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## Exploring Juvenile Justice System Social Workers' Dual Role Conflicts

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Tayler Deggendorfer

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Walden University

2026

Abstract

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by

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MS, Walden University, 2024

MA, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2021

BA, Oregon State University, 2019

BS, Oregon State University, 2019

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

Social workers working within the juvenile justice system face challenges in managing dual roles of providing social support for clients in a punitive environment of incarceration. The problem that was explored in this study is the ethical and practical dilemmas of dual roles for social workers—specifically the potential for burnout and mental health injury for social workers who work within the parameters of both roles. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of a selected criterion sample of social workers. The study was framed by Goffman's role theory. Oral narrative data were collected from interviews with eight volunteer participants. Transcripts were hand-coded, and thematic content analysis was used to analyze them. A total of three themes emerged in the data: (a) role dilemma of responsibility without authority, (b) vicarious trauma of professional-role informed approaches, and (c) frustration and helplessness with lack of clinically appropriate resources. This study may impact social change by providing new evidence to inform improving policies and practices to better support social workers with multiple roles.

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## Dedication

To my mom and dad for always being my biggest and loudest cheerleaders in everything that I pursue. To Benson and Bella, for being my constant companions.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to my chair, Dr. Barbara Benoliel, for your guidance and feedback.

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	6
Purpose of the Study .....	6
Research Question .....	7
Theoretical Framework for the Study .....	7
Nature of the Study .....	7
Definitions.....	9
Assumptions.....	9
Scope and Delimitations .....	9
Scope.....	9
Delimitations.....	10
Limitations .....	11
Significance.....	12
Summary .....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	16
Literature Search Strategy.....	16
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Literature Review.....	18
Education in the Field of Social Work.....	18

Social Worker Settings .....	20
The Big Dilemma.....	23
The Role of Social Workers in the Juvenile Justice System.....	32
The Impact of the Juvenile Justice System on Juveniles and Their Families .....	37
How Social Workers Respond to Dual Roles .....	44
Summary and Conclusions .....	46
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	49
Research Design and Rationale .....	49
Role of the Researcher .....	50
Methodology .....	50
Participant Selection Logic .....	51
Sampling Strategy .....	53
Instrumentation .....	54
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection .....	54
Data Analysis Plan .....	55
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	56
Credibility .....	56
Transferability .....	57
Dependability .....	57
Confirmability.....	58
Ethical Procedures .....	58
Summary .....	59

Chapter 4: Results .....	60
Setting .....	60
Demographics .....	61
Data Collection .....	62
Data Analysis .....	64
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	65
Credibility .....	65
Transferability.....	66
Dependability .....	66
Confirmability.....	66
Results.....	67
Theme 1: Role Dilemma of Responsibility without Authority.....	67
Theme 2: Vicarious Trauma of Professional Role-Informed Approaches .....	70
Theme 3: Frustration and Helplessness with Lack of Clinically Appropriate Resources.....	74
Summary .....	76
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	78
Interpretation of the Findings.....	78
Theme 1: Role Dilemma of Responsibility without Authority.....	79
Theme 2: Vicarious Trauma of Professional Role-Informed Approaches .....	80
Theme 3: Frustration and Helplessness with Lack of Clinically Appropriate Resources.....	81

Limitations of the Study.....	82
Recommendations.....	83
Implications.....	83
Conclusion .....	84
References.....	86
Appendix A: Social Media Invitation .....	96
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	98

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographics of Participants ..... 62

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The situation or issue that prompted me to search the literature is social workers' involvement in the dual systems of juvenile justice and child welfare and the potential for role conflict of social workers working with adolescents experiencing involvement with both systems (Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2023). The goals of the profession of social work and the goals of the juvenile justice system often differ. Social workers who work within this system must navigate the goals and requirements of each system while maintaining best practices and keeping patient outcomes in mind which can cause stress and strain (Maddock, 2023). The recent literature highlights social worker motivations as well as organizational prerequisites for providing care to children who commit crimes (Tärnfalk & Alm, 2021). However, the research to date is limited in evaluating the possible significance for professional practitioners within each system who provide this care as well as overall professional outcomes, specifically relating to social workers mental health and burnout.

I used a qualitative study to explore the narrative stories of lived experiences of social workers who currently work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and who have worked within this system for at least 1 year. While similar topics have been studied, there are still gaps in the literature. Kuehn et al. (2023) stated that there is a growing number of adolescents with mental health symptoms and diagnoses entering the juvenile justice system, but there are few studies on the individuals who provide these services. Although research illuminates important findings regarding those who work in the juvenile justice system, there is little research that has examined the potential dilemma of

role conflict of the workers who provide the services within this system. Given such, further research is warranted on the lived experiences of social workers who provide services within the juvenile justice system, the dual roles, and conflicts that may be present as a result of these dual roles.

The results of this study can benefit human services professionals by providing new information and ways to support this population, which could help better understand burnout and how to prevent it. Being able to better support this population of individuals could also help improve the practices and methods that are being utilized when working with the juveniles who experience involvement in the juvenile justice system as well as their families, which facilitates improvements in individual, family, and community outcomes. In addition, the results of this study might benefit individuals as it could help clarify the roles and expectations of social workers who work within the justice system.

### **Background**

When examining statistics about juveniles who commit crimes it is important to note that not all juveniles who offend are reported for their offenses. Many youths who commit crimes never enter the juvenile justice system, which can make developing an accurate snapshot of youth who engage in law-violating behaviors challenging (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Data about juvenile offenders relies on self-reports from juveniles as well as victim data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse's Monitoring the Future Study (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Any official data that are present about juvenile

offenders comes from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Supplementary Homicide Reports as well as its National Incident-Based Reporting System (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). The following are data from the Youth and the Juvenile Justice System: 2022 National Report (Puzzanchera et al., 2022) that reflects juveniles who were accused of a serious violent crime and therefore experienced involvement in the juvenile justice system. The data do not include juveniles who simply self-reported involvement in law-violating or criminal behaviors.

Serious violent crimes can be defined as robbery, aggravated assault, murder, rape, and sexual assault (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). In 2019, 146,000 youth aged 12-17 years old were involved in serious violent crimes (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). This equates to 9% of all serious violent crimes committed in 2019. Juveniles were involved in 1 in 14 homicides and 780 murders, or 7% of all murders that occurred, in the year 2019 (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). According to Puzzanchera et al. (2022), clearance figures implicate juveniles in about 1 in 15 aggravated assaults, 1 in 7 robberies, and 1 in 20 murders in 2019. In 2019, approximately one-third of all U.S. states had a juvenile violent crime arrest rate that was above the national average.

Nine states hold statutes that define individuals younger than 18 as adults for the purposes of prosecution (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). This means that in these states, these juveniles do not fall under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system, but rather the criminal justice system (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). The processes and statistics of the juvenile justice system vary greatly from state to state. According to Puzzanchera et al. (2022), in 2019, 42% of arrests involving youth who were eligible for prosecution within

their state and the juvenile justice system were handled within law enforcement agencies, 49% were referred to juvenile court, and 4% were referred directly to criminal court.

Now that the population served has been introduced, the individuals who hold professional roles within the U.S. juvenile justice system, specifically social workers, and the roles that they play in relation to these individuals, must be introduced. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2024), the profession of social work aims to help improve the lives of others. Social workers assist others by helping them learn how to cope with issues in their everyday lives, relationship dynamics and to solve family, personal, and professional problems (NASW, 2024).

The role of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system can vary from state to state and among jurisdictions, but common functions include pre-adjudication services, psychological assessments, intake screenings, courtroom testimony, probation supervision, court-mandated investigations, and other court-assigned social services (Peters, 2011). While the daily functions of social workers can remain the same or similar for those who work within the juvenile justice system and those who do not, social workers who work within external systems often experience role strain, role confusion, and role conflict (NASW, 2024). For social workers who work within the juvenile justice system, role strains can stem from training incongruity, interprofessional status tensions, and role inconsistency (Maddock, 2023). Social workers in the juvenile justice system often experience conflict between treatment and control functions as well as social work ethics and goals that differ from the goals of the juvenile justice system. Social workers often perceive the justice system as a system that imposes

control over their interactions with adolescents/their clients in a way that can hinder treatment goals, which further translates to hindrance of their goals as a social worker (Peters, 2011). Additionally, social workers who work within the juvenile justice system are often engaging in tasks that do not match their training (Peters, 2011). For example, social workers are taught the value of continuity as well as development of the individual through casework, individual treatment goals, and progressive development, but the juvenile justice system often creates and imposes a division of labor for social workers by implementing episodic contact with individual clients and mandated cutoff dates for treatment and interventions in a way that social workers do not have a say in or control over (Peters, 2011).

There are a variety of therapeutic considerations that play a role in providing care and services to justice-involved youth (Biris & Feher, 2024). There is an overlap between each system that each individual youth experiences, as well as therapeutic considerations that may be relevant to each individual, particularly within each system that they are involved in. Each system that individuals are involved or work in interact and work together as well as pose challenges to providing care and long-term outcomes (Snyder & Duchscher, 2022). Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system experience different challenges than those who work within different systems; therefore, their role within this system must be examined separately from their role within other systems.

I explored the prominence of dual roles that social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system experience, specifically in relation to the ethical dilemmas

that arise because of these dual roles. The mental health of social workers who must work within the parameters of their role as a social worker and their role within the juvenile justice system whether this dual role involvement increases the risk of burnout was explored through this qualitative study. According to Reyes-Quilodran et al. (2023), research that evaluates the mental health and wellness of social workers is limited on a global level. Current research focuses on the welfare and mental health of social work as a practice in relation to the adult justice system, but not the juvenile justice system (Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2023).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that was explored is the prominence of dual roles for social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system, specifically the potential of burnout and ethical dilemmas due to these dual roles. The wellbeing and mental health of social workers who must work within the parameters of both roles (Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2023) and the impact that this can have on burnout and the ability to maintain a position as a social worker within the U.S. juvenile justice system were both examined.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of a selected sample of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and the potential internal conflict that arises because of the dual roles these social workers experience, specifically the dilemmas of these dual roles. For the purpose of this study, dual roles relate to the roles that social workers hold within the profession of social work and the roles that they hold as social workers within the U.S. juvenile justice system and

the dilemma is the often-opposing roles and goals of the two systems and how this impacts the work that the selected sample of participants are able to do. Participants include social workers who currently work within the U.S. juvenile justice system, who have at least 1 year of experience working within this system and who hold a master's degree in social work or counseling.

### **Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of social workers who work in the U.S. juvenile justice system as they relate to the dilemmas that arise as a result of the dual roles that these professionals experience?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theory that framed this study is Biddle's 1986 role theory. Biddle stated in his essay on role theory that an individual who is aware of their role will know how to act within that role. Biddle explained roles by presuming that individuals are members of society with defined positions, patterns, or roles and presumed that society defines these positions and holds expectations for the behaviors of those who uphold those positions. These expectations are reflected in how society understands the role (e.g., someone's first thoughts when they think of the role of teacher or fireman) and that is expected of the behaviors of those in these roles. Further discussion of role theory is in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, the specific research design used was descriptive phenomenology as described by Giorgi (2009) and following their outline. A descriptive phenomenological approach can be used to explore the

everyday experiences of humans while suspending any preconceived assumptions that the researcher may hold about the phenomenon of interest (Giorgi, 2009). Phenomenological studies are used to understand experiences through individual perspectives. As such, this method aligns with the research question and the purpose of the study. This approach allowed me to gather data about their lived experiences through a variety of data sources, specifically interviews, conversations, and written records. Descriptive phenomenology was used as the phenomenon of role conflict for social workers in juvenile justice practice has not yet been described or explored in the literature as far as I have been able to discover in my searches.

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study include the impact of power differentials, interconnected systems, modeling, opposing behaviors and beliefs within systems, and dual roles of social workers as they relate to opposing systemic goals and beliefs (Maddock, 2023). In this study I aimed to examine the lived experiences of social workers within a specific, identified system; role theory is an appropriate choice. Role theory (Biddle, 1986) was used to help identify and understand the roles that the juvenile justice system plays and experiences of the social workers who work within these systems. Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system are often stuck between the role that they play within the profession of social work and the role that they hold within the juvenile justice system. As such, this theory was appropriate.

## **Definitions**

*Social work:* Work carried out by trained professionals with the aim of helping people who have social disadvantages or personal problems.

*Role conflict:* Emotional conflict that arises when competing demands are made on an individual in the fulfillment of their multiple social roles (Biddle, 1986).

## **Assumptions**

It was assumed that all participants self-identified as qualified to participate based on the inclusion criteria. It is assumed that participants provided factual and accurate personal accounts of their roles as both social workers and as social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system. These assumptions help ensure that participants are providing accurate and factual information that relates to the study and that participants have the required education and professional background to be able to speak to the topic.

## **Scope and Delimitations**

### **Scope**

The population that was studied was social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and who have worked within this system for at least 1 year. As such, these social workers hold a master's degree in social work or a related field that allows them to work within this professional role. Additionally, social workers are licensed to practice social work in the state where they hold their professional role. This study is based on a one-time interview with each individual participant. Each interview lasted 30 minutes to 1 hour. This research study was conducted virtually with social

workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system in the states of Oregon, California, Ohio, New Jersey, and Florida

### **Delimitations**

Social workers who are not licensed to work in the state within which they hold a professional role were excluded from this study as well as individuals who do not hold a master's degree in social work or an appropriate related field such as counseling. These individuals were not included as bachelor's level social workers are unable to fulfil the same roles as those with a master's degree and, as such, are not held to the same standards and may not experience the same dual role involvement. Additionally, a master's degree in social work is often a requirement to work within the juvenile justice system. According to the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections (n.d.), individuals seeking a role as a mental health professional in the juvenile justice system must hold a master's degree and a current, active Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners license or have completed coursework for a Doctorate program including completion of practicum hours in behavioral health (Arizona Department of Juvenile Justice, n.d.). Candidates must also have two years of experience in treating juveniles or young adults in a behavioral health setting. As the governing body for these professional positions dictates specific education and experience requirements, excluding those who do not meet these requirements from the present study was appropriate. Including individuals who hold different roles within the juvenile justice system or other social work-related fields would have made the study too broad and would have made generalizing the results more challenging.

## **Limitations**

Qualitative phenomenological designs may be limited as the data and the results are not always generalizable, gathering and analyzing data can be time consuming and require extensive labor, there may be factors that impact a participant's ability or desire to articulate/express themselves (such as language barriers, age, cognitive ability, etc.), and the results of necessitate interpretation without the bias of the researcher which cannot be guaranteed (Mwita, 2022). Potential challenges during the present study included my time and financial resources to be able to conduct interviews and analyze the data. In addition, my limited experience conducting interviews and analyzing qualitative data may pose an additional challenge. Another barrier included the participants' availability, experience with Zoom, willingness to engage in the research process or their comfort level during the data gathering process, and participants not arriving to the schedule meeting. While I am responsible for building rapport with the participant, that does not always mean that the participant will feel comfortable engaging in the interview or will provide in-depth answers that will contribute to the data in a beneficial way. When conducting interviews, I made sure to focus on creating a warm, welcoming, professional, and collaborative environment to try to build rapport in the limited amount of time and to engage the participate in a conversation that would contribute to the results.

I worked to overcome the barriers of participant availability by being flexible in my availability to accommodate the participant's schedule. In addition, I offered interviews via Zoom and provided resources on how to navigate Zoom if the participant needed them. Offering virtual interviews addressed participant transportation barriers that

could have impacted availability or participant willingness. I sought to address the challenges of this study through conducting practice interviews prior to this project with friends, family, and peers to gather feedback. This helped me gain experience with formal qualitative interviews. I spent time identifying the best fit of qualitative data analysis software and spent time navigating and getting to know the software and its uses with practice data sets prior to conducting data for the present study. I also sought guidance and support from Walden's resources, such as OASIS, in relation to conducting and analyzing qualitative research.

### **Significance**

This study is significant in that I aimed to address the gap in literature in relation to the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system. I explored the lived experiences of social workers who currently work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and who have worked within this system for at least 1 year. While similar topics have been studied, there are still gaps in present in the literature. Kuehn et al. (2023) stated that there is a growing number of adolescents with mental health symptoms and diagnoses entering the juvenile justice system, but there are few studies on the individuals who provide these services. In addition to a gap in the literature in relation to the individuals who provide services within this system, Zuchowski et al. (2022) stated that there is limited literature that evaluates and explores how the youth experiencing the services delivered to them feel and what their experiences with the services and the practitioners providing the services are. Local agencies that would benefit from this study would be local mental health providers (community-based

outpatient agencies as well as inpatient mental health/psychiatric treatment centers that treat/focus on adolescents), schools, teachers, family members of the adolescents, and community members/taxpayers as less adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system places tax dollars elsewhere as well as impacts the community in a positive manner. Additional stakeholders who may benefit from this study include social workers and other providers who work within the juvenile justice system, such as probation/parole officers and lawyers. The social determinants of health that relate to this study include health care access and quality, education access and quality, and social and community context (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Addressing access to health care, specifically health care, in turn increases mental wellness for adolescents as well as their families. In doing so, this increases their ability to participate in their education, both in the present and in the future. This in turn benefits the community and the adolescent's present and future abilities to participate in their community in a healthy and appropriate manner.

### **Summary**

The present study aimed to address the gap in the literature in relation to the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and internal conflict that arises as a result of the dual roles these social workers experience, specifically the dilemmas of these dual roles. This was framed by Biddle's (1986) role theory that states that individuals who are aware of their role will know how to act within that role and will be guided by

that awareness. Descriptive phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of the identified social workers who hold a role within the U.S. juvenile justice system. The current literature highlights social worker motivations as well as organizational prerequisites for providing care to children who commit crimes (Tärnfalk & Alm, 2021). However, present research is limited in evaluating the professional practitioners within each system who provide this care as well as overall outcomes, specifically relating to social workers mental health and burnout.

The data on juveniles who commit crimes are often limited as they rely on self-reports from juveniles and the victims of these crimes. Each state defines juveniles who commit crimes in a different manner which impacts the due process they experience and the roles of social workers who are assigned to their cases. The profession of social work aims to help improve the lives of others by helping them learn how to cope with issues in their everyday lives, relationship dynamics, and solve family, personal, and professional problems (NASW, 2024). The role of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system can vary from state to state and among jurisdictions, but common functions include pre-adjudication services, psychological assessments, intake screenings, courtroom testimony, probation supervision, court-mandated investigations, and other court-assigned social services (Peters, 2011), and at times these roles may be in opposition of the roles that social workers hold within their profession from a generalized viewpoint.

This study may be limited as qualitative phenomenological designs are not always generalizable. Additionally, gathering and analyzing data can be time-consuming and

require extensive labor. There may be factors that impact a participant's ability or desire to articulate/express themselves (such as language barriers, age, cognitive ability, etc.), and the results necessitate interpretation without the bias of the researcher which cannot be guaranteed (Giorgi, 2020). I worked to address limitations appropriately and ethically as they arose. This study is significant in that it aimed to address the gap in literature in relation to the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. Juvenile Justice System. Additionally, the results of this study could benefit human services professionals as identifying the lived experiences of social workers who work within this community could help to identify ways to support this population which in turn could help identify signs of burnout and prevent it. Being able to better support the identified population of individuals within their roles could improve the practices and methods utilized when working with adolescents who are involved in the juvenile justice system, individual and community outcomes, clarify roles for practitioners who work within this system, and provide support to the identified population of providers.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The situation or issue that prompted me to search the literature is social workers' involvement in the dual systems of juvenile justice and child welfare and the potential for role conflict of social workers working with adolescents experiencing involvement with both systems. For this review, I will synthesize some of the recent literature that highlights social worker motivations as well as organizational prerequisites for providing care to children who commit crimes (Tärnfalk & Alm, 2021). However, there appears to be limited research in understanding how these experiences may affect the individual professionals within each system who provide this care, as well as overall personal outcomes, specifically relating to social workers' mental health and possible burnout.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I searched the Walden Library with the Boolean operators. I limited the search to peer-reviewed journal articles published after 2019. Keywords used were *juvenile justice system* and *case worker* as well as *juvenile justice system* and *care worker*, *juvenile justice system* and *human services*, and *juvenile justice system* and *social services*, *social worker* and *education*, *social work* and *juvenile justice*, *mental health* and *social work* and *juvenile justice*. Additional searches utilized Google Scholar and the key words *social workers' role in juvenile justice system*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory that framed this study is Biddle's (1986) role theory. Biddle explained roles by presuming that individuals are members of society with defined positions, patterns, or roles and presumed that society defines these positions and holds

expectations for the behaviors of those who uphold those positions. These expectations are reflected in how society understands the role and their expected behaviors for that role (e.g., fireman).

In keeping with role theory, human beings behave in ways that may be different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation (Biddle, 1986). Role theory suggests that the more knowledge that an individual has about their socially defined role, duties, and responsibilities, the more positive their behavior will be when approaching professional dilemmas (Biddle, 1986). Another key feature of role theory is that role expectations are the major generators of roles and that these expectations are learned through exposure, training, and experiences, and thus, the individual is aware of the expectations of their role (Biddle, 1986). Role theory asserts that humans are thoughtful and socially aware actors who are able to maintain their roles (Biddle, 1986).

Biddle (1986) stated that role conflict occurs when a person experiences expectations that are incompatible with their behavior due to holding more than one social role. Role conflict occurs when an individual experiences conflict and stress as a result of trying to meet the demands of multiple roles (Biddle, 1986). This conflict can lead to dissatisfaction, stress, and decreased performance within these roles (Biddle, 1986). The larger the number of roles that a person holds, the more intense the conflict that arises may be (Biddle, 1986). The time and energy that is spent fulfilling the duties of one role will reduce the time and energy that individuals have available for other roles

and the stressors that are associated with one of the roles can negatively impact the performance in other roles (Biddle, 1986).

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study include the impact of power differentials, interconnected systems, modeling, opposing behaviors and beliefs within systems, and dual roles of social workers as they relate to opposing systemic goals and beliefs. As this study aimed to examine the lived experiences of social workers within two specific identified systems, the roles that they hold within these systems, and the dilemmas that may arise as a result of these often-opposing roles, role theory is an appropriate choice. Role theory was used to help identify and understand the role that the juvenile justice system plays in the roles and experiences of the social workers who work within this system. It was used to help increase the understanding of the roles of social workers within their broader profession as well as within the juvenile justice system. Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system are stuck between the role of professional social workers and the role of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system; as such, this theory is appropriate.

## **Literature Review**

### **Education in the Field of Social Work**

#### ***Bachelor's Degree in Social Work***

According to the Council on Social Work Education (2025), social work education at all levels, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral, helps shape the future of the profession of social work through the instruction and fostering competent professionals. A bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) is the minimum requirement for most

professional social work positions as it helps prepare individuals for general social work practices and professional positions (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). A BSW specifically helps the individual learn the basics in relation to casework, engaging with clients (communities, families, and individuals), needs assessments, connecting clients with services, and ways in which to monitor client progress (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). If a BSW program is accredited, a minimum of 400 hours of supervised field experience will be required to graduate (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). In many states, one can become a licensed social worker with a BSW (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). Individuals who wish to work as social workers within the justice system must continue to receive a master's degree. A BSW is seen as a steppingstone and lays the foundation for individuals who wish to continue on in this role as it does not adequately prepare social workers for the professional roles that they will hold, particularly their roles within the justice system.

### ***Master's Degree in Social Work***

Many professional positions in the field of social work require a master's degree and therefore, individuals seek to continue their education. A master's degree in social work (MSW) helps prepare individuals for work in their chosen field of specialization or concentration (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). This includes helping them develop the necessary skills to manage large caseloads, perform clinical assessments, take on supervisory roles, explore new ways of drawing on social services to meet the needs of clients and their communities, and engage in policy-level advocacy (Council on Social Work Education, 2025b). A MSW program generally lasts 2 years and requires

that individuals complete a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field instruction to graduate (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). Individuals with an MSW are eligible to pursue licensure (Council on Social Work Education, 2025).

### ***Doctorate Degree in Social Work***

For the most part, a doctorate degree in social work is not required to practice or receive licensure. There are two different types of doctorate degrees in the field of social work. The first one is a practice doctorate, which is usually referred to as a Doctor of Social Work (DSW). The second is a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD; Council on Social Work Education, 2025). The curriculum for a DSW varies but generally focuses on advancing the training and education received during a BSW and MSW and a PhD primarily prepares individuals for academic and research careers (Council on Social Work Education, 2025). A doctorate is not necessary to work as a social worker within the justice system, but this is not a common educational path for those who hold this role. However, continuing education and staying up to date on role expectations and evidence-based research and practices can be beneficial to continuing in role of a social worker, particularly one who works in the justice system.

### **Social Worker Settings**

In a report from the Council on Social Work Education and The National Association of Social Workers, that was completed from 2017-2019, the Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity surveyed a sample of 3,400 individuals completing their master's in social work (Salsberg et al., 2020). This in-depth study included information on the demographic, background, and educational backgrounds of MSW

graduates as well as the populations that they plan to serve, the types of jobs they are taking, experience in the job market, and job satisfaction within the field of social work (Salsberg et al., 2020). Two-thirds of the respondents reported that over 50% of their clients were individuals living below the federal poverty level (Salsberg et al., 2020) with 66.9% of them being Medicaid eligible (Salsberg et al., 2020). Additionally, of this population, 65.8% of the respondents stated that the population that they served was made up of 65.8% individuals with mental health disorders (Salsberg et al., 2020). One third of the population of social workers included in this study, 35.1%, were working with people experiencing substance use disorders and 34.4% were involved in the child welfare system (Salsberg et al., 2020). Almost one quarter of the participants were working with individuals who were seriously ill and in need of assistance with activities of daily living (Salsberg et al., 2020). Sixty-six percent of new MSW graduates stated that the main focus of their jobs is to provide mental health services to the majority of their clients (Salsberg et al., 2020).

The most common organizations where individuals hold social work positions include private, not-for-profit, tax-exempt, or charitable organizations, outpatient healthcare services, government agencies (state, local, or federal), or hospital inpatient facilities (Salsberg et al., 2020). Social workers primarily aim to provide services to children and families, individuals with mental health disorders, within schools, individuals experiencing substance use disorders, individuals experiencing mental health disorders, and gerontology/geriatrics (Salsberg et al., 2020). Case worker and case manager positions are more available than indirect or macro-level social work positions

such as advocacy, policy, research, administrative, and management positions are much less available (Salsberg et al., 2020). The specific job types for social workers that are “much more available” (Salsberg et al., 2020), in order from most to least available, include case managers and case workers, licensed positions, mental and behavioral health positions, clinical and direct services (counselors and therapists), child welfare and child protective services, and substance use disorder treatment positions (Salsberg et al., 2020). The specific job types for social workers that are much less available, in order from most to least available, include indirect work relating to policy, research, administration, management, and advocacy, unlicensed positions, positions leading to licensed positions, jobs with Veterans Affairs, school social work, and community organizing, outreach, and planning positions (Salsberg et al., 2020).

The most common type of employer for social workers is a private, non-profit, or charitable organization (34.3% of all social workers work for this type of employer; Salsberg et al., 2017). However, 41% of social workers work for the government when combining state, local, and federal governments (Salsberg et al., 2017). Additionally, 22.3% of social workers work for private for-profit companies and businesses, and 2.5% of social workers are self-employed (Salsberg et al., 2017). The American Community Survey collected data on the type of setting of employment based on the federal government’s North American Industry Classification System for classifying business establishments and in terms of major groupings of individual industries, the single largest setting where social workers hold professional positions is within social assistance agencies, as 40% of all social workers hold a position within these settings (Salsberg et

al., 2017). Twenty-nine percent of social workers hold professional positions within health care settings (Salsberg et al., 2017).

## **The Big Dilemma**

### ***The Goal of Social Work***

The field of social work can vary from state to state as each state has its own guidelines for practice. In the U.S., social work education and the field of social work as historically embodied the values related to serving the disadvantaged (NASW, 2021), as well as protecting individuals and families who may need additional help and support to both survive and flourish (NASW, 2021). Social workers in the U.S. are regulated by the state government in the state in which they practice. The mission of the profession of social work was given a roadmap to help overcome the challenges of the profession (Alcantar et al., 2023). The roadmap is titled the “Grand Challenges for Social Work” (Uehara et al., 2014). According to the guiding principles of social work, these grand challenges are designed to address the most compelling issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and most include cross-sector and interdisciplinary collaboration that should involve diverse stakeholder groups, resources, and outcomes that span across multiple systems (Barth et al., 2022).

The NASW (2025) stated that the primary mission for the field of social work is to enhance the well-being of individuals and to help meet both the basic and complex needs of all humans. The basic goal of the profession of social work is to help improve the lives of others and to help social workers help to fight for justice, improve communities, and relieve people’s suffering (NASW, 2025). Pritzker and Giraldo-

Santiago (2022) added that the profession of social work places a large emphasis on furthering social justice through policy change efforts. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) published that the role of social workers is to help individuals both prevent and cope with problems that occur in their everyday lives. These problems can include, but are not limited to, relationship dynamics, day-to-day stressors, and personal, family, and professional problems/stressors (NASW, 2025). Social workers are taught the value of continuity as well as the development of the individual through casework, individual treatment goals, and progressive development (Esthappan et al., 2020).

The NASW (2025b) stated that the profession and practice of social work consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends: counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups; helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; helping people obtain tangible services; and participating in legislative processes. The field of social work is interdisciplinary and requires knowledge of social, economic, and cultural institutions; human development and behavior; and the interaction of all of these factors (NASW, 2025b). At the core, social work is a helping profession with the primary mission of enhancing human wellbeing and to help meet both the basic and complex needs of all people, with a particular focus on individuals and communities that are living in poverty, vulnerability, and oppression (NASW, 2025a). Social workers look at the external factors that can impact an individual's situation and outlook and create opportunities for assessment and intervention to help clients, and sometimes communities, cope effectively with their reality and to take steps to change that reality

when necessary. Social work aims to help people of every age and background and to guide individuals to critical resources and to provide counsel on life-changing decisions (NASW, 2025a). Additionally, social workers strive to improve social conditions through advocacy within their individual work and beyond (NASW, 2025a). According to the NASW (2024), the profession of social work aims to help improve the lives of others. Social workers assist others by helping them learn how to cope with issues in their everyday lives, relationship dynamics, and to solve family, personal, and professional problems (NASW, 2024). The field of social work aims to address goals related to improving human well-being and social justice (Naranjo, 2023).

Social work is different from other professions because the work focuses on both the individual and their environment (NASW, 2025). In addition to focusing on the individual and their current situation, social workers look at and deal with external factors that play a role in both the present situation, potential future situations, and the individual's perspective (NASW, 2025). Social workers aim to help individuals determine and cope with both how they feel about a situation and appropriate ways in which they can deal with said situation (NASW, 2025). The field of social work strives to create opportunities for intervention as a way to help teach individual clients, families, and communities how to cope with their situations effectively and appropriately, and to make changes when necessary (NASW, 2025).

The role of a social worker is not to make changes for an individual, but rather to guide them and help them learn how to make changes on their own so that they have healthy, effective, and appropriate coping skills and resources that they can carry with

them moving forward. Social workers utilize what is referred to as reflexivity to guide individuals. Reflexivity is the practice of encouraging reflection, questioning, analyzing, and evaluating oneself (Ide & Beddoe, 2023). The use of reflexivity in practice helps social workers guide the individuals that they are working with in a way that allows them to grow and gain tools to help themselves in the future (Ide & Beddoe, 2023).

Social workers provide services in a wide array of settings and to a wide array of population groups (Salsberg et al., 2020). Regardless of the setting, the goal of social work is to provide extensive services to high-need, low-income populations (Salsberg et al., 2020). The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (n.d., as referenced by Proctor, 2019) states that social work seeks to champion social progress powered by science. The most common focus of work as it relates to populations served is children and families, followed by individuals with mental health disorders (Salsberg et al., 2020). The field of social work strives to place a particular focus on individuals and communities who are identified as vulnerable, living in poverty, or oppressed (NASW, 2025). This means that the large majority of social workers provide services to children and families who are high need and/or low-income as well as struggling with mental health disorders. New MSW graduates are serving high-needs populations regardless of the settings that they are working in (Salsberg et al., 2020).

Social work as a profession aims to address some of the most complex and intractable human and social problems (Proctor, 2019). This includes mental illness, poverty, addiction, homelessness, and child abuse (Proctor, 2019). The field of social work is distinct for its efforts to minimize and reduce the impact of the toughest of

societal problems that tend to be experienced by society's most vulnerable populations while working in underfunded and under-resourced institutions and settings (Proctor, 2019). Individuals who work within the field and profession of social work tend to be underpaid and work for agencies that lack the infrastructure and data that is required for rigorous assessment and evaluation (Proctor, 2019). The field of social work aims to confront the identified human and social problems and challenges due to being ethically bound to deliver high-quality services (Proctor, 2019). The field of social work has policy and regulatory requirements that demand that social workers both deliver and document the effectiveness of the highest quality, evidence-based, as well as the most appropriate, and effective interventions to receive a reimbursement for those services (Proctor, 2019).

In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 goals that offered an integrated approach to social and economic development (Rice et al., 2022). These goals were labeled as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and are also known as Global Goals and seek to provide a framework for action to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals, communities, and worldwide (Rice et al., 2022). The SDGs aim to comprehensively address human needs, prosperity, peace, partnership, and the planet (Rice et al., 2022). Due to the emphasis on enhancing economic and social functioning at various levels of care, the SDGs are strongly aligned with the social work profession (Rice et al., 2022). SDGs mirror the focus of social work through the emphasis on individuals, families, organizations, groups, and communities as intervention targets to help each promote and experience an improvement in health and well-being (Rice et al., 2022). According to Rice et al. (2022z0, some social work education programs have historically struggled to

bridge the micro-macro divide in curriculum and SDGs helps to provide a roadmap for combining the efforts of individual actors, civil society, and governments to address and improve the world's most pressing economic, social, and health issues (Rice et al., 2022).

Some of the 17 goals are as follows: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, climate action, peace, justice, and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals (World Hope International, 2022). As mentioned above, these goals aim to provide a framework for action to meet the needs of vulnerable individual and communities worldwide. As such, while many of them align with the field of social work, not all of them will be the focus of social workers or the field of social work but many play a large and critical role in the work that social workers do.

The evolution of social work and social work practices, research, and education have all been influenced by the dynamics of globalization and interactions across both developed and developing countries (Munoangira et al., 2024). Social work is a field that is recognized in many nations as a profession that promotes societal development, transformation, and cohesiveness (Munoangira et al., 2024). Additionally, social work is recognized as an interdisciplinary field (Munoangira et al., 2024).

### ***The Goal of the Justice System***

The U.S. criminal justice system plays a multifaceted role in society that it primarily aimed at and focused on maintaining public order, ensuring justice, and upholding the rule of law (Shelley, 2024). Shelley (2024) states that the core purpose of

the criminal justice system is to prevent and punish criminal behavior as a way to help maintain stability and safety within communities. Additionally, the criminal justice system strives to protect individual citizens and communities, to provide fair legal proceedings, and to foster a safer environment for all (Shelley, 2024).

While one of the goals of the criminal justice system is to offer offenders opportunities for reform and reintegration into society as a form of rehabilitation, but community and professional perspectives on the appropriateness of the approaches and outcomes relating to these goals differs. The principle of ensuring fair treatment and justice within the criminal justice system revolves around the fundamental belief that everyone deserve fair and equal treatment under the law, however both defining and achieving fairness is complex due to the diversity in viewpoints on what fairness actually means and the many competing interests that are present and at play (Shelley, 2024). The concept of fairness within this system was evaluated by Berk et al. (2018; referenced by Shelley, 2024). The concept of fairness within the criminal justice system is controversial because it intersects with a variety of social factors that include racial and gender biases that can and do influence legal outcomes (Berk et al., 2018).

According to Berk et al. (2018) and Shelley (2024) statistics support that there are disparities and inherent biases present in the criminal justice system, both in sentencing and enforcement. While there are programs, such as the Smart on Crime Program, launched by the Department of Justice, that highlight efforts that are being made to adjust sentencing and charges to the specifics of each case as a way to help promote fair treatment by avoiding excessive mandatory minimums for low-level, nonviolent offenses

(The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2015; as referenced by Mancini, 2022).

Both states and the federal government have attempted new reforms that increase punishments for those that are associated with committing both violent crimes and “victimless” non-violent crimes (Mancini, 2022). As it stands, the current U.S. justice system relies on severe punishments that often disproportionately impact minority populations (Mancini, 2022). Policy adjustments such as the one mentioned above, are a part of a broader goal and efforts to make the justice system more effective and equitable. Many states have attempted to enact an array of new reforms that are more aligned with reducing punishments in the hopes to lead to system reform (Burton et al., 2020).

The criminal justice system is made up of three primary components designed to help carry out the goals of the system. These components include law enforcement, the court system, and corrections and rehabilitation (Shelley, 2024). Each component serves its own function. Law enforcement strives to maintain public order, the court system strives to adjudicate cases, and corrections and rehabilitation strives to help reintegrate offenders into society (Shelley, 2024). The current study is focused on the roles and goals of the court and corrections and rehabilitation components as they are the components that employ social workers and are separate from law enforcement.

### ***The Dilemma***

The role of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system can vary from state to state and among jurisdictions, but common functions include pre-adjudication services, psychological assessments, intake screenings, courtroom testimony, probation supervision, court-mandated investigations, and other court-

assigned social services (Esthappan et al., 2020). While the daily functions of social workers can remain the same or similar for those who work within the juvenile justice system and those who do not, social workers who work within external systems, such as the justice system, often experience role strain, role confusion, and role conflict (NASW, 2024). Peters (2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020) stated that for social workers who work within the juvenile justice system, role strains can stem from training incongruity, interprofessional status tensions, and role inconsistency. Social workers in the juvenile justice system often experience conflict between treatment and control functions as well as social work ethics and goals that differ from the goals of the juvenile justice system. Social workers often perceive the justice system as a system that imposes control over their interactions with adolescents/their clients in a way that can hinder treatment goals, which further translates to hindrance of their goals as a social worker (Peters, 2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020). Additionally, social workers who work within the juvenile justice system are often engaging in tasks that don't match their training (Peters, 2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020). For example, social workers are taught the value of continuity as well as development of the individual through casework, individual treatment goals, and progressive development, but the juvenile justice system often creates and imposes a division of labor for social workers by implementing episodic contact with individual clients and mandated cutoff dates for treatment and interventions in a way that social workers do not have a say in or control over (Peters, 2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020).

There are a variety of therapeutic considerations that play a role in providing care and services to justice-involved youth. There is an overlap between each system that each individual youth experiences, as well as therapeutic considerations that may be relevant to each individual, particularly within each system that they are involved in. Each system that individuals are involved, or work in, interact and work together as well as pose challenges to providing care and long-term outcomes (Snyder & Duchschere, 2022). Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system experience different challenges than those who work within different systems and therefore, their role within this system must be examined separately from their role within other systems.

### **The Role of Social Workers in the Juvenile Justice System**

The first juvenile court was created in 1899 with the help of social workers (Washington et al., 2021). At this time, youth were believed to be inculpable for certain criminal actions since their brains are not as cognitively developed as adults (Scott, 2000; as referenced by Washington et al., 2021). Due to this, separate measures were created with the intention of rehabilitating youth who exhibited what was labeled as deviant and delinquent behavior (Washington et al., 2021). As of today, over 100 years after its creation, the current U.S. juvenile justice system does not follow the same premise. The current juvenile justice and legal system has moved away from providing an alternative to punitive treatment and further involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system and instead focuses on the punitive measures that it aimed to previously avoid (Washington et al., 2021).

The current system disproportionately arrests, confines, and displaces minority youth, and the focus has shifted away from rehabilitation of the juvenile offender (Hartney & Silva, 2007; as referenced by Washington et al., 2021). Washington et al. (2021) assert that the juvenile justice system deliberately places youth into hostile environments that adversely affect their mental health and well-being. Additionally, minority youth, specifically Black youth, are profiled as dangerous by law enforcement officials and are often perceived as older and less innocent than White youth and therefore are disproportionately involved in the juvenile justice system (Fox-Williams, 2019; as referenced by Washington et al., 2021). Many adolescents who are involved in the juvenile legal system are exposed to other oppressive and systemic disadvantages across multiple social domains before having their first encounter with the legal system (Washington et al., 2021). This highlights that many youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system could have benefited from additional social services at an earlier intervention point as a way to avoid involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Social workers are called upon to challenge oppression and injustice which is a role that is enshrined in the professional associations' Code of Ethics (Dettlaff et al., 2023). According to the NASW's Code of Ethics (2021), social workers must take action against racism, oppression, inequities, and discrimination, as well as acknowledge their personal privilege, as a way to strengthen the commitment of the profession of social work and the responsibility of individuals who work within this profession to take direct action to combat injustice (Dettlaff et al., 2023). According to Dettlaff et al. (2023), there is no greater call to challenge oppression and injustice for the profession of social work

than by critically examining and dismantling the role that social workers play in upholding systems and structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression through collaboration with the carceral state.

Many believe that it is the role of social workers to take the lead in reclaiming this system and reconstructing it to have a more beneficial, rehabilitative approach rather than punitive (Washington et al., 2021). Individuals, communities, and political leaders often look to social workers as professionals who are equipped to lead the way on transforming systems and policies, specifically those relating to the juvenile justice system (Washington et al., 2021). The role of social workers within the juvenile justice system became marginalized as law enforcement officials began to dominate the area of corrections (Patalinghug, 2021), but this role is everchanging and has come back around to play a key role in the lives of justice-involved youth.

The role that social work plays in maintaining the carceral state spans the history of the profession and is deeply entrenched in the policies and practices of social work (Dettlaff et al., 2023). The web of carceral entanglement for children and youth includes, but is not limited to, the policies and practices of the juvenile justice and juvenile legal system, social workers who operate alongside school policing, and the forced removal of children from their families by child welfare and child policing systems (Dettlaff et al., 2023). According to Washington et al. (2021), the future of the juvenile justice system and the involvement of social workers within this system is dependent on how far the profession of social work is willing to go to advocate for changes to the system as well as

their willingness to advocate for how society treats young people, specifically at-risk justice-involved youth.

As mentioned above, social workers play a significant role in the juvenile justice system (Biris & Feher, 2024). It is believed that social workers are the catalysts for change within the juvenile justice system as they aim to break the cycle of delinquency and support youths in leading fulfilling and law-abiding lives (Biris & Feher, 2024). Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system fulfill a multifaceted role (Biris & Feher, 2024). These social workers aim to address the underlying issues that contribute to the criminal activities of youth (Biris & Feher, 2024). Social workers strive to facilitate positive outcomes by providing necessary support and resources that in turn, help to increase resiliency and education for external supports, such as parents/caregivers, families, and community members (Biris & Feher, 2024). Social workers aim to supervise youth throughout their involvement in the juvenile justice system, as well as to provide comprehensive support, guidance, and resources (Biris & Feher, 2024). The resilience of delinquent youth involved in the juvenile justice system is an area of interest for communities, specifically for social workers who work within the juvenile justice system (Biris & Feher, 2024). In order to facilitate the reintegration into community, social, and family environments, the juvenile justice system, specifically social workers who work within this system, must work to promote resilience (Biris & Feher, 2024).

Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system assess the situations of youth, taking into consideration their family dynamics, mental health, risk factors, and educational needs using their assessments to develop individualized case plans that focus

on underlying issues and rehabilitation (Biris & Feher, 2024). Social workers offer counseling, support, and guidance to help the youth navigate challenges, avoid further involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and make positive choices (Biris & Feher, 2024). This role can include making referrals to additional services both during and after system involvement, such as substance abuse treatment, educational programs, and mental health services (Biris & Feher, 2024). The primary goal and focus of social workers who work within this system is to provide resources and support to foster rehabilitation, to reduce recidivism, and to promote positive long-term behavioral changes (Biris & Feher, 2024). Social workers aim to use productive activities to help justice-involved youth acquire socially acceptable behavior (Patalinghug, 2021). Additionally, they provide immediate support, assistance, and interventions and support during crisis situations that may arise during the probation period to help prevent further escalation and to ensure the safety of the youth (Ionescu et al., 2016; as referenced by Biris & Feher, 2024).

Social workers' roles and efforts do not end immediately upon the youth's release. These social workers assist with the reintegration of the youths into their communities as well as facilitate access to education, job training, support networks, and resources to reduce the likelihood of reoffending or further system involvement (Biris & Feher, 2024). This role is a collaborative one. Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system collaborate with a variety of stakeholders such as community organizations, schools, lawyers, and judges to help advocate for the needs of the youth and to ensure that they receive the necessary and appropriate services and opportunities

for their individual needs (Biris & Feher, 2024). Additionally, social workers have historically collaborated with families to aid in the rehabilitation of youth. This includes both micro and macro interventions with youth to help fix the individual and the family, often using punitive measures (including court fines, court fees, incarceration, and the state removal of children from families). The use of punitive measures through the juvenile justice system has devastating impacts on youth that are correlated with adverse health and mental health outcomes, functional health limitations, increased suicidality (Tolliver et al., 2022), long-lasting trauma, poverty, houselessness, and future incarceration (Hobbs et al., 2021).

### **The Impact of the Juvenile Justice System on Juveniles and Their Families**

The U.S. juvenile justice system was founded on the belief that the juvenile court would act as “the ultimate parent” for youth, but the history of the juvenile justice system and youth punishment challenges the idea of juvenile “justice” (Rodriguez & Goldman, 2024). As discussed above, one of the primary goals of the juvenile justice system is to protect communities and to enforce laws. Involvement in the juvenile justice system does not only impact the justice-involved youth. System involvement impacts families and caregivers as well. The impacts of system involvement do not end upon release, but often extend into the future.

### ***Mental Health Impacts***

The juvenile justice system and the mental health of the youth involved in this system are intricately related (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). Youth who experience conflict with the law experienced a higher prevalence of substance use and mental-health related

problems and youth with mental health-related problems have an increased likelihood of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). Mental health professionals can play a significant role in impacting the mental health of these youth by contributing at all levels of system involvement including preventing youth from coming into contact with the juvenile justice system, mental health promotion, treating youth who are involved in or have contact with the juvenile justice system, and rehabilitation (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). At some contact points within this system, as high as 70% of the youth have a diagnosable mental health problem or substance use disorder (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). The most common diagnoses are conduct disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and mood disorders (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). Externalizing disorders (conduct disorders, ADHD, etc.) increase the likelihood of juvenile delinquency, violence, and recidivism (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). Early identification and interventions by mental health practitioners are associated with a decreased rate of recidivism and improved social integration (Snehil & Sagar, 2020).

Snehil and Sagar (2020) state that the mental health of justice-involved youth and their delinquent behaviors are interrelated. This may be due to their biopsychosocial vulnerabilities or one condition exacerbating the other (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). Letting the mental health needs of justice-involved youth go untreated or unaddressed leads to increased recidivism and poor functional outcomes (Snehil & Sagar, 2020). As such, letting professionally educated and trained mental health practitioners address the needs of justice-involved youth is crucial. Mental health practitioners contribute significantly to therapeutic, preventative, advocacy, and rehabilitative aspects of the juvenile justice

system (Snehil & Sagar, 2020); therefore, their knowledge and experience should play a critical role in all aspects of the juvenile justice system. Incorporating mental health practitioners in all aspects or levels of the juvenile justice system may help decrease the short and long-term consequences of juvenile justice involvement.

### ***Physical Health Impacts***

Juvenile incarceration can have lasting negative impacts on health and well-being (Mendel, 2022). Juvenile incarceration leads to poorer health in adulthood. Youth who experience system involvement often already have health problems and system involvement exacerbates the serious health problems that are already present (Mendel, 2022). Youth who are incarcerated in the juvenile justice system experience many health problems such as dental, vision, or hearing problems, acute illnesses, and injuries (Mendel, 2022). Literature highlights the systemic and recurring abuses that are present in the juvenile justice system with many youth experiencing physical and sexual abuse during their involvement in the system by staff and/or peers, as well as witnessing abuse that others have endured at the hands of the system (Mendel, 2022). Justice-involved youth are far more likely to have mental health problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal thoughts (Mendel, 2022). Juvenile incarceration is associated with shorter life expectancies (Mendel, 2022).

### ***Financial Impacts***

One impact of the juvenile justice system that is not often highlighted is the financial impact of system involvement. There are many fines and fees associated with juvenile justice system involvement, including those of legal counsel, as well as the

punitive fines and fees. The fines and fees associated with the juvenile justice system are referred to as Legal Financial Obligations (LFOs). Families and victims acknowledge that the intended purpose of LFOs is to teach offending youth responsibility, but the actual impact of LFOs on family life is far more detrimental (Paik & Packard, 2019). LFOs hinder any intended positive effects and often undermine any trust that families may have in the juvenile justice system (Paik & Packard, 2019). LFOs impact families emotionally due to the knowledge that they must be paid and as well as the worry, stress, and anxiety of securing the funds. Financial strain often occurs for these families and paying the LFOs comes with an emotional burden as well as financial burdens that trickle over into other financial responsibilities (Paik & Packard, 2019). One parent who was interviewed expressed frustration over the financial strain as they didn't have a say in where their child went or what happened to them, but they were still required to pay the LFOs (Paik & Packard, 2019). In addition to worry, stress, and anxiety, LFOs often increase feelings of hostility and anger towards the juvenile justice system and those involved in it (Paik & Packard, 2019). LFOs limit the spending of families both on necessities and recreational purchases and activities (Paik & Packard, 2019). This impacts time that families spend together, whether it be that time is limited because the caregivers are working to pay the fees, or the absence of recreational activities that are desired and may have once been a part of the family routine due to the increased financial strain (Paik & Packard, 2019). This leads to an increase in debt and limited social mobility for the youth and their family members which in turn increases conflict and the emotional toll of system involvement (Paik & Packard, 2019). Many youth reported an increase in difficulty attending

secondary education due to the financial toll of system involvement and LFOs which can have long-lasting impacts on youth and their futures (Paik & Packard, 2019)

### ***Familial Relationships***

Involvement in the juvenile justice system impacts the relationship between youths and their caregivers and families. These youth have significant restrictions placed on them, whether this be incarceration, or parole or probation. While incarcerated, caregivers and family's interactions with the youth are both limited and heavily monitored by those who work in the juvenile justice system. As such, their roles are far less involved than they are when at home which can have lasting impacts on the relationship roles and dynamics beyond system involvement. Family members of justice-involved youth reported a decrease, or in some scenarios, absence of trust (Paik & Packard, 2019). Some families who enforced consequences at home and required their youth to pay them back for the LFOs stated that this brought up anger and an increase in conflict between them and the youth (Paik & Packard, 2019).

In some cases, youth have had their driver's licenses suspended or are ineligible to receive them due to their crimes or nonpayment of their LFOs which further exacerbates financial strain as they are not able to drive to school or work to provide for themselves or their families (Paik & Packard, 2019). All of the above consequences of juvenile justice system involvement can lead to further system involvement if not handled appropriately or timely (Paik & Packard, 2019) which is referred to as the criminalization of families (Rodriguez and Goldman, 2024).

### ***Disparities and Inequalities***

Rodriguez and Goldman (2024) discuss the inequalities that are present in the juvenile justice, stating that these inequalities are often exacerbated by the youth's family system. According to Rodriguez and Goldman (2024), youth that come from families that diverge from a White, heteronormative, nuclear family often experience harsher punishments and increased system involvement. In a 2024 study, data showed that Black and Native American youth were less likely than White youth to receive diversion, and other family systems than two-parent systems (example: youths of single parents, youth living with extended family, and youth in foster care) were all less likely than youth of two-parent families to receive diversion (Rodriguez & Goldman, 2024). Additionally, Black youth were more likely than White youth to be detained while youth in foster care were more likely than youth who still reside in their biological families to be detained. Although, youth from single-mother or single-father families were less likely than youth of two-parent families to be detained (Rodriguez & Goldman, 2024). This study reflects the idea that families are impacted by juvenile justice system involvement, but also that juvenile justice system involvement may also be impacted by family dynamics and structures, in addition to youth offender behaviors.

### ***Long-Term Impacts***

Despite literature that provides evidence that juvenile incarceration is an ineffective strategy in preventing youth from engaging in delinquent behavior and that high rates of juvenile incarceration do not improve public safety, the juvenile justice system has yet to experience significant reform (Mendel, 2022). According to Mendel

(2022), juvenile incarceration produces counterproductive outcomes. State-level data on recidivism consistently show that youth who are released from correctional confinement experience new adjudications in juvenile court or convictions in adult court, reincarceration, and high rates of rearrest. Studies that examined youth outcomes into adulthood have found that a significant number of youths who have experienced juvenile justice system involvement were later arrested, convicted, and incarcerated as adults (Mendel, 2022). Imprisonment is shown to increase the rates of rearrest and incarceration more than probation or other community alternatives to confinement (Mendel, 2022). Additionally, data shows that declines in youth incarceration do not increase the presence of juvenile crimes (Mendel, 2022).

Juvenile incarceration often impedes young people's success in education and employment (Mendel, 2022). Incarceration decreases the likelihood that youth will graduate from high school, as the school re-enrollment rates for youth returning home from juvenile facilities are low (Mendel, 2022). Juvenile incarceration also decreases college enrollment and completion and lowers future employment and earnings in adulthood (Mendel, 2022).

Cauffman et al. (2021) completed a study that evaluated the impact on adolescent boys, aged 13-17, five years after their first arrest. They found that youth who participated in formal processing within the juvenile justice system during adolescence were more likely than their peers who did not experience system involvement to be re-arrested, more likely to be than their peers who did not experience system involvement to be incarcerated, reported a greater affiliation with delinquent peers, reported lower school

enrollment, engaged in more violence, were less likely to graduate high school within five years, had lower perceptions of opportunities than informally processed youth, and reported less ability to suppress their aggression (Cauffman et al., 2021). The findings of this study were not impacted by age of first arrest, race, or ethnicity (Cauffman et al., 2021). Cauffman et al. (2021) state that these results should impact policy in relation to the juvenile justice system, specifically, formally processing juveniles as offenders. While formally processing youth can reduce public safety, it is also expensive and significantly reduces the youth's later potential contributions to society (Cauffman et al., 2021).

### **How Social Workers Respond to Dual Roles**

As discussed, social workers who work within both the criminal justice system and the juvenile justice system can hold many roles and responsibilities. Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system specifically work to create individualized case plans that focus on family dynamics, mental health of the youth, risk factors, educational needs, underlying issues, and rehabilitation (Biris & Feher, 2024). Social workers within this system aim to offer counseling, support, and guidance to help both youth and their families navigate challenges, avoid further system involvement, make positive choices, and facilitate the transition from the system back home which may include making referrals for other treatments or services (Biris & Feher, 2024). The primary goal and focus of social workers who work within this system is to provide resources and support to foster rehabilitation, to reduce recidivism, and to promote positive long-term behavioral changes (Biris & Feher, 2024).

Stress and burnout can have a negative impact on the work and performance of social workers (Maddock, 2023). Stress and burnout can also impact the individual social worker's mental health and overall well-being (Maddock, 2023). A significant number of social workers who work across settings report mild to severe issues in depression, anxiety, and mental well-being (Maddock, 2023). Emotional exhaustion is a risk factor for anxiety while personal accomplishment (s) is a protective factor against depression and positive mental well-being (Maddock, 2023). There is currently a gap in the literature about how the negative effects of stress and burnout and how they play out in the personal and professional lives of social workers (Maddock, 2023).

Personal experience with adversity, system involvement, or mental health concerns may draw individuals to the social work profession (Steen et al., 2021; as referenced by Holley et al., 2024). Additionally, working with individuals who have experienced trauma can lead to secondary trauma for providers (Rayner et al., 2020, as cited in Holley et al., 2024). This highlights why it is not surprising that about one-half of all social workers may experience mental health issues during their careers (Straussner et al., 2018, as cited in Holley et al., 2024). Individuals who have first-hand experience and knowledge based on lived experiences of mental distress have the potential to better prepare other professionals as well as the individuals and communities that they serve to best advocate for and educate them (Steen et al., 2021, as cited in Holley et al., 2024). While personal experience may lead individuals to this field, it does not prevent the prevalence of mental health concerns or issues that may arise as a result of working

within this field. Social workers are not immune from secondary trauma, despite their knowledge, but they may be better equipped to navigate it (Holley et al., 2024).

In the last few decades, individuals and agencies have aimed to address the flaws that are present within the juvenile justice systems, but few studies have examined the support provided to social workers who work within the field or this system (Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2023).

The present study aims to address the gap in the literature relating to social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and navigating the dual and opposing roles that arise. Additionally, the present study aims to explore internal conflict that is created by the dual roles that social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system experience and the prevalence of poor mental health and burnout that may occur as a result of these dual roles (Reyes-Quilodran et al., 2023).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The role of social workers and the role of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system as well as the goals of social work and the goals of the U.S. justice system do not always align. The primary mission for the field of social work is to enhance the well-being of individuals, to help meet both the basic and complex needs of all humans (NASW, 2025), to help improve the lives of others, to fight for justice, improve communities, and relieve people's suffering (NASW, 2025). The U.S. criminal justice system plays a multifaceted role in society that it primarily aimed at and focused on maintaining public order, ensuring justice, and upholding the rule of law (Shelley, 2024). The core purpose of the criminal justice system is to prevent and punish criminal

behavior as a way to help maintain stability and safety within communities (Shelley, 2004). The criminal justice system strives to protect individual citizens and communities, to provide fair legal proceedings, and to foster a safer environment for all (Shelley, 2024).

While the daily functions of social workers can remain the same or similar for those who work within the juvenile justice system and those who do not, social workers who work within external systems, such as the justice system, often experience role strain, role confusion, and role conflict (NASW, 2024). Social workers in the juvenile justice system often experience conflict between treatment and control functions as well as social work ethics and goals that differ from the goals of the juvenile justice system. Social workers often perceive the justice system as a system that imposes control over their interactions with adolescents/their clients in a way that can hinder treatment goals, which further translates to hindrance of their goals as a social worker (Peters, 2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020). Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system are often engaging in tasks that don't match their training (Peters, 2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020). For example, social workers are taught the value of continuity as well as development of the individual through casework, individual treatment goals, and progressive development, but the juvenile justice system often creates and imposes a division of labor for social workers by implementing episodic contact with individual clients and mandated cutoff dates for treatment and interventions in a way that social workers do not have a say in or control over (Peters, 2011; as referenced by Esthappan et al., 2020).

The impact of involvement in the juvenile justice system reaches beyond present system involvement and impacts both the youth experiencing involvement as well as their families, caregivers, friends, and communities. Involvement in the juvenile justice system has impacts on juvenile mental health, the mental health of family members of the justice-involved youth, physical health impacts, financial impacts, practical impacts, educational impacts, relational impacts, and long-term impacts. Rodriguez and Goldman (2024) discuss inequalities that are present in the juvenile justice system and the impact that these inequalities can have on individuals and their families.

As a result of the differing, and often opposing, goals of the juvenile justice system and the profession of social work, social workers who work within this system often experience dual roles and both role strain and conflict. The present study aims to evaluate these dual roles, the impact that they have, and ways to address them to improve outcomes for justice-involved youth and the social workers who provide services to them while they experience system involvement.

The following chapter will discuss the present study and how it connects with the current literature as well as the methods that will be used when conducting research and the rationale for selecting these methods.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The present study will be discussed in depth in the following chapter, including research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and methodology. The chapter also covers participants, procedures for participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter ends with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The study was qualitative, and I utilized a descriptive phenomenological design as prescribed by Giorgi (2020). A descriptive phenomenological approach is used to investigate the everyday experiences of humans while suspending any preconceived assumptions that the researcher may hold about the phenomenon of interest (Giorgi, 2009). Existential phenomenological studies are used to understand experiences through individual perspectives. As such, this method aligns with the research question and the purpose of my study. This approach allowed me to gather data about their lived experiences through a variety of data sources, specifically interviews, conversations, and written records. Descriptive phenomenology was used, as the phenomenon of role conflict for social workers in juvenile justice practice has not yet been described or explored.

Participants were selected based on their education and professional work experience, specifically those who hold a master's in social work, or a related field such as counseling, and who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and who have held this professional position for at least 1 year. At the conclusion of the interview process,

each interview was transcribed using transcription software and was then analyzed through thematic analysis to identify themes and codes. These themes and codes were used to help make sense of, organize, and better understand the data. The themes and codes were identified both by hand and through qualitative analysis software. Finally, the transcriptions and analysis were used to draw conclusions about the data.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was to create an appropriate research model for the present study including gathering and evaluating current literature and research and addressing gaps in the current literature. Other parts of the role included identifying and recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and following ethical guidelines and considerations. For data analysis, my role included coding interviews, evaluating the results of the study, making efforts to generalize the results of the study, addressing limitations in the present study, and identifying and discuss results of the research and next steps in research. I did not have any relationship with participants outside of this study, as participants were recruited outside of my personal and professional environments.

### **Methodology**

To address the research question in this qualitative study, the specific research design was descriptive phenomenology. The research question was designed to examine the daily experiences of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system. A phenomenological approach is used to investigate the everyday experiences of humans while suspending any preconceived assumptions that the researcher may hold about the

phenomenon of interest (Ho & Limpaeche, 2022); as such, this method aligned with the research question and the purpose of the study. This approach allowed me to gather data about participants' lived experiences through a variety of data sources, specifically interviews, conversations, and written records. Semistructured interviews gave me a place to start in relation to questions asked and data gathered and ensured that at a minimum, every participant answered the original questions. This provided some cohesion in the data and helped facilitate the identification of themes in the data. A semistructured format also allowed me to ask follow-up questions and go more in-depth depending on the participant, their answers, and the flow of the interview. This format allowed me to ask questions or gather more data on questions that may not have been relevant or considered prior to beginning the interviews.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Participants were selected based on the criteria discussed in the Sampling Strategy section. First, participants were invited to participate using purposive sampling. If the identified sampling method did not yield the appropriate sample size, snowball sampling would be used as a backup method through the participants already committed to participating. Once a participant agreed, I provided further details on the nature of the study, informed consent was obtained, and the participant had the opportunity to ask questions or withdraw from the study. I then coordinated a time for interviews with each participant and conducted semi-structured interviews individually with each participant. I asked that each participant set aside at least 1 hour for the interview; however, interview

times varied depending on the participant, their comfort with the interview process, and the depth of the answers provided. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom as participants were recruited across the states of Oregon, California, New Jersey, Ohio, and Florida. As the interviewer, I conducted interviews from my home office without the presence of distractions. I requested that each participant participate in the interview from a quiet space, without distractions, and where confidentiality for their answers could be maintained. Interviews were then conducted.

I took handwritten notes during the interviews as well as recorded them with an audio recording device. Participants were aware of the documentation and recording process as well as the process of storing these notes and recordings. Prior to the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participant if they had any questions, concerns, or any additional information that they wanted to provide. I also ensured that each wanted to continue with participation. Each participant participated in a debriefing interview/conversation immediately after completion of their interview. At the conclusion of the interview process, each interview was transcribed using transcription software. Each interview was then analyzed through thematic analysis to identify themes and codes to help make sense of and organize the data. Themes and codes were identified by hand and through qualitative analysis software. At this time the transcriptions and analysis were used to draw conclusions about the data.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The sampling strategy for this study included purposive sampling of social workers who met the following criteria:

1. A master's degree in social work (or a related field)
2. Independently licensed in the state in which they are practicing
3. Currently working as a social worker within the juvenile justice system (past experience working in this system does not qualify, however past experience can be combined with current experience to add up to 1 year of experience).
4. At least 1 year of experience working as a social worker within the juvenile justice system.

Master's level clinicians were utilized, as this is a requirement for most social work positions. This ensured that the participant has a minimum experience in the field through their education and required practicums/internships to complete their degrees. Purposive sampling was used, as it allowed me to select participants based on the above criteria. As I wanted to examine the daily experiences of social workers within a specific environment, I utilized a sampling method that allowed me to locate participants who met the criteria of this population to gather data on my phenomenon of interest. As purposive sampling is used to intentionally select participants based on specific knowledge or experiences, among other things (Patton, 2025), this was appropriate for the present study.

## **Instrumentation**

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews conducted by me with the identified population (social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system). Since the 1920s, interviews have been used in the process of securing a job, with individuals of specified professions to learn more about themselves and the work that they do, and in research to gather detailed information about a phenomenon of interest (Platt, 2001). An interview was the appropriate instrument to utilize for the present study as it allowed me to tailor the questions to gather information about the topic of interest, the lived experience of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system. Utilizing an interview also allowed me to ask follow-up questions to gather more information from the participant.

## **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

First, participants were invited to participate using purposive sampling. Once a participant had agreed, I provided further details on the nature of the study, informed consent was obtained, and the participant had the opportunity to ask questions or withdraw from the study. I then coordinated a time for interviews with each participant and conducted semistructured interviews individually with each participant. I asked that each participant set aside at least 1 hour for the interview; however, interview times varied. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with both the participants and I in locations with minimal distractions and in a setting that could provide confidentiality.

I took handwritten notes during the interviews as well as recorded them with an audio recording device. Participants were aware of the documentation and recording

process as well as the process of storing these notes and recordings. Prior to the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participant if they had any questions, concerns, or any additional information that they wanted to provide. I also ensured that each wanted to continue with participation. Each participant participated in a debriefing interview/conversation immediately after completion of their interview. At the conclusion of the interview process each interview was transcribed using transcription software. Each interview was then analyzed through thematic analysis to identify themes and codes to help make sense of and organize the data. Themes and codes were identified by hand and through qualitative analysis software. At this time, the transcriptions and analysis were used to draw conclusions about the data.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Thematic analysis was used for this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method that is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns, or themes, within data. As the present study utilized qualitative, semistructured interviewing, thematic analysis was appropriate. This method of analysis allowed me to identify common themes and trends within the interviews/data that in turn helped draw conclusions and make sense of the data in a beneficial manner. Thematic analysis took place after the data were transcribed. I used hand analysis to identify themes, categories, and codes within the data. Each interview was viewed as one piece of data. Each interview was examined individually as well as in comparison to the other interviews/data sources to identify themes that arise both within one interview and among multiple interviews. These were then utilized to draw conclusions about the data as a

whole. For this study open coding was used. According to Siegle (2023), open coding is the initial stage of qualitative data analysis and is where data are initially broken down and analyzed to identify concepts, categories, or themes in the data. Open coding involves generating initial codes that capture the main concepts or ideas that are found in the data (Siegle, 2023). Open coding allowed me to identify initial codes from the transcripts of the completed interviews. These codes focused on themes within the interviews in relation to the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was maintained through open, honest communication with participants. Answering questions in a direct and honest manner as well as ensuring anonymity, rapport building, and following through on stated procedures and timelines helped to maintain credibility and dependability.

### **Credibility**

In qualitative research, credibility means that the findings of the research are both trustworthy and plausible (Stenfors et al., 2020). Stenfors et al. (2020) stated that for a qualitative study to be credible, there must be alignment between the theory, research question, data collection, analysis, and results. There must also be alignment between the sampling strategy, the volume of the data, the depth of the data, and the analytical steps taken in relation to the data (Stenfors et al., 2020). To maintain credibility within this study, I ensured that alignment was met between the theory, data collection, analysis,

results, and the research question. In addition, I utilized previous research to guide my study to inform the methods, analysis, and practices being used.

### **Transferability**

Transferability means that the findings from one study can be transferred to another group, context, or setting (Stenfors et al., 2020). Transferability is met through the researcher providing a detailed description of the context which the research was performed in and how this impacted the data and findings (Stenfors et al., 2020). As such, the present study met transferability through discussing the environment of each interview and discussing how this may have impacted each individual interview as well as the impact that this may have had on the findings in general. I also included a discussion on limitations that addresses any reasons why the present data/study may not have met transferability and why that is.

### **Dependability**

Dependability means the extent to which the research can be replicated in similar conditions (Stenfors et al., 2020). Dependability can be met in a qualitative study through ensuring that there is sufficient information present and described in a way that another researcher can access it and follow the same steps procedurally even if the additional researcher draws different conclusions (Stenfors et al., 2020). According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), dependability can be met through including a detailed and reasonable explanation for how the data were collected and how they aligns with the details of the study. To ensure that dependability was maintained, I included a thorough procedures section where I discussed in detail each component of the study as well as the reasoning

behind it. This ensures that other researchers can replicate the study should they choose to do so.

### **Confirmability**

According to Stenfors et al. (2020), confirmability is met through the researcher showing how they reached their findings through detailed descriptions of the data and use of quotes when appropriate. The present study ensures confirmability through the inclusion of the interview transcripts in the appendix so that the audience can view them if necessary/they desire. In addition, the transcripts and quotes from the interviews/data were used to identify codes and themes within the data and were therefore utilized in the analysis where the audience can see the connection between them (the data), and the findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

This study utilized Walden University's resources relating to inviting participants to participate. In previous courses, I was provided with a template for an invitation to participate that I utilize to ensure that the proper protocol is followed when gathering participants. Participants were solicited through purposive sampling. In addition, informed consent occurred prior to the interview process and continued throughout the duration of data collection so that each participant was fully informed and knew that they could resign from participating at any time. Informed consent was completed both verbally and in writing. Each participant participated in an informed consent discussion with the researcher at the completion of the data collection portion. This provided me with feedback as well as allowed the participant to ask any additional questions and to

feel comfortable with their participation. To ensure that anonymity was maintained, only necessary individuals, such as myself and my chair, have access to participant information. In addition, anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms when reporting the data. Data will be stored in an ethical manner on a format that cannot be accessed by outside individuals. Data will be stored on the qualitative analysis software, NVivo. Data will be stored until the dissertation is completed and approved and will be deleted after 5 years.

### **Summary**

The research question that was explored was “What are the lived experiences of social workers who work in the U.S. juvenile justice system as it relates to the dilemmas that arise as a result of the dual roles that these professionals experience?” The present qualitative study relied on interviews conducted by me with social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system. Participants were recruited based on their education, holding a master’s degree in social work, or a related field such as counseling, and their professional role, a social worker who works within the U.S. juvenile justice system. A phenomenological approach was used, and data were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. I took steps to ensure that trustworthiness and ethical considerations were maintained and addressed in an appropriate and timely manner.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of a selected sample of social workers, or mental health professionals, who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and the potential internal conflict that arises because of the dual roles these professionals experience, specifically the dilemmas of these dual roles. This study adds to the current body of literature as few studies have sought to evaluate the lived experiences of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system and the challenges that they navigate within this system. Semistructured interviews were conducted with eight individuals who hold a master's degree in social work (or a related field), are independently licensed in the state where they practice, and have at least 1 year of experience working within this system. The research question for this study was "What are the lived experiences of social workers who work in the U.S. juvenile justice system as it relates to the dilemmas that arise as a result of the dual roles that these professionals experience?"

### Setting

Six interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom, and two were conducted via telephone due to internet issues on the participants' end at the scheduled interview time. I was located in a private office with the door closed. Participants joined from either their home offices or the offices of their jobs and took steps to ensure privacy such as closing the door. Participants communicated the need for privacy to those around them prior to the interview, and neither I nor the participants experienced any interruptions during our scheduled meetings.

### **Demographics**

The eight participants were from five states: Oregon, California, Ohio, New Jersey, and Florida (see Table 1). Most were female, master's level clinicians, and hold a degree in social work. Two individuals work within the Oregon juvenile justice system, one in California, two in Ohio, two in New Jersey, and one in Florida juvenile justice system. All participants work within the juvenile justice system in some capacity, with six focusing primarily on the mental health needs of the juvenile offenders and two of them focusing primarily on the educational needs of the juvenile offenders. Two of the participants specialize in juvenile sexual offenders, while two others stated that their programs exclude juvenile sexual offenders. The average age range was 12-20 years old with some participants stating that they could work with youth as young as 6 and as old as 23 but that these were outliers and not the norm. Additionally, all eight stated that they primarily work with males as there is a large difference in the number of females who are involved with the justice system and the males who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

**Table 1***Demographics of Participants*

Baseline characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	7	87.5
Male	1	12.5
<b>Degree</b>		
Social Work	6	75
Counseling	1	12.5
Psychology	1	12.5
<b>State</b>		
Oregon	2	25
California	1	12.5
New Jersey	2	25
Florida	1	12.5
Ohio	2	25

**Data Collection**

This descriptive phenomenological qualitative study (Giorgi, 2009) was conducted to evaluate the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system included eight participants, all eight of whom participated in a semistructured interview. The objective was to compile in-depth data and perspectives of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system, specifically relating to their roles, functions, collaborators, and challenges that they experience working within

the identified system. I aimed to focus on gathering data on the lived experiences of social workers.

Prior to participation, all participants completed a written informed consent. The informed consent document was signed with either an e-signature or printed signature and scanned back via email prior to the start of the interview. Participants were provided with opportunities to ask questions during the recruitment and informed consent process. Additionally, participants gave a verbal consent to participate at the start of each interview and were made aware of the confidentiality policies and practices being used as well as the research question and the purpose of the study. All participants were informed that they could rescind their participation at any time and that they could decline to answer a question should they feel uncomfortable.

An interview protocol (see Appendix B) was created and followed to help direct my questions, to guide the conversation, and to try to ensure consistency across interviews and the type of data being gathered. A series of 13 questions were asked to all participants with additional follow up questions asked to each participant as needed and as I felt appropriate. Both hard copy and electronic versions of the interview data are archived. Electronic data were secured by a unique password that only I can access, and hard copies were kept in a locked cabinet in my home. As a part of the privacy and confidentiality practices, data were not shared with other people, including other participants. In the final analysis and reports, all identifying information, such as names, job title, and job location, were kept anonymous to protect participants' privacy. For storage purposes, data with participants' identifying information is stored in an electronic

folder that is password protected, and I am the only one with the password. Data will be kept for 5 years, after which it will be destroyed.

Interviews ranged in length from 24 minutes to 74 minutes. As the researcher, I conducted six of the interviews from my home office and two of the interviews from the privacy of my professional office. As discussed during the written and verbal informed consent, data were audio recorded through the “Voice Memos” application on my MacBook. Transcripts were created using the transcription feature on Zoom and were then hand-coded and analyzed for common themes and codes.

### **Data Analysis**

I transcribed all eight interviews and then hand-coded them to help gain understanding of the content of each both individually and in relation to the other interviews and to help identify themes within the data. I started by reading through each interview in its entirety, and I then annotated the informed consent portion of the interview so that it was excluded as this is not relevant to the experiences of the participants. I looked for experiences that were common between two or more of the participants. I manually highlighted and annotated with specific colors and tabs for each code that emerged. I performed an additional read-through to look for categories within the identified codes. Finally, several more read-throughs were conducted to determine which themes presented in the most interviews and which were most relevant to this study, the research question, and the purpose. Initially, 15 categories emerged. Upon additional read throughs many of the codes overlapped or were similar enough in nature that they could be combined and categorized within without impacting the overall data or

results. Focus was placed on codes that related to the experiences the social workers had within their system, common challenges with the youth that they work with, common challenges within the juvenile justice system, and the needs within their roles both relating to the work they are doing and the youth which resulted in three categories. The final categories and codes were selected based on their relevance to the research question and purpose of the study and their ability to explain the results in a thorough and effective manner.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was maintained through direct, open, honest communication with participants. Participants were all provided with a written copy of the informed consent as well as a verbal, informed consent at the start of the interview process. Participants had multiple opportunities during recruitment, scheduling, and the interview process to ask questions and they were answered in a direct and honest manner. I worked to ensure anonymity by not discussing names or identifying information during the interview. Names were not used in interview storage but rather initials. I worked to build rapport by providing a brief background on myself, being flexible with participants, their schedules, and their interview preferences (Zoom, Teams, phone call, etc.). Following through on stated procedures and timelines also assisted in building rapport and helped to maintain both credibility and dependability.

### **Credibility**

Prior to conducting research, I ensured that alignment was met between the theory, data collection, analysis, results, and the research question. Previous research was

used to guide my study to inform the methods, analysis, and practices being used. I worked to maintain credibility through rapport building as well as following through on stated procedures and timelines.

### **Transferability**

I met transferability through discussing the environment of each interview as well as discussing how this may have impacted each individual interview and the impact that this may have had on the findings in general. I provided an in-depth discussion on the limitations of this study, including any reasons why the present data/study and how this may impact transferability.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was maintained through a detailed procedures section and through maintaining this procedure with each participant in the study. The rationale behind each component of the procedure was communicated to participants so they had a better understanding of the study and the methods to prevent this from impacting the overall results. This will aid in future studies and future researchers who may want to replicate this study.

### **Confirmability**

This study ensured confirmability through the inclusion of the interview transcripts in the appendix so that the audience can view them. In addition, the transcripts and quotes from the interviews/data were used to identify codes and themes within the data and were utilized in the analysis where the audience can see the connection between the data and the findings.

## Results

A total of three themes emerged in the data: (a) role dilemma of responsibility without authority, (b) vicarious trauma of professional role-informed approaches, and (c) frustration and helplessness with lack of clinically appropriate resources. Themes related to challenges that the participants experienced within their roles as well as challenges that presented in the juveniles and the system that impacted the work that the social workers were doing within the juvenile justice system. Participants answered semi structured interview questions that focused on their educational background as it pertained to their experience and role within the juvenile justice system as well as questions about their role within this system including challenges, supports, and positives.

All participants discussed conflicting goals with the juvenile justice system with their focus being on youth progress, such as are they attending their required sessions or groups, are they making progress academically, are they being connected to external resources that will benefit them when they return home, and are they making social and emotional progress. All participants stated that the goal of the system differed from the goal of their role and that the system placed an emphasis on reducing recidivism with one participant stating that in their role, reducing recidivism for one year is the primary focus and graduating from the specific program, and educational progress being the secondary focuses/goals.

### **Theme 1: Role Dilemma of Responsibility without Authority**

Systemic challenges translate to role inconsistency and dilemmas for the social workers who work within the juvenile justice system. Social workers have a professional

and ethical responsibility to the individuals that they treat, and they have an accountability to these individuals as well as the system that they work in, but that they do not have control over outcomes, external factors, or any authority within this system. As discussed above, social workers primary goals relate to patient care, a decrease in symptoms, connecting individuals to necessary resources, and facilitating the learning of skills that will help the individual cope with overwhelming emotions and stressful situations or life events on their own. The primary goals of the juvenile justice system are to prevent further system involvement, reduce or prevent recidivism, and punishment for crimes. Social workers are expected to facilitate these system goals without having the support from other professionals within the system or any authority over the system. Social workers are unable to control external factors such as inconsistencies within the system at different levels, outdated policies and regulations, or lack of clinical and/or developmental knowledge from other professionals, specifically judges and parole/probation officers who do have authority over the system. Per participant four, “I love the challenge of working inside a system that doesn’t necessarily blend with social work and it’s values, but this can also be exhausting.” These social workers are being asked to control outcomes but are given limited to no authority over the youth and the system which can lead to role inconsistency, role confusion, and burnout.

One participant discussed how corrections officers’ perspectives and determinations held more weight than the social workers, despite not having the knowledge, experience, or educational experience with youth or youth with traumatic backgrounds. Per the participant, “At the end of the day, the rule was the corrections

officers because their goal is always safety outcomes first. So, if at the end of the day they would be like, it doesn't matter what you say, this is what's happening. That would be hard." Additionally, another participant stated, "A probation officer wants a minimum of such and such time for a criminal offense and my job is to try and balance both the probation officers' goals with my goals as the social worker because I can't override what they want."

Three participants reported that their state holds outdated laws and regulations in relation to juvenile offenders and that this is due to both being slow to catch up and a lack of a desire by politicians, communities, and system personnel to want to catch up. Additionally, participants reported challenges with probation, referred to as diversion officers in one state, officers. Participants reported that one of their primary struggles is with probation officers. Participants stated that probation officers lack knowledge about working with youth, trauma-informed care and treatment, and often place an emphasis on punitive measures and responses that are not beneficial to the youth and coincides with the role of social workers who are trying to build trust and rapport with the youth so as to improve their social, emotional, educational, and long-term outcomes.

All the participants experienced systemic challenges, however these systemic challenges varied. The primary systemic challenges that presented across participants were challenges with inconsistency. Participants reported that youth punishments were often impacted by judges as well as state and local policies and regulations. It was also reported that there are times when youth determinations were impacted by the political

cycle and attempts from judges or other key players to try to get reelected which in turn led to inconsistencies in rulings and youth punishments or support.

## **Theme 2: Vicarious Trauma of Professional Role-Informed Approaches**

Social workers discussed how all youth who enter this system and their care have some sort of trauma history. This trauma can include gang involvement, domestic violence, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, generational trauma, parental or familial mental health and/or substance abuse, socioeconomic status/poverty, human trafficking, and challenging family dynamics. All these examples impact youth beliefs, behaviors, and their ability to participate in treatment. While all participants reported knowledge of and experience with trauma-informed care, they reported that other professionals within this system lack this same knowledge and experience which can further traumatize youth and make it challenging to work with them. Additionally, these youth backgrounds mean that the social workers must approach each youth individually and with these experiences in mind to provide the most effective and appropriate care in a way that both addresses the social worker's goals and the goals of the juvenile justice system. For example, participants discussed challenges with parole and probation officers, specifically ones who believe in a punitive approach. These parole/probation officers are not trained in trauma-informed practices and have little knowledge about child and adolescent development and how trauma in early childhood can impact youth behaviors and offenses and therefore do not interact with the youth in a beneficial or effective manner which can make things more challenging for the social workers. The social workers then have to spend more time building rapport with the youth but also

doing their best to separate themselves from the system to build trust and to provide effective services for the youth. One of the challenges in this is that the parole and probation officers often have more authority over the youth and their outcomes within this system than the social workers do. In some states or cases, the parole/probation officer has a say in the length of time within this system as well as punitive measures and practices. This is something that the participants reported struggling with as they have the professional and clinical knowledge, backgrounds, and experience to work with these youth and are being asked to work toward identified systemic goals, but they are not given the same level of authority within this system as individuals who don't have this knowledge or experience which can be frustrating as well as challenging to navigate. This can lead to role inconsistencies as discussed above as well as burnout and social workers who do not remain within this system.

One participant discussed the differences in roles and expectations between the social workers and other professionals within the system and how the social workers emphasized a trauma-informed approach that was not used by the other professionals and how some of the other professionals used a punitive approach that elicited additional trauma. Per Participant two, "When conflict arose, it was always between the goals of the corrections officers and the therapists. The corrections officers are there for safety, and they are very, very strict and some of them come in with a chip on their shoulder about authority. There were a few minor conflicts where a kid would tell me that something happened, almost always on night shift, where they had to stand in the corner in their boxers and a t-shirt for 45 minutes while everyone else was having reading time and I had

to inform them, that is not corrective or rehabilitative but it is embarrassment for the youth and can be traumatizing, in addition to the other struggles they may have already experienced both in the system and prior to entry.”

Another participant discussed trying to find the balance of treating youth despite not believing that their behaviors warranted involvement in the juvenile justice system. “Sometimes advocating that this isn’t necessarily a criminal issue as much as it is a mental health and family assistance issues that we’re incarcerating youth over and over and over again and that they don’t necessarily need this level of system involvement.” This participant discussed how advocating for the youth both within the system, within their families, and within their communities is one of their primary roles but that it is often met with pushback, particularly from those who do not have knowledge relating to mental health or trauma or how both of these things can lead to maladaptive behaviors that need to be addressed, but that may be better addressed in a different system. Participants discussed how they make every effort to advocate for the youth and to get them connected to the right level of care with individuals who have the appropriate knowledge and education, but that when they don’t have a say, they do what they can with their knowledge, education, and resources to still be able to treat the youth appropriately. Participants discussed how their primary goals always relate to the youth and helping them learn ways to better themselves, in a broad sense, and how this focus can be challenging and daunting to maintain when other players in the system don’t have the appropriate knowledge or experience to be able to effectively and appropriately help

the youth which can lead to further traumatization both for the youth and the social workers.

While all of the participants emphasized their enjoyment for working with the youth, they also discussed challenges that arose in relation to the youth. These challenges are related to external factors that the social workers do not have any control over. Participants stated that many of the youth who enter the system are neurodivergent and/or have cognitive impairments. These can impact their ability to understand their crimes as well as their ability to learn healthy coping skills and their success within this system. The participants discussed how they often need to adjust their approaches to meet the youth where they are in relation to cognitive abilities as well as socially and emotionally.

Other challenges related to the youth include a lack of insight, a lack of motivation to learn or improve, a lack of understanding, being misunderstood both within the system and within their families of origin and communities, lack of parental or familial support, and environmental challenges. Many youths who enter the juvenile justice system come from underserved communities and families who experience other system involvement which can lead to additional challenges. Families who experience additional system involvement struggle to help their youth because in their history, system involvement is normal and often, expected. In other cases, these families are unsure of how best to approach their youth or make positive changes, or they become burnt out from dealing with the youth and their perceived challenging behaviors. Additionally, youth who enter the system are often going back home to the same environment that contributed to their system involvement. The participants reported that

this was a challenge as it often led to their system involvement and made it challenging to get them connected to effective and appropriate resources to prevent further or additional system involvement.

All the participants expressed that lack of knowledge was a challenge. This includes a lack of knowledge with parents and families and how to support their youth as well as a lack of knowledge in how to navigate the system. Within the system, social workers reported that parole, probation, and diversion officers presented with a lack of knowledge on youths, trauma-informed practices, building rapport with youth, and working with youth in an effective way, which impacted their ability to build positive relationships with the youth and in some cases, impacted the youths sentencing and length of stay within the system. Participants report other key individuals including judges and education professionals, both who work within the juvenile justice system and education professionals who work outside of the system, who present with a lack of knowledge of youths, youth offenders, rapport building, a history of trauma and how this can impact offending, other youth behaviors, and rehabilitative approaches

### **Theme 3: Frustration and Helplessness with Lack of Clinically Appropriate Resources**

All the participants reported a lack of resources as a challenge that impacts their role within this system. One participant reported that as they only work with juvenile sex offenders, there is a limited number of providers (both social work and otherwise) who have the knowledge, experience, and interest in working with sexual offenders. This can make connecting juveniles to additional resources or providers, both during system

involvement and as a part of their after-care plan, a challenge. Another participant discussed their work with victims of sex trafficking and how there are less than five individuals in their state who specialize in working with this population and that all these individuals work at a minimum of 45 minutes away from their facility and some being out of state trying to serve youth in multiple states. Per participant five, “There’s a lack of resources for human trafficking and for us, being located in a hotspot for human trafficking, this is kind of disappointing.” Similarly, participant two stated, “With our population, because they have problematic sexual behaviors, it is so hard to get them in anywhere. Like we’ve had kids that they’re not safe living at home because the victim is a younger sibling, or the home isn’t a safe environment, and they need to be removed so they end up in a foster family that’s hours way or in a different state or a lot of residential placements or higher levels of care won’t take them with a history of problematic sexual behaviors. It’s very difficult.”

Participants discussed a lack of resources in rural areas which leads to youth being sent to facilities away from their families and in turn, makes it challenging to get them connected to the necessary resources in their communities when the time comes. Additionally, participants spoke of the lack of placement options. One participant discussed proctor parents. Proctor parents are specialized foster parents who are trained to work with juvenile sex offenders. There is a limited number of proctor parents and there are strict guidelines for placing youth with proctor parents that can limit this number even further. For example, one participant explained that other youth in the home can’t be younger than a certain age so if there are younger children in the home, even on

a foster care basis, the juvenile sex offenders can't be placed there. Per participant, "It's difficult with how few proctor homes we have for them to have bed assignments and housing assignments. For example, we can't have a 14-year-old with a 19-year-old unless there are at least three children in that room, and they are never alone together. There's already a foster care shortage, which makes the proctor family shortage even more evident." Similarly, each participant reported that are a lack of programs or facilities in their state. These programs and facilities may include specialized residential programs or independent living placements for older youths.

Participants spoke of the uniqueness of many of their programs and how this can impact their ability to do their job and to effectively treat the youth or connect them with the resources that may be the most beneficial to them. Per participant two, "We're the last program kind of like this because of that frequency that youths are not doing well in outpatient but that is becoming the gold standard because it's cheaper and easier, especially with rural issues and families not wanting their children to move several hours away to live in a foster care system instead of at home."

### **Summary**

In summary, the primary challenges that the participants face in their work within the juvenile justice system relate to other individuals, such as probation officers, judges, family members, and education professionals, and their lack of knowledge of juvenile offenders, their lack of consistency, and their conflicting goals with social work. Additional challenges relate to the youth and their histories, abilities, family support, and a lack of motivation from other parties to learn or gain the relevant skills or knowledge

necessary to best support the youth. Each participant spoke about the backgrounds of the youth and how almost all have a history of trauma and how a large population also have parents, or other family members, involved in the adult justice system which can impact attitudes and perspectives relating to juvenile involvement in the system and their family's ability to appropriately support them as they navigate this system. Another prevalent challenge is a lack of resources, in some cases due to a lack of funding, a lack of professionals in the field, a lack of trained or qualified in the field, specifically in relation to those with specialized trainings, a lack of resources in the geographic region where it is most needed, and a lack of individuals interested in working with the identified population. All these challenges relate back to the primary themes of role inconsistencies, trauma-informed approaches, and a lack of clinically appropriate resources which in turn impact social workers' responsibility and accountability to the youth and the system but do not give them additional authority within the juvenile justice system and can in turn lead to burnout.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of a selected sample of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and the potential internal conflict that arises because of the dual roles these professionals experience, specifically the dilemmas of these dual roles. A descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009) was used to explore the everyday experiences of the identified population. A phenomenological study was used as it allowed me to gather data about the lived experiences of social workers who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system through semistructured interviews. The phenomenon studied was the role conflict for social workers in juvenile justice practice, which has not yet been described or explored in the literature.

I found three primary themes and that social workers within this system primarily struggle with a lack of knowledge from external individuals, a lack of resources, and that their experiences greatly hinder working with a supportive team and supervisor. Dual roles present themselves in the work that is being done; however, it is not as prominent as initially expected. This is because the social workers reported that their teams and the desire of the individuals on their teams all aligned with themselves and the roles of social work, which helps balance out the conflicting goals of the justice system and reduces the prevalence and impact of dual roles and dual role conflicts.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

As discussed, three themes emerged in the data: (a) role dilemma of responsibility without authority, (b) vicarious trauma of professional role-informed approaches, and (c)

frustration and helplessness with lack of clinically appropriate resources. Themes related to challenges that the participants experienced within their roles as well as challenges that presented in the juveniles and the system that impacted the work that the social workers were doing within the juvenile justice system and how this is impacting social worker experiences within this system and burnout.

### **Theme 1: Role Dilemma of Responsibility Without Authority**

Current literature states that the primary mission for the field of social work is to enhance the well-being of individuals and to help meet both the basic and complex needs of all humans (NASW, 2025). Additionally, the profession of social work strives to help improve the lives of others and to fight for justice, improve communities, and relieve people's suffering (NASW, 2025). The profession of social work places a large emphasis on furthering social justice through policy change efforts (Pritzker & Giraldo-Santiago, 2022). While none of the eight social workers are currently in a social work position that focuses specifically on policy change efforts, they are all working as advocates.

Advocates for juvenile offenders and their families as well as advocates for positive changes to the juvenile justice system, both directly and indirectly. They are acting as guides and educators for other professionals who may be unaware of best practices, which aids in creating positive systemic change, even if it may feel slow. This study highlights many of the challenges that the identified population works with and how that impacts the work that they are able to do both for and with juvenile offenders. But it also highlights how they work to balance those challenges to continue to aid in the field of social work and to assist juvenile offenders. The present study recognizes the needs of

social workers who work within the juvenile justice system and how their challenges may be impacted or influenced by the dual roles that they hold as social workers and social workers within the juvenile justice system, a system that often opposes the field of social work.

The challenges that these social workers face tie into the roles that they hold. They hold professional roles within the field of social work as well as within the juvenile justice system. As discussed, these social workers hold both responsibility and accountability over the work that they do and the youth, but they do not hold authority within the system or the overall systemic outcomes of the youth which can impact burnout.

## **Theme 2: Vicarious Trauma of Professional Role-Informed Approaches**

This study highlights the need for social workers and individuals with knowledge and experience in trauma-informed approaches and how this can benefit youth outcomes both within the juvenile justice system as well as long-term. The negative impacts of individuals working within the juvenile justice system who do not hold or utilize a trauma-informed approach are counterproductive to the goals of the juvenile justice system. Allowing social workers to have more authority over the youth and within this system could lead to improved outcomes, which is a goal of social workers, as well as prevent recidivism and future crimes, which are goals of the juvenile justice system. A more trauma-informed approach could help social workers to feel more supported within the juvenile justice system, could help improve youth outcomes, and could prevent burnout in the social workers who work within the juvenile justice system. Additionally,

this could help address the role inconsistencies discussed above. If other individuals within the juvenile justice system hold knowledge relating to trauma-informed approaches, practices within the system could change, which could support the goals of social work and the work that the social workers are trying to do. This could lead to a decrease in role inconsistency as well as prevent burnout.

Many youth and their families present with needs and vulnerabilities that can benefit from social work interventions but that social workers are often tasked with providing these supportive interventions within systems that do not align with the goals of social work (Dettlaff et al., 2023). The use of punitive methods and approaches can lead to negative impacts on children and their outcomes (Dettlaff et al., 2023). Youth arrests and incarceration are correlated with increased suicidality, functional health limitations, and adverse health and mental health outcomes (Tolliver et al., 2022). As such, youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system can benefit from the supportive and trauma-informed approaches that social workers are experienced and knowledgeable in, however other individuals who work within this system, such as judges and parole/probation officers, do not have this knowledge or experience, which can lead to punitive approaches that lead to further harm and negative long-term impacts on the youth.

### **Theme 3: Frustration and Helplessness with Lack of Clinically Appropriate Resources**

Smith Ramey (2023) acknowledged the lack of access to evidence-based treatment and practices, as well as a lack of services, services being unavailable, or

fragmented services, which can impact long-term outcomes for youth. Youth who do not have access to adequate resources are at risk for additional system involvement, a longer length of stay within the juvenile justice system, and additional system involvement long-term. Social workers are limited in the services that they can provide or refer out to.

When the necessary services are not available or not available in the desired geographic location, the youth suffer. This can lead to further harm for the youth and negative long-term impacts in relation to mental health as well as physical health for youth (Dettlaff et al., 2023). This study highlights the need for clinically appropriate resources both within the juvenile justice system as well as within communities and schools as it can benefit the youth entering the system as well as the social workers who provide services within the juvenile justice system, which can reduce social worker role inconsistencies and burnout.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of the challenges in the juvenile justice system is that policies, practices, and regulations vary significantly from state to state. This study utilized participants across five states with different positions within the system. Individuals worked as school social workers at juvenile detention centers, in private practice with adjudicated youth, as counselors/social workers embedded within a detention center, and as counselors/social workers at residential facilities for adjudicated youth. The wide range of positions within this system makes it challenging to generalize the results. It is also assumed that the results may vary from this study should a specific state or type of social worker within this system be studied. The small sample size presents limitations to generalizability as well. Interviews and reviewing transcripts for codes and themes are time intensive

processes which can make utilizing a larger sample size more challenging; however, a larger sample size could yield more generalizable results.

A final limitation is that while the results are telling, they do not adequately address the dual roles that social workers within the juvenile justice system experience in an explicit way. Much of the data and the interviews with participants touch on the challenges that they face and how this can impact dual roles, but further research that explicitly discusses the dual roles may provide a more accurate representation.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended to conduct the same or a similar study within either one state or to identify a specific type of social worker within the juvenile justice system, such as a social worker who is embedded within a detention center or a social worker who works in private practice with adjudicated youth. A more specific approach could yield more generalizable results.

### **Implications**

The results of this study can benefit social workers, and, in some cases, mental health professionals/counselors, who work within the juvenile justice system. It can help guide policies and practices to both benefit the social workers and the youth that they treat. This study highlights the needs of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system and therefore can be used to help fill the gaps and address those needs. This study identifies specific resources as well as community and family support that are lacking for youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system and how addressing

these can lead to a decrease in social worker role inconsistency, improve system-related practices, and in turn prevent social worker burnout.

This study can also help create more structured and consistent policies around juvenile offenders and the programs that are offered to support them within the juvenile justice system. As mentioned, the juvenile justice system varies greatly from state to state and even within states depending on the counties, judges, and parole/probation officers. This study highlights how the individuals and this system could benefit from creating training about juvenile offenders and their needs, risk factors, and evidence-based ways to interact with, support, and treat them as they navigate this system in a way that addresses the goals of the juvenile justice system, and the goals of the social workers who treat them.

### **Conclusion**

Social workers focus on others, improving the well-being of others, helping others to meet their basic needs, helping others to meet their complex needs, advocating for changes in systems, families, and communities, and to relieve the suffering of others (NASW, 2025). Social work is a profession that encourages the individual to take a back seat to the work that they do to facilitate change for others. Social workers who work within the juvenile justice system still have these focuses but also have to focus on reducing recidivism, educational outcomes, and histories of trauma, among other things, that may not be as prevalent in other systems. While many of the roles and goals align with the profession of social work, others do not. It is important for social workers who work within the juvenile justice system to balance the goals of the profession, the goals of

the system, and the social workers' code of ethics, in a way that facilitates meeting the needs of the youth that they serve but also the system that is temporarily in charge of their lives. This study highlights the challenges that these social workers face, how best to support them, as well as ways to address the dilemmas that they experience in a way that aligns with the goals of the social work profession.

Current literature states that the primary mission for the field of social work is to enhance the well-being of individuals and to help meet both the basic and complex needs of all humans (NASW, 2025). Additionally, the profession of social work strives to help improve the lives of others and to fight for justice, improve communities, and relieve people's suffering (NASW, 2025). The profession of social work places a large emphasis on furthering social justice through policy change efforts (Pritzker & Giraldo-Santiago, 2022). While none of the eight social workers are currently in a social work position that focuses specifically on policy change efforts, they are all working as advocates and to balance the social worker code of ethics, the role of their profession, and their role within the juvenile justice system.

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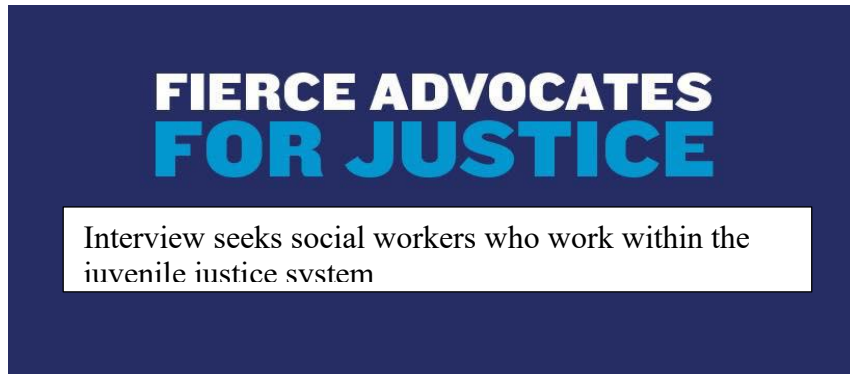
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## Appendix A: Social Media Invitation



Caption: There is a new study about the experiences of social workers who work within the juvenile justice system that could help these mental health providers better understand their roles within the system of social work as well as the juvenile justice system and how to balance these roles in an effective and appropriate manner. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences as a social worker working within the juvenile justice system.

**About the study:**

- One 30-60 minute Zoom interview that will be audio-recorded
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Master's degree in social work (or a related field)
- Has worked as a social worker/mental health professional within the juvenile justice system

- A minimum of one year experience working as a social worker/mental health professional working within the juvenile justice system

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Tayler Deggendorfer, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during October and November.

Please message or email ( [REDACTED] ) Tayler Deggendorfer privately to let her know of your interest.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Tayler Deggendorfer. I am currently pursuing doctoral degree in Human Services with a specialization in criminal justice at Walden University. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview and the overall study is to gather data and information on social workers who work within the juvenile justice system and what their experiences in this role, within this system are. This interview will remain anonymous, and your name will be changed in the interview data that is included within the study. Confidentiality will be maintained and any personal and/or identifying information will not be shared with anyone. This interview will last approximately one hour. I will be taking notes as well as recording the interview. After reviewing the informed consent documentation, do you have any questions before we begin?

If at any time during the interview you need a break, are uncomfortable, or would like to decline to answer a question for any reason, please let me know.

The research question for this study is as follows: What are the lived experiences of social workers who work in the U.S. juvenile justice system as it relates to the dilemmas that arise as a result of the dual roles that these professionals experience? The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the lived experiences of a selected sample of social workers, or mental health professionals, who work within the U.S. juvenile justice system and the potential internal conflict that arises because of the dual roles these professionals experience, specifically the dilemmas of these dual roles.

Do you have any questions? If not, let's begin the interview.

## Interview Questions

- What type of training and experience was required to obtain the position that you are currently working in?
- What is (or was) your primary role as a part of the juvenile justice system?
  - Tell me about a typical day when you are working within this system.
- What different groups of individuals do (or did) you generally work with, including professionals and families?
- What are the most common needs of the populations that you work with?
- What is (or was) your role in interacting with outside mental health providers, agencies, and family members?
- What resources do (or did) you have available to you/access to complete your job?
  - Can you give me a specific example?
- Do you feel as though you have enough resources or support from the system that you work in to be able to effectively complete your job? If not, what would be beneficial, necessary, or helpful to have access to?
  - Can you give me a specific example of resources that are beneficial or helpful and the type of resources that would be beneficial or necessary to help you in your role within this system?
- What are the primary goals in the work that you do with the population that you work with?
  - What determines a successful or positive outcome?

- Does your definition of a positive outcome differ from that of your employer or this system?
  - How does this impact you, your perspective on your job and the work that you do, and the work that you do with the individuals that you serve?
- Have there been any situations or experiences where you were challenged by the system that you work in or the resources available to you? Can you please give an example or describe this situation?
- Have you ever felt as though your role as a social worker/mental health practitioner within this system challenged your role as a social worker/mental health practitioner in general? Can you please elaborate or describe this situation?
- What made you choose to pursue a career in social work/mental health?
- What are some challenging aspects of your job?
- What are some things that you enjoy or love about your job?
  - What do those experiences mean to you?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me before we finish this interview?

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for your time and participation in this interview. I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for your interview to the email address you provided on the informed consent form. I will be completing additional interviews and I will then evaluate all of the interviews for themes and other helpful data/information. Prior to

completing this study and publishing it, you will have access to your interview as well as the study itself and the results. If at any time you have questions, concerns, or wish to withdraw your participation, please feel free to reach out to me via email or phone. Thank you again for your time and participation.