

Police Social Work: Potential Collaborative Responses to Crisis Situations

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Abstract

Law enforcement and social work professionals frequently work with overlapping populations experiencing a variety of crises. Although these two professions call upon and reference each other, few research studies have been conducted to explore formalizing and enhancing this partnership. This study aims to identify the overlapping roles and duties of law enforcement and social work, as well as to explore the attitudes that professionals have regarding this potential partnership and possible barriers to implementation of a formal collaboration. A comprehensive literature review was completed to better understand the two fields' crisis response methods and the crossover in roles and populations. Individual interviews were conducted in order to compare response protocols in the two fields. Based upon case vignettes about domestic violence, child welfare, mental health, substance abuse, and juvenile offenders, paired interviews with one law enforcement officer and one social worker were conducted to identify how the two disciplines collaborate and reflect upon the partnership in one another's presence. Interviews were analyzed for repetitive themes and ideas to determine the similarities and differences that exist in crisis response between the two fields, and better understand the potential for the two fields to collaborate for the benefit of the communities they serve. Preliminary findings suggest that while police and social workers understand the benefits of interdisciplinary crisis response, there are barriers to implementation. These include funding within the precinct and existing community crisis response agencies resisting systems change.

Keywords: Social Work, Law Enforcement, Crisis Response

1. Introduction

Although many people may not think of social work and policing as similar professions, there is a large overlap in the populations that they serve and the situations to which they respond¹. These situations can include instances of domestic violence, child welfare, substance abuse, mental illness, and more. While police officers are trained in immediate reaction, social workers are more often long-term case managers and resource providers². The field of police social work melds these two disciplines. Police social workers work within a precinct to, "assist law enforcement professionals in the service-oriented functions of their job"³. One of the primary goals of police social work is to help officers handle crisis situations from a social and emotional perspective, something officers are sometimes criticized for lacking⁴. While the mission of law enforcement centers on protection and safety, the mission of social work is to promote individual well-being and help meet basic needs^{5:6}. Approaching crisis situations from both of these perspectives, with both of these missions in mind, can reduce tension and make crisis situations less dangerous for officers, offenders, victims, and bystanders¹.

1.1. Literature Review

Despite overlap in the two fields, police social work as a specialty has had trouble gaining traction in the U.S.¹ Police social work has been a successful specialty in certain states such as Wisconsin and Illinois, with the latter establishing the Association of Police Social Workers statewide⁷. In New York City, a bill was introduced that would require a licensed social worker to be employed 24/7 in all New York precincts⁴. Despite evidence that police social work increases use of social services, lowers recurring crisis rates, and eases burdens on the justice and healthcare systems, the specialty has not been growing on par with other specialties in social work and remains obscure in the United States⁸.

There is evidence that a collaboration between law enforcement and social workers creates preferable outcomes for the two professions and the community. Lamin and Teboh found that 69% of police officers interviewed, “agree that collaboration will reduce the amount of avoidable casualties as well as build, or increase, police-community trust”¹. Corcoran and collaborators found that in-department social workers improved connection to resources and services⁹. Hatten and Moore found that when working without social workers, only 10% of officers knew all crimes that were eligible for victim services¹⁰. Finally, Shapiro and collaborators found that a partnership between police and social workers reduced arrest rates and on-site time⁸. With so many studies highlighting the benefits of police social worker, the question remains, why is not being implemented?

Studies have been done to better understand this phenomenon, but no clear conclusion has been drawn^{1;8;9;10}. The current study built upon the work of existing research, which has found that a clash in culture between the two fields may be an obstacle to collaboration⁸. For example, although police officers must be authoritarian in nature to keep situations safe and minimal, social workers are often gentler and nurturing, approaching situations as a partnership². This clash in approaches to crises could explain the difficulty that the police social work field is having in becoming established; however, it does not justify the rate at which individuals are being criminally prosecuted for their crises rather than being referred to social services, as is the case with many individuals with mental illness⁸. Another possible barrier to implementation is funding for social work positions within the precinct, especially 24 hours a day⁹. Despite these barriers, it is shown throughout the literature that formal partnerships between law enforcement and social work have positive outcomes for the professions and communities they serve⁸.

In their 2016 study, Lamin and Teboh identified the direction that future studies in police and social work collaboration should go. They state, “we suggest further exploration of how social workers and the police will partner in such a way that will ensure the best possible results”¹. Guided by this recommendation, the purpose of this study was to conduct: (1) individual interviews in order to compare response protocols in the two fields; (2) paired interviews with one law enforcement officer and one social worker in order to identify how the two disciplines collaborate and reflect on the partnership. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, this study will identify the effectiveness of individual and collaborative crisis response, potential barriers to implementation, and professional opinions on the potential for collaborative crisis response.

2. Methodology

All activities relating to this project were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Northern Arizona University.

2.1 Participants and Recruitment

Recruitment efforts were aimed at local social service agencies and police departments. Ultimately, 6 police officers were recruited from a university police department and 5 social workers were recruited from mental health and domestic violence agencies (n=11). Recruitment for individual interviews was done via supervisors at agencies. Emails were sent to supervisors asking them to provide information about the study to their department who could then contact the researcher to participate. From there, snowball sampling was done by asking interviewees about other potential participants. Recruitment for paired interviews (n=3) was done by introducing the idea at the end of the individual interviews. Therefore, the sample for the paired interview was a sub-sample of the individual interview sample.

Participants in this study ranged in age, from 22 to 59 years old, and also in experience level, from it being their first year in the field to near retirement. Participant race included Caucasian, Native American, and Hispanic. All of the social workers interviewed were female, while law enforcement officers included 3 males and 3 females.

It was determined that the project would reach data saturation when no new themes were emerging within the interviews¹¹. The target sample size was 10 individual social work interviews, 10 individual law enforcement interviews, and 10 paired interviews, with the understanding that data saturation could be met before meeting that goal.

2.2. Data Collection

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participants were asked questions regarding their department's crisis response methods and their opinion on collaborative crisis response. Following those questions, participants were asked to respond to crisis case vignettes according to their department standards and personal priorities.

This design was intentionally modeled after a five-year study which explored the best way to use case vignettes in qualitative research¹². Jenkins and collaborators stated that in order for case vignettes to be used effectively they should have the interviewee act as a protagonist and be "highly plausible"¹². Thus, case vignettes were adapted from *Crisis Intervention: A Practical Guide*¹³. Case vignettes and questions centered on the five areas of police social work outlined by Terry Thomas in *The Police and Social Workers: Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence, Child Welfare, and Juvenile Offenders*¹⁴.

Paired interviews were conducted following individual interviews at a separate time and location. Paired interviews were completed with the same case vignettes in order to compare crisis response protocol to individual interview responses. Participants were asked to first respond to the case vignettes as a crisis response team, then answer questions regarding how they reflect on the partnership, what they believe are benefits of the partnership, and what they foresee are barriers to implementation.

Participants were offered a \$10 gift card for each interview they participated in.

All data was kept on a secure drive provided by Northern Arizona University. Each interview was deidentified and assigned a number which was attached to the audio and the corresponding transcription. All interviews were transcribed by REV.com, then reviewed to confirm accuracy. The interviewees' demographic information and informed consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet inside of the faculty advisor's university office. The code which connected interviewees to their number was kept in a separate locked cabinet.

2.3. Analysis

Data analysis for this study was modeled after Interpretive Description¹⁵. Interpretive Description, while originally designed for nursing research, is appropriate to this project because findings are intended to inform practice rather than theory.

The creator of Interpretive Description outlined four phases that one should go through when following interpretive description methodology: (1) Conceptualizing the analytic process: Finding the knowable; (2) Beginning the analytic process: Moving beyond the self-evident; (3) Enacting the analytic process: Engaging the mechanisms of interpretation, and; (4) Concluding the analytic process: Envisioning the research product¹⁵. This model informed data analysis in the current study.

The first of these phases, conceptualizing the analytic process, includes gathering as much known information as possible about the topic at hand and using this information to inform one's research question¹⁵. In this study, this was done by conducting a literature review at the beginning of the project and using that to inform interview questions and case vignettes. The second phase, beginning the analytic process, includes a back and forth of data collection and analysis to identify patterns and theories, while seeking external support to guide the researcher away from assumptions and premature conclusions¹⁵. This was done in the current study by conducting interviews over several months and reviewing transcriptions simultaneously. External support was given by a faculty mentor who met with the researcher weekly to discuss the research process and potential findings.

The third phase, enacting the analytic process, includes comparing the interviews for different ideas and themes which present themselves, seeking patterns and overarching ideas, and translating that information to practical application¹⁵. The focus of analysis within interpretive description is broad, including "Why is this here? Why not something else? And what does it mean?"¹⁵. The analytical foci for this study were:

1. Priorities and Practices: What were the overarching priorities and protocols for each profession?
2. Partnership: How did the participants collaborate and how did they reflect on the collaboration? Are there any gaps that this collaboration would fill?

3. Potential: What are the perceived benefits of this collaboration and what are the barriers to implementation?

The final phase, concluding the analytic process, involves drawing conclusions and establishing validity¹⁵. Conclusions are drawn based on what patterns and overarching ideas are observed by the researcher, and validity is established when conclusions fit within the known narrative of the field¹⁵. One way to establish validity is to meet with an expert in the field who is in a position to determine whether the results meet that criteria¹⁵. In this study, the conclusions were discussed with the faculty mentor mentioned previously. Additionally, a form of member checking, or giving participants opportunity to “edit, clarify, [and] elaborate,” was used in this project in that the researcher discussed emerging patterns and ideas with participants to receive additional input and perspectives from the professionals in the field¹⁶. The faculty mentor and the professionals interviewed aided in minimizing bias, determining the contextual reality of the conclusions, and overall increasing the validity of the study.

3. Data

The data from this study revealed several significant findings. First, while social workers and police officers work with many overlapping populations, their priorities, practices, and perspectives are vastly different from one another; these differences are expected to be a barrier in implementing a police social work system. Second, while there are many difficulties that come with collaboration, both professions see value in the opportunity to learn from one another. Third, both law enforcement and social workers see huge benefits to a police social work system, including improving community perceptions of law enforcement and encouraging officers to discuss their own mental health. Finally, despite these benefits, both fields feel that cost is the biggest barrier to implementation and that with the differences in the two professions, conflict would be inevitable.

3.1 Priorities and Practices

The data gathered from individual interviews revealed major differences between the two fields, specifically in their first priority when arriving on scene and their follow-up with individuals who experienced crisis. The main differences between the two professions comes from their difference in approach and focus, as the two professions fulfill different roles in the crisis and the community. This is depicted in Figure 1.

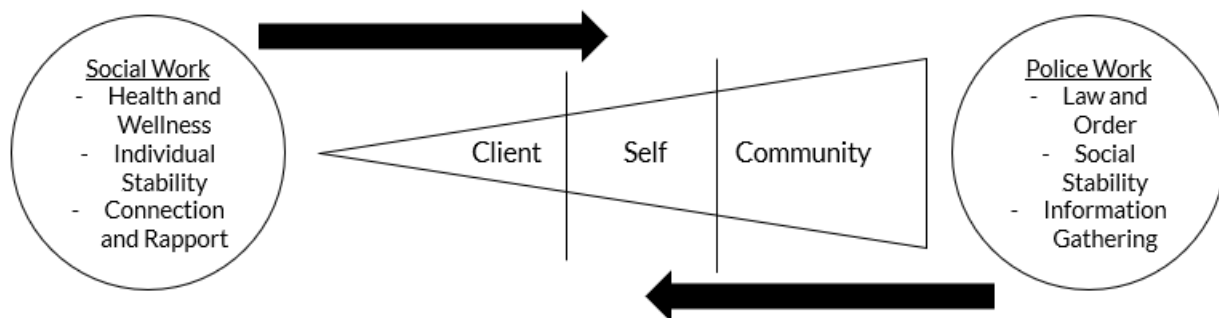


Figure 1: The crisis approach of police officers and social workers varies due to their different roles, priorities, approach, and focus in a crisis situation.

When arriving on scene, both professions approach with different priorities. One social worker stated, “We’re working to stabilize the client... we’ll work with the client to complete a safety plan.” This statement shows that when social workers approach a crisis, they are client oriented; they focus on the client’s health and safety. When discussion first priorities, one officer stated, “My first priority is everybody is safe... Then I want to talk to both parties and know what actually happened.” This aligns with law enforcement’s main role of keeping the peace and serving the community. This reveals that the two professions approach situations from an opposite stance: law enforcement focus

on the community and then in on the individual, while social workers focus on the individual. In Figure 1, this is shown by the triangle in the middle outlining the different priorities.

When it came to follow up with individuals who have experienced a crisis, social workers stated they always followed up with the individual to check on their well-being. One social worker from a mental health crisis response agency stated, “We schedule either a follow-up call or an in-person follow-up [with every client].” Conversely, law enforcement did not prioritize follow-up as their focus was not on well-being, but on law and order. One law enforcement officer stated, “Primarily, we don’t do follow up... There’s so much [for us to respond to] that we just kind of move on.” Many officers stated that follow-up is only done as it pertains to the case, i.e. to gather more evidence. This dichotomy highlights one of the main differences in social work crisis response and law enforcement crisis response. This difference, along with other main differences seen between social work and law enforcement, is outlined in Figure 1 within each professions’ description.

3.2 Partnership

When acting through a partnership in the paired interviews, there were many mixed reviews from both professions. Both professions could see the benefit to the system but acknowledged that it would be difficult to create a well-functioning dynamic. The main difficulties that the participants discussed were similar to the differences observed in the individual interviews: the professions fulfill different community roles and they come from different professional backgrounds.

When discussing the different roles that the two professions fill, one social worker stated, “Community safety, that’s [law enforcement’s] number one goal. Social workers are coming from mental health safety and sometimes they’re not the same thing.” Additionally, when discussing the different professional backgrounds of the two professions, one social worker stated, “I think there would have to be a lot of fighting [between the social workers and law enforcement], because we think vastly different from each other.” All participants agreed that the different cultures of the two professions would prove to make partnership difficult.

Despite these difficulties, the responses to the paired interviews were overwhelmingly positive; participants were very thankful and eager for the opportunity to learn from the other profession. Participants soon switched their focus to discussing the benefits of these different perspectives, rather than the difficulties it would pose. One social worker stated, “If it’s not something I know how to handle, hopefully it’s something [the police officer] knows how to handle or vice versa between the two of us in a crisis.” Additionally, one law enforcement officer stated, “I like the idea of having different lenses to approach a situation with.” Overall, most participants agreed that while the partnership would have an adjustment period as the professionals learned how to work together, the benefits would ultimately prevail.

3.3 Potential

3.3.1 *benefits*

Almost every participant agreed that this system would improve the community’s perception of law enforcement. One officer stated, “It’s going to be more of a helping type of perspective, because a lot of people have the perspective that officers are not helping.” Another officer mirrored this idea in stating, “any effort we show that we’re making, to improve the services that we’re providing, are good.” One social worker said it would change their personal ideas about law enforcement, “as a community member myself, it’s like, well the police department is changing the way that they have been for so many years to better serve the community members.” No participant stated that this system would have a negative impact on community opinion.

Both law enforcement and social workers agreed that there were many gaps in the system that this partnership could remedy. One gap that was addressed multiple times by both social workers and law enforcement was officer mental health. A social worker stated, “I think [having a social worker available for officers] would be helpful for police... being able to talk about [the things they see].” A police officer mirrored this idea, stating, “[It would be] nice to have somebody there that could potentially bridge that gap, and same with officer mental health because I know officers are kind of a pain when it comes to dealing with their own mental health.” Many participants said that having a social worker available, who is going on calls and understands the situation, could encourage officers to seek support for their mental health.

Another benefit would be alleviating some of the responsibilities of law enforcement. Many law enforcement officers stated that they were increasingly being asked to fulfill the role of a social worker. One officer stated, “we’re

being asked to perform the role of a social worker when we don't have the skills, knowledge, or abilities to even come close to that;" another officer stated, "the sort of social work demands of society have somehow found themselves laid at our feet, right? So, in that regard, if people are going to continue to call the police about issues where a social worker is more appropriate than an officer... it would be potentially a good approach." Finally, when discussing the benefits of having a victim advocate, one officer stated, "It took away my need to try to be a social worker at the same time because I can't do both well." Overall, the law enforcement officers seemed eager to have assistance handling the more social service aspects of their job.

Finally, one gap observed within both systems was the way that the two professions approach substance abuse crises. Due to the high variability in substance abuse crises, neither profession had a standard protocol with which to apply to the case vignettes presented. One social worker stated, "somebody that's intoxicated, providing them with services is not necessarily beneficial... I'd lean on PD for this." While an officer stated, "If we don't have a crime, if we don't have a victim... custody is nothing that we're even going to think about." These ideas were echoed in several individual interviews with both professions. In the paired interviews, however, the two professionals were able to discuss resources available to each of them individually and come to a decision about how best to serve the individual in crisis. When discussing the case vignette with the social worker, one officer stated, "from the police standpoint, I mean, we're pretty much, 'lets go to this call, put a band-aid on it, and move to the next one...' If there isn't somebody there with you to put the brakes on... he's either going to jail, or he's going on his own." The social worker went on to state that while it's difficult to offer services when someone is intoxicated, they often have success through follow up meetings and phone calls.

3.3.2 barriers

Almost every participant mentioned that the main barrier to implementing a police social work system would be cost. When discussing if the police department could fund a social work position, one law enforcement officer stated, "we're already broke as a department." One social worker stated in a paired interview, "I think [the law enforcement officer] really pointed out a lot of ways in which [implementing this system is] difficult, and not ideal, and very expensive." Many participants questioned the ability to not only get initial funding for implementing a police social work system, but also the longevity, stating that if a department were to get budget cuts, the social worker would most likely be the first to go.

As previously discussed, the different perspectives and cultures of the professions would prove to be a barrier. One officer stated that, "The two things we hate the most are change and the way things are." One social worker stated, "there are times, if we're both trying to achieve something and we're trying to work together and we're coming from different perspectives, that it's not going to work." This difference in culture and resistance to change would prove to be a barrier to implementing this system.

Finally, each profession had a unique barrier that they foresaw to the system. Multiple social workers stated they would not want to be associated with the police. One social worker stated, "people have a fear of police and sometimes police can trigger client's anxiety if they've had a bad experience with police... if we come in separately, we're not associated with the police." While social workers were concerned with the client's willingness to work with them, police officers were more focused on safety concerns. One officer stated, "if the social worker's in harms way now it puts me in a position where maybe I have to take somebody's life because the social worker's life is at stake." Another officer stated, "the biggest challenge is sort of figuring out how do you integrate it safely?" Many officers mimicked this idea that the social worker's safety would become a priority and a liability.

4. Conclusion

This study shows the difficulties that come with blending two professions. Police officers and social workers fulfill different roles in the community, and therefore have different perspectives and cultures. These differences make collaboration difficult, but not impossible; both social workers and law enforcement officers agree that the benefits to the public and the professionals would be great. These benefits include opportunity to learn from one another, improving community perceptions of law enforcement, and increasing law enforcement officers' access to mental health resources. The biggest barriers to implementing police social worker are believed to be cost and potential conflict.

4.1 Study Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. First, this study has a small, convenience sample. This means that the priorities and protocols discussed reflect only one police precinct. Second, the law enforcement officers were from a university police station rather than a city precinct. This limits the populations that they work with to a specific age demographic. The university officers did not have much experience with juveniles to reflect on, while city officers would have more experience with this demographic. Finally, the paired interviews were done with a sub-sample of the individual interviews rather than a new sample; therefore, the sample size was small, and the participants were already introduced to the case vignettes and had time to think about them. If the paired interviews were done with new officers and social workers, they may have approached the crises differently and from a fresh perspective. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into social workers' and law enforcement officers' feelings toward collaboration, as well as perceived barriers and benefits.

4.2 Future Research

Future research studies should continue to explore this partnership and provide opportunities for the two professions to work together. By providing these opportunities, researchers can continue to explore the similarities and differences in the two professions, potential barriers, and potential benefits. Additionally, research could be done at precincts where police social work is being implemented to see if the perceived barriers and benefits are legitimate.

Police social work has been shown to be beneficial to both professionals and community members by decreasing casualties and recurring crises, reducing the burden on the justice system, and improving access to resources^{1:8:9}. This study shows that both social workers and law enforcement officers feel these goals are realistic and they are open to collaboration.

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