

**Defund the Police: Moving Towards an Anti-Carceral Social Work**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses social work's place in the movement to "defund the police." We argue that social work's collaboration with police and use of policing constitutes *carceral social work*. In defining carceral social work, we specify the ways in which coercive and punitive practices are used to manage Black, Indigenous, other people of color and poor communities across four social work arenas – gender-based violence, child welfare, schools, and health and mental health. To inform *anti-carceral social work*, we provide examples of interventions in these arenas that dismantle police collaborations and point to life-affirming, community-centered, and mutual aid alternatives.

**Keywords:** social work, police, abolition, transformative justice, White supremacy

**Defund the Police: Moving Towards an Anti-Carceral Social Work**

May 26, 2020 marked the beginning of a series of racial justice protests across the United States. Throughout the following summer, mass demands to “defund the police; defend the people” reverberated throughout the nation in response to law enforcement-perpetrated murders of unarmed Black people—George Floyd, whose brutal murder sparked the uprising; Breonna Taylor, fatally shot as she lay in her bed; Tony McDade, a transgender man, who died at the hands of the police the day after the death of George Floyd; and countless others before and since. Uprisings from urban centers to suburban and rural outposts has led to a nationwide reassessment of the role of policing as a centerpiece of U.S. policy.

The protests of also fixed a spotlight on the field of social work. The demands to defund the police and the flurry of public discourse that followed raised questions about the power and authority vested in law enforcement and the possibility of alternative solutions to the problems we call on law enforcement to address (see, e.g., Kaba, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Taub, 2020). The suggestion that social workers provide an ameliorative softening of police powers or a more pronounced *alternative* to the police ignited debates within and outside of social work that revealed the vexed history of social work and its ambivalent role in the U.S. socio-politico-economic context.

The early public reaction of social work’s organized bodies reflected vastly divided positions. On the one hand, the National Association of Social Work (NASW), arguably the organization most widely recognized, championed social work’s history of collaboration with the police (McClain, 2020). Another representative body, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2020), similarly offered “sympathies and condolences” to those directly affected by

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police violence, while continuing to support police and social work interprofessional collaboration.

These initial public pronouncements championing social work's pro-police position galvanized a more critical social work response, one that denounced police violence against Black people and voiced support for structural change in policing (Society for Social Work and Research, 2020; The California Association of Deans and Directors, personal communication, June 22, 2020). A defiant faction countered that social work should be part of the larger movement to divest from policing (Abrams & Dettlaff, 2020; Social Service Workers United-Chicago, 2020), arguing, in some cases, for the abolition of current forms of social work and related sectors (e.g., child welfare), given their history of social control and racial oppression (Dettlaff & Weber, 2020; Riley, 2020; Roberts, 2020).

In light of the current national reckoning with U.S. investment in law enforcement and its role in upholding White supremacy, the need to reconsider social work's largely uncritical alliance with law enforcement is clear. In this paper, we provide a path forward for social work's divestment from policing, emphasizing the need for simultaneous reinvestment in social welfare and highlighting models of social welfare interventions that operate independently from law enforcement. We begin by discussing carceral social work—addressing social work's own legacy of social control and White supremacy and noting historical and contemporary factors that problematize social work's existing investment in and collaboration with law enforcement and policing. We then turn to four specific social work arena-- gender-based violence, child welfare, schools, and health and mental health. Within these arenas we unpack current investments in law enforcement and related negative effects on individuals and communities. We also identify a decidedly anti-carceral intervention within each arena, unpacking its guiding

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framework and essential practices. Finally, we argue for an *anti-carceral* social work, one that is life-affirming and supports the health, self-determination, and sustainability of all communities, particularly Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC), and others most oppressed and impacted by state violence.

### **Defining Carceral Social Work**

We define *carceral social work* as a form of social work that relies on logics of social control and White supremacy and that uses coercive and punitive practices to manage BIPOC and poor communities. Carceral social work enacts these logics and practices in tandem with the penal arm of the state, condoning and in many cases collaborating or integrating with police, prosecutors, jails, prisons, juvenile and criminal courts. Therefore, we understand carceral social work as two interlocking components – the deployment of tactics, within social work, dependent on the same White supremacist and coercive foundations as policing, as well as direct partnership with law enforcement itself. Both components of carceral social work are oppressive and demand interrogation; here we explore the roots of carceral social work in order to respond to current debates around the harms perpetrated by the police and to disentangle social work from contemporary police practices.

### **Foundations of Carceral Social Work: Social Control and White Supremacy**

Logics of social control and White supremacy, as well as related coercive practices, are well-documented in social work's early history. Social work developed alongside industrial capitalism, an attempt at ameliorating the social sequelae of capitalist development (see Gordon, 1995; Piven & Cloward, 1993; Platt, 1977; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Many of the first duties of social workers were to aid new immigrants entering the United States from 1875-1924. During this period, the primary goals of social work were to assist in protecting immigrants from

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exploitation by the growing industrializing society and to “teach” immigrants how to assimilate (Park & Kemp, 2006). These contradictory aims uncover the history of the profession’s role in enforcing social control. In fact, the prevailing social perception of immigrants from southern and eastern European countries was that they were “unassimilable and unfit for integration into American polity, society, and bloodline” (Abbott, 1924, p. 89; Park & Kemp, 2006). In addition to reinforcing social control by separating immigrants from the larger society unless they could conform to social norms, these sentiments pathologized “undesirable” traits as inherent to non-White, non-northern European immigrants.

The support for oppressive social control practices further characterized the Progressive Era of social work with social work founders such as Richmond, Addams, Breckinridge, and Abbott advocating for the practice of eugenics to root out undesirable traits from society (Kennedy, 2008). These traits included being unmarried, diagnosed with a mental illness, and being Black. The support for eugenics led to the forceful sterilization of hundreds of young girls in the United States and continued practices of reproductive control targeting BIPOC communities (Kennedy, 2008; Roberts, 1999). In the arena of child welfare, social workers assisted in genocidal atrocities enacted across generations of Native American communities, leaving a legacy of historical trauma lasting generations (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Between the mid-1890s and extending into the 1970s, social workers participated in the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and their placement in government run boarding schools in order to “Europeanize” them, resulting in the removal of tens of thousands of children from their families, tribes, and culture (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

While these examples highlight only some of social work’s role in upholding White supremacy and racial capitalism, the latter tying capitalist development not only to class division

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but also to racial and other divides (Kelley, 2017), they further serve as a reminder that social work's repeated claims of social justice can belie historical legacies and contemporary practices that uphold the opposite. As critical race theorists have long attested, it is the very focus on the excesses of oppressive practices, such as visibly egregious forms of police violence, that can excuse everyday practices of violence. The legitimization of social control as uniform and rationalized mechanisms carried out by the institutions of social welfare can further perpetuate everyday practices of surveillance, categorization, and decisions over benefits versus exclusions as invisible and normalized aspects of modern administrative life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Thus, social work's foundational logics of social control and White supremacy and their often comparatively subtle manifestations in social work practice align with and support the carceral state.

### **Carceral Social Work and Law Enforcement**

Though the relation between social work and law enforcement is not the sole manifestation of carceral social work, the movement to defund police begs the profession to reconsider its support for and collaboration with this part of the broader carceral state. Social work within law enforcement has a long history, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Patterson & Swan, 2019). However, in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest in a range of hybridized and collaborative social work and law enforcement models grew alongside the rise of the “penal arm of the state” (Wacquant, 2009). One orientation has called for the integration of social work into law enforcement in the form of “police social work” (see, e.g., Carr, 1979; Roberts, 1978; Treger, 1980); another orientation has argued for social workers to intervene upon law enforcement, in an effort to make law enforcement more like social work (e.g., by training law enforcement; Roberts, 1978; Slaght, 2002; Ward-Lasher et al., 2017); and another orientation has

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called for increased “interprofessional collaboration” between law enforcement and social work more broadly (Abel & Suh, 1987; Holmes, 1982; Patterson, 2007; Treger, 1981).

Given that a majority of calls to the police are less crime related and more a response to social service needs, it makes sense that police-based social work and collaborative programs most commonly seek to address domestic or sexual violence, mental illness, and delinquency among youth (Patterson & Swan, 2019). Proponents of social work and law enforcement collaboration argue that the relationship addresses “a vital need” (Roberts, 1978, p. 98), “provides new relationships and opportunities for public service” (Treger, 1980, p. 3), and that social workers bring to policing the “professional expertise necessary to address...social problems” (Patterson & Swan, 2019, p. 867).

In our view, arguments for strong relationships between social work and policing are severely limited by the following five factors:

1. *The ideal of police social work appears far from empirical reality.* In an extensive systematic review, Patterson and Swan (2019) note the lack of research testing the effectiveness of police social work in addressing social problems. Research on other carceral systems suggests social work can be compromised when placed within these systems. For example, Solomon and Draine’s (1995) evaluation of case management’s impact on recidivism indicated that probation officer-case manager collaboration may *increase* recidivism among people on probation. Ultimately, little empirical support exists for the effectiveness of police social work or its superiority over social work alone, while some evidence suggests the goal of collaboration may be difficult to achieve and when achieved may lead to unintended, negative consequences.

2. *Collaboration with law enforcement hinders liberatory social movements and anti-oppressive social work practice.* Some social work scholars have critiqued social work’s reliance



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on law enforcement and the integration of law enforcement and social work practice. Kim (2013) highlights the way in which social work in the anti-domestic violence arena contributed to the corruption of liberatory social movement efforts and the “legitimization of criminalization as a dominant frame for social amelioration and the unwitting participation in the construction of the carceral state” (p. 1285). Mehrotra and colleagues (2016) argue that, along with neoliberalism and professionalization, criminalization has impaired domestic violence work by reducing structural intervention, contributing to the carceral state and hyperincarceration, and “fetishizing safety” (i.e., prioritizing physical safety and limiting interventions to those that seek to physically protect individual “victims” from individual “perpetrators”; see also Kim, 2013), with particularly deleterious effects on BIPOC, poor, queer, and gender non-conforming communities. This critique echoes those made by Lynch and Mitchell (1995) two decades prior when they stated, “[F]or too long social workers have accepted the tendency to serve as little more than functionaries of the U.S. legal system. In this role, intended advocacy on behalf of clients is essentially negated” (p. 10).

3. *Social control and White supremacy are foundational to law enforcement.* In the United States, modern policing grew out of southern slave patrols (Hadden, 2001; Turner et al., 2006) and a British model of organized policing that sought control over poor people (Hansan, 2011; Robinson & Scaglione, 1987; Walker, 1980). Post reconstruction, anti-Black vestiges of slave patrols remained in police-enforced Jim Crow laws, which sought social control over Black people, segregation of Black Americans from White Americans, and dehumanization of Black communities (Alexander, 2012; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; S. Robinson, 2017). This racialized system of enforcement etched racism into the modern police system, in which contemporary “race neutral” policies disguise their disproportionate impact on BIPOC communities (e.g., crack

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cocaine sentencing disparities, “stop and frisk” procedures, and graduated sentencing). The British professionalized form of policing also heavily influenced law enforcement in the United States today (Walker, 1980), bringing with it the aims of British Poor Laws enshrined in British policing—i.e., that police are responsible for the management of poor people for the benefit of property owners (Hansan, 2011; Robinson & Scaglione, 1987). Initially a tool for business elites to maintain order among workers and markets in expanding cities, these policies later emerged in the late 1960s in efforts to regain political ground after the civil rights movement and to manage the collapse of industrial urban centers (Wacquant, 2010; Weaver, 2007). Since the 1980s, the continuation of efforts to manage poverty and the poor are notable in bail systems, “broken windows” policing, and laws against homelessness (Beckett & Herbert, 2009; Edelman, 2017; Spitzer & Scull, 1977).

4. *Reliance on policing comes with costs to the broader social safety net.* Studies of the rise of the criminal legal system in the United States emphasize the association between the expanding carceral state and welfare state retrenchment (Wacquant, 2009, 2010). Nothing represents the trade-off between penal and social welfare intervention more than the near simultaneous passage of the 1994 Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act, which further fiscally incentivized penal responses to social problems, and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which ended an entitlement to welfare. The “punitive turn” – the criminalization of social problems and recruitment of U.S. citizens into the ethos of crime control – characterizing the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has fueled the growth of the carceral state at the expense of the welfare state. Ultimately, the penal system has become the “catch all solution” for a variety of social and economic problems (Gilmore, 2007, p. 5).

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5. *Reliance on law enforcement has deleterious consequences for BIPOC and poor people and communities.* The U.S. reliance on penal intervention has most directly resulted in the highest incarceration rate in the world, and incalculable social and fiscal costs (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Further, the targeting of penal intervention by race, class, and place, has resulted in the dramatic overrepresentation of Black and economically poor people in carceral systems (Wacquant, 2001). As the front end of the carceral state, law enforcement's negative impact is rendered most obvious by excessive use of force, often against Black people. The number of people killed by police in the United States outpaces that of other comparable countries (Serhan, 2020), with law enforcement three times as likely to kill a Black person than a White person, and Black people being 30% less likely to be armed (*Mapping Police Violence*, 2020). For Black people with a mental illness, those statistics are even more stark (Saleh et al., 2018).

In sum, police-social work collaborative models lack an evidentiary basis; penal investment has significant social and fiscal costs; and investment in law enforcement bolsters social control and White supremacy. In light of these factors and the current national reckoning with and questioning of U.S. investment in law enforcement, we argue that social work's uncritical alliance with law enforcement must be challenged. Divestment in the carceral arm of the state should be accompanied by investment in the social welfare arm of the state. However, the role of the welfare state in the United States is tempered by the field's own history of social control and racial oppression. Thus, questions of what kind of social work and what kind of social welfare system are critical in such demands for increased social welfare investments.

### **Anti-Carceral Possibilities Across Social Work Arenas**

To further understand the need and vision for anti-carceral social work and social systems, we look across four social work arenas – gender-based violence, child welfare, schools,

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and health and mental health. For each, we identify latent and explicit ties to law enforcement, briefly highlight the negative consequences of these ties, and provide examples of interventions that intentionally avoid the involvement of and collaboration with law enforcement. These examples were selected based on their explicit disengagement from logics of social control and punishment and disconnection from institutions and practices that further these logics – law enforcement, coercive forms of social work, and policing. *Table 1* briefly describes these examples, as well as other examples of anti-carceral organizations and programs not fully discussed in this paper. We conclude by tracing the theoretical underpinnings of each and key practice components of these interventions, which may be applied to other programs and settings.

[Place Table 1 about here]

### **Gender-Based Violence**

#### ***Carceral Feminism and Ties to Law Enforcement***

The gender-based violence intervention arena or, more specifically, anti-domestic violence and sexual violence services, have been deeply connected to law enforcement. Institutions that form the bedrock of the social work response to gender-based violence – victim witness programs, Community Coordinated Response (CCR), and Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs) – tie advocacy and care directly to law enforcement (Kim, 2020), earning the field the moniker of *carceral feminism* (Bernstein, 2010). More recently, initiatives to address sex trafficking have prompted landslide wins for legislation enhancing crime control efforts. They have resulted in a myriad of programs that leverage arrest, compliance with law enforcement, and subjugation to moral rescue from the sex trade to aid “victims of crime,” even when voluntarily chosen as forms of work (Bernstein, 2010; Panichelli, 2018). Indeed, the

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landmark legislation applauded for its recognition of gender-based violence as a crime, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994, was passed as a part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, federal legislation featuring a set of draconian policies that further accelerated hyperincarceration and concretized collaboration between the anti-violence field and the carceral state (Kim, 2013).

In practice, several negative sequelae can be traced to the interconnection between the anti-gender-based violence arena and law enforcement. Not only have survivors of gender-based violence been held under a coercive framework defined by strict and often racialized gender-binaries that closely align with those of crime control, that is, the “good female victim” and the “bad male perpetrator,” but they have also been subject to a set of remarkably narrow remedies despite the anti-violence movement’s creed of “survivor-centeredness” (Kim, 2013; Koyama, 2006; Mehrotra et al., 2016). Today’s survivor of gender-based violence faces a set of options rigidly determined by binary gender and victim-perpetrator categories, safety contingent on a model of escape and refuge for survivors and police intervention for perpetrators and professionalized and individualized service delivery models that are inaccessible or harmful to many communities.

While the anti-violence response involves agents beyond the field of social work, the social work role within this sector remains tightly bound to these professional constraints and, indeed, are likely to strengthen the individualized case management and law enforcement-aligned approach to violence intervention within a field once characterized by feminist organizing strategies (Kim, 2013; Mehrotra et al., 2016). In addition, survivors of gender-based violence who do not fit the “good victim” standard are not only excluded from services through failure to meet program criteria or guidelines, but may be entrapped in the web of surveillance

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that casts them as criminals rather than survivors of violence deserving of safety, dignity and resources (Koyama, 2006; Mogul et al., 2011; Richie, 2012). Those excluded or criminalized tend to be BIPOC, transgender, gender non-binary, and queer people, immigrant communities, youth, people involved in sex trade, people with disabilities, and beyond (Bierra, 2007; Chen et al., 2016; INCITE!, 2016; Richie, 2012).

### *Anti-Carceral Gender-Based Violence Intervention: Creative Interventions*

In 2000, the founding of a radical feminist social movement organization, INCITE!, established by women of color, organized under a radical political framework that paved a pathway towards the anti-carceral or abolitionist transformative justice movement today (INCITE!, 2016; Kim, 2018). The founders took an explicit departure from the mainstream anti-violence field by centering BIPOC communities, championing community organizing and political mobilization strategies (as opposed to direct services) and naming not only interpersonal violence but state violence as a primary perpetrator of violence against women and communities of color. Individuals and organizations affiliated with INCITE! developed not only political analyses at the intersections of gender-based and state violence but also practices that integrated services with organizing approaches driven by those most impacted by interpersonal, systemic, and institutional violence.

Building from this work, Creative Interventions, a Bay Area organization, was among the first organizations to develop a non-policing, non-systems community-based approach to address all forms of intimate partner and sexual violence (Kim, 2018). Established in 2004 by one of the co-founders of INCITE!, the organization explored what interventions to violence would look like if they centered the wants and needs of survivors and relied upon the mobilization of friends, family, and community members rather than service providers. In the gap between emerging

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feminist abolitionist politics and a dearth of on-the-ground options reflecting these political principles, Creative Interventions began as a resource center housing a pilot project to develop a collective, non-policing intervention approach (see Creative Interventions, 2012). It also created a storytelling project called StoryTelling & Organizing Project (STOP) which became a clearinghouse for stories of everyday collective responses that could reinvigorate and reshape a public imagination which came to see policing or vigilantism as the only forms of justice.

Creative Interventions radically shifted the focus from organization-based service delivery to one that supported interventions carried out in the homes and neighborhoods where violence occurred—and by those closest to the situation of violence. Creative Interventions positions the survivor, along with those chosen from their network, as the experts on the situation of violence, the factors that could bring safety and accountability, and the cultural conditions that might act as barriers or pathways to change. With this model, long term accountability is not achieved through punishment meted out by the state. Instead, those close to the person or people who have caused harm support change through care and compassion, even amidst sentiments of fear and outrage. The model centers a collective, community based organizing strategy rather than a professionalized individual treatment, case management, or state-based law enforcement model. Ultimately, Creative Interventions differs from traditional service delivery models by orienting its model of violence intervention on organizing community members most directly impacted by violence—survivors, friends, family, and allies, and the person who caused harm.

### **Child Welfare**

#### ***Child Welfare as an Extension of Policing***

Although the child welfare system is not explicitly an arm of the U.S. criminal legal system, there are multiple points at which the child welfare system works directly in

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collaboration with law enforcement, most notably in the case of child protective services (CPS) investigations and forcible child removals, sometimes jointly carried out by social workers and law enforcement (Detlaff et al., 2020; Palinkas et al., 2014). Each of these new points of contact with law enforcement opens the possibility for state sanctioned violence and criminalization towards BIPOC and families living in poverty that disproportionately interface with the child welfare system. However, the child welfare system is, itself, a distinct and pervasive system of surveillance and punishment, with the capacity to remove children from families and deem the state as legal guardians for those children and youth referred to foster care, representing “perhaps the greatest power a state can exercise over its people: the power to forcibly take children away from parents and permanently sever parent-child relationships” (Sangoi, 2020, p. 10). In 2018, CPS agencies received 4.3 million referrals with 2.4 millions of those screened in for a CPS response (U.S. Department of Health Services [DHS], 2020).

Though the vast majority of CPS cases involve neglect related to poverty (Roberts, 2009, 2020), child welfare responses fail to address social and economic root causes. Rather, they employ social control strategies that draw children and parents more deeply into a system of surveillance and separation that produces poor outcomes (Detlaff & Weber, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Often well intentioned and under-supported, social workers and others who work in the child welfare system have historically acted in complicity with policies and practices that promote racialized family surveillance and separation (see, e.g., Clifford & Silver-Greenberg, 2017; Jones et al., 2020; Movement for Family Power, 2019; Roberts, 2009). Economically poor Black families are the most likely to be targeted for state disruption (Roberts, 2009, 2020) and Black children’s outcomes within the child welfare system are poorer; they spend more time in foster care and are less likely to be reunified or adopted (Detlaff et al., 2020; Roberts, 2009).



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In general, young people who enter foster care are far more likely to experience interrupted education and curtailed educational access, poorer mental health outcomes, an increased likelihood of juvenile justice involvement, and adult incarceration and poverty (Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003). These poor outcomes are exacerbated for BIPOC youth, queer and transgender youth, and youth who are multiply marginalized (Mountz, 2020; Roberts, 2009; Shpiegel & Simmel, 2016). In this way, the child welfare system also serves as a carceral pipeline for the nation's most marginalized youth. Some scholars and advocates refer to child welfare as a system of "family regulation," and CPS's role as one of "policing" (Movement for Family Power, 2019; Roberts, 2020; Williams, 2020), thereby challenging the name and narrative of "child protection" and "child welfare."

### ***Anti-Carceral Child Protective Intervention: Bay Area Transformative Justice Collaborative***

In families in which there is known physical abuse towards children, there are few options within current state based child welfare practice for restoring safety, transforming the conditions that contribute to violence within families of origin, or avoiding recurrent trauma in foster care (Riebschleger et al., 2015). As part of a larger transformative justice movement, The Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC) (n.d.) promotes a response to harm completely outside of the scope of child welfare, law enforcement, and the extensive network of social services and schools that constitute today's extended carceral web. BATJC grew out of the work of generationFIVE, an organization founded and led by survivors of child sexual abuse in the late 1990s and an early proponent of transformative justice (generationFIVE, 2017).

BATJC extended a local, organizing model of transformative justice, centered on what the group developed as the concept of *Pods* and the method of *pod mapping* (Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective [BATJC], n.d.). Grounded in the group's understanding that

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people who experience violence, harm and abuse turn to their intimate networks before they turn to external state or social services, a pod is a way of naming the group of people one already relies upon for friendship, solidarity, and problem-solving. The use of pods was an evolutionary process for the organization, representing a shift from what they recognized as a more nebulous notion of *community*. By placing relationship-building at the center of transformative justice work, intentional organizing around already trusting relationships are developed through skills-building in generative conflict, consent, constructive and reciprocal feedback, reliability, and other qualities devalued under neoliberalism but necessary for radical transformation (Mingus, 2016). Through general principles of transformative justice, the development of strong networks based upon pods and the study and practice of transformative justice and restorative justice interventions to child sexual abuse and other related forms of interpersonal violence, BATJC has built local infrastructures and skills to then provide prevention and interventions to child sexual abuse attentive to the specific dynamics, cultures, and resources relevant to diverse and pervasive situations of child sexual abuse (Mingus, 2016).

### **The School Arena**

#### ***Policing Schools and the Criminalization of Students***

Since the 1990s, zero-tolerance policies have extended broader “tough on crime” measures into schools and have promoted the integration of police in schools (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Zero tolerance policies fostered school criminalization, a practice where infractions previously met with a school-based response of detention, suspension, or possible social work intervention (Cameron, 2006) become automatic triggers for arrest and court referrals (Hirschfield, 2008). While some police receive training in child development, mentoring, and school regulation to become “school resource officers” (Theriot, 2016; Theriot & Orme, 2016),

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many officers in schools do not receive any special training for the school setting (Martinez-Prather et al., 2016). When police officers are present, school personnel often yield their authority to enact school discipline (Kupchik, 2016). In turn, police officers, regularly respond to discipline with the issuance of legal interventions in the form of tickets, arrests, and, in some cases, physical violence (Kupchik, 2016; Theriot, 2009).

The integration of police and policing in schools has several detrimental consequences. Youth are more likely to be arrested when police are placed in schools, and arrest significantly increases the risk of negative life outcomes (Hirschfield, 2008; Kupchik, 2016; Theriot, 2016). Compared to schools without school officers, middle and high schools with officers have more arrests for drugs and weapons and “significantly more” arrests for “disorderly conduct” (Theriot, 2009) - a subjective term that could range anywhere from physical altercations to horseplay and cafeteria food fights (Davis, 2019; Kupchik, 2016). These exclusionary practices disproportionately affect youth of color, put undo financial strain on youth and their families, and require time out of school to address charges while introducing youth to courtrooms and criminal processing (see, e.g., mass-issue truancy tickets to students who arrive to school late; (ACLU Southern California, 2011; Blume, 2011; Fuentes, 2012; Hing, 2011). Despite evidence that police officers and zero-tolerance policies do not make schools safer and in many cases make them less safe, they have expanded over the past three decades (Kupchik, 2016; Mallett, 2016; Theriot, 2016).

Many schools lack basic pupil services such as guidance counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers, yet spend precious funds on police officers and surveillance technology (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Mann et al., 2019). In fact, national data indicate an astounding 10 million children attend schools with police officers but no social workers (Mann et

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al., 2019). Most often, these schools serve predominantly Black and Latinx students living in low-income, urban neighborhoods (Mann et al., 2019; Weisburst, 2019). The presence of police and lack of social service support in such schools is endemic to the criminalization of youth of color that fuels racial and economic inequality, as well as hyperincarceration (Hirschfield, 2008; Mallett, 2016).

### *Anti-Carceral School Intervention*

The Just Discipline Project (JDP) is a research-to-practice initiative that supports schools in developing affirming school climates and eliminating reliance on punitive measures through the implementation of restorative practices and an explicit focus on racial equity (Huguley et al., 2018). In contrast to the exclusion and isolation strategies employed by zero-tolerance policies, restorative justice is both a reaction to harm that seeks to repair rather than punish and a “proactive relational strategy to create a culture of connectivity” (Davis, 2019, p. 19).

Recognizing the complexity of changing school culture and of supporting students and school professionals, the JDP model consists of eight inter-dependent tiers: (a) school-community buy-in; (b) strong relational climate; (c) just discipline policies; (d) full-time staff; (e) integrated behavioral systems; (f) attention to race and social context; (g) structural supports (e.g., data tracking systems and professional training); and (f) intensive behavioral and social supports (Huguley et al., 2018).

JDP utilizes a full-time, MSW-level restorative practices coordinator who supports a pilot school in building relationships in and across classrooms, reducing physical altercations by mediating conflict resolutions amongst students, and increasing classroom time by providing alternatives to detention and suspension (Stuart McQueen, Huguley, Haynik, Calaman, Williams, Wang, forthcoming; Huguley et al., 2019). As a result, the pilot school saw a 28% decrease in

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the number of students suspended and a 30% decrease in total disciplinary referrals within two years (Huguley et al., 2019). Additionally, surveys indicated a 19% increase in students' perception of safety at school in the same period. One student leader explained, "we are learning to solve our issues through talking it out with one another instead of fighting. We hope to model that to our communities and together create a better place for us to grow" (Huguley et al., 2019, p. 6). The shift to restorative justice is time intensive and requires a collective commitment from school community members, JDP and other restorative justice approaches, including restorative justice-trained, anti-racist social work professionals. Still, such a re-allocation of resources from punitive to life-affirming interventions can create safer spaces for youth to express themselves, overcome conflict in relationship, and build community within their schools.

### **Health and Mental Health**

#### *Policing and Health Inequity*

Police interventions – from surveillance to interrogation to arrest and detainment - exacerbate health inequities and expose marginalized communities to extreme risk of harm. Activists and scholars cite health and mental health inequities as embodied forms of racial, gender, and economic oppression, further noting that there can be no health equity when certain groups fear the harm and murder of their families and community by the state (INCITE!, 2016; SisterSong, 2020). Encounters with the police result in both acute and chronic mental health and health inequities, including premature death (Miller et al., 2017; Mingus, 2016). Mental illness is a major factor in police killings. Saleh and colleagues (2018) found that the risk of death from police intervention was seven times greater for people with mental illness than for those without, particularly those with untreated mental illness. Housing is also a factor. While those experiencing homelessness and mental illness are vulnerable to police violence (Eisenmann &

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Origanti, 2019), housing alone cannot protect those with mental illness from being killed by the police. Those with mental illness killed by police were far more likely to have been within their homes than those without a history of mental illness (Saleh et al., 2018).

Those with health and mental health needs encounter the police within clinical settings, especially in ambulance services, emergency rooms, or inpatient trauma care facilities (Jones et al., 2006; Seim, 2017). The justification for deploying the police in health crises or in healthcare settings is the protection of frontline workers, patients, or visitors; the management of disorder; and crime investigation (Jones et al., 2006; Seim, 2017). However, as a growing body of evidence suggests, the presence of police officers may increase risk of harm and death for patients. For example, police interactions with patients (e.g., interviewing) may delay or interfere with patient care, increase patient stress, or retraumatize patients (Jones et al., 2006). Police interactions can agitate already disoriented patients and increase distrust of healthcare providers. As outside clinical settings, marginalized people, including BIPOC individuals, people with mental illness, and poor people, bear the brunt of police encounters. For frontline health and mental health workers, the negative consequences of police involvement in their settings include interprofessional tensions, ethical dilemmas, and even risk of harm to frontline workers themselves (Ben-Moshe, 2020; California Health+ Advocates et al., 2017; Jacoby et al., 2018; Structural Competency Working Group, n.d.).

### ***Anti-Carceral Health and Mental Health Intervention: Oakland Powers Project***

Rooted in an abolitionist framework and the explicit rejection of the criminal legal system, Oakland Powers Project (OPP) was launched in California in 2015. OPP aims to build knowledge among providers (including health and mental health social workers) and community members regarding how police involvement exacerbates health and mental health crises, and to

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engage providers and community members in developing responses that minimally involve police (Oakland Powers Projects, 2020). OPP provides direct intervention in two forms; OPP facilitates community investigations when the police have entered communities during health or mental crises and it provides health and mental health response workshops. Workshops cover three areas: (1) behavioral health and de-escalation, (2) drug overdoses, and (3) acute injuries (e.g., vehicle crashes or gunshot/knife wounds). Here, social workers can learn the social and political background of the entanglement of healthcare and policing, reflect on how the police manifest in their own workplaces, develop skills for assessing and supporting people in crisis, and learn how to support community members in becoming crisis interventionists. OPP also distributes flyers to health and mental health providers describing practices for de-escalation and instructions on how to involve local county fire and medical emergency responders instead of police. The relatively simple intervention of educating social workers on alternatives to calling 911 provides the opportunity for social workers to protect clients and communities when they are vulnerable to police violence and help clients in crisis access appropriate care. Initiatives like OPP increase capacity for frontline health and mental health social workers to meaningfully support clients in crisis, analyze the role of police in professional environments, and build trust with communities who bear the brunt of police violence.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Recent calls to defund police have put a spotlight on the relations between law enforcement and social work, calling into question previously accepted police, social work, and policing practices. We argue that policing communities through law enforcement and/or carceral social work practices has not been an effective approach for meaningful, life-affirming community support, healing or building; rather, it has distorted social work practice and values,

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while particularly harming BIPOC and communities; poor people; immigrants; queer, transgender and gender non-conforming people; youth and the elderly; and people with disabilities. As such, we suggest an alternative, anti-carceral social work model which seeks to divest from the carceral arm of the state and enrich and enhance transformative, restorative and abolitionist practices. Anti-carceral social work aligns more closely with social work's core commitment to social justice (NASW, 2017) and should inform foundational social work practices.

Examining law and order responses to social problems and the integration of police and policing in social work practice across arenas, we found several negative consequences. Police and policing exacerbate existing inequalities, supports the rise in hyperincarceration, and, in some cases, sustains limited educational and economic opportunities, negative mental and physical health consequences, exposure to violence, historical trauma, and even death. Within this carceral social work framework, social work across sectors *softens* the police and the control of communities falling outside of a White supremacist norm. Individuals and communities are drawn into social work systems shaped by policies and practices that collaborate with police. What is classified as a “good” social work subject is highly racialized, gendered, classist, and ableist, placing BIPOC, women, trans and nonbinary people, immigrants, and economically poor people at heightened risk of surveillance, exclusion or punishment when they seek services and support. Social work ties or abdication to the police further create pipelines to the carceral system within social work systems. These practices create or accommodate disparate access to services, increase individual and community risk profiles. They have historically distorted social work practice, itself, promoting neoliberal models of social work that espouse social justice and self-determination but uphold White supremacist and carceral frameworks and practices.



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The hegemony of the carceral social work model is clear. In our process of identifying examples that fall outside the carceral norm, we found few existed or were well-publicized. Those practices that support social work's autonomy from law enforcement were often found outside of social work or, at most, straddling standard social work boundaries through the work of social work transgressors.

Focusing on those anti-carceral examples we were able to locate, we noted three consistent themes. First, these practices tend to *decenter the social worker* and the institutions within which they are embedded. Instead, they elevate community voices, community practices, and community problem solving. Second, many of the proposed alternatives *engage transformative justice, restorative justice, and/or abolitionist approaches* to address social problems. These approaches (a) acknowledge historic and contemporary harm done by the ideologies and institutions that uphold the legitimacy of the criminal legal system and the carceral logics of discipline and punishment, (b) see individual and collective justice and liberation as inseparably entwined, moving from neoliberal individualized direct service models towards collective practices of care, compassion, and community self-determination, and (c) look beyond specific individual actions or behaviors to understand the systemic conditions that give rise to violence, poverty, homelessness, disability, and many of the social conditions addressed by individualized service delivery models (generationFIVE, 2007; INCITE!, 2016). These practices reject the “belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe,” (Critical Resistance, n.d., para. 1) and emphasize adequate food, shelter, education, and healthcare as the resources that support thriving communities (Critical Resistance, n.d.; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2020; Kaba, 2020). Third, alternative organizations have developed strategies consistent with traditions of *mutual aid* in which communities move away from seeking solutions in oppressive

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institutions, systems and even professionalized services altogether and instead work to collectively build new, interdependent, and sustainable social relationships (Spade, 2020).

### **Recommendations**

Most social work practice and scholarship has been slow to engage with and support the contemporary anti-carceral or abolition movement (c.f., Richie & Martensen, 2020). To address this gap, we described anti-carceral, abolitionist, and community-based alternatives to involving the police in the arenas of gender-based violence, child welfare, education, and health and mental healthcare. These alternatives provide opportunities to train frontline social service professionals in strategies that avoid the police whenever possible, as well as provide alternative community-based interventions. Based on these models, we offer the following recommendations for social work educators and social work practitioners to work toward critical and community centered anti-carceral social work.

- I. Learn about alternatives to policing** - Absent knowledge of social work's history of White supremacy, participation in racial capitalism and ties to policing, social workers will remain embedded in the status quo. Grounding social work education in alternatives to policing connects practitioners to critical social work practices that center communities and their needs and structural change and healing. Scholars can support this effort by more carefully attending to the knowledge base of existing police social work models, as well as anti-carceral possibilities.
- II. Share and build alternatives with those most impacted** – Conventional social work gives individuals, communities, and organizations limited options grounded within existing systems that are founded in oppressive practices. Ensuring that service users know about anti-carceral alternatives and how they can participate in them is a crucial

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part of rethinking how social work can truly support self-determination and social justice. Shifting service delivery models towards alternative community-based approaches that center and give resources directly to communities most impacted offers even more sustainable options for anti-carceral social work.

### **III. Adopt internal agency policies and external policies that move away from required**

**police involvement towards more liberatory options** - It is imperative that social workers not only focus on support for individual service users but also work towards systemic change. One way to accomplish this is to advocate and organize for policies, both inside and outside agencies, that reduce or fully eliminate police involvement (e.g., in civil commitment/psychiatric holds) and increase community involvement.

Collaborative fields, such as public health, have started calls for their practitioners to move away from calling the police (End Police Violence Collective, 2020), and social work can (and should) do the same.

### **IV. Strengthen community organizing and mutual aid traditions within social work -**

Many emerging and veteran social workers struggle with our field's racist, sexist, ableist, and classist history, as well as the current connections with law enforcement and the criminal legal system. Centering community led practices, lifting up social work's community organizing legacy, and moving towards transformative justice, abolitionist, and other critical practices will advance a vision of social work that can truly accomplish many of our deeply held goals and values, that is, enacting social justice, supporting people in their environment, and upholding self-determination (NASW, 2017).

### **V. Shift from individualized to collective practices –** Social workers need to liberate ourselves from the bounds of neoliberal emphasis on individualized social problems and

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individualized interventions. Rather, we need to come together, commit to, and work towards an orientation towards collective change not as independent practitioners, but as a field that is dedicated to collective well-being.

As social work is brought into the conversation and activism around defunding police, the profession must recognize its own oppressive history and support communities as they vision a major shift from policing to new models of intervention. We must move from paternalistic patterns of managing, controlling, and correcting BIPOC, economically poor, transgender, gender non-conforming, queer, immigrant, disabled, and other individuals and communities who do not fit the White supremacist norm—i.e., carceral social work. This shift requires social work to move away from practices that collaborate with law enforcement and integrate police and policing in social work practice, and requires social work move toward anti-carceral social work based in community centered models of change. We have provided examples of anti-carceral alternatives and see these examples and corresponding recommendations as important to social work's divestment from policing, commitment to social justice, and refocus on the need for true reinvestment in social welfare. As social work begins to move away from partnerships with local, state, and federal police and other carceral institutions, we must also think about how to reclaim the welfare arm of the state, so that we can sufficiently resource and center community driven interventions and fulfill our mission as social workers.

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**Table I. Alternative Intervention to Police Involvement in Social Work Practice Areas**

<b>Intervention Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Area of Practice</b>	<b>Intervention Approach</b>	<b>Intervention Description</b>
<b>Creative Interventions<sup>1</sup></b>	Oakland, CA	Gender-based violence/interpersonal violence	Community accountability/transformative justice interventions	Community-based interventions to interpersonal violence that are facilitated, collective and coordinated. Organizing strategies that bring together survivor, family, friends, community and, when possible, person(s) who caused harm.
<b>Young Women’s Empowerment Project<sup>2</sup></b>	Chicago, IL	Youth development and gender-based violence	Peer-led, transformative justice and harm reduction interventions	A youth led organization that provides safe spaces for girls and young women who engage in sex trade and street economies.
<b>Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective<sup>3</sup></b>	Oakland, CA	Child sexual abuse	Transformative justice, pod mapping prevention and intervention strategies	A collective that works to secure safety and intervene in past and current situations of child sexual abuse while also build long term spaces of accountability and strategies for healing and resilience for all survivors, bystanders, and those who have caused harm.
<b>Just Discipline Project<sup>4</sup></b>	Pittsburgh, PA	Education/ schooling	Relational models and restorative justice framework	A research-to-practice initiative designed to eliminate racial disparities in and reliance on exclusionary discipline practice, and to support positive school climates through school-based relational techniques and restorative programs.
<b>Oakland Power Project<sup>5</sup></b>	Oakland, CA	Health/Mental Health	Community organizing, health crisis intervention and promotion	A volunteer-based, grassroots organization conducting community interviews on police harm during mental health and health crises as well as trainings for healthcare workers and community members on how to avoid and minimize police involvement in care.
<b>Crisis Assistance Helping Out on The Streets (CAHOOTS)<sup>6</sup></b>	Eugene, OR	Mental Health	Crisis intervention (tied to 911 but diverts mental health crises from police response)	A county-wide mental health crisis response which provides immediate stabilization for urgent medical need or psychological crisis, assessment, information, referral, and advocacy.

<sup>1</sup> (Kim, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> (Young Women’s Empowerment Project, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> (Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> (Huguley et al., 2018)

<sup>5</sup> (Oakland Powers Projects, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> (Dempsey et al., 2020; Kropf, 2015)

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