

Social Work Roles and Skills

Social workers have played a role in forming many aspects of our current judicial system. They have contributed to significant changes in the way society handles crime and punishment, working to make the system more fair and beneficial to both convicted criminals and their victims. Social workers are also called to respond to violent events to aid survivors in dealing with the aftermath.

Historical Background **LO 4**

In Great Britain during the 1740s, a sheriff named John Howard and an ordinary citizen, Elizabeth Gurney Fry, began to create prisoner assistance programs (Fox, 1997). Sheriff Howard focused on improving prison conditions while Fry provided direct aid to prisoners. By the late 1800s, Americans in Massachusetts, Maryland, and New York were attempting to duplicate Howard and Fry's prison reform efforts. The foundation of criminal justice social work had been laid. The prevailing belief among social workers of the time (a view still held by some today) was that they could not help people help themselves in an authoritarian prison context, and the profession largely avoided work with adult criminal offenders until the 1920s (Roberts, 1997a).

In 1847, John Augustus, a Boston philanthropist, became the first unofficial probation officer when he convinced the Boston courts to release people convicted of alcohol-related offenses to his care so that he could help with rehabilitation efforts (Allen, 1995). In today's world, **probation** is a sentence that does not, at least initially, require incarceration. It may involve a fine, supervision, community service, restitution, or home confinement. The goal of probation is to reintegrate offenders into the community. In many cases, if the conditions of probation are not met, the person who was convicted can be incarcerated. The concept of parole was officially introduced into the US criminal justice system in 1884. **Parole** is the conditional release of a prisoner from incarceration to supervision after part of his or her sentence has been completed (Allen, 1995).

Prior to the twentieth century juveniles were treated in about the same way as adult criminals. In 1897, social workers began advocating for **delinquent youth**—children under the age of 18 years who have violated a local, state, or federal law for which an adult can be prosecuted—and began fighting for a separate court system to serve them (Exzell, 1995). The first official juvenile court was established in Chicago in 1899 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999), paving the way for the creation of the juvenile justice system.

Jane Addams and other social workers played an important role in developing the first juvenile courts and promoting juvenile reform measures. By the early 1900s, the entire juvenile court system had acquired a social work emphasis. The goal was to provide treatment and rehabilitation for youth. Thanks in part to the efforts of social workers, **due process** was introduced into the juvenile system during the 1960s; due process includes the right to a fair

trial, the right to be present at the trial, the right to an impartial jury trial, and the right to be heard in one's own defense. Previously, only adults had these constitutional rights. By the 1980s, the perceived failure of juvenile rehabilitation to control delinquency would lead to a shift toward the control and punishment philosophy that dominated the adult corrections system. The social work profession's influence on juvenile courts was largely lost, and the juvenile court system began to once again mimic the worst of the adult system (Miller, 1993).

During the early 1900s, social workers in many large cities initiated programs to do protective and preventive work with female and juvenile prisoners (Roberts, 1997b). These programs, originally called women's bureaus, were the first examples of **police social work**, which evolved into a specialization that provides social work services to victims and offenders who are referred by the police (Treger, 1995). By the 1940s, social workers had begun to interact regularly with adult offenders in the court system, and police social workers were routinely engaged in counseling women and troubled children (Roberts, 1997a). Police social work experienced a resurgence during the 1980s, when many social workers were hired with funds from a federal grant program, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. When the grants ran out in the mid-1980s, many police social workers lost their jobs (Roberts, 1997a).

During the 1960s, rehabilitation had become the focus of adult corrections in the US legal system. **Rehabilitation** is treatment that helps criminal offenders change their antisocial styles of thinking, feeling, and acting (Gendreau, 1997). Because rehabilitation requires employees to understand human behavior and have the skills to make successful interventions, more social workers than ever before began working with adult prisoners. Judges began to rely on social workers to provide information on family history, social environment, attitudes, and motivation before making sentencing recommendations (Ingrer & Allen, 1997).

In the late 1960s, reformers introduced the practice of offering diversion as part of criminal rehabilitation. **Diversion** involves officially suspending criminal or juvenile proceedings so as to allow defendants to meet specified conditions, such as completing treatment, community service, or an educational program. On successful fulfillment of the conditions, the charges may be dismissed. Diversions are now being used more frequently, particularly for minor first offenses in the juvenile justice system. During the 1970s, social workers also began to assist in **reintegration** services, providing a bridge to the released from prison (Moss & Whittee, 1998).

community for adults victims were a rarity. In 1982, during the 1970s, victim assistance programs were a rarity. Because the number of people victimized by crime had reached an all-time high, the federal government organized the first President's Task Force on Victims of Crime. The task force focused attention on the psychological trauma suffered by victims of violent crime. The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) was instituted by the Department of Justice in 1983, and the federal Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) was enacted in 1984. Both provide federal funds to support victim assistance programs and advocate for the fair treatment of crime victims (US Department of Justice, 1998). The Office of Victim Assistance also