I think there is a lot of recidivism when they don’t leave with a plan. If you leave with a plan, they are less likely to come back. Like submitting an application for their GED while they were detained or helping them get on the right psychiatric medication.”

Supervision, Training, and Support

Supervision, training, and support emerged 18 times in the data. Examples that emerged in this category that related to success included good supervision, training, therapy, and support in the workplace and outside of the workplace. Participant 5 noted, “I try to ground myself. I was never going to push that boundary and become unprofessional in that way, and if I felt close to it, I had the support I needed to talk through it with other staff and supervisors. Definitely took self-care days, simply because I felt drained.” Participant 7 added, “a lot of supervision, supervision really helped being

able to constantly refer to my colleagues who were also struggling but my professor at the time and understanding that I am doing what I can and not taking things personal and not internalizing as being a failure or success on my end.” Participant 12 indicated, “get a therapist, I would say that. Make sure that you have a good support system outside of work. Make sure good work support like a good supervisor. Someone that you can talk to and be open and honest with.”

Participant 1 stated, “we also get formal trainings every year to make sure we are following all these over general medical ethics. It just becomes part of the profession and continuing education helps us refresh on all of that. Together making decisions and revisiting scenarios that could be questionable.” Participant 13 added, “training for cultural competency. I’m always involved in some type of mental health training. Talk to your supervisor, supervision is really important and self-care, so you don’t become burned out.”

Theme 4: Improvement Recommendations for Social Work Curricula

The fourth theme that emerged was improvement for recommendations in social work curricula. Out of 1459 codes 149 were related to improvement recommendations. The categories that emerged were combining social work and criminal justice topics in classes, field experience, increasing/recruiting social workers in corrections, reflexivity classes, and specialty supervision/training.

Combining Social Work and Criminal Justice in Classes

Combining social work and criminal justice in classes emerged 48 times during data collection. Participants shared that masters’ level social work schools should offer

and improve the way that social work in criminal justice or corrections is taught.

Participants outlined that when criminal justice classes are offered to social workers, they are not inclusive to social work services but rather a separate subject altogether. Criminal justice classes for social workers are also not instructed by a social worker but rather by a criminal justice professional.

Participant 10 noted, “I wish in social work you would learn more about that stuff like the laws and policies that are out there. I took basic classes but none of it was ever taught. Ethics were criminal justice they were not for social work. The forensic social work track was eliminated from the school. The professors were not social workers they were criminal justice. At the same time, it was never really tailored to us. I only saw the criminal justice side. It was lacking in how social workers help those in the criminal justice system.” Participant 7 further noted, “in my program there needed to be one, more classes. There needs to be a bridge between the coursework and the field placement in which you are discussing these challenging issues and how to work through them effectively.” Participant 6 stated, “like I would have liked to have a whole class dedicated to criminal justice aspect of social work and being in this type of setting.”

Participant 12 indicated, “I remember thinking and being super frustrated because I came to my university because they had a specialization for forensic social work, which is supposed to be more focused on being a social worker in a criminal justice setting. So, I started taking more classes for that specialization. But they were just classes from the criminal justice grad program/criminology program there was actually nothing about actually being a social worker within the criminal justice system. It was like here you’re

going to learn about what it means to be a clinician and then you're going to learn about what criminology is. There was nothing specific to what it is like being a social worker in a jail or work within a court system and understand exactly what it meant to exist in such a strict setting. Participant 2 stated, "the job description in no way shape or form paints the picture at all because it's hard because you can't paint the picture. Definitely more, not concentrations, but even more courses that would encompass corrections or even rehabilitation."

Field Experience

Field experience emerged 17 times in the data as a category related to social work curricula. Participants shared the value of field experiences and hands on learning. For example, Participant 10 indicated,

In schooling you don't really know. I wasn't taught much about the justice system. I didn't really know I took classes, but I learned more from the inmates about D-Bonds, and I Bonds. Stuff that I would never have learned in the forensic track I was on at school.

Increasing and Recruiting Social Workers

Increasing and recruiting social workers into corrections emerged in the data 10 times. Participants discussed the importance of exposing students to criminal justice settings, to make them aware that the setting is an opportunity to practice social work and there is a great need. Participant 1 stated, "there needs to be for sure a class in criminal justice and social work and I think more specific to like corrections, and even include a visit into one of these institutions. This can open doors for students to do more

internships in these settings. There was a time when many people wanted to come in kind of work in this setting and see what it was like, and again just learn all the different complexities of all these systems working together. We do not have people running to apply for these jobs anymore. People are just not interested in working with us anymore.”

Participant 4 summarized, “I mean you’re going to enter into correctional social work for two reasons: one because your down for the cause or two because you want to make some money. Which it can be a little of both you know it doesn’t hurt that we were well paid, because it’s very difficult work and all social works should be paid better than they are.” Participant 11 added, “I would like to see more bodies on staff, a larger staff and system of help. It feels like our justice system is very punitive and controlled by guards, laws, and judges. There are not enough social workers and social services in place to reach the majority of clients in corrections because there are so few restorative justice projects in place because there are so few people that want to work in that overarching system of corrections.”

Reflexivity Classes

Reflexivity classes emerged as a category 13 times in relation to social work curricula. Participants identified the need for social workers to be reflexive of their biases and values in social work practice. Participant 11 stated:

Advise them (social workers) to do their research and asks themselves why they feel pulled towards corrections and involved in the justice system in any form.

Because is there is any shred of personal bias towards people who are involved in corrections. Ff a social worker feels like they are less, or they deserve to be

treated this way, incarcerated, or locked away, that can get in the way of providing ethical and professional care.

Participant 4 further noted:

This whole piece of reflexivity. In terms of the work that you do because if you are not consistently being reflective about what you bring to the work you do, in terms of your own values, your own biases, and your own prejudices. I think each class should have a portion on, you know a component, on how to be reflexive in the work that you are doing.

Specialty Supervision and Training

Specialty supervision and training was a category that emerged in 27 codes of the data. Participants mentioned that during field seminar, their experience was so different from others that they felt they needed specialty supervision and training. For example, participant 5 stated, “honestly, I did not have any criminal justice options in BSW and MSW; most resources I had to find on my own. Especially during class clinical supervision, I was the only person at a correctional facility.” And Participant 2 added, just kind of talking more about the criminal justice system. There is a lack of information on how we can handle certain situations or how can we work with inmates because it is different traumas.

Participant 4 noted:

It still amazing to me that we are not mandated to go into some treatment however brief. So that we know what that experience is like. Whether it’s a research interview, whether it’s a practice interview, you know a clinical interaction. It’s a

very different experience when you're on the other end. To kind of have some portion of that program where you yourself are the client. If you want to provide therapy, you should know what it's like to be on the other end.

Participant 13 added:

When it comes to training, in class we did a good job with human behavior and the DSM. I would say more classes related to how to work with individuals who are a part of the criminal justice system and may suffer from mental illness, bridging the two. Trauma is a big one as well, you are going to work with individuals who have a lot of traumas.

Theme 5: Systemic Barriers and Systemic Success

The fifth and final theme that emerged was systemic barriers and systemic successes. Participants provided insight through 200 codes related to this theme.

Categories included correctional institution policy barriers, correctional institution policy success, COVID-19, criminal justice system/laws, discrimination/minorities, reentry resources, and social work advocacy.

Correctional Institution Policies Barriers and Success

Correctional institution policies barriers and success were discussed 23 times in the study date. Participants shared, that social workers make a difference through making small impacts that lead to macro change. Success at the policy level includes making changed in rules or policies at correctional institutions. Barriers included policy surrounding suicide watch, discharge, homelessness, and transportation.

Participant 7 stated, “be strong, your being there is an impact. The impact might feel small, but it is memorable, and clients remember and even when it feels like you are not making target goals every day that you are showing up is making a difference. It’s not us this is macro, and we constantly make strides in the right direction.”

Participant 14 indicated an example of systemic success:

I was able to get with the chief of security and the warden there to kind of say, if these women are going to work even though they have to, but if they got a promotion or got this or that, why don’t they get an extra day when they go home.

Participant 1 noted:

Success I think in their willingness (the institution) to help them more with the patients transition to the community has been incredible, because you know at one point, we would never have the ability to transport someone to a program and to ensure that they get there safely. So having that option right now is amazing. As far as some policies in the jail there are some things that obviously could help like this whole issue of having people walk out of the jail at 2 or 3 in the morning.

Participant 3 stated, “the one that comes to mind the most that when a person would tell me they are suicidal and having to follow the policies. Then seeing people in a holding cell for my whole shift and going to supervision the next day and hearing that they had been there overnight. If they are suicidal taking the appropriate steps.”

COVID-19

COVID-19 emerged as a systemic barrier that impacted correctional social work and the entire world. COVID-19 was identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019.

COVID-19 is caused by the virus severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), a new virus in humans causing respiratory illness which can be spread from person-to-person. Early in the outbreak, many patients were reported to have a link to a large seafood and live animal market, however, later cases with no link to the market confirmed person-to-person transmission of the disease. Additionally, travel-related exportation of cases has occurred (CDC, 2021). The category of COVID-19 emerged 8 times in the data. COVID-19 caused barriers in service delivery, barriers to reentry, and mandated overtime for staff.

Participant 6 summarized, “because of Covid they don’t want to take anybody from the jail setting as much right now, it’s hard to get them accepted.” Participant 3 noted, “this is systemic and that was more towards the end when people were being required to work double shifts because of the pandemic and you can work 16 hours in a jail without being exhausted and that kind of speaks to a bigger issue.” Participant 13 added, “As of lately I was going to monthly community meetings but since the pandemic we are no longer having those meetings.”

Criminal Justice System and Laws

Criminal justice system and laws were identified in 55 codes related to systemic barriers. Barriers included harsh laws, unequal sentencing, and distrust. Participant 10 stated, “the limits that are there on discrimination, one person might be there for a few days and another person may be there for a year with the same charge.” Participant 14 further noted, “the biggest thing, minimum and maximum sentences you can see the inconsistencies once you start working with this population.”

Participant 7 indicated, “macro, the idea that we are criminalizing drug activity and use.” It is more of the judicial system and how we view substance use within this population. Participant 12 further noted, “the clients that were in jail for marijuana possession and how that is barely even a thing now with the laws changing and it wasn’t even that long ago. Just like experiencing back it just felt so insignificant and putting someone through the trauma of jail and they are like 19 because they were caught with some weed.” Participant 3 added,

I can think of another guy who had early stages of dementia and kept getting rearrested at jewel for stealing their chicken because he loved their chicken. So, he would steal and eventually Jewel banned him and then every time he could come back, he would get rearrested. He was a veteran so setting him up with benefits when he left the jail that was a success but also a barrier because I had seen him at least 3 times while I was at the jail for the same reason. It just like it made me feel like so frustrated that the system kept putting him back where he didn’t belong.

Participant 11 noted:

I have seen a sense of resentment from clients, as a social system we have failed people over and over, so there is a lack of trust occasionally from a client and I feel like I am a spoke in that wheel. Sometimes with clients, they don’t believe that I can be an agent of change and they can receive services or resources because they have been hurt so many times and shown so many times that there aren’t people willing to help them. Barriers come with the lack of empathy of

policy it is really black and white there are not a lot of avenues and caveats for extenuating circumstances in policy and the clients we are working with almost never fit into a black and white mold. Those policies cater to what we want to generalize and see as a cookie cutter person in prison, mental health, or treatment. They are often victimized by those policies because as a person they are forced to fit into a mold that is punitive and not helpful to their situations.

Discrimination and Minorities

Discrimination and minorities were discussed 69 times in the data. Examples that emerged included bringing diversity to the workplace, language barriers, racism, immigration status, sexism, homophobia and expressing political beliefs in the workplace. Participant 8 stated, “give opportunities for other people of color beside Black and Hispanic, like South Asians and Muslims. This is some work that needs to be done and we are okay with you coming in and doing it. I thought there was like one person, not a lot of Muslims or South Asians want to do this type of work maybe talking to universities about inclusivity.” Participant 14 noted, “when it comes to race and gender. Where two people are in there with the same case, and one has a sentence of 6 months and the other once has years. More consistency at the macro level that could trickle down to the micro level every day.”

Participant 2 indicated, “the biggest barriers I saw with that was due to immigration status or language barrier. Its systematic because those are least likely to be paid attention to, they are left forgotten. Immigration is another big thing too because they would have no ID and getting them connected to the consulate that is a huge barrier

too. You see the huge obvious discrepancy in race. The breakdown of races that are incarcerated that is systemic thing itself. I got to see 60% of the population was African American, 30% Hispanic, and the other 10% was mixed. The reality of the systematic oppression, labeling and Zooming in on those specific populations and races.”

Participant 4 stated, “administratively yikes! I could give you a million examples, but for me the biggest barrier and it was still a barrier is that you have folks who ascribe to political beliefs that do not align with the goals of the department, the goals of the jail, and the goals of the work that were trying to do. Unfortunately, we had quite a few people at the administrative level that did not make that a secret.”

Reentry Resources

Reentry resources emerged as a systemic barrier 40 times in the data collection. Reentry barriers include homelessness, stigma, transportation, Participant 1 indicated, “breaking those stereotypes and educating people about these people are returning to our community. They have needs and if they we don’t help them, they often come back and utilize our system as a revolving door. There is a lot of homelessness that we try to address, and it is very difficult because of the way the homeless program works. There are no buses running and transportation. I mean there are so many obstacles that they face when they get out.”

Social Work Advocacy

Social work advocacy emerged as a form of systemic success 8 times in the data. Examples of social work advocacy include changing policies at an institution and empowering clients to vote. Participant 2 stated, “I think maybe proper follow ups after

crisis assessment, proper and timely. A lot of times they would let too much time go between a crisis evaluation and a follow up. By bringing it up to management with the support of other colleagues we were able to put a time frame in place.”

Participant 12 summarized, “I did an internship with a treatment provider, and I sat on one of those drug education things with kids that were caught with marijuana and the guy who did it passed around information like if you want to continue to smoke weed why don’t you learn the importance of voting because if you vote you can change the law and make it legal. That was something that I thought was so cool of a perspective to take on it.”

Discussion of Unexpected Findings

The problem statement for this study involved interviews with participants surrounding the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. Social workers who practice in criminal justice settings face unique obstacles (Young, 2015). Social workers are in high demand in the criminal justice settings due to an increase in the incarcerated population and the challenges this population faces in society (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Social workers are underrepresented in the criminal justice field due to conflicting values between the criminal justice and social work professions, lack of social work training in this specialized field, and perceived limited effects of interventions with adults in the criminal justice system (Pettus-Davis, 2012). This study aimed to identify challenges and ethical conflicts and define competencies that are needed to practice social work in corrections.

Unexpected findings that related to the first theme were barriers to client services. This included barriers to engagement and resources. Participant 5 outlined the following barrier due to the jail being a 24-hour facility where programming staff is only onsite during the day, “general engagement levels, you did not know what you were walking into.” Participant 11 further noted, “it feels like resources are purposely invisible to some groups of people or agencies because there is a target group they are for.”

It was unexpected that this Participant shared that while there are resources available to clients there is inequality in resource availability. It is worth noting that disadvantaged groups are overrepresented in the criminal justice system such as women, inmates with mental illness, minority groups, the impoverished, inmates with limited education, veterans, substance users, the elderly, and those who identify as LGBTQ (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Participant 14 added,

in the prison and the jail, when women are leaving the prison there are resources, but they have no transportation so when they leave, they have to cab, bus, or train and that all costs money. Although there are a lot of resources once women or men get released its more about; am I going to spend my time or money to travel to a meeting or am I fine on my own.

This Participant noted that while there are resources available the client must decide if it is worth their time or money to seek out resources that are not readily available to them. Nearly half off all prisoners in the United States were in poverty at the time of their arrest. The rate of homelessness is four to six times that of the general

population and only 13% of jail inmates have more than a high school degree (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

Another unexpected finding that emerged in client service barriers was that 4 participants identified a challenge and personal bias in working with people charged with sexual offenses, specifically offenses against minors. This emerged as an issue because the social work bias conflicted with social work ethics and values. The NASW ethical code provides a framework for social workers to practice. Section 4.05 of the code addresses self-care guidelines for the professionals. The section states that the social worker is responsible for monitoring their own professional fitness and seek help with needed (Wilson, 2016). Participants reported being able to work in a professional relationship with clients but identified the following biases and/or discomforts.

Participant 4 indicated,

One thing that was always difficult for me was a bias on my behalf, with working with individuals who had sex charges, criminal sexual assault charges of minors. That kind of thing particularly in respect to minors. It was always a resurfacing issue in working with individuals who had sex charges with minors and just to be able to. Often too, that is why me and many other people try not to even know what the charge is but at a certain point it becomes unavoidable.

Participant 3 stated,

pedophiles I had a really hard time with. It was hard because for one they are probably not going anywhere because of what they did and not crushing their spirit.

For theme two participants identified barriers faced by social workers in the correctional setting. Barriers identified included Code of Ethics issues and barriers with staff/colleagues. Social workers practicing in the criminal justice system are met with the challenge of navigating a difficult partnership and the colliding values between criminal justice and social work. Participant 11 stated the following, which was unexpected finding related to code of ethics violations by colleagues, “it can be no empathy and treating someone like a caged animal to offering personal numbers, clothing, and housing. It is very confusing to clients receiving services and incarcerated.” Participant 12 added, “I ran into barriers with correctional officers a bit. Generally, it felt like we were working against each other, some of them.” Participant 4 further noted, “then there are other times when the culture of a certain division, or the culture of a certain group of correctional officers, really becomes not only a barrier but a danger to your personal safety.”

In theme three social workers define success, the following unexpected findings were discussed. Participants identified success in their social work practice through individual therapy, creating programming, treatment plans, being self-aware, multidisciplinary teams, and upholding the Code of Ethics with ease. The grounding theory for this study Luhmann’s Systems Theory, emphasizes functional aspects of social work that include roles, goals, organization, and directions on how to deliver services (Kihlström, 2012).

Participant 5 summarized, “it was more so on an individual therapy type level, we did a lot of groups, but I wasn’t able to build rapport in that way.” Participant 14 added,

“implementing new types of groups: art therapy, emotional regulation, and a gardening program.” Participant 7 further noted, “for me I felt success in making treatment plans and seeing the attitude and motivational changes behind the services and their drug and alcohol addiction. Participant 4 stated,

I will be upfront and honest, there were certain things that it be demanded to be done a certain way, if I felt it was unethical, I didn't do it. But I feel like, especially the nature of social work is, if your put in a position of having to be unethical then it's time to go.

Participant 1 further noted,

As far as releasing records and knowing all the policies as much as possible. Kind of working where the clients are and not imposing our own values on them. I don't think of how we can compromise that. We definitely exercise it. It is an automatic thing now.

Participant 5 summarized, “also checking your privilege at the door because it is sort of like it goes without saying, you have the privilege of walking in and out of those doors and most people that you will come across don't.”

Theme 4 discussed improvement recommendations for social work curricula. Unexpected recommendations included recruiting more social workers into corrections due to a lack of interest and chronically vacant positions, a recommendation for including reflexivity into social work classes, and social workers being required to experience being a client. Exposing social work students to course work and field education in criminal justice increased the likelihood that they will practice in criminal justice upon

graduation (Scheyett et al., 2012). Studies have found that the biggest challenge to placing students at criminal justice settings is finding an MSW supervisor on site and lack of student interest combined with anxiety. Other challenges include bureaucratic regulations such as security clearance, criminal justice lack of interest in social work, and financial barriers due to lack of funding or stipend or economic insecurity in criminal justice settings. Findings suggest that the use of financial incentives may recruit more students. (Scheyett et al., 2012). Participant 1 noted,

there was a time when many people wanted to come in and kind of work in this setting and see what it was like, and again just learn all the different complexities of all these systems working together. We do not have people running to apply for these jobs anymore. People are just not interested in working with us anymore.

Participant 4 stated,

this whole piece of reflexivity. In terms of the work that you because if you are not consistently being reflective about what you bring to the work you do, in terms of your own values, your own biases, and your own prejudices. I think each class should have a portion on, you know a component, on how to be reflexive in the work that you are doing.

Finally in theme five participants discussed systemic barriers and systemic successes. Unexpected barriers included issues with suicide protocols, immigration status, language barriers, politics, and isms in the workplace. Unexpected success included advocacy through teaching clients about the importance of voting and education around laws. In corrections, social workers may work towards advocating for the human

rights of prisoners. However, prisons often fail to view prisoners as right-bearing humans (Jarldorn, 2019).

Participant 3 stated,

the one that comes to mind the most that when a person would tell me they are suicidal and having to follow the policies. Then seeing people in a holding cell for my whole shift and going to supervision the next day and hearing that they had been their overnight. If they are suicidal taking the appropriate steps.

Participant 2 indicated,

the biggest barriers I saw with that was due to immigration status or language barrier. Its systematic because those are least likely to be paid attention to, they are left forgotten. Immigration is another big thing too because they would have no ID and getting them connected to the consulate that is a huge barrier too.

Participant 4 stated,

administratively yikes! I could give you a million examples, but for me the biggest barrier is that you have folks who ascribe to political beliefs that do not align with the goals of the department, the goals of the jail, and the goals of the work that were trying to do.

Participant 12 summarized,

I did an internship with a treatment provider, and I sat on one of those drug education things with kids that were caught with marijuana and the guy who did it passed around information like if you want to continue to smoke weed why don't you learn the importance of voting because if you vote you can change the law

and make it legal. That was something that I thought was so cool of a perspective to take on it.

Finally, in theme five participants discussed systemic barriers and systemic successes. Social workers enter helping relationships with a presumed expertise which is based on professional training in knowledge, values, and skills designed to help people transform their lives and systems. It is possible to engage in restorative work in prisons only if social workers allow themselves to be guided by their clients as leaders in their goals and needs (Campbell et al., 2020). Suggestions for systemic improvement include more efficient suicide protocols and more culturally competent care for immigrants and people who do not speak English as their first language. Systemic barriers also include changes to laws and the criminal justice system. Discrimination and racism emerged as categories in this theme that can be addressed through education and equal treatment of people from diverse groups.

Summary

Section 3 of this study provided an overview of the study's findings. This section included data analysis techniques, findings, and the summary of the results. The research question the study attempted to address was: What are the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections? The practice problem explored how social workers define success in their work, the on the job challenges they face, and what competencies are needed to be effective in the correctional setting. The study participants provided valuable insight into the unique challenges they face in the correctional setting. The themes included client service barriers, barriers faced by social workers in the

correctional setting, improvement recommendations for social work curricula, social workers define success, and systemic barriers and systemic success.

Given that only 1% of social workers practice in criminal justice, there is a gap in the knowledge of the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections. In the study findings there is a discussion of unexpected findings. Data collection found that 2 participants reported that although resources are available for their clients post incarceration, they are not always accessible to their clients by design or due to transportation constraints. It was identified by 4 participants that they had difficulty in working with clients accused of sexual offenses, specifically those against minors. Participants identified that having a bias against this type of charge made it difficult to work with them but also barriers in linking them to resources such as housing was a challenge. A participant indicated difficulty in working with correctional staff and colleagues who showed no empathy towards clients and treated them like animals. Another participant highlighted the importance of being self-aware of privilege. A participant identified the dangers of working in a correctional setting when the culture of certain jails was unsafe, and the tormenting of staff and detainees was a source of entertainment.

All participants shared a sense of pride and ease in being able to uphold the Social Work Code of Ethics. Ethical dilemmas were more so gray areas and the challenge of not being able to fully advocate for their clients like they would in other social work settings. Ethical dilemmas were also identified in observations of other staff and colleagues, and how much they should advocate and speak up about those violations. Several participants

highlighted the importance of reflexivity in social work practice to be self-aware and put the client first. They also highlighted the importance of recruiting more social workers to corrections and in them being from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Systemic barriers included improving suicide protocols, equal sentencing, providing services in clients native language, and reducing “isms” in the workplace. Finally, systemic success included education and advocacy for clients including information on voting and laws.

The purpose of this study is to understand the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections in Midwestern jails. Section 3 summarized a presentation of the findings and unexpected findings. Section 4 will provide a discussion of the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, and implications for social change.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections, addressing the low number of social workers in criminal justice and a subsequent lack of research (Young, 2015). The study consisted of 14 individual interviews with master's level social workers who graduated from a CSWE-accredited school and practiced at a Midwestern jail within the past 5 years. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone call, and member checking was done via email correspondence. Through participant interview data I identified several themes that were consistent with the literature about social workers practicing in corrections: client service barriers, barriers faced by social workers in the correctional setting, social workers define success, improvement recommendations for social work curricula, systemic barriers, and systemic success.

Unexpected findings included participants' discussion of how comfortable and sure they felt about upholding the code of ethics in this unique setting. The key findings of this study will help to inform social work practice by providing exploration into the experiences of social workers in corrections, validation to existing data, policy change and by providing direction for social work education and training. Due to a lack of generalizability from using a small sample size of those working in Midwestern jails, the findings of this study may have limitations when considering how to extend knowledge in the social work field. Midwestern. There are, however, some useful implications for correction social worker settings in the Midwest.

Section 4 includes the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, and implications for social change. The Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice Section will present and explain at least two specific principles from the NASW Code of Ethics related to this social work practice problem and how these findings will impact social work practice, particularly in relation to the area of professional ethics. The Recommendations for Social Work Practice section will include action steps for clinical social work practitioners who work in this area and provide recommendations for future research that are grounded in the strengths and limitations of the study. Finally, I will describe the potential impact for positive social change at the appropriate levels: micro, mezzo, and macro and/or practice, research, and policy.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

In practicing social work in correctional settings there are ethical conflicts that arise from a mismatch between social work values and institutional settings (Campbell et al., 2020). The NASW (2017) Code of Ethics sets guidelines for social workers to conduct their work professionally. The mission of social work is rooted in a set of six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of a person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. This section will discuss two social work values related to the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections: social justice and dignity and worth of a person.

Social justice refers to the duty of social workers to pursue social change, especially on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people. More than 11 million adults are

detained in prison and jails throughout the world, and the imprisonment rates of the poor and working class continues to increase (Jarldorn, 2019). Social change efforts focus on issues of poverty, unemployment, and discrimination, with social workers seeking to promote knowledge and sensitivity about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity as well as ensuring access to resources and equal opportunities (NASW, 2017). But participants shared challenges to social justice due to structural oppression of vulnerable populations. This oppression includes but is not limited to unequal sentencing, the criminalization of drug use, barriers to resources, and stigma. Participant 11 noted,

there is a barrier in what I can actually help them get a hold of, because of post incarceration, probation/parole, is that criminal record that people carry around, poses a lot of barriers to health care, mental health care, and employment. It is a stigma and a general material barrier that clients carry, plays into the trust role that they can find housing or a job, but they have a record and that is usually in the fine print to qualify.

Several participants shared that policy and systemic change can occur through education, more equal sentencing, destigmatizing people of color, and decriminalizing drug use. It is possible to engage in restorative work in correctional settings only if social workers allow themselves to be guided by their clients as leaders in their goals and needs (Campbell et al., 2020). Participant 11 summarized,

in terms of education working to destigmatize and decriminalize young people of color of low socio-economic status. That begins in the home, at school, with

professionals all over. If we begin to destigmatize and decriminalize people of color, I think we will see a drastic decline of folks who are in corrections.

Additionally, social workers often weigh the needs of offenders against those of the justice system. Social workers can take on this challenge by participating in molding social policy and legislative action (Wilson, 2010). Participants shared that just by showing up every day social workers are making an impact and even if the impact is small, it makes a difference and leads to macro change. Social workers can introduce topics like restorative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and an awareness of the impact of race, culture, and poverty to institutions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).

The social work value of dignity and worth of a person outlines that social workers should strive to treat each person in a caring and respectful manner being aware of individual differences, cultural diversity, and ethnic diversity (NASW, 2017). Social workers seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interest and the broader society's interest in a socially responsible manner. Participants in this study discussed concerns about how clients are viewed and treated. They shared concerns that the system can be dehumanizing and that staff both correctional and program staff can become complicit to perceiving the clients negatively. Participant 3 shared this insight:

so, honestly some of the struggles I had personally were with my colleagues who were not able to keep an open mind in regard to our clients. I think a lot of people come to the jail with a pre-conceived notion of what quote on quote criminal behavior is, but they don't always take into account like the trauma that people have experience the life stressors, violence, family issues.

As part of the social worker value of dignity, participants also shared that they attempt to bring that empathy for clients into the workplace and recommended that more social workers be recruited to corrections. However, though social work principles are ideal, they may result in job burnout or vicarious trauma. Professionals working with victims of trauma often have issues that are displayed through personal efficacy and increased emotional and physical concerns (Wilson, 2016). Participant 11 stated,

that lack of empathy from officers was a barrier. I am not sure if true burnout is the issue, but actually a lack of empathy from folks that are not in the right field, and it presents as burnout. A lot of staff who are going into the social service field, there is a lack of empathy because we get to go home and walk out of the facility and be quote on quote regular people. We don't have to usually carry around the baggage that our clients have to carry around. There is a lack of personal boundaries, lack of understanding, and a power dynamic. It can be no empathy and treating someone like a caged animal to offering personal numbers, clothing, and housing. It is very confusing to clients receiving services and incarcerated.

Participants suggested that burnout can be prevented and improved through relying on colleagues, good supervision, training, and maintaining boundaries. Three participants shared the importance of reflexivity and being self-aware of personal biases in social work practice. Participant 11 provided the following recommendation,

advise them (social workers) to do their research and asks themselves why they feel pulled towards corrections and involved in the justice system in any form.

Because is there is any shred of personal bias towards people who are involved in corrections, if a social worker feels like they are less or they deserve to be treated this way, incarcerated, or locked away, that can get in the way of providing ethical and professional care.

This section summarized the application for professional ethics in social work practice. The two social work values that were most prevalent in this study were social justice and dignity and worth of a person. Social workers face unique challenges in correctional settings, and the NASW Code of Ethics serves as a guide for resolving dilemmas. The findings of this study will help guide social justice efforts in social working by informing the need for social change in the areas of incarceration, poverty, unemployment, mental illness, and discrimination. The findings will also inform a need for change for the social work value of dignity and worth of a person by striving to treat people who are incarcerated in a caring and respectful manner regardless while keeping in mind individual differences, cultural diversity, and ethnic diversity. The next section will discuss recommendations for social work practice.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Based on the findings of this study, a primary recommendation is that there be additional research about the occupational experiences that social workers face in corrections. The information gained in this study is a foundation that can be built upon to gain more generalizable results. Additional research may be able to focus on a larger range of correctional settings and an increased number of social workers who practice in corrections in the United States. It is important to increase understanding of the barriers

that occur due to systemic factors (macro) as well as those that relate practice in the workplace (micro). This knowledge will help to guide future action and practice. The following section includes practice and policy recommendations for social work practitioners who work in the study's area of focus.

Action Steps for Social Work Practitioners

Based on this study's finding, one practice action step is specialized training and education related to social workers practicing in corrections. Social workers are often put into legal and ethical binds due to reporting requirements mandated by the agency, local, state, and federal law (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Most study participants mentioned a need for more training and education related to the needs of clients, challenges with staff, and barriers unique to the correctional setting. Participants suggested that social work education could improve through combining classes or tracks to include criminal justice and social worker practice and values. Participants shared that in some Master of Social Work programs, no criminal justice or corrections classes were available. Others shared that though criminal justice classes and even forensic social work tracks were available, they were not combined well and instead taught as separate subjects. One participant shared that they would have liked to learn about laws and policies in class. It was shared that faculty teaching criminal justice to social workers should have a social work background not just a criminal justice one. Participant 12 indicated,

I remember thinking and being super frustrated because I came to my university because they had a specialization for forensic social work, which is supposed to

be more focused on being a social worker in a criminal justice setting. So, I started taking more classes for that specialization. But they were just classes from the criminal justice grad program/criminology program there was actually nothing about actually being a social worker within the criminal justice system.

Participants also discussed the value of hands-on learning through internship and field experiences in correctional settings. Participants suggested that exposing students to criminal justice settings may increase interest to this area of social work. Participant 1 noted,

there needs to be for sure a class in criminal justice and social work and I think more specific to like corrections, and even include a visit into one of these institutions. This can open doors for students to do more internships in these settings.

Participants also suggested that social workers in corrections engage in training. Training topics recommended for correctional social work included mental health, substance abuse, and trauma. Vulnerable and disadvantaged populations are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and inmates present with a range of social, psychiatric, medical, and learning needs (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Participants stated that they sought training and guidance through supervision. Engaging in supervision was viewed as necessary; this includes consulting with colleagues. Many participants mentioned participating in continued education, which is required to maintain social work licensure. Some participants noted that they receive formal trainings every year in the workplace that go over ethics and cultural competency.

Action steps for policy change include advocacy and education by practitioners, clients, and the broader society. One participant stated that social workers make a difference every day by meeting small goals that lead to macro change. Examples of change include changing institutional policies, laws, discrimination, and offering more diversion programs. During President Reagan's presidency, the administration shifted criminal justice philosophy from a rehabilitative approach to a more punitive one (Pettus-Davis, 2012). At the same time the social work profession moved away from the field of criminal justice due to the following: a perceived or real lack of effective practice skills and rehabilitative treatment for offenders, tensions between the philosophies of social work and corrections, and a lack of training for work in criminal justice setting provided in school of social work. Recent changes suggest that social work is beginning to refocus on criminal justice (Scheyett et al., 2012). One participant shared that they worked with the warden and chief of security to approve an incentive program for women who were doing well at a work release detention center to get reduced days on their sentences if they did well at their job assignments. Policy suggestions from participants also included changing suicide watch protocols at an institution so that clients were attended to with more urgency and did not have to sit in holding cells overnight.

A suggestion for improvements to the justice system also include more equal sentencing since there are great disparities on sentencing between different races and genders. One of the biggest challenges that forensic social workers face is practicing effectively in an adversarial legal system (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Participants in the study noted inconsistencies with minimum and maximum sentences where two

clients had the same charge, and one was sentenced to months and the other years in prison. Another improvement included decriminalizing drug use. A participant mentioned that they worked with clients who were in jail for marijuana possession, and it felt like the charge was so insignificant and it was unnecessary to put someone who was 19 years old through the trauma of jail for that.

Participants also mentioned the need for changes in the incarceration of people who suffer from mental illness. A participant shared that they felt frustrated that the system kept putting their client back in jail where they did not belong. Participants also noted systemic barriers in how people were treated due to their immigration status or a language barrier. These clients are likely to be ignored and forgotten and finding them resources such as identification and insurance is a huge barrier.

How these Findings will Impact the Researcher's Social Work Practice

As a result of my research, I will aim to advocate and educate others about the unique challenges that social workers face in corrections in providing services to incarcerated or post-incarcerated individuals. Correctional settings often fail to view prisoners as right-bearing humans, but social workers' core value is being a human rights profession, advocating for the human rights of prisoners (Jarldorn, 2019). It is important that my work as a clinical provider go beyond the clinical treatment setting and that I become more involved in positive social change. In corrections, positive social change can be accomplished through improving programming, training of staff, increasing resources, changing institutional policies, changing laws, through research, and advancements in social work education.

As a clinical program manager at a jail, I strive to improve services for incarcerated people, specifically for women and people who identify as LGBTQIA. I am a part of positive social change by creating, implementing, and sustaining innovative clinical programs. I am also involved in training program staff as well as social work and psychology interns. I have served as a field supervisor for social work and counseling students since 2016. I have become involved in creating trainings for all staff on trauma responsive practices in the jail. I was also involved in creating a risk assessment for the purpose of screening all incarcerated individuals into rehabilitative and vocational programs.

I build partnerships in the community with volunteer organizations that provide programming for people in the jail and upon discharge, as well as organizations who provide useful and generous donations. I have worked on institutional policies related to visitation of incarcerated mothers and their children, policies related to substance and mental health treatment, and policies related to individuals who identify as LGBTQIA. I have also worked as a part of a multidisciplinary drug court team with public defenders, probation officers, treatment case managers, states attorneys and a dedicated judge. This drug court team gives people with addiction and mental health problems an alternative to jail and prison, through treatment, employment, and support.

I will continue speak in support of social work in corrections with colleagues in the field and at continued education and networking events. I hope to be more involved with training correctional staff in the future. I hope to share my findings with schools of

social work to be able to guide criminal justice social work classes and tracks. I am interested in becoming a professor for social work in corrections.

Usefulness of Study Findings for Social Work Practice

Social workers who practice in corrections are working in an interprofessional practice since social work is not the dominant profession. Interprofessional practice requires the building of professional skills, values, and knowledge across disciplines (Sweifach, 2015). The findings of this study provided insight into the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections at a Midwestern jail. However, these findings can be useful in the broader field of social work. This section will explore the implications of the current study findings upon practice, policy, and research considerations within the broader field of social work practice.

Participants in this study identified several barriers to direct practice. These barriers included client engagement, community resources and programming materials. Social workers core tasks of delivering interventions and therapeutic programs becomes secondary to prison compliance measures and data entry (Jarldorn, 2019). The findings of these barriers can be used to advocate for more space, confidential space, improved programming materials, and more community resources.

In the correctional setting access to writing supplies such as pens can be difficult and therefore poses a barrier to conducting treatment groups and assignments. Funding and resources for programming in prisons and jails is generally insufficient and prison data has found that there is inconsistency in programs and a relative low rate of success (Franke et al., 2017). A lack of space to run groups made group numbers large and lack

of private space made individual counseling difficult. Participants noted how difficult it can be for a social worker to create a safe space for a client in a hallway with others being able to listen which also conflicts with confidentiality.

Participant 2 stated:

There is a huge limitation in materials for treatment such as handouts and things that can be incorporated in individual and group therapy. We could not have things like staples or paper clips; not having the stuff you need to do your job made it hard, like access to a printer and office space was a real problem.

Participants also shared barriers to client engagement such as combative clients, low motivation, trauma, or severe mental illness. These findings can be used to prepare social workers to practice with this population. Disadvantaged groups represented in the criminal justice system include women, inmates with mental illness, minority groups, the impoverished, inmates with limited education, veterans, substance users, the elderly and those who identify as LGBTQ (Matejkowski et al., 2014). Practitioners can seek out specialty training in the areas to provide competent services.

Participant 1 noted, “the clients many of them, don’t have the motivation to implement some positive changes. So, we can’t really do everything for them. Many times, this is why, when treatment and programs are court ordered, you think that the patient is obviously obligated in a way to follow through.” Participant 4 summarized, “the level of mental illness that people are grappling with sometimes, it does not allow them to be receptive to the care that you would like to provide for them. I think another issue is having a trauma informed approach with people because you have so many

people in corrections, especially in women's divisions, who have history of sexual abuse and physical abuse.”

The study findings discussed policy issues and suggestions for reform. The United States has the highest rates of mass incarceration than any other Western country, long sentences, racial discrimination, and discrimination among people of low socioeconomic status. The United States leads the world in incarceration rates with 25% of the world's incarcerated people (Cox & Augustine, 2018). Policies discussed by participants that need to be reformation included incarcerated parent and child(ren) visitation, education to eliminate stigma, and community resources.

One participant expressed that visitation policies should be different and more uniform especially for those who are incarcerated and have children. There are jails and prisons through the United States who have visitation programs that can successfully have quality visits between detained people and their family. More than 2.7 million children have a parent in jail or prison. Parental incarceration has been linked to aggression, delinquency, anxiety, and depression in children (Pettus-Davis, 2012).

Programs like the Incarcerated Parents Program in Los Angeles, facilitate visitation between women who are incarcerated and their children in out-of-home placement. The program is open to incarcerated mothers with children who have a current open Family Reunification Plan with the Department of Children and Family Services. The program helps ensure incarcerated parents complete any court-ordered programs, acts as a liaison between social workers and the incarcerated parent and helps improve

outcomes for released parents through resource referrals and supportive services (Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, 2019).

Education around stigma and marginalized populations was identified as a macro issue. More than 60% of U.S. prisoners are from racial or ethnic minority groups. African Americans make up 12% of the general population however they make up half of the prison population (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Participant 11 summarized, “in terms of education, working to destigmatize and decriminalize young people of color of low socio-economic status. That begins in the home, at school, with professionals all over. If we begin to destigmatize and decriminalize people of color, I think we will see a drastic decline of folks who are in corrections.”

The lack of transportation due to location or access to pay for it, was identified as a barrier at a policy level. Without access to transportation clients cannot utilize community services and resources. However, it was noted that there had been an improvement in policies related to transportation. Participant 1 noted,

success I think in their willingness (the institution), to help them more with the patients transition to the community has been incredible, because you know at one point, we would never have the ability to transport someone to a program and to ensure that they get there safely. So having that option right now is amazing. As far as some policies in the jail there are some things that obviously could help like this whole issue of having people walk out of the jail at 2 or 3 in the morning.

The study findings can help to guide research for social work practice. Clinical supervision was discussed by participants as being necessary and vital in navigating

social work in corrections. Seeking out training and continued education was identified to achieve success in corrections. Research can also help to identify why there are a lack of social workers practicing in corrections.

It was shared by study participants that clinical supervision was valued highly in the correctional setting. Four participants shared frustration over a lack of or unhelpful supervision. These participants stated that they did not have supervisors from a social work background, they were all psychologists. Participant 3 noted, “having supervision, we did not have supervision at the jail to be honest. We did not have social work supervision; all our leads were psychologists.” Participant 1 summarized, “supervision, the only bit of a difference in that is we work under the direction of a chief psychologist, so sometimes we don’t get the supervision from our own profession like maybe we should, and other places do provide that. The way our team works is that we really try to rely on each other and troubleshoot with each other. We use each other’s knowledge and expertise to try to put out all the fires, because we don’t really get that from an administrator or a supervisor.”

Participants shared that participating in trainings offered in the workplace helps but also seeking out training opportunities is good practice. Participant 1 stated, “we also get formal trainings every year to make sure we are following all these over general medical ethics. It just becomes part of the profession and continuing education helps us refresh on all of that. Together making decisions and revisiting scenarios that could be questionable.” Participant 13 added, “training for cultural competency. I am always involved in some type of mental health training.

Participants identified a need for more social workers to practice in corrections. Further research can help to identify why there is low interest in practicing in corrections and identify ways to increase interest. Recent changes suggest that social work is beginning to modestly refocus attention on criminal justice. Evidence includes several new texts in social work and criminal justice, the growth of forensic social work, the formation of the National Association of Forensic Social Workers (Scheyett et al., 2012).

Participant 1 stated, “there needs to be for sure a class in criminal justice and social work and I think more specific to like corrections, and even include a visit into one of these institutions. This can open doors for students to do more internships in these settings. There was a time when many people wanted to come in kind of work in this setting and see what it was like, and again just learn all the different complexities of all these systems working together. We do not have people running to apply for these jobs anymore. People are just not interested in working with us anymore.” Participant 11 added, “I would like to see more bodies on staff, a larger staff and system of help. It feels like our justice system is very punitive and controlled by guards, laws, and judges. There are not enough social workers and social services in place to reach the majority of clients in corrections because there are so few restorative justice projects in place because there are so few people that want to work in that overarching system of corrections.”

Limitations of Study Findings Impacting Usefulness

A limitation to this study is the small sample size, (N=14). Most qualitative research studies aim to study a specific phenomenon in a certain population. Therefore, the generalizability of qualitative research findings is usually not an expected

characteristic. However, with the increasing knowledge on the synthesis from qualitative research evaluation of generalizability is relevant. A practical approach to assessing generalizability is to adopt criteria for validity. Validity can be attained by constant comparison, triangulation, proper audit, and documentation (Leung, 2015).

Due to the small sample size findings of the study are not generalizable. The study focused on social worker occupational experiences at Midwestern jails. The explorative nature of this study this limits the applicability to other jails in the country. A larger sample size would have allowed for a broader understanding and exploration of the experiences of social workers in corrections.

Thirteen out of fourteen participants were identified as female and one as a male. This limited the experience shared from participants from other genders who may have offered different perspectives and insights. In additional study participants practiced in three Midwestern counties. This limited the inclusion of perspectives from those who may have worked outside of those counties. One of the counties was urban and the other two counties were rural. One participant practiced at both a jail and a women's prison. Although there was ethnic and cultural diversity in the participant pool it was not inclusive to all cultures and ethnicities due to the small sample size.

Recommendations for Further Research

New and veteran social workers are becoming more interested in the criminal justice system. Although there is plenty of research on criminal justice there is a lack of research from the social work perspective (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Social work is beginning to modestly refocus attention on criminal justice. This is evidenced through several new

texts in social work and criminal justice, the growth of forensic social work, the formation of the National Association of Forensic Social Workers and a journal in 2011, and new NASW practice section on social work and the courts (Scheyett et al., 2012). Research done by practitioner's aids in the process of addressing organizational and practice problems to improve service delivery to clients. This section will discuss recommendations for further research in the areas of training and education, social worker qualities that equate to success, and advocacy for policy change.

Participants in the study discussed the need for specialized training and education for social workers in correctional settings. Social work education offers limited opportunities for students to specialize in working with people who are currently or were recently incarcerated. It is critical for social work curricula to prepare social work students to work in complex systems such as corrections (Franke et al., 2017).

Participant 1 noted the importance of training and ethics, "we also get formal trainings every year to make sure we are following all these over general medical ethics. It just becomes part of the profession and continuing education helps us refresh on all of that. Together making decisions and revisiting scenarios that could be questionable."

Social workers enter helping relationships with a presumed expertise which is based on professional training in knowledge, values, and skills designed to help people transform their lives and systems (Campbell et al., 2020). Social workers have influence over the services that clients have access to. This can be an opportunity for advocacy, but it can also come with responsibility. Licensed social workers in criminal justice settings hold power and privilege to diagnose clients which can then influence the rights of these

vulnerable people. Clinical decision can influence decisions on medical and clinical treatment services (Prescott, 2019). Therefore, proper training, supervision, and consultation is necessary since a social workers decision or clinical decision impact the lives of their clients.

Inmates present with a range of social, psychiatric, medical, and learning needs (Matejkowski et al., 2014). The over representation of the mentally ill in the criminal justice system leads to a need to properly treat and address clients that are incarcerated and living with a mental illness. Social workers must seek proper training to work with people with mental illness as well as advocate on their behalf for services, medication, and reentry plans. Participant 4 stated, “the level of mental illness that people are grappling with sometimes, it does not allow them to be receptive to the care that you would like to provide for them.”

Participants in the study identified qualities that equate to success in the correctional settings. For social work and criminal justice to improve their practice outcomes there must be a focus on interprofessional practice. Social workers working in interprofessional settings face unique stressors, pressures, and challenges such as role ambiguity, marginality, and value conflicts. A positive interprofessional partnership is built upon elements of collaboration such as trust, respect, confidence, accountability, coordination, cooperation, autonomy, and assertiveness (Sweifach, 2015). Further research on this area could be helpful to develop training and education for social workers and other disciplines in the correctional setting.

Participant 1 stated, “it has to be done through your multidisciplinary team you cannot do it alone. So were talking about the correctional piece, about the nursing piece, were talking about the other players that may be even outside of the jail. To work with the team inside to help the patient transition out. I really cannot do it by myself and when the patient connects with that outside program that’s how I define success.”

Participants identified success and ease in upholding the Code of Ethics in the correctional setting. Participants shared that they could not compromise their ethics and always put the client first. Social work ethics help to define the social work profession and provide guidelines for finding solutions to social work dilemmas (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Participant 4 stated, “just always being mindful about what your professional goals are, and by that, I mean the standards of your profession not your career advancement. Adhering to the values of social work and your own personal values.”

Participant 11 indicated, “success is protecting my own professional boundaries and understanding there is only so much that she can do in a professional role that will protect me and the client. I created a healthy and appropriate professional space where they feel like they can ask me for help without asking for my personal time, money, or things that happen outside of the professional setting.”

More research is needed in the advocacy for policy change involving social work in corrections. Social work’s value base is characterized by helping people with their problems and by promoting social justice. Social workers should understand social justice and its effects, tackle the problems when possible, and be aware of a person’s

difficult circumstances (Fenton, 2015). Social workers have an opportunity to play a role in correctional policy, operations, reentry, prison practices, prison conditions, family services, mental health, substance abuse counseling, probation management, job, and life skills (Our Lady of the Lake University, 2020).

Participant 11 summarized, “in terms of education working to destigmatize and decriminalize young people of color of low socio-economic status. That begins in the home, at school, with professionals all over. If we begin to destigmatize and decriminalize people of color, I think we will see a drastic decline of folks who are in corrections.” Participant 10 stated, “the limits that are there on discrimination, one person might be there for a few days and another person may be there for a year with the same charge.”

Participant 7 indicated, “macro, the idea that we are criminalizing drug activity and use. It is more of the judicial system and how we view substance use within this population.” Participant 11 noted, “I have seen a sense of resentment from clients, as a social system we have failed people over and over, so there is a lack of trust occasionally from a client and I feel like I am a spoke in that wheel. Sometimes with clients, they don’t believe that I can be an agent of change and they can receive services or resources because they have been hurt so many times and shown so many times that there aren’t people willing to help them.”

Future research is needed on the occupational experiences of social workers in correction to improve services and advocacy for incarcerated people. Social workers can introduce topics like restorative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and an awareness of

the impact of race, culture, and poverty to institutions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). The effects of criminal justice go beyond incarceration since people with felony convictions become excluded from housing, education, social service, and voting opportunities (Pettus-Davis, 2012). This study explored the barriers and success that social workers encounter in correctional social work which can be used as a base to guide future research.

Dissemination of Study Information

The dissemination of this study will share significant findings that can contribute to the learning of others and be applicable to the social work practice. Qualitative research findings are used to inform decision making (Toews et al., 2016). Technology also offers a new avenue to connect people interested in complex social problems (Hitchcock et al., 2021). This study will be disseminated to the study participants, schools of social work, and people in my workplace. Sharing the study digitally will allow for practitioners and people interested in these social problems to easily access and share the information.

The participants in this research study will receive a digital copy of the final study via email. This will give them the ability to learn from other participants and from the existing data in the field of study. Participants will be encouraged to share the study with people in their personal and professional networks. This will facilitate additional discussion of knowledge on the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections, which is the primary purpose of this research study.

A copy of this research will also be emailed to the directors of the jail where the majority of study participants practice. Although the jail's where participants practiced did not formally or informally consent to partner with the study the findings may be helpful and of interest to them. The study participants provided insightful information and recommendations that can assist the clinical, administrative, and policy related change process. This can lead to success for social workers in the workplace which equates to success in service delivery provision to detained people.

Finally, I will share my research at my workplace. As a social work professional, I work with a team of social workers and counselors who advocate and provide services to detained individuals. The programs department works with people facing incarceration, mental illness, substances use, poverty and many more barriers. Since social workers frequently work in multidisciplinary settings, social workers can potentially use technology to reach across professional boundaries, contribute to public conversations that inform policy and practices, and help overcome research-to-practice gaps (Hitchcock et al., 2021). If allowed, I will present my findings to coworkers and the programming department as well as to other disciplines in the workplace such as correctional staff and medical staff. Dissemination of this study will aid in sharing research on the occupational experiences of social workers and can guide future research in this specialty area of social work.

Implications for Social Change

The NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) guides social workers to pursue social change on the behalf of oppressed and disadvantaged individuals. Niklas Luhmann

outlines that each society is divided into separate subsystems such as the political, legal, education, and scientific (Mattheis, 2012). Systems dynamics principles can guide social work innovation (Stringfellow, 2017). This study explored the experiences of social workers practicing in corrections which includes many subsystems such as legal, correctional, medical, social work and many other systems. This section discusses how the findings of this study have a potential impact for the positive social change at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice.

Micro

Study participants highlighted that social work schools and correction institutions did not provide adequate training that fully encompasses the skills and knowledge needed for social workers to practice in correction. Most participants expressed a need for combined social work and criminal justice classes while in school and specialty supervision and training to practice in corrections. While this is accurate it is not possible to encompass all challenges and dilemmas that may occur while practicing social work in corrections. Practitioners must seek ongoing training and educational opportunities that will aid them in addressing the unique challenges and issues they may face practicing social work in corrections. While the employer may have the primary responsibility of training employees they cannot anticipate or prepare employees for every challenge or client need that may arise.

Study participants made the following suggestions for training topics that would be beneficial for a social worker working in corrections: trauma, mental health, reentry resources, psychoanalytical counseling, self-care, laws, reflexivity, cultural awareness,

burnout, and upholding the Code of Ethics in criminal justice settings. Participants also highlighted that for successful practice to occur the NASW Code of Ethics must always remain at the forefront of their practice. Participants with more over 10 years of practice in the field shared how following the Code of Ethics was automatic for them and if there was a doubt they consulted with their colleagues or supervisors. All participants felt they were able to uphold the Code of Ethics with ease, however dilemmas did occur with other staff and colleagues not adhering to professional ethics. Due to a range of roles for forensic social workers this calls for a need for more specialized ethical guidelines than those set forth the by the National Association of social workers (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011).

There are schools of social work that offer forensic social work tracks or classes on criminal justice, corrections, or forensic social worker. Four participants also stated that they had a dual degree with a criminal justice background in undergraduate education. However, they noted that criminal justice and social work were taught as two different subjects and it would have been more beneficial if criminal justice could be taught from the social work perspective.

Additional resources that can be used to prepare social workers to practice in corrections include curriculums and specialized trainings. Stephanie Covington is a leader in the field for trauma informed and gender-sensitive programs and trainings. Dr. Covington is a pioneer in addiction, trauma and recovery and developed approaches for public, private and institutional settings. She provides training and consultation to

criminal justice institutions to develop effective gender responsive and trauma informed services (Covington, n.d.)

Conferences and trainings relating to criminal justice and issues faced by people involved in the criminal justice system can often be found within the workplace or on sites like Eventbrite; these trainings are often free or at a low cost. Organizations who facilitate these trainings include but are not limited to the University of Chicago, Loyola University, University of Illinois, the National Institute of Justice, National Criminal Justice Training Center, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Criminal Justice Reference Service, and the National Criminal Justice Association.

Mezzo

Issues at the mezzo level included reentry resources, recruiting social workers to corrections, specialty supervision, and burnout. High recidivism rates and rising public costs of crimes are increasing the demand for social workers in criminal justice settings Young (2014). Social workers are needed but infrequently involved in criminal justice systems. One way to increase the number of social workers in criminal justice is by exposing students to work in these settings. Exposing social work students to course work and field education in criminal justice increased the likelihood that they will practice in criminal justice upon graduation. Findings suggest that the use of financial incentives may recruit more students (Scheyett et al., 2012).

The existence, quality and attainment of reentry resources is lacking to people reentering the community from the criminal justice system. One of the main barriers is transportation however other barriers exist such as qualification for and obtaining

services. The effects of criminal justice go beyond incarceration since people with felony convictions become excluded from housing, education, social service, and voting opportunities (Pettus-Davis, 2012). This calls for a change in how society views people who leave the criminal justice system and how much of a challenge it is to qualify for services that may prevent recidivism and improve their quality of life.

Over two million adults were incarcerated in the U.S. in 2014, and another 4.7 million were on probation or parole. These prisoners are overwhelmingly people of color who are more likely to have problems with mental health, substance abuse, poverty, education work and homelessness (Franke et al., 2017). The rate of homelessness is four to six times that of the general population. On average only 13% of jail inmates have more than a high school degree (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Participants shared that homelessness is a large problem for clients and this holds especially true for people with a history of sexual assault charges. There is a call for social change in meeting the most immediate needs of people leaving corrections such as housing, clothing, food, medical attention, mental health care and transportation.

Participants in the study identified the importance of supervision from people with knowledge of the social work profession. Studies found that the biggest challenge to placing students at criminal justice settings is finding an MSW supervisor on site. (Scheyett et al., 2012). Participants noted that there was a disconnect in receiving supervision from a psychologist instead of a social worker. They also noted this hierarchy, where psychologists were always at a level above social workers; social workers were not in management roles.

Participant 3 stated, “having supervision, we didn’t have supervision at the jail to be honest. We didn’t have social work supervision all our leads were psychologists.

Participant 1 summarized, “supervision, the only bit of a difference in that is we work under the direction of a chief psychologist, so sometimes we don’t get the supervision from our own profession like maybe we should, and other places do provide that.”

Social workers work tirelessly with clients to help them improve their life situation. While social work principles are ideal, they may result in job burnout or vicarious trauma (Wilson, 2016). Social work principles teach practitioners to put the client first; this was shared in the study data however this principle often comes at the cost of practitioner burnout. Participants suggested that burnout can be prevented and improved through relying on one’s colleagues, good supervision, training, and maintaining boundaries. In preparing social workers to practice in corrections the profession must take a preventative stance to education future social workers on the negative effects of job burnout and vicarious trauma. This education beings in social work education programs but must continue through ongoing training on self-care offered by organization and professional bodies (Wilson, 2016).

Macro

The responsibility of solving complex problems does not fall only on the social work field. Different types of partnerships and collaboration need to be developed such as transdisciplinary partnership, partnerships with communities, clients, and practitioners (Stringfellow, 2017). Change at the macro level can also be achieved through advocacy

of policy and legislation reform. Issues that related to the macro level of practice were laws and unequal sentencing, discrimination, and institutional policies.

A macro issue that was outlined by several participants was the call for reform to the criminal justice system in its laws and sentencing. The United States has the highest rates of mass incarceration than any other Western country, long sentences, racial discrimination, and discrimination among people of low socioeconomic status. The United States leads the world in incarceration rates with 25% of the worlds incarcerated people (Cox & Augustine, 2018). Participants noted the inequalities in criminalizing people of color and the disparities in sentencing based on race, gender, and immigration status.

Participant 11 summarized, “in terms of education, working to destigmatize and decriminalize young people of color of low socio-economic status. That begins in the home, at school, with professionals all over. If we begin to destigmatize and decriminalize people of color, I think we will see a drastic decline of folks who are in corrections.”

Participants also expressed a need for decriminalizing drug use. Between 1986 and 1996 the number of women in prison for drug offenses rose by 888% (Pettus-Davis, 2012). The number of women in prisons has increased by 50% since 2000 while for men it increased by 18%. This increase has been linked to sentencing policies and drug crimes. To understand women’s criminalized behaviors there must be an exploration of their experiences of violent victimizations, poverty, and marginalization (Willison & O’Brien, 2017).

Participant 7 indicated, “macro, the idea that we are criminalizing drug activity and use.” It is more of the judicial system and how we view substance use within this population. Participant 12 further noted, “the clients that were in jail for marijuana possession and how that is barely even a thing now with the laws changing and it wasn’t even that long ago.”

Approximately 20% of inmates in jails and 15% in prisons have a serious mental illness. These illnesses include schizophrenia, schizoaffective, major depression, bipolar or a brief psychotic disorder (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2014). In 2013, three of the largest county jails in the United States were acting as the largest mental health facilities, despite their limited programming (Franke et al., 2017). Los Angeles County Jail, Chicago’s Cook County Jail and New York’s Riker’s Island housed more mentally ill individuals than any psychiatric hospital in the United States.

Participants in the study outlined how discrimination affects people who are involved in the criminal justice system. After being involved in the justice system these people carry around a criminal background that creates obstacles in being able to secure housing, employment, education, and social services. Participant 11 stated, “it feels like resources are purposely invisible to some groups of people or agencies because there is a target group who they are for.” Participants shared that the criminal justice population is perceived in a negative light which makes it difficult to secure resources upon discharge. Participant 9 summarized, “a lot of organizations or employment didn’t want to work with inmates just because they have that in their background.” Participant 11 noted, “there is a barrier in what I can actually help them get a hold of, because of post

incarceration, probation/parole, is that criminal record that people carry around, poses a lot of barriers to health care, mental health care, and employment. It is a stigma and a general material barrier that clients carry, plays into the trust role that they can find housing or a job, but they have a record and that is usually in the fine print to qualify.”

This barrier calls for a change in how people involved in criminal justice are viewed. The design of the criminal justice system in the U.S. is grounded in law-and-order rhetoric as well as a public sentiment about punishment for crime that is fueled by politics and the media (Willison & O'Brien, 2017). Social services and resources are necessary and deserving of this population to break the cycle of recidivism, improve the client's quality of life, and keep our communities safe.

More than 60% of U.S. prisoners are from racial or ethnic minority groups. African Americans make up 12% of the general population however they make up half of the prison population (Pettus-Davis, 2012). Social change is also needed in barriers at faced with correctional institutional policies. There is a difficult partnership and colliding values between criminal justice and social work. The predominant correctional philosophy of retribution, in criminal justice, contrasts the social work value of dignity and worth for all (Young, 2015). Ethical challenge to social workers is weighing the needs of offenders against those of the justice system. Social workers can take on this challenge by participating in molding social policy and legislative action (Wilson, 2010).

Although correctional policies support the use of volunteers providing direct services it is often a lengthy negotiation with bureaucracy to get inside program wings of correctional institutions. Once inside of a prison programming can be delayed due to

lengthy prison protocols. Prison relative restorative justice relies on the partnership and approval of correctional administrators (Campbell et al., 2020). Participant 6 summarized, “there are times where I guess the social service aspect doesn’t seem as important in the grand scheme of things within corrections, kind of like my position isn’t seen, as necessary.”

Research and innovation have been conducted in other parts of the world to shift the criminal justice system from a carceral state to one that is viewed as a social problem. The NASW released a publication in 2010 titled, *Criminal Justice Social Work in the United States: Adapting to New Challenges*. This publication offered an overview of the American criminal justice system and the historic role of social workers in it. It went over the dramatic growth of jail and prison populations as well as reentry challenges. It outlines the Scotland Paradigm as a model for criminal justice system since they strategically decision to reform criminal justice prevention and psychosocial services. Scotland made this decision since they had one of Europe’s highest rates of drug related crimes (Wilson, 2010).

Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the occupational experiences of social workers in corrections who have practiced at Midwestern jails. Correctional social workers are faced with unique challenges such as ethical dilemmas, contrasting values between their profession and organization, and lack of educational training in correctional social work. Participants in this study consisted of 14 master level social workers who practiced in a Midwestern jail within the past 5 years. Individual qualitative interviews

were conducted with participants which led to a rich data collection of their challenges and successes in practicing correctional social work. Participants identified barriers to client services, barriers faced in the correctional setting, and systemic barriers.

Participants also discussed how they define success at the correctional setting and offered improvement recommendations for social work curricula.

Social workers are underrepresented in corrections. The NASW found that only 1% of social workers practice in corrections. Corrections encompasses a multitude of vulnerable populations that often face compounded barriers to accessing resources and treatment. Social workers are tasked with upholding the Social Work Code of Ethics in the criminal justice system through principles such as dignity and worth of a person and social justice. Social workers pursue positive social change through advocating for adequate services, resources, and training at the micro level. They seek an improvement in training and education for future correctional social workers. At the mezzo level social workers call for improved reentry resources, an increase in social workers in corrections, and adequate supervision. This can be achieved thorough partnering with community organizations, recruiting social work students and social workers to this area of practice, and having more social workers in administrative/managerial roles.

Participant 7 stated, “be strong, your being there is an impact. The impact might feel small, but it is memorable, and clients remember and even when it feels like you are not making target goals every day that you are showing up is making a difference. It’s not us this is macro, and we constantly make strides in the right direction.”

At a macro level social change can be attained through a systemic review of our criminal justice system in the United States. This can be done through changes in our legal system, education and elimination of racism and discrimination, and a shift in the punitive paradigm of correctional institutions to a rehabilitative one. Due to the small percentage of social workers who practice in corrections there is a need for exploration of the occupational experiences of these social workers. Exploring this area of social work can lead to positive social change implications in correctional social work. This can include preparing and recruiting social work students to this specialty area of correctional social work. Exploration can also lead to improvements in addressing ethical dilemmas, decreasing burnous, increasing effective practice and improving policies in correctional settings. The increase in the incarcerated population along with challenges in society has led to a serious need for social workers in corrections. Human rights are engrained into the social work profession which aligns with the need to advocate for the welfare of detained people and their human rights.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

The Occupational Experiences of Social Workers in Corrections Interview Questions

Participant ID#:

Interview Method: Zoom FaceTime Phone Call

Date of Interview:

Time and Length of Interview:

Age:

Gender Identity:

Racial/Cultural Background:

1. How long have you practiced social work in corrections?
2. When did you obtain your Master's in Social Work, and at what school?
3. How do you define success in your work and provide examples?
4. What goals have you helped your client reach that equate to success?
5. What changes have you been a part of at the correctional setting that equate to success?
6. What are some examples of times you felt unsuccessful in correctional social work?
7. What are some barriers that you face as a correctional social worker with clients?
8. What are some barriers you face with staff?
9. What are some barriers you face with resources?
10. What are barriers that you face with policies?
11. What social work ethical conflicts have you experienced in the correctional setting?
12. How have you struggled to uphold the NASW Code of Ethics in a correctional setting?
13. How have you succeeded in upholding the NASW Code of Ethics in a correctional setting?
14. What advice would you share with a social worker trying to become involved in correctional social work?
15. What improvements would you like to see in social work curricula relating to criminal justice social work?