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At the micro level, social work values require treating each offender as a unique individual and developing a specific plan of action to meet the person's needs. From a systems theory perspective, social workers must campaign vigorously for policies that promote social and economic justice. Combining the elimination of injustice with the broken window strategy is probably most likely to significantly reduce crime. Society has tried many forms of deterrence and imprisonment, but crimes continue to be committed, and the prisons are overflowing. On the other hand, society has not substantially invested in prevention and treatment programs or education and job skills training. Pre-large-scale, nonpunitive ways to eliminate poverty have been instituted. Prevention, treatment, and training all require a strengths perspective to be successful. The social work profession supports:

- Using the political system to eliminate poverty and make society's rewards accessible to all
- Making prisons humane and safe environments in which inmates can learn from the model behaviors of prison personnel
- Giving inmates access to effective therapy, educational opportunities, and job skills training
- Removing offenders who have been diagnosed with mental illnesses or substance abuse problems from prisons and providing treatment in secure environments
- Accepting that violent career criminals, sociopaths, serial killers, and psychopaths will probably never change and are a continuing danger to themselves and others, and isolating them in maximum-security prisons

The Criminal Justice System



EP 6b

Social workers have not always been comfortable working within institutionalized structures created to deal with crime. These structures have been called "an authoritarian system that dehumanizes, discriminates, and focuses on custody instead of rehabilitation" (van Wormer, 1999, p. 82). The social work profession's reliance on the strengths perspective is in direct conflict with the criminal justice system's goals of social control and punishment. If a strengths perspective were utilized, the primary goals of the system would be prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

Although there has been a six-year trend in the decline of prison populations, overcrowding in adult and juvenile facilities is still a serious problem. The response has generally been to build more prisons, to put more people in them, and to refer more juveniles to the adult criminal justice system. In stark contrast, the social work profession's response has been to argue that convicted criminals can be rehabilitated, that more funds should be spent on juvenile prevention and treatment programs, and that all victims should receive assistance. Even more fundamentally, the profession has argued for more funds to prevent crime by alleviating poverty and healing people's emotional wounds. Unfortunately, as long as mainstream society embraces individualistic theories of criminal behavior, punishment will win out over rehabilitation.

Racial Imbalance



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As a result, a discouragingly small percentage of criminals are successfully rehabilitated in the US criminal justice system.

Both the juvenile justice and adult criminal justice systems have long been plagued by charges of racism, largely because of the disproportionate number of nondominant group members in them. For example, in society as a whole, about 40 percent of adults in prison are African American, but they account for only 13 percent of the population. Although whites account for the largest percentage of the population, they account for only 39 percent of the prison population. Latinos make up 19 percent of the prison population. The racial disparity in prisons is especially egregious in the Midwest and Northeast. Iowa has the widest disparity in the nation, imprisoning blacks at more than 13 times the rate of whites (Sentencing Project, 2017).

Harrington and Spohn (2007) found black males were significantly less likely than white males, white females, and black females to be placed on probation rather than sentenced to jail. Schanzenbaci and Yaeger (2006) found that, when controlling for as many relevant characteristics as possible, blacks and Latinos received longer prison sentences than whites for white-collar crimes. In the criminal justice system, women and girls are not exempt from unequal treatment based on race. Recent research found that African American girls were more likely to get rearrested than were white girls, even though both groups reported similar amounts of criminal behavior (Chauhan, Reppucci, Burnette, & Reiner, 2010). The most significant factor in determining who got arrested was the neighborhood where the young women lived. People in disadvantaged neighborhoods get more attention from the police, and a greater number of people of color live in these neighborhoods.

Many different theories have been put forth to explain racial differences in the correctional system; however, institutionalized racism and racial bias in sentencing are two of the most likely culprits (Sentencing Project, 2017). The Pew Report (2010) found that African American drug offenders generally receive longer sentences than white drug offenders. In addition, even after controlling for prior criminal record and the type of offense, African Americans were twice as likely as whites to receive habitual offender sentences. Part of this discrepancy is explained by federal legislation that passed during the 1980s and was designed to address the growing concern about crack cocaine in urban areas. Under federal law, a small-time drug addict caught with one-fifth of an ounce of crack (the less expensive form of cocaine prevalent in poor, urban African American areas) received an automatic five-year sentence, whereas someone caught with the identical amount of cocaine (more typically used by dominant group people) had only committed a misdemeanor and was less likely to go to jail. In addition, four out of five defendants in federal crack cases are black (Hensley, 2008). Advocates have been lobbying Congress to pass legislation to correct the disparity and clear racial bias in sentencing between crack and powder cocaine. The Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 will go a long way toward correcting this problem, though it will not yet make