

Social workers should reclaim role in juvenile corrections system, researcher says

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In the pioneering days of the juvenile corrections system, social workers often served as the primary probation officers who rehabilitated young offenders. As the field of corrections became dominated by law enforcement officers, the role of social workers was marginalized. A University of Missouri expert on juvenile justice and child welfare says social workers should return to the juvenile corrections system and reclaim their role as rehabilitators. Less than 2 percent of trained social workers are employed in the corrections system, according to the National Association of Social Workers.

Clark Peters, an assistant professor in the MU School of Social Work and a policy research scholar at the Institute of Public Policy in the Truman School of Public Affairs, says social workers' specialized qualifications as counselors and facilitators better prepare them than law enforcement personnel to address youth offenders' psychological and social needs. Compared to those trained in criminal justice, social workers are more likely to advocate for offenders' access to needed services, such as mental health or substance abuse counseling, education or [vocational training](#), or increased support from their family and friends, Peters said.

"Social work and criminal justice have core differences in perspectives," Peters said. "While law enforcement officers often bring a punitive, authoritative outlook that invites failure, social workers have a more therapeutic, holistic focus. Social workers are trained to identify and prevent potential failures, and they can manage issues as they arise."

Current statistics point to decreasing [crime rates](#) in the U.S, but incarceration costs continue to rise. To combat the increasing incarceration costs, many states now are supporting community-based probation programs. These programs provide comprehensive approaches that help prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency and increase public safety, Peters said.

"An opportunity exists now to reevaluate how we treat offenders in this country," Peters said. "Once we turn away from simply locking people up for a long time, social workers will be in a great position to reenergize a rehabilitative ideal that focuses on safely transitioning offenders back into their communities."

Peters explains how social work historically has benefitted the juvenile corrections system and the current need for more social workers in the field in "Social Work and Juvenile Probation: Historical Tensions and Contemporary Convergences," published in *Social Work*, a journal of the National Association of Social Workers.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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