

Practice and Prospects of Social Work Interventions in Community Corrections

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Abstract: This paper explores the pivotal role of social work in community corrections as a progressive alternative to mass incarceration. It examines strategies at micro, meso, and macro levels, highlighting individualized support for offenders, community-based interventions, and policy advocacy to promote rehabilitation and reintegration. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of sustainability in social work services, advocating for volunteer involvement to extend the reach and impact of professional interventions. Drawing on examples such as the Brug Binnen Buiten project, this study illustrates how integrating professional expertise with community engagement can ensure long-term support for offenders. By adopting a holistic and sustainable approach, social workers can address the complex needs of offenders while fostering safer and more inclusive communities.

Keywords: Social Work; Community Corrections; Intervention

1. Introduction

Mass incarceration creates a range of problems, including financial burdens and physical and mental health issues, while also contributing to higher recidivism rates^[1]. In light of concerns about correctional effectiveness and cost, community corrections have emerged as an alternative option. Globally, the population of community corrections offenders is substantial and continues to grow. In the USA, nearly 3 out of 10 individuals under correctional supervision are incarcerated, while approximately 7 out of 10 are supervised within the community^[6]. In China, a cumulative total of 4.78 million people have participated in community corrections, with 4.11 million successfully discharged. Annually, over 500,000 new offenders enter community corrections, and 1.26 million are under supervision at any given time^[3]. The number of individuals in community corrections continues to rise and is projected to grow further^[14].

Research indicates that community sentences are generally associated with lower recidivism rates compared to custodial sentences^{[8][13]}. However, Harding et al. (2022) highlight that individuals under community supervision face significant risks of arrest and incarceration, with little evidence supporting the claim that community supervision improves public safety. It may not be the method of serving sentences—whether in prison or the community—that primarily influences recidivism and social reintegration^[4]. For instance, approximately twice as many people are incarcerated for technical violations of probation and parole than for new criminal convictions^[1]. Despite this, the rate of incarceration for such technical, non-criminal violations remains persistently high^[2]. Prolonged regulatory measures arguably exacerbate these challenges^[4]. From a public safety perspective, the prevailing focus on surveillance over support has failed to yield the desired outcomes. Research consistently shows that support, rather than punishment, is more effective in reducing recidivism rates^[4].

In addition to its important role in the criminal justice system, community corrections has gained widespread attention due to its lower economic costs and efficient use of social resources. Compared to traditional incarceration, community corrections provides personalized education, supervision, and assistance, effectively reducing recidivism while alleviating the burden of overcrowded prisons. Moreover, community corrections emphasizes the connection between offenders, their families, and society. This approach not only reduces offenders' sense of social isolation but also helps them reintegrate into society more quickly, thereby promoting social harmony and stability.

However, in practice, community corrections still faces numerous challenges. For example, issues

such as offenders' mental health, insufficient social support, and public misconceptions about community corrections may limit its effectiveness^{[1][5][12]}. Additionally, how to effectively integrate social work methods into various aspects of community corrections to enhance offenders' rehabilitation outcomes and social adaptability remains an urgent issue to address.

Whether considering the role of social support in promoting social adaptation or addressing the specific needs of offenders for such support, social support for community corrections offenders in China should be a key focus for social workers. This priority becomes even more critical when devising intervention strategies within the framework of social work. To this end, it is essential to leverage the distinct characteristics of forensic social work or correctional social work, focusing on how their specialized approaches can enhance offenders' access to and utilization of social support systems.

At the core of these strategies lies the value foundation of social work. Social work is rooted in the principles of social justice and human rights, emphasizing the interplay between individual and collective well-being. This perspective is particularly crucial for offenders, who often experience marginalization and a lack of supportive networks^[9]. By addressing these gaps, social workers not only help offenders build stronger social ties but also promote their reintegration into society as constructive members.

Moreover, correctional social work seeks to align its interventions with the dual goals of reducing recidivism and fostering social harmony. By employing evidence-based practices, social workers can facilitate offenders' access to resources such as counseling, education, and community support, ensuring that their needs are met while addressing broader societal concerns. This integrative approach underscores the importance of viewing social support not as an isolated intervention but as a dynamic process that bridges individual rehabilitation and collective progress.

2. Strategies for different levels of social work intervention

Forensic social work encompasses various types of social work practices designed to assist individuals involved in the criminal justice or legal systems. It operates across micro, mezzo, and macro levels to address the multifaceted needs of clients^[9].

2.1. Micro-Level Interventions

At the micro level, social workers focus on the individual needs of clients, offering tailored assistance and personalized support to address the unique challenges each person faces. When working with individuals who have committed criminal offenses, social workers often adopt a holistic approach, identifying and addressing barriers across multiple areas of their lives. This includes not only the immediate problems clients may encounter but also the underlying issues that contribute to their difficulties, such as a lack of social support, limited access to resources, or stigma associated with their criminal history. By leveraging their extensive knowledge and skills, social workers aim to empower clients to resolve their challenges, rebuild their lives, and navigate complex systems with greater confidence and competence.

Specific interventions employed by social workers may include providing emotional support to alleviate stress and anxiety, offering administrative assistance to handle bureaucratic tasks, and ensuring that clients have access to accurate and relevant information about the legal system. For example, social workers might guide clients through legal procedures, accompany them to court appearances, or help them understand their rights and responsibilities within the community corrections framework. In addition, they may assist clients with practical matters such as applying for housing aid, securing employment opportunities, or connecting with mental health services and addiction treatment programs. These efforts are designed to address not only the immediate needs of clients but also the root causes of their difficulties, promoting long-term stability and personal growth.

Furthermore, social workers often advocate on behalf of their clients to ensure they are treated fairly and equitably within societal and institutional systems. This may involve mediating conflicts with employers, landlords, or government agencies, or working to remove barriers that prevent clients from accessing essential services. In doing so, social workers help clients overcome systemic challenges that might otherwise hinder their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

An equally critical aspect of social work practice at this level is fostering the self-efficacy and autonomy of clients. Social workers aim to equip clients with the tools and skills necessary to manage

future challenges independently. For instance, they may provide guidance on effective problem-solving strategies, financial management, or communication skills, enabling clients to rebuild their confidence and actively participate in their own rehabilitation process.

These micro-level interventions are essential for promoting meaningful and sustainable change in the lives of clients. By focusing on individualized, problem-focused support, social workers address the specific needs and circumstances of each person, ensuring that their services are both relevant and impactful. This personalized approach not only facilitates the rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals into society but also contributes to reducing recidivism, ultimately benefiting both clients and the communities in which they live. Through their targeted and compassionate interventions, social workers play a vital role in helping clients achieve stability, self-sufficiency, and a renewed sense of purpose in their lives.

2.2. Meso-Level Interventions

At the meso level, social workers play a critical role as intermediaries, connecting clients with the external systems and resources they need while addressing the broader environmental factors that impact their lives. This level of intervention extends beyond the clients themselves, focusing on the relationships and interactions between individuals and the larger structures they navigate. For clients requiring specialized responses, social workers frequently collaborate with professional service organizations, such as housing agencies, healthcare providers, legal aid services, and employment support programs. By establishing these connections, social workers help clients access tailored support that might otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to navigate independently.

In their advocacy role, social workers provide vital contextual background information about their clients to these organizations. This ensures that service providers fully understand the unique needs and circumstances of the individuals they are assisting, promoting more effective and responsive interventions. For instance, social workers might advocate for expedited processing of housing applications for clients experiencing homelessness or ensure that healthcare providers consider the mental health challenges faced by individuals transitioning out of correctional facilities. This advocacy not only bridges gaps between clients and services but also humanizes the client experience, fostering empathy and understanding among service providers.

Social workers at this level also act as coordinators, facilitating collaboration between multiple service providers to create integrated support plans. For example, a client struggling with substance abuse and unemployment might require simultaneous assistance from addiction counseling services, job training programs, and social welfare agencies. By coordinating these efforts, social workers ensure that clients receive comprehensive and cohesive support, reducing the risk of fragmented or duplicated services.

In addition to connecting clients with resources, social workers also work to strengthen the capacity of communities and organizations to support individuals effectively. This may involve providing training for staff at partner organizations, facilitating workshops to raise awareness about the challenges faced by specific client groups, or fostering partnerships that promote shared goals. Such initiatives help create environments that are more inclusive, supportive, and attuned to the needs of marginalized populations.

Furthermore, social workers engage in proactive problem-solving at the meso level. They identify systemic barriers that hinder clients' access to resources and advocate for changes that enhance service delivery and inclusivity. For example, if clients consistently face language barriers when accessing legal aid, social workers might push for the inclusion of multilingual staff or the development of translation services. This level of systemic intervention ensures that external environments are more equitable and accommodating, benefiting not only individual clients but also the broader community.

By employing holistic, needs-based approaches at the meso level, social workers broaden the scope of their support to address both individual and environmental factors. This dual focus fosters positive interactions between clients and their surroundings, creating pathways for sustainable well-being and social integration. Through their efforts, social workers enhance not only the immediate quality of life for their clients but also contribute to building more supportive and inclusive communities, ultimately amplifying the impact of their interventions on a larger scale.

2.3. Macro-Level Interventions

At the macro level, social workers focus on creating supportive community and societal environments for clients. A study by Lands et al. (2023) on abortion seekers illustrates the importance of community building in social work practice^[7]. According to their research, effective interventions involve not only providing clients with necessary information and emotional support but also fostering community dialogue and understanding. For instance, social workers can lead online or in-person discussions on sensitive topics, such as abortion, and facilitate community-building conversations. These initiatives create spaces where individuals can process and discuss their experiences, contributing to a more inclusive and understanding environment^[7].

Inspired by this approach, social workers can adopt similar strategies when working with community corrections offenders. Community building is essential, as offenders serve their sentences and eventually reintegrate into the communities where they reside. The community's attitude significantly impacts offenders' rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes. Discriminatory and hostile environments—characterized by misunderstandings, stigmatization, or a refusal to engage in constructive discussions about community safety—are detrimental to both offenders and the community at large. Therefore, social workers must promote awareness and discussions about community corrections, dispel misconceptions and biases, and foster rational, inclusive, and supportive community environments. This work is critical to creating an ecosystem that offers environmental support to offenders.

Beyond the community level, interventions must extend to the broader societal context. Advocacy and policy recommendations are key components of macro-level social work. As professionals with direct knowledge of the challenges faced by offenders, social workers are uniquely positioned to highlight the marginalization of these individuals and to bring their struggles to the forefront of public discourse. By presenting these realities transparently, social workers contribute to the development of a more neutral and equitable societal environment. Moreover, advocating for policies that address the legitimate needs of offenders is a scientific and practical approach to fostering systemic change. Such efforts aim to create a society that supports the reintegration of offenders through policies that promote fairness, inclusivity, and support.

In summary, forensic social work interventions must transcend the individual level to address the broader social contexts in which offenders exist. Through micro-level support, mezzo-level coordination, and macro-level advocacy, social workers play a vital role in fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for community corrections offenders.

3. Sustainability in Social Work Services

Ensuring the sustainability of social work services requires both an expansion of service reach and a focus on enduring impact. One effective strategy is the cultivation of volunteers, a vital aspect of social work practice. Training volunteers and fostering mutual aid among clients are equally important, as both enable the continuity of service impact even after social workers withdraw from a project. Expanding the scope of services means that social workers should not only guide and assist clients but also train volunteers, thereby broadening the pool of individuals equipped to provide support. Volunteers trained under the guidance of professionals can independently assist clients, ensuring that the benefits of social work services extend well beyond the project's duration. This approach fosters sustained assistance for clients, offering long-term support even after the project's conclusion.

Naessens et al. (2024) present a compelling model for sustainable social work through their study on ex-offenders. Their research highlights the collaboration between volunteers and professionals in friendship-building initiatives, exemplified by the Brug Binnen Buiten project. This initiative does not aim to train experts but instead focuses on developing partners to provide emotional support to target groups. Volunteers in this project are expected to establish equal relationships with clients, serving as companions, confidants, support hotlines, or motivators. This peer-based approach fosters meaningful connections, creating a network of support that resonates deeply with clients^[10].

The direct services provided by volunteers closely resemble those offered by social workers. Their responsibilities include active listening, providing emotional and practical support, addressing administrative challenges, and empowering clients to regain autonomy. Each volunteer is paired with a single client, allowing for personalized attention. The matching process is meticulously overseen by social workers, who align clients' needs with volunteers' skills. For instance, a client seeking emotional

support would be matched with a volunteer skilled in empathetic listening, while administrative challenges might lead to pairing with a volunteer experienced in navigating bureaucratic systems ^[10].

While volunteers play a pivotal role, the professional oversight of social workers ensures the quality and efficacy of services. Social workers not only facilitate the initial matching but also monitor service quality, provide support to volunteers, and intervene when challenges arise. For example, if a volunteer-client relationship encounters difficulties, social workers mediate to restore trust or, if necessary, directly engage with the client. Similarly, when a client's needs surpass a volunteer's capabilities, social workers collaborate with volunteers to address these concerns or take over the case entirely. This collaborative framework ensures that volunteers are supported in their roles and that clients receive the services they need, even in complex scenarios requiring professional expertise ^[10].

Additionally, volunteers are supported through regular group and individual supervision sessions. Monthly meetings allow volunteers to share experiences, discuss challenges, and receive guidance from professionals. This dual approach to supervision ensures that volunteers are well-equipped to address client needs while also fostering their personal growth and service capacity. Volunteers are encouraged to maintain autonomy in their roles, tailoring their support to meet clients' unique needs. Meanwhile, social workers remain in the background, providing essential resources and professional insight to empower volunteers ^[10].

The integration of volunteers into social work not only broadens the reach of services but also enhances their sustainability. Traditional social work projects often have fixed durations, limiting the number of clients who can benefit from professional assistance. While some clients show significant improvement during these projects, the withdrawal of services may lead to regression. The involvement of volunteers addresses this limitation by creating a lasting network of support. Volunteers, equipped with professional guidance, can continue to provide meaningful assistance, ensuring that the positive outcomes achieved during the project are maintained over time.

In conclusion, fostering volunteer participation is a key strategy for extending the impact of social work services. By carefully assessing the needs of offenders and the capabilities of volunteers, social workers can facilitate effective matches and provide ongoing oversight. This dual focus on professional intervention and volunteer development creates a sustainable model of support. Social workers play a proactive role, not only in addressing the complex needs of offenders but also in empowering volunteers through training and supervision. This approach ensures that both clients and volunteers receive the resources they need to thrive, contributing to a more inclusive and resilient social support system.

4. Conclusion

In the contemporary context of penal reform, the shift from mass incarceration to community corrections represents a significant step toward fostering rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. This paper has underscored the pivotal role of social work in this transition, highlighting its contributions at micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, social workers provide tailored support to offenders, addressing their emotional, practical, and administrative needs. Such individualized interventions not only facilitate personal growth but also prepare offenders for a smoother reintegration into society.

At the meso level, social workers act as intermediaries, linking clients with community resources and advocating for their needs. By bridging gaps between offenders and support systems, these professionals foster collaborative relationships that extend the scope of interventions beyond individual clients, promoting holistic well-being. Furthermore, the macro-level interventions emphasize policy advocacy, public awareness, and systemic change to create an environment conducive to successful offender reintegration.

The sustainability of these interventions remains critical. By integrating volunteerism into social work practices, professionals can ensure the continuity of services even after their formal engagement ends. The cultivation of a network of trained volunteers enhances the reach and longevity of social work efforts, providing enduring support for offenders within the community. Such initiatives, as evidenced by programs like the Brug Binnen Buiten project, demonstrate the potential for sustainable models of intervention that leverage both professional expertise and community engagement.

In conclusion, the practice and prospects of social work in community corrections hold transformative potential. By adopting a multilevel approach and fostering sustainability through community-based collaborations, social workers can address both the immediate and long-term needs

of offenders. This holistic framework not only aids individual rehabilitation but also contributes to the broader goal of creating safer and more inclusive societies.

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