

## Editorial

### **It's Not CSI: The Importance of Forensics for Social Work Education**

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When most people hear the term “forensic” they immediately think of the popular television show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, or perhaps, other crime shows that feature highly sophisticated laboratory and computer equipment that quickly lead the police to identifying the perpetrator of a sensational crime. Needless to say, this is not an accurate portrayal of real-world forensic investigation, as recently evidenced by the alarming discovery of between 100,000–400,000 untested rape kits nationwide, with some sitting in police evidence lockers for many decades (Graham, 2014). Importantly, this is also not an accurate depiction of forensic social work, which rarely relies on laboratory evidence. And yet, forensic practice is fairly widespread in our profession, despite the fact that most social workers in forensic settings do not necessarily identify themselves as forensic social workers.

Although there are a number of different definitions of what, exactly, forensic social work encompasses, in the narrowest sense it refers to the intersection of social work practice and the legal system. Maschi and Killian (2011), however, have argued for a broader and more integrative definition that not only explicitly includes our profession's commitment to both social justice and human rights, but also stresses the collaborative nature of forensic social work. Forensic social workers are found in a variety of settings and perform diverse roles and functions including child and elder protection, child advocacy, child custody cases, termination of parental rights and adoptions, services to juvenile and adults in correctional institutions, court mandated mental health and substance abuse treatment, services for crime victims, community service for offenders and restitution to victims, human

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trafficking, domestic violence, education, health care, welfare rights, kinship and elder care, evaluation of competency in civil and criminal trials, sentence mitigation, and mediation, among others. In addition, social workers in many settings may be called to testify in court as either a fact witness or expert witness (Barker & Branson, 2000; Maschi & Killian, 2011; Munson, 2011). Given the widespread arenas in which forensic social work is present, we believe it is important for social work educators to be aware of the breadth of forensic social work as well as the unique challenges that social work practitioners face when they are involved in forensic roles and settings.

Not coincidentally, forensic social work evolved concurrently with social work practice and shares the same roots. From the English Poor Laws, which determined the categories of people who legally deserved assistance and became embedded in colonial policies of the United States, to the formation of the juvenile court, to the social reform movements of the early 1900s, forensic social work has been present, at least to some extent, in both community and clinical practice from the onset (Maschi & Killian, 2011; Roberts & Brownell, 1999). However, according to Munson (2011), forensic social work did not begin to take on a larger role within the profession until the 1960s, when people began to turn to the legal system as a remedy for issues previously not dealt with in the legal venue.

Although social workers are trained in various aspects of social work practice, they are rarely trained in the forensic or legal arena. Forensic social work involves boundary spanning, challenging social workers to address the interconnectedness between society's legal and human service systems (Barker & Branson, 2000). Central to forensic social work is the ability of social workers to navigate the legal and criminal justice systems with which their clients are often involved or are at risk of involvement. This necessarily includes social workers' ability to convey information in court through competent testimony, either as a fact or expert witness. Unfortunately, social work programs rarely prepare students for the reality of social work practice in the courts, or with forensic populations or settings, based on the idea that they will receive on-the-job training. Many judges complain that social workers are inadequate witnesses, and that their lack of competence in the court adversely affects case decisions. It does not bode well for either our clients or the profession if we continue to ignore this and other forensic issues that are central to our professional mission.

However, recent current events, such as the deaths of Black men Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, and the Black Lives Matter movement appear to have provided a wake-up call to the social work profession. It is becoming common knowledge among social workers that the United States is the largest incarcerator in the world, with over 2.3 million individuals in prison, of which 200,000 are elderly (ACLU, 2012). Adding to this is the reality of racial disproportionality which is not only apparent in the adult criminal justice system, but for juveniles as well (McCarter, 2011).

And while other social problems, such as family and community violence persist, social work programs have paid minimal attention to educating students to navigate these many forensic topics even though they intersect with human rights and social justice. Although overdue, social work programs across the nation have finally begun to recognize the ways in which systemic racism and oppression contribute to not only social injustice, but forensic injustice as well. Of special importance was the collective call to end structural racism and violence by promoting more restorative approaches to justice matters (NADD, 2015). This call to action further demonstrates the necessity of providing students with forensic social work content in the curriculum. This call is consistent with the recent *New York Times* Editorial, “The ‘Missing’ Black Men” by Marc Lauer (April 23, 2015). Mauer underscores the importance of promoting more wide-scale social welfare policies development and reform to replace the overuse of criminal justice punitive policies that have been the drivers of mass incarceration and the premature death of black men. Preparing graduates in forensic social work to tackle social welfare and criminal justice reform is critical for the social work profession to be at the forefront of this transformation.

With the recent release of the Council on Social Work Education’s 2015 Educational Policy (CSWE, 2015), the time is ripe for examining ways in which we might better address forensic issues and content in our courses and curriculum. CSWE states that the “*purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being*” (CSWE 2015). It expects social workers not only to be competent to “*advance human rights and social and economic justice*” but to understand the “*relevant laws and regulations that may impact practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels*” (CSWE, 2015). The revised competencies also infuse an intersectionality framework based on characteristics such as race, gender, social class, and LGBT, mental health and immigration status, among others. Yet, our educational policies fail to explicitly address the fact that these groups are extremely likely to be victimized and criminalized as a form of oppression. They also pay scant attention to how one’s legal status or criminal justice history is another type of disadvantaged social location in which people often experience ongoing social exclusion and discrimination, particularly in areas such as housing and employment. Given these mandates, we believe it is imperative that the social work curriculum prepare students to work within the reality of the ever-increasing forensic world in which we all live.

A handful of social work programs have already instituted forensic social work specializations, while others offer the option of a joint or dual Master of Social Work/Juris Doctor degree. Short of major curriculum revision, or the addition of a forensic specialization, there are other ways to accomplish this within the structure of existing courses and curricula.

This may include, for example, having students engage in forensic social work research and empowerment practice, or having them formulate and advocate for policies to reduce co-morbid health, behavioral health, and criminal justice disparities. Perhaps above all, we must increase our commitment to working with these often stigmatized populations (McCarter, 2011).

Importantly, forensic social work requires interprofessional collaboration. However, social workers must first learn to appreciate the professional differences between lawyers, law enforcement, and social workers so they can learn to navigate the legal arena. We believe that it is critical for social work programs to not only prepare students for the reality of professional practice but also educate both social work students and colleagues about the legal aspects of their work, as well as the expectations of ethical and best practice standards when intersecting with the legal arena.

Increased scholarship about forensic issues in social work and innovations in forensic social work education are also necessary to make the profession more aware of the breadth of forensic social work practice. As a start to accomplish this, we would like to invite our readers to contribute forensically based articles to the *Journal of Social Work Education*, the *Journal of Forensic Social Work*, and *Traumatology: An International Journal*. The time is ripe. The time is now to return to our charity roots once again with a commitment to justice for all.

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