

**Police-Social Work Collaboration and the Ethical Practice Paradox: Perspectives  
from Social Work's Next Generation**

Alex L. Fixler<sup>1</sup>, Leah A. Jacobs<sup>1</sup>, and Cecily D. Davis<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh

This article has been accepted for publication in JOURNAL OF PROGRESSIVE HUMAN SERVICES, published by Taylor & Francis. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alex Fixler, [alf210@pitt.edu](mailto:alf210@pitt.edu).

**Abstract**

This research investigates the dilemma practicing social workers confront when collaborating with police in the face of ethical concerns. The study used a convergent triangulation mixed methods design. Social work students from a major research university were surveyed about their perceptions of police bias and racial violence and their perceptions about social work collaboration with police. Overall, students perceived high levels of violence and bias among police, while also largely endorsing collaboration between social work and law enforcement. Our study explores the implications of this ethical paradox for social work research, education, and practice.

*Keywords:* police-social work collaboration, interprofessional collaboration, social work education, racial bias, police violence

## **Police-Social Work Collaboration and the Ethical Practice Paradox: Perspectives from Social Work's Next Generation**

### **Introduction**

In the United States, practicing social workers face a dilemma. If they continue collaborating with police, how do they prevent the well-documented harms of policing? If they reject collaboration with police, how do they meet procedural standards for the many social work activities that rely on law enforcement? Though unreconciled, this interprofessional collaboration (IPC) dilemma is of considerable import and interest to the social work profession.

Violence perpetrated by police against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), poor people, and people with disabilities has driven debates among social work's leaders regarding the appropriate relationship between social work and law enforcement and the appropriate role of social work in law enforcement reform (Jacobs et al., 2021). Meanwhile, more than 50,000 social work students graduate annually in the U.S., (Council on Social Work Education, 2021) likely entering practice with little clarity as to their ideal or mandated relationship to police, ethical considerations for engaging with police, or skills for navigating encounters or collaborations with police. The profession has been left without a clear stance on or guidance for social work's relationship to law enforcement.

Some scholars have suggested that social work practitioners could play a role in reducing violence and challenging racism within police forces (Deveau, 2021; S. E. Moore et al., 2016). However, there is a widespread lack of consensus within the field. While some representatives of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) have endorsed collaboration between police and social work (Chang & Wilson, 2020; McClain, 2020), multiple petitions, each signed by between 1,000 – 2,500 social work scholars, practitioners, and organizations, were issued in

response, arguing that the field should not align itself with a white supremacist institution (Abrams & Dettlaff, 2020; Social Service Workers United, 2020; Young, 2020). These missives maintained that the field has its own oppressive historical background to contend with, making its association with law enforcement especially problematic. Their claims are not baseless. Recently, the NASW issued an apology for social work's role in, among other things, removing Native American children from their families en masse, recruiting Black men into the Tuskegee Experiment, and conducting intakes at Japanese internment camps (NASW, 2021).

This study grounds debates among social work scholars and administrators in the perspectives of social work's next generation. It does so by surveying current social work undergraduate and graduate students, gathering and exploring relationships between their perceptions of police and social work-police collaboration, and drawing implications for social work education and practice.

### ***Research on Interprofessional Collaboration***

A wide body of scholarship, both theoretical and empirical, has considered IPC in a variety of settings. D'Amour et al.'s review of this literature defines collaboration by concepts of "sharing, partnership, power, interdependency, and process" (2005, p. 116). Ideally, IPC allows multiple professions to combine forces to achieve goals that they might not be able to fulfill independently (Green & Johnson, 2015). Although IPC research regarding social work-police collaboration is rare, a handful of studies have focused on tensions and challenges inherent to it. However, it is important to note that most IPC scholarship assumes an alignment of goals between partners that may or may not exist, starting from a step beyond the point of determining whether or not such a partnership would be beneficial. Some rare exceptions exist, such as Green & Johnson's editorial including a readiness checklist, which works to support potential

collaborators preparing to join forces (2015). Rather than presuming that collaboration will or should take place, this checklist challenges planners to first evaluate whether the problem at hand would be most effectively solved by partnership. It also prompts consideration of how members of separate organizations relate to one another's professions, whether they share the same goals, and whether there is comprehensive inter- and intra-departmental buy-in. These factors are crucial elements for grounding the discussion about whether partnership between law enforcement and social work is a practicable solution to combating police racism and violence.

The interprofessional power dynamic is a theme that surfaces in both IPC research and literature discussing the working relationship between social work and police. Garrett (2004) evaluated an example of this partnership in child protective services, identifying the inclination of police to consider themselves the "lead agency," and describing the role adjustments social workers needed to make in order to preserve a serviceable rapport. Some social workers' ideologies reflected the priorities of police, emphasizing the criminalization of family harms rather than the restoration of healthy family dynamics, while others gave families the impression that they were also police officers during joint visits. Since in the context of partnership social workers often enter the domain of police rather than vice versa, these results speak to the chance that their professional identity may be subsumed in collaboration.

Power dynamics can also be impacted by interprofessional defensiveness and the safeguarding of roles and tasks. Collaborative police-social work efforts have long been affected by issues of mutual skepticism and territorialism, even when the partnerships are largely deemed successful (Holdaway, 1986; C. Moore & Brown, 1981). Axelsson and Axelsson (2009) discussed the prevalence and disruptive potential of organizational territorialism in IPC, suggesting that participating individuals must cultivate a sense of professional maturity and trust

amongst one another, and that large-scale organizational buy-in must also exist to underscore the importance of these values. Peaslee (2009) spoke to this issue in an analysis of policing and social service partnerships, contending that while police may aid social service organizations in important ways, this potential depends on a large-scale overhaul of police cultural norms and structural hierarchies to overcome officer resistance and negotiate new power structures compatible with the logistics of equitably and meaningfully integrating social services. Given the current state of affairs, advocates for collaboration must address the likelihood that it may not succeed in current circumstances. To improve the odds of attaining a positive result, both professions would need to commit to a considerably increased amount of attention to power dynamics, consideration of structural barriers, and the facilitation of meaningful organizational change.

Presently, power dynamics in IPC literature appear to be under-researched, suggesting that they are not factored heavily in professional education programs (Paradis & Whitehead, 2015). This is relevant to the conundrum presented to social workers in police environments who are intended to mitigate against harms done by law enforcement. In most cases, they will not have been trained to effectively challenge police. Paradis and Whitehead also noted that “education programmes are expected to transform individuals into effective collaborators, without heed to structural, organisational, and institutional factors” (p. 399). Given the prevalence of police violence and racial bias (PVRB), and the lack of available relevant evidence-based training regimens for social workers, successful intervention against PVRB is likely beyond the reach of individual practitioners, and perhaps even of the educational institutions tasked with their training.

Another prominent concern is the alignment of professional goals and values. Glen's treatment of values in IPC emphasized the importance of understanding the origins and functions of occupational goals (1999). Within this framework, procedural and moral values direct the development of goals, and are baked into professional education, agency policy, and interpersonal interactions on the job. In this way, values come to define organizational culture and professional identity. Glen suggested that value conflicts are inevitable in collaboration, and can be overcome by "tolerance, compromise, and education for dialogue" (p. 207), and recommends that social care professionals learn these skills. Indeed, targeted skills such as these could be incorporated into social work education, but as noted previously, police would also need to train for and implement them in order for successful collaboration to occur. Otherwise, culture clashes may impede progress, or one profession may come to supersede the other. Rogers noted that in the instance of culture clash, "role blurring" (p. 240) is likely to occur in response, typically leading paradigms from the dominant group to be adopted by the one that is less so (2004).

Without compromise and resolution, social workers will likely encounter several challenges in collaboration with police. In a qualitative study of work dynamics between police and social workers responding to domestic violence within motorcycle gangs in Australia, Cooper et al. (2008) explored cultural differences between the two professions. Findings indicated that a number of points of contention interfered with the relationship between social workers and police, and suggested that professional culture was one source of interference. Social work culture was defined by advocacy, social justice values, and cooperation, with human well-being as its primary goal, while police culture was characterized as having a hierarchical, patriarchal structure, with the ultimate goal of maintaining community order and safety by way

of coercion and force. Due to a perceived misalignment of professional cultures and mandates, the authors concluded that collaboration would be difficult.

Indeed, training content and protocol for social workers and police are very different. Police are typically trained primarily in defensive strategies and control tactics in a paramilitary format, with an authoritarian bent, and the inclusion of community policing or other skills designed to improve relations and communication with the public are not standard (Blumberg et al., 2019). Accredited social work programs, on the other hand, must provide training in human rights and social justice, engagement with communities and community members, and respect for the self-determination of individuals (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Although neither profession is a monolith, and the values and beliefs of individual practitioners or officers may vary from those of their broader professions, cultural socialization can still create barriers to fair and effective cooperation. Meanwhile, even though general collaboration skills and ethical decision-making factors are discussed in social work education, they have yet to be developed in this pedagogy to an extent sufficient to ensure that social work students are prepared to effectively work in police departments, particularly if the goal of collaboration is to help mitigate or prevent harms done by PVRB.

### **Current Study**

This exploratory study uses a convergent parallel design to assess the opinions of the next generation of social workers regarding the relationship between social work and policing. Specifically, it aims to: (a) assess their attitudes and perceptions regarding PVRB, (b) assess their attitudes and perceptions regarding the relationship between social work and law enforcement, and (c), measure the extent to which their opinions about PVRB moderated their opinions about



the relationship between the two professions. We address these aims based on a sample of 124 students and a validated instrument used to assess beliefs about law enforcement.

### **Methods**

This is a cross-sectional, observational study. We use data from a survey of graduate and undergraduate social work students to fulfill our research aims. More information about the design and analyses is provided below.

### ***Design***

This study used a convergent parallel mixed methods survey design. Mixed methods analysis enables a thorough investigation of a phenomenon, is appropriate for exploratory and descriptive studies, and can enhance validity, making it ideal for this study's purpose. The convergent parallel design was chosen for its capacity to represent a dynamic and nuanced dialogue. This design involves the concurrent collection of quantitative and qualitative data during one phase, the separate analysis of each, and finally the comparison and synthesis of both. It also allows for the triangulation of methods by directly comparing the separate analyses of statistical and qualitative results (Watkins & Gioia, 2015). In this study, the analysis of quantitative data allowed for the identification of patterns and the analysis of relationships between constructs. Meanwhile, since the topic is understudied and complex, including a qualitative analysis contributed to findings grounded in the cognitions, experiences, and insights of participants.

### ***Sample***

Participants were recruited using homogenous purposive sampling, which allows for the study of a specific sampling profile (in this case, social work students; Etikan et al., 2016). The sampling frame included all BASW and MSW students across three campuses of a major

research university, including a main urban campus and two regional rural campuses (combined  $N = 399$ ). Participants were recruited by way of emails to the student body, live informational sessions in four student classes, and a post in a Facebook group for MSW students attending the university. The survey was digitally constructed and disseminated with an online survey tool (Qualtrics, 2021). Remuneration was provided in the form of \$20.00 gift cards distributed to 15 randomly selected participants. Ultimately, 128 students completed the survey, and 124 were included in the final sample (a 31% response rate). Fifty-nine of these 124 students (48% of the sample) also provided qualitative responses to open-ended questions.

### *Measures*

The survey included 25 items including measures for perceptions of police and perceptions of police-social work relationships, and demographic questions. Items included the questions from the Beliefs About Law Enforcement (BALE) scale, and closed- and open-ended questions asking students to rate and then elaborate on their views regarding police bias and regarding collaboration between social workers and police. Demographic variables included age, social work program (i.e., BASW vs. MSW), campus, and ethnoracial group.

To assess social work students' attitudes and perceptions of policing and police bias (Aim A), we used the BALE scale. This instrument was selected because it captures the role of racial bias in perceptions of police, a critical component of contemporary debates. Further, the instrument was previously validated using a sample of social work students (Lemieux et al., 2020). The BALE is a 15-item instrument with Likert-style responses, assessing perceptions of anti-Black bias and violence in policing (Lemieux et al., 2020). It includes three factors, measuring: 1) perceptions of police use of force and criminalization of Black people, 2) the importance of police training and oversight, and 3) the use of body cameras as a strategy for

police accountability (Lemieux et al., 2020, p. 11). The overall model has strong internal consistency reliability, as demonstrated by multiple confirmatory factor analysis models. In our analysis, we ultimately used only the seven items from the first factor, as this was the dimension most directly relevant to our research questions. These items asked respondents to rate their perceptions of police use of force and police bias, and how likely police were to inflict violence on Black individuals versus whites. Authors reported Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and composite reliability ( $CR = .93$ ), and an average variance extraction of .69 to demonstrate reliability and convergent validity for this factor on its own. We used a sum score of responses to these questions to represent attitudes about police use of force and anti-Black bias.

To address Aims B and C, we assessed students' perceptions of and attitudes toward social-work police partnerships. On a 5-point ordinal scale ranging from "To No Extent" to "To A Great Extent", students were asked to identify the degree to which they found it appropriate for social workers to collaborate with law enforcement. Also on a 5-point scale (of Very Unwilling to Very Willing), students were asked to identify how willing they would be to collaborate with police as part of a social work job themselves. We combined the two ordinal questions asking students to rate appropriateness and willingness, and converted their combined scores into a binary of strong endorsement or weak-to-no endorsement.

Finally, we supplemented quantitative items with three open-ended questions. To complement the BALE, respondents were asked to answer the open-ended question: If you wish, please elaborate on your views regarding policing and police bias. We also included two open-ended questions asking students to elaborate on their opinions about policing and PVRB, and about the relationship between social work and policing.

## Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted with R statistical computing software, and qualitative data were analyzed in Dedoose qualitative data analysis software (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, 2021; The R Foundation for Statistical Computing, 2020). To assess the association between student demographics and BALE scores, we used Kruskal-Wallis and Spearman's rho tests. We used binary logistic regression to measure the relationship between BALE scores and student perceptions about the appropriateness of social work collaboration with law enforcement, adjusting for ethnoracial group, campus, program, and age.

To inform our interpretation of quantitative results and deepen understanding of students' opinions about PVRB and social-work police collaborations, two researchers coded and interpreted qualitative data. They implemented thematic analysis to process the answers to open-ended questions, guided by Braun & Clarke's protocol (2012). Researchers familiarized themselves with the data, then independently coded all text in a two-stage process: first, they identified initial codes inductively, then met to discuss them and develop a coding frame, and re-coded all data using the agreed-upon framework. Finally, they met to discuss the application of codes, develop themes and subthemes, and apply these to the text. We did not calculate an inter-rater reliability score, in accordance with Braun & Clarke's assertion that inter-rater reliability speaks to multiple researchers having been trained in the same way rather than reflecting accuracies of the code (2019). Instead, we conducted a two-person coding and collaborative interpretation process to facilitate deeper reflection and ensure a more comprehensive analysis, as both researchers considered the topic from different perspectives, backgrounds, and professional experiences. One of the coding researchers is a Black woman with experience providing direct services within jails, as a director in a state chapter of the NASW, and as a

member of staff in an MSW program. Her theoretical perspective and body of research work centers critical race theory and racial socialization. The other is a white woman with experience with public defense policy advocacy, and whose research focuses include transformative justice and harm reduction. Double-coding and shared analysis enriched our conclusions and interpretation by synthesizing insights gleaned from these different lenses.

### ***Sample Description***

One hundred and twenty-eight students took the survey, but four were eliminated for missing data, yielding a final sample of 124. Student ethnoracial groups were aggregated into the categories “white” and “another race” in order to protect the anonymity of participants of color, since response rates for students from each individual ethnicity group other than white were very low. The majority of respondents were white (83.06%) MSW students (90.32%), from the urban campus (94.35%). They ranged in age from 18-58, with a mean age of 29.53 (SD = 8.33), and a median age of 27 (see Table 2 for a more detailed breakdown of study participant characteristics and the distribution of BALE scores).

### **Results**

Students reported generally unfavorable attitudes about police, perceiving high levels of PVRB. Possible BALE scores ranged from 7 to 35, with lower scores indicating unfavorable attitudes about PVRB (i.e., having greater concern about PVRB), while higher scores indicated more positive attitudes (i.e., having less concern about PVRB). Students had a median score of 9 ( $\bar{x}$  = score of 10.43, SD = 4.74, range = 7-30). The answers to ordinal questions measuring the dependent variables were collected and summed (see Table 1 for all counts and frequencies of these results). Despite generally negative perceptions of police, most students considered collaboration appropriate (88.71%), with 52.42% considering it appropriate “to a great extent”

(the modal response). Most students also indicated that they would be personally willing to work with police, though a substantial portion were less inclined – the modal response to this question was “somewhat willing,” (40.32%) with 18.55% indicating that they were unwilling or unsure. Most (75%) strongly endorsed collaboration, while 24.2% only weakly endorsed it or did not endorse it at all (1 student did not specify their willingness to collaborate and was excluded from the count).

**Table 1**

*Student perceptions about the appropriateness of social work collaboration with law enforcement, and about their own willingness to collaborate with police*

Question	Count %	Qualitative response count
	<i>n</i> (%) N = 124	<i>n</i> (%) N = 59
To what extent is it appropriate for social workers to collaborate with police?		
To a great extent	65 (52.42)	27 (45.76)
To a medium extent	33 (26.61)	15 (25.42)
To a small extent	12 (9.68)	7 (11.86)
To no extent	5 (4.03)	5 (8.47)
Unsure	9 (7.26)	5 (8.47)
How willing would you be to collaborate with law enforcement as part of a social work job?		
Very willing	48 (38.71)	21 (35.59)
Somewhat willing	50 (40.32)	21 (35.59)
Somewhat unwilling	11 (8.87)	7 (11.86)
Very unwilling	10 (6.45)	9 (15.25)
Unsure	4 (3.23)	0
No response	1 (0.11)	1 (1.69)
Endorsement of collaboration		
Strongly endorse	93 (75)	39 (66.1)
Weakly endorse	30 (24.19)	19 (32.2)
No response	1 (0.81)	1 (1.69)

### *Assessing Attitudes About PVRB Using Comparison Tests*

Comparisons of perceptions of PVRB between students in different programs, campuses, and ethnoracial groups were calculated using non-parametric tests, as BALE scores were heavily right skewed and logarithmic adjustment did not improve the distribution. A Wilcoxon Rank-

Sum test found no significant relationship between PVRB and ethnoracial group ( $W = 971.5, p = .46$ ), and a Spearman's correlation test indicated no significant relationship between PVRB and age ( $p = .10$ ). Two more Wilcoxon Rank-Sum tests detected significant differences in PVRB by campus and program. Students in rural campuses had BALE scores double that of students from the urban campus, with a 9-point difference ( $W = 645, p = .01$ ). Meanwhile, the median score of students from the MSW program was 1.5 points higher than that of the BASW students ( $W = 411, p = .03$ ). These tests indicated that students from the rural campuses had considerably less concern about PVRB than those at the urban campus, while the perspectives of MSW students were slightly more favorable toward police than those of the BASW students.

**Table 2***Demographic and score distribution across student groups.*

Variable	Full sample count	Full sample BALE score	Qualitative sample count	Qualitative sample BALE score
	<i>n</i> (%)	M [SD]	<i>n</i> (%)	M [SD]
Total	124 (100%)	10.43 [4.75]	59 (47.58)	9.98 [4.66]
Campus				
Rural	7 (5.64)	16.57 [7.14]	56 (94.92)	20.67 [7.51]
Urban	117 (94.35)	9 [4.34]	3 (5.08)	9.41 [3.77]
Program				
BASW	12 (9.68)	8.58 [3.37]	8 (13.56)	8.88 [4.16]
MSW	112 (90.32)	10.62 [4.84]	51 (86.44)	10.16 [4.74]
Race/Ethnicity				
White/Caucasian	103 (83.06)	10.64 [5.01]	52 (88.14)	9.96 [4.73]
Another race	21 (16.94)	9.38 [2.99]	7 (11.86)	10.14 [4.41]
Age (years)				
Mean [SD]	29.53 [8.33]		27 [9.32]	
Range	18 - 58		18 - 58	

*Note: Counts and percentages are presented for nominal variables, and means and standard deviations are presented for BALE scores and age. BALE scores range from 7-30, within a potential range of 7-35.*

***Level of Endorsement of Collaboration as Moderated by PVRB***

A binary logistic regression gauged whether students' perceptions of PVRB were associated with their level of endorsement of collaboration between social work and police. The

regression adjusted for ethnoracial group, campus, program, and age. Results indicated that the level of endorsement of partnership between the two professions was moderately associated with perceptions of less PVRB ( $b = 0.68, p = .002$ ). In other words, students who perceived police as less violent and less racially biased were more likely to endorse social work-police collaboration.

### *Qualitative Analysis of PVRB and Police-Social Work Collaboration*

Among those who responded to open-ended questions and who were therefore included in the qualitative analysis portion of the study, the average BALE score was 10.12 (SD = 4.68) with a range of 7-29, indicating considerably unfavorable views of PVRB. There were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of PVRB, levels of endorsement, or demographic characteristics between the full sample and a sample comprised only of those who provided qualitative answers (see Tables 1 and 2 for a more detailed breakdown of construct and demographic differences between the full sample and the qualitative sample). Thematic analysis of the qualitative responses yielded three major themes, including power, ambiguity, and change paradigms. These themes illustrate a range of concerns and ideas regarding the relationship between social work and police.

**Power.** The concept of power dynamics was prevalent among responses, manifesting primarily in two ways. First, students discussed power in the context of white supremacy, and how Black and other communities experiencing racial discrimination are impacted by the power held by both police and social workers. They also considered the power dynamics between social workers and police in collaborative initiatives. Placing these responses in the context of the quantitative data, all but one of the 11 students who referenced power in their responses perceived very high levels of PVRB. Thus, perceptions of police appear conditioned on students' recognition and consideration of power.



Some students who discussed elements of racism in relation to police power suggested that police culture and training predispose officers to exert this power in racially biased ways.

One student who gestured toward this professional culture argued that

[I]t takes a certain personality type to want to become a police officer. You have to want to exert control over others, and you have to believe that people need to be watched in order to behave well. Couple that with our culture's fear of Black people, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Another critique of police culture pointed to the origins of early U.S. policing's explicit function to quell anti-slavery rebellions and capture those who escaped slavery. This student condemned the structural foundation of law enforcement in the United States and characterized the field as "a system that was designed to protect property and preserve slavery. No good apples on a diseased tree." A third asserted that "any system with unchecked power will be corrupt and harm the most marginalized people, and that is the state of our police presently."

Students who mentioned power in the context of white supremacy or racial bias often referred not only to policing, but also to social work. Some expressed concern that a partnership between the two would simply reproduce or even amplify the effects of racial bias in law enforcement, either by overcoming the best efforts of social workers to reduce harm, or by the structural tendency of the social work profession to operate according to these same biases. One pointed out that social workers are not immune to racial discrimination impacting their practice, and expressed concern that they might simply replicate the behaviors of police if elevated to the same level of power:

I ... fear that social workers might eventually just become another type/form of police.

Social workers are just as susceptible to power dynamics, implicit or explicit bias... [sic]

all these things affect our practice solely in [social work], so they will definitely affect our practice when working with police, and might worsen things in some instances.

Students commenting on the power dynamics between social workers and police did so under the supposition that these dynamics would be unbalanced in the favor of police. The only student who indicated slightly more optimistic views about PVRB still expressed skepticism that the power distribution between the two professions would allow for smooth collaboration, and stated that “police need to be willing to work with social workers and properly engage. If they are unwilling it will not be effective.” Another (who strongly endorsed partnership) noted that social work training for maintaining professional autonomy in these settings is not well-developed, and advocated for careful preparation and selection of practitioners placed in these settings to improve their chances of obtaining a positive result:

It takes a very specific type of social worker to be successful at this type of job, especially since it is so new and we don't have a lot of information [about] how to make these relationships work. I worry that the social worker will be walked on by police officers so we need social workers who are well practiced and confident.

By and large, the consideration of power dynamics was bound up with concepts of systems and professional cultures. Students especially tended to situate the exercise of power in the context of white supremacy as resulting from professional cultures and long-enacted national systems of injustice. Social work was not exempt from these critiques, although most were leveraged against police.

**Ambivalence.** Although most students supported collaboration between social workers and police, many of these shared concerns similar to those expressed by their colleagues with more critical views. Ambivalence generally manifested in two ways: one being a sense of moral

conflict in which participants weighed the potential ethical consequences of partnership with police, and another being the concern that professional ambiguity might arise as a consequence of role overlap in such partnerships. Thirteen students exhibited a sense of ambivalence in their responses, four of whom strongly endorsed partnership and nine who weakly endorsed or did not endorse it.

A sense of ethical conflict pervaded the spectrum of perspectives. The matter of white supremacy again surfaced as a particular source of anxiety while social workers grappled with its relation to their field's professional identity. One described social work as a "structure of colonization," adding that they hoped to reduce the harm it has caused, but worried that this would be impossible if the field maintained ties with law enforcement. Another noted the difficulty in working to differentiate the professional identities of social work and policing while still acknowledging social work's own history of oppression:

Social workers, like police, have implicit bias and can do harm. When police/prisons are abolished, funneling money into social work is not going to stop the cycle of white supremacy because white supremacy exists in social work ... I don't regret ... becoming a social worker, but not acknowledging our partnership with police and not acknowledging how we, like police, are often a conduit for white supremacy, is not helpful to any community.

Among students who supported collaboration, these same concerns remained prevalent. One noted the potential for social workers to support people ensnared by the law, but also cautioned that such overlap could ultimately be harmful: "Within [the] context of decarceration it seems okay for social workers to help tend to prisoners' mental health and resource needs, but it is a slippery slope to strengthen the connection between social workers and the law. Social

workers should not be backed up by the power to incarcerate.” This precarious balance between the potential to either reduce or cause harm by way of collaboration frequently surfaced as a source of professional anxiety. One student consolidated a number of concerns expressed by others:

Given the current power dynamic of police, I do think it is appropriate to get social workers working with them. Both for accountability and education. That being said, I don't believe that the power and influence police hold in many situations ... is appropriate or beneficial. So does collaborating with police in these settings just further cement that power and influence in inappropriate elements of society? I'm not sure.

Many students also expressed ambivalence about the matter of professional function and roles, grappling with the possibility of “blurred lines,” and worrying that social workers involved with police may be more likely to come to resemble police than to have any hand in reform. One expressed that they felt “concern about ending up as an accomplice to police violence instead of in a place to prevent, mitigate, or respond to it.” Another relayed the experience of colleagues who worked with police departments and

ended up doing the work of marketing/PR to make the police seem ‘not as bad,’ despite law enforcement’s reputation within the community as unhelpful, racist, and frequently, perpetrators of [domestic violence and sexual assault]. I have definitely seen the value of having workers collaborate with police, but long term, the partnership is not healthy nor sustainable.

**Change paradigms.** Multiple strains of thinking were reflected in the different student-proposed solutions to PVRB. Most of these fell within reformist paradigms ( $n = 32$ ), although some advocated for the abolition of policing ( $n = 5$ ).

Some reformists took an optimistic view, advocating for partnerships for the sake of mutual benefit. These students indicated straightforward enthusiasm for social work-police collaboration. One championed a broadly implemented effort to integrate social workers across the criminal legal system on a broad scale, stating that “there is incredible opportunity for partnership with social workers on all levels of the legal and justice systems.” Others suggested that “we may be able to help each other,” and that police could make referrals to social services. One suggested merging the professions, arguing that they share the same goals and are working in different ways to achieve the same end:

To me police officers are a different kind of social worker. The two groups want to protect vulnerable people and take care of their communities, we just have different ways of handling social problems and different regulations/rules about how those programs should be handled-- and we shouldn't.

Some respondents regarded partnership as an opportunity for social workers to influence law enforcement by way of example or persuasion, with one describing how they had “seen first-hand how officers in the jail can respect and form relationships with social workers employed in the facility and how that relationship can shift their perspectives about some of the inmates in their charge.” Another suggested that having social workers in spaces typically dominated by police may facilitate “mediation between officers and clients and could provide officers with a perspective on humanness [sic], empathy, and helping/care. This could possibly prevent a lot of law enforcement-based trauma for clients.”

Others viewed partnership as a necessary stopgap on the way to more transformative solutions, or as a form of harm reduction by which social workers might monitor police or alleviate damages inflicted by them (one argued that “social workers should be involved with all

of the situations [that police officers are]. There is no situation I can think of that a police officer should act alone, especially if they have no training in psychology or human behavior”). These respondents operated on the assumption that the presence of social workers alongside police in emergency response may have a protective effect against PVRB. Some suggested that social workers could provide oversight and perhaps intervene in situations in which officers might resort to violence or otherwise inflict harm on Black individuals. For example, one posited that “[it] is important for Social Workers to work with police so police treat people with equity and so they can help de-escalate situations when police use excessive force against marginalized and oppressed people.”

Finally, several critical respondents argued against collaboration because they considered it to be complicity and a violation of ethical principles. For example, one opposed partnership on the basis of unwarranted police capacity to enact power according to discretion in poor faith, and suggested that our efforts would be better spent elsewhere: “I believe that social workers should oppose policing because police enforce unjust policies unfairly, and we should work to activate alternative systems because of the systemic problems within policing that have failed to improve for decades.” Another viewed police as unhelpful and obstructive to social work goals: “I have yet to encounter a situation where the police were helpful in relation to what I do ... More often they escalate, complicate, and drag out our [work], sometimes for completely frivolous reasons.” Several also expressed the conviction that social workers should replace police altogether whenever possible, such as one who did not “think that police should be involved in responding to most of these calls, at all. Due to their training and implicit biases, historical and current actions of police, and community perceptions, their presence tends to automatically escalate any situation.”

## Discussion

The relationship between social work and policing is nuanced. Many in the profession find themselves at a crossroads when making decisions related to working with police. Our results illustrate a complicated relationship between students' perceptions of PVRB and their feelings about social work partnerships with policing. Overall, respondents perceived high levels of PVRB and widely endorsed collaboration between the two professions. Below, we work to unpack the paradox that these two seemingly dissonant sentiments display in their concurrence, and consider its implications for social work education, practice, and research.

The results of our quantitative analyses indicated that social work students perceived high levels of PVRB. Given existing literature reflecting social work students' problematizing of acts by law enforcement that they perceived to be in violation of social justice principles (Knight, 2017), respondents' overall negative perceptions of police are perhaps not surprising. However, the overwhelming degree of this perception is quite dramatic. Paradoxically, results also indicated that most (75%) students strongly endorsed collaboration between police and social work. These results were consistent across most demographic categories measured, although students from the rural campuses perceived only half as much violence or bias on the part of police than those from the urban campus, and BASW students expressed slightly more PVRB than MSW students. Further analysis revealed that students who strongly endorsed collaboration perceived slightly lower levels of PVRB than those who weakly endorsed or did not endorse it. In other words, although most students supported collaboration between social workers and police to some extent, those who were most critical of police were more likely to reject collaboration. Qualitative responses provided rich insight into the relationship between PVRB and endorsement of collaboration. The overarching endorsement of collaboration may reflect

different understandings of what collaboration means. Some participants considered it a voluntary partnership designed for mutual benefit, while others regarded it as an unavoidable circumstance necessitated by institutional and legal mandates. In both cases, participants provided a wide range of rationales for their choices, with many expressing serious doubts and ambiguities that complicated their thinking. Even students who argued against partnership did so for a variety of reasons. Some suggested that social workers should replace police, some felt that social workers would be ill-equipped to respond to dangerous situations that police are summoned for, and several argued that social workers are also agents of social control and that association with police only underscores our own history of oppressive practices. Power dynamics informed opinions about the probability of successful collaboration between the two professions, and influenced students' interpretations of the relationships between social work, police, and community members. Some felt that working relationships would be threatened by an imbalance in power skewed toward police, impacting their assessments of any potential good to be done by collaboration. Others assumed that social workers would have the power to influence police to be less oppressive, either in leading by example or providing direct training and oversight. These respondents inferred differences in professional culture that attribute an inherently protective effect against oppression to the social work field.

Ultimately, findings indicate that though students roundly critiqued police, they widely supported collaboration between the professions, representing what we call *the ethical practice paradox*. This paradox illustrates the seemingly dissonant expression of support for professional collaboration with a structure viewed by most respondents as extremely problematic. Students had many concerns about police behaviors and social roles, but they also perceived policing to be inextricably linked with social work, and struggled to resolve this conflict. Students grappled



with critical tensions, often working to reconcile anticarceral ideals with the hope that social workers might be able to stand between community members and police officers to prevent harm by way of obstruction or persuasion. Their reflections demonstrated that while many viewed the presence of social workers in carceral contexts to be a form of harm reduction helping to protect citizens against PVRB, they also displayed serious consideration for social work's potential to replicate, rather than resolve, the bias and harm they attributed to policing. While some hoped that their work with police might help to extend the benevolent arm of social work, others worried that social workers could just as easily extend the punitive arm of the law. The ethical practice paradox situates policing as a violation of social work ethics *and* a necessity of social work practice.

Our findings hold implications for social work education, practice, and research. As for education, social work curriculums should attend to social work's history of harming in the name of helping, social problems of policing, and ethical decision-making processes. Since many students expressed the belief that social workers could channel their inherent benevolence to influence or mitigate against oppressive police practices, programs should ensure that students have a balanced view of the profession's ability to serve this purpose by fully addressing social work's own history of engaging in oppressive practices. Similarly, since students with greater awareness of the harms of policing possess more skepticism toward social work-police collaboration, social work educators should include law enforcement perpetration of violence and racial bias in curriculums on social problems. Singh's case study examining the learning outcomes of an anti-racist social work education suggests that the impact of anti-oppressive pedagogy is measurable (2019). Social work education programs should be encouraged by this

finding and work to design comprehensive curriculums with meaningful coverage of oppressive interventions used by both police and social work.

Social work education should also include the comprehensive provision of knowledge and tools for ethical decision-making in carceral contexts. The prevalence of ambiguity and ethical conflict among students surveyed are cause for concern when evaluating readiness for partnership with police. If students are widely conflicted about the ethical implications of this collaboration, they are likely not well-equipped to make informed ethical decisions in collaborative settings. Coupled with a general sense of anxiety about collaboration, this uncertainty could have harmful effects in practice. Prior research indicates that anxiety in policing is associated with poorer performance, less effective communication efforts, and more inappropriate use of force (Renden et al., 2017). It stands to reason that the anxieties surrounding collaboration would also influence the ability of social work practitioners to make sound decisions in the field.

Outcomes also warrant further consideration of the role social work practitioners may play in partnerships with police. Given that existing research suggests police behavior is not impacted by bias trainings, and that monumental changes in police culture and structure would need to precede the successful collaboration of law enforcement and social work (Peaslee, 2009; Worden et al., 2020), expecting practitioners to mitigate against PVRB is a tall order. This concern is reflected in IPC literature that interrogates the feasibility of balanced partnerships between professions with prominent value and task conflicts, historically adversarial relations, and considerable power differentials (Green & Johnson, 2015; Rogers, 2004; Sicotte et al., 2002). We should not expect a smooth or straightforward path to collaboration, and any entry into such partnerships should be carefully planned, with a pre-established commitment to shared

goals and related processes actively embraced by both parties. The current balance of power suggests that, in order for social work practitioners to wield influence against PVRB, the police would need to endorse their presence and agree with their aims. In absence of police cooperation, the presence of social workers may not be enough to provide a meaningful protective effect against injustice or harm.

To clarify the ideal relationship between social workers and police, future social work research should investigate the following: 1) the capacity for social workers to directly and specifically impact PVRB; 2) practitioner and institutional factors that may condition their ability to serve this purpose; 3) the influence of ethical decision-making tools on police-social work practice; and 4) the impact of various forms of social work-police collaboration on client well-being, and on social workers' professional identities and ethics. Also, future IPC theory and research should account for the possibility that collaboration will not always be the ideal means of achieving a given goal, and explore potential methods of assessing this possibility.

This study has several limitations that restrict its generalizability. Notably, although the demographic breakdown of social work students on a national level suggests that around 50% of MSW students are White and non-Hispanic, this group accounted for 83% of respondents to the survey at hand. Further, only 7% of respondents were Black, which is especially concerning when analyzing the results of a survey meant to determine perceptions of police bias against Black individuals. Also, responses from BASW students made up less than 10% of the sample, and students from rural campuses accounted for only 6% of outcomes. BASW students comprise 14% of the student body, so the program breakdown is not entirely representative. However, students from rural campuses comprise only 5% of the student body, so the response rate from these campuses is not proportionally low. Although the study population is small and results are

slightly underpowered, 31% of the university's social work students responded to the survey, which is on par with average response rates for online surveys ( $\bar{x} = 35\%$ ; Manfreda et al., 2008).

### **Conclusion**

This study reflects the orientation of contemporary social work students regarding the relationship between social work and policing—an ethical practice paradox. Overall, students perceived high levels of PVRB. Still, most considered it appropriate for social workers to collaborate with police to some extent. Social work's next generation sees police-social work collaboration as either a best practice or necessity, a perception colored by anxieties about ethical ambiguity and the social work field's professional identity.

For schools of social work to support students in understanding and navigating their relationship to law enforcement, they must first be cognizant of where students stand, and the factors associated with their positions. Results indicate a need for further research about the capacity for social workers to directly impact police bias, the degree to which social work training equips them to fulfill this purpose, and social work education's treatment of the relationship between law enforcement and social work. As we clarify our professional identity, orient our values, and reckon with our past, social work's relationships with carceral systems and the inherent paradoxes of these relationships are a critical part of this work.

### **Disclosure statement**

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Word Count: 7,695

## References

- Abrams, L. S., & Dettlaff, A. (2020). *An open letter to NASW and allied organizations on social work's relationship with law enforcement*. <https://alandettlaff.medium.com/an-open-letter-to-nasw-and-allied-organizations-on-social-works-relationship-with-law-enforcement-1a1926c71b28>
- Axelsson, S. B., & Axelsson, R. (2009). From territoriality to altruism in interprofessional collaboration and leadership. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 23(4), 320–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820902921811>
- Blumberg, D. M., Schlosser, M. D., Papazoglou, K., Creighton, S., & Kaye, C. C. (2019). New directions in police academy training: A call to action. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(24), 4941. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16244941>
- Braun, V., & Clark, V. (2019). *Answers to frequently asked questions about thematic analysis*. <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/psych/about/our-research/documents/Answers%20to%20frequently%20asked%20questions%20about%20thematic%20analysis%20April%202019.pdf>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Chang, S., & Wilson, A. (2020, June 23). Opinion: Police should partner with social workers—National Association of Social Workers Michigan. *The Detroit News*. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/2020/06/23/opinion-police-should-partner->

social-workers/3235618001/?fbclid=IwAR1oaHMNm-hNZyUc8kjr-BQKw7vZ-X-s4JWX05DPgiCRN0tZeVCaGs2kDCM

Cooper, L., Anaf, J., & Bowden, M. (2008). Can social workers and police be partners when dealing with bikie-gang related domestic violence and sexual assault? *European Journal of Social Work, 11*(3), 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450701733317>

Council on Social Work Education. (2021). *2020 Statistics on social work education in the United States: Summary of the CSWE annual survey of social work programs*. <https://www.cswe.org/research-statistics/research-briefs-and-publications/2020-annual-statistics-on-social-work-education-in-the-united-states/>

Council on Social Work Education. (2022). *Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs*. Commission on Accreditation & Commission on Educational Policy. <https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/94471c42-13b8-493b-9041-b30f48533d64/2022-EPAS.pdf>

D'Amour, D., Ferrada-Videla, M., San Martin Rodriguez, L., & Beaulieu, M.-D. (2005). The conceptual basis for interprofessional collaboration: Core concepts and theoretical frameworks. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 19*(sup1), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820500082529>

Deveau, L. (2021). Law enforcement agencies' approach to de-escalation: Incorporating a social services perspective: This article is related directly to the 6th International Law Enforcement & Public Health (LEPH) Virtual Conference in March 2021. *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being, 6*(2), 66–70. <https://doi.org/10.35502/jcswb.182>

- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>
- Garrett, P. M. (2004). Talking child protection: The police and social workers “working together.” *Journal of Social Work*, 4(1), 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017304042422>
- Glen, S. (1999). Educating for interprofessional collaboration: Teaching about values. *Nursing Ethics*, 6(3), 202–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096973309900600303>
- Green, B. N., & Johnson, C. D. (2015). Interprofessional collaboration in research, education, and clinical practice: Working together for a better future. *The Journal of Chiropractic Education*, 29(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.7899/JCE-14-36>
- Holdaway, S. (1986). Police and social work relations—Problems and possibilities. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 16(2), 137–160. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a055188>
- Jacobs, L. A., Kim, M. E., Whitfield, D. L., Gartner, R. E., Panichelli, M., Kattari, S. K., Downey, M. M., McQueen, S. S., & Mountz, S. E. (2021). Defund the police: Moving towards an anti-carceral social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1), 37–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2020.1852865>
- Knight, C. (2017). BSW and MSW students’ opinions about and responses to the death of Freddie Gray and the ensuing riots: Implications for the social justice emphasis in social work education. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 37(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2016.1273293>

- Lemieux, C., Kim, Y., Brown, K. M., Chaney, C. D., Robertson, R. V., & Borskey, E. J. (2020). Assessing police violence and bias against Black U.S. Americans: Development and validation of the Beliefs About Law Enforcement scale. *Journal of Social Work Education, 56*(4), 664–682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2020.1764893>
- Manfreda, K. L., Bosnjak, M., Berzelak, J., Haas, I., & Vehovar, V. (2008). Web Surveys versus other survey modes: A meta-analysis comparing response rates. *International Journal of Market Research, 50*(1), 79–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147078530805000107>
- McClain, A. (2020, June 15). Opinion | Social Workers Cooperate With Police Forces. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www-wsj-com/articles/social-workers-cooperate-with-police-forces-11592255480>
- Moore, C., & Brown, J. (1981). *Community versus crime*. Bedford Square Press.
- Moore, S. E., Robinson, M. A., Adedoyin, A. C., Brooks, M., Harmon, D. K., & Boamah, D. (2016). Hands up—Don't shoot: Police shooting of young Black males: Implications for social work and human services. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 26*(3–4), 254–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2015.1125202>
- NASW. (2021, June 17). NASW apologizes for racist practices in American social work. *National Association of Social Workers*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/2331/NASW-apologizes-for-racist-practices-in-American-social-work>
- Paradis, E., & Whitehead, C. R. (2015). Louder than words: Power and conflict in interprofessional education articles, 1954–2013. *Medical Education, 49*(4), 399–407. <https://doi.org/lemi>



- Peaslee, L. (2009). Community policing and social service partnerships: Lessons from New England. *Police Practice and Research*, 10(2), 115–131.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15614260802264578>
- Qualtrics. (2021). *Qualtrics*. <http://www.qualtrics.com>
- Renden, P. G., Landman, A., Daalder, N. R., de Cock, H. P., Savelsbergh, G. J. P., & Oudejans, R. R. D. (2017). Effects of threat, trait anxiety and state anxiety on police officers' actions during an arrest. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 22(1), 116–129.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12077>
- Rogers, T. (2004). Managing in the interprofessional environment: A theory of action perspective. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 18(3), 239–249.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820410001731287>
- Sicotte, C., D'Amour, D., & Moreault, M.-P. (2002). Interdisciplinary collaboration within Quebec Community Health Care Centres. *Social Science & Medicine* (1982), 55(6), 991–1003. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536\(01\)00232-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536(01)00232-5)
- Singh, S. (2019). What do we know the experiences and outcomes of anti-racist social work education? An empirical case study evidencing contested engagement and transformative learning. *Social Work Education*, 38(5), 631–653.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1592148>
- Social Service Workers United. (2020). *Petition to the NASW*. Google Docs.  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/13rpUFnk9YBuGHgdpe-soD6MLvHeFuT0BelvsNaYLPw4/edit?usp=sharing&usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/document/d/13rpUFnk9YBuGHgdpe-soD6MLvHeFuT0BelvsNaYLPw4/edit?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook)
- SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC. (2021). *Dedoose* (9.0.54).
- The R Foundation for Statistical Computing. (2020). *R version 4.0.3*. <https://www.r-project.org/>

Watkins, D. C., & Gioia, D. (2015). "Second floor": Designing mixed methods studies. In *Mixed Methods Research*. Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199747450.003.0002>

Worden, R. E., McLean, S. J., Engel, R. S., Cochran, H., Corsaro, N., Reynolds, D., Najdowski, C. J., & Isaza, G. T. (2020). *The impacts of implicit bias awareness training in the NYPD* (p. 188). Center for Police Research and Policy.

Young, K. (2020). *Petition: Social Workers in Solidarity Against Safe Policing for Safe Communities Executive Order*. Ipetitions. <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/social-workers-in-solidarity-against-safe-policing>