Research, Practice, and Policy Strategies to Promote Smart Decarceration

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The Grand Challenges for Social Work developed by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AAS-WSW) offer opportunities for the profession to confront pervasive societal issues. Although these challenges outline varying large-scale aims for social work, each also advocates for innovative strategies that can be readily implemented throughout areas of practice. The challenge to "promote smart decarceration" is no exception with the overarching goal of reimagining the current criminal justice system through progressive evidence-based approaches that transcend discipline and professional divisions (AASWSW, 2017). The need is clear as the United States has the largest incarcerated population in the world by both number and ratio incapacitated. It is not surprising that these substantial figures are accompanied by immense social and economic costs. Direct cost estimations indicate that our country pays "nearly $300 billion annually to police communities and incarcerate 2.2 million people," amounting to approximately $134,400 per imprisoned person (O'Neill Hayes, 2020, para. 1; also see Hyland, 2019). Social costs are more often indirect, accruing and conflating over time, and rippling out into families and communities. Although more difficult to calculate with accuracy, when the cost of lost wages, poor health, and long-term negative outcomes for families of those incarcerated are monetized, the sum expense of our criminal justice system rises to $1.2 trillion, which increases this burden threefold (O'Neill Hayes, 2020). Current direct and indirect costs reflect a significant economic and social problem that largely overlooks moral considerations for the worth of human life and ability to change (AASWSW, 2017; Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015).

Social work is uniquely qualified to lead decarceration efforts given its prominent history of spearheading micro, mezzo, and macro initiatives to ameliorate deleterious social conditions. Value alignment is also evident in the profession's commitment to the pursuit of economic, racial, and social equity. Due to varied practice settings, social workers can support transdisciplinary collaboration unifying wide-ranging discrete interests into cogent strategies that promote humane treatment in a time of incarceration devolution. Overall, these efforts can lead to more ethical and reasoned methods to ensure the welfare of citizens while countering the culture of mass incarceration. Social work research, practice, and policy all have distinct yet interconnected roles in advancing smart decarceration and reforming our current criminal justice system. Through a person-in-environment perspective, the profession can effectively converge over practice areas resulting in a pragmatic and attainable agenda that incorporates expertise across disciplines (Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015). To this end, social workers are skillfully prepared to meet this grand challenge.

Social work research efforts to advance decarceration emphasize unexplored topics of study, collaborative inquiry, standardized methods of measurement and data collection, and widely circulated findings. For example, there is a need for increased research surrounding factors that contribute to mass incarceration rather than indiscriminately using the number of those incapacitated to uphold current exorbitant expenditures. To this end, studies should include the social and personal causes of criminal behavior and the influence of decarceration approaches on such (Pettus-Davis, Epperson, & Grier, 2017). Relatedly, we must have a better understanding of the direct and indirect costs and benefits of decarceration compared

with traditional punitive imprisonment. Expansion of intervention research also allows for increased attention to racial, social, and economic disparity through study methods that appreciate the lived experiences of affected constituencies. A holistic approach of this nature requires a recursive flow of information where data informs practice and policy that continually shapes research. Collaboration and large-scale adoption of novel evidence-based decarceration policies and practices can be eased by legislation and incentives. Consistent measurement and data collection among local, state, and national entities is also needed to provide an accurate representation of current demographics and outcomes to inform decarceration moving forward. A unified data source that allows for individual-level analysis can encourage partnership across entities while better identifying variables related to recidivism, disparity, and effects of incarceration that are cognizant of the person in environment (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2016). Last, social work researchers are vital in shaping public perception through evidence that validates the tenets of decarceration. Specifically, the benefits of a humanitarian response to criminality must be clearly demonstrated through straightforward interpretations of both the shortcomings of mass incarceration and the advantages of alternative approaches to criminal justice. To meet this aim, research findings that translate into innovative strategies need to be easily understood by the general populace and extensively disseminated throughout current and diverse media platforms and social networks. Model legislation, policy statements, and practice briefs that plainly illustrate decarceration initiatives should be targeted to practitioners and those with vested interests in the criminal justice system (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Social workers have long contributed to reducing crime, incarceration, and recidivism through primary interventions and services, and those implemented during and after imprisonment intended to prevent repeat offending. Within the criminal justice system, practitioners facilitate job readiness training, psychoeducational programing, peer support groups, mentoring programs, and educational opportunities. They also rely on a range of cognitive behavioral techniques and provide specialized treatment for substance abuse and sexual offenses (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006; Austin et al., 2013; Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015). Although these interventions have been found to be only moderately effective, the need for rehabilitative services in these core areas will remain, requiring evidence-based redevelopment and a community-focused lens. Practice interventions must also increasingly confront racial, economic, and social disparities that influence crime, incarceration, and recidivism. The profession's appreciation for diversity and difference, coupled with proficiency in culturally competent practice, equips social workers to lead intervention efforts. Likewise, practitioners are well positioned to adopt a community-minded focus that relies on strategies founded in empirical evidence critical to successful readjustment of formerly incarcerated individuals (Aos et al., 2006; Austin et al., 2013; Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015). Last, social work practitioners can provide firsthand insights into the efficacy of interventions that prevent repeat offending and are therefore vital to garnering favor and resources for continued decarceration advancement. Practitioner advocacy for funding to develop and maintain programs that promote rehabilitation rather than more costly imprisonment is fundamental to influencing local, state, and national resource allocation. Through our unique skill set, social workers can enhance current interventions and also advocate for the financial means needed to sustain them (Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015).

Social work policy efforts to advance smart decarceration require shifts in legislation that enhance multidisciplinary approaches, make use of evidence and data, and ensure collaboration throughout all levels of government. Although the country's incarceration rate continues to increase, there is a scarcity of successful policies and interventions to address or prevent imprisonment. Advocacy and policy recommendations to reduce incarceration, correct inequities, and ensure the welfare of citizens seek to do so by redefining the very nature of our criminal justice system (Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). Although it may be difficult to acknowledge, research reveals that incarceration is not successful in realizing public safety neither through rehabilitation nor inhibition of criminal behavior by fear of punishment. Therefore, policy change that better reflects current evidence views incarceration as a last-resort means to remove individuals who pose an imminent danger from society when community-based alternatives are insuffi-

cient. In this sense, decarceration policies must counter current conditions wherein the preponderance of those incarcerated do not pose a significant threat to anyone. When imprisonment is used as a reflexive reaction to crime and unwanted conduct, behaviors that may be due to other factors become criminalized. Sentencing reform better aligned with individual circumstances and degree of potential risk to public safety can address this downfall in our current policies. The reduction of social disparities based on racial, class, and behavioral health statuses should also be central in decarceration efforts ensured by legislative mandates enacted across levels of government. We must also remove policies that do not align with rehabilitative aims such as those that rescind or limit legal powers and freedoms due to criminal rulings (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2016; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). For example, there are presently approximately 40,000 "civil disability or collateral consequences policies" nationwide that inhibit or prohibit housing assistance, student loans, professional licensure, employment, voting, and parental rights. Yet effective policies that have rehabilitative aims do not exclude those with past convictions to maximize success; doing otherwise is counterproductive (Laird, 2013; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017). Last, decarceration policies require funding redistribution to build community-based programs to reduce crime and recidivism founded on evidence that flows from praxis between research and practice. This can be achieved by securing funding specified for justice reinvestment initiatives that strengthen communities most harmed by incarceration. Such social capacity assets can be created through the implementation of behavioral health services, public education, economic infrastructure, and other forms of community supports. This reinvestment not only fortifies communities, but also acts as a protective mechanism to deter crime (Austin et al., 2013; Pettus-Davis et al., 2017).

Social workers are rallied to "promote smart decarceration" through their areas of expertise that span practice, policy, and research. We are tasked "to improve social welfare and social justice for a large segment of our society—not only those directly involved in the criminal justice system, but also the families and communities from which they come" (Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015, p. 12). Our continued efforts to encourage collaboration across disciplines and attention to the person in environment are ideal for social work to realize decarceration goals set forth in this grand challenge. **HSW**

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