SOCIAL WORK AND JUVENILE PROBATION: HISTORICAL TENSIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CONVERGENCES

By Clark Peters

SUMMARY

The field of juvenile probation shares roots with the profession of social work but lacks a strong connection to it today. This article explores the history of social work in the field of corrections and juvenile probation and outlines steps in professional education and workforce development that would move the profession towards reintegrating social work into the field of corrections.

HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK AND CORRECTIONS

TWO ERAS RELEVANT TO THE HISTORY OF JUVENILE PROBATION AND SOCIAL WORK

First era: Characterized by the growing dominance of psychological methods
- Gendered nature of the field of corrections; predominately male presence
- Social work theories and best practice did not fit within the practice arena of the corrections system at the time

Second era: Profession’s withdrawal from the field was nearly complete
- Cynicism toward rehabilitation of juveniles
- Professionalization of probation

REINTEGRATION OF SOCIAL WORK AND CORRECTIONS

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
- Reform is necessary to engage social workers in juvenile justice systems
- Schools of social work need to expand their curriculum
- New ways to resolve therapeutic tension in even the most coercive of environment
- Social workers should be reforming the punitive system that is hostile to the communities that social workers serve
- Issues of gender in the workplace have increased remarkable
- A heavier involvement of social workers in the field is an important step to moving probation departments away from the authoritative model of intervention that dominates criminal justice training and back toward a casework-driven rehabilitative model

PUTTING SOCIAL WORKERS BACK INTO JUVENILE PROBATION
- Social workers can address risk factors and broader systems
- Utilize family-based services to aid these children and their families
- Social work theories such as the ecological framework are well-suited to working with juvenile offenders
- “Cross-over” clients – juveniles that have faced maltreatment, mental impairments, or other adverse conditions are very prevalent in the juvenile corrections system
- Social workers often work with probationers in other contexts such as child welfare, residential settings, schools, etc.
- Probation officers don’t have social work skills or training to understand and juveniles’ unique needs, they tend to favor a punitive approach
- Fiscal concerns and recognition of racial disproportionality in juvenile justice have led to a growth in alternatives to incarceration

10% OF SOCIAL WORK SCHOOLS OFFERED A COURSE IN CORRECTIONS AS OF THE MID-90S

2% OF SOCIAL WORKERS ARE CURRENTLY IN CORRECTIONS

RESERACH SUMMARY

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