Safety Net: A Police-Mental Health Approach to Social Justice

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Jail is America's Largest Hospital

It is evident that there is an influx of inequities impacting today's youth in the form of under-resourced schools, perpetual gang involvement, poverty, and substance use. Haskell-Hoehl and Wilson (2017) put current issues of the Juvenile Justice System (JJS) in perspective and further provided a consensus on what is currently being done. The authors illuminated how a cumulative 11,000 prisoners between three of the nation's largest jails, Cook County, Los Angeles County, and New York City, are being treated daily for mental health illnesses making prison an impromptu behavioral health care provider. It was found that roughly 50% of prisoners reported impairment over the previous year due to a mental health problem and also met criteria for drug dependence, abuse, or both (Haskell-Hoehl, & Wilson, 2017). More shockingly, these rates go up for youth detained in the JJS. Approximately 70% meet diagnosable criteria while 61.2% screened positive for a substance use disorder.

Haskell-Hoehl and Wilson (2017) call for a growing awareness of this crisis and further, emphasized a need for action in the fight for social justice. Barrett and Olle (2016) provided a framework by which to answer this call. These authors emphasized how the field of psychology is pushing students to integrate multicultural and social justice theory into practice and further, offered an examination of a counseling psychologist's role in a police-mental health collaboration, Safety Net.

How many people are locked up in the United States?
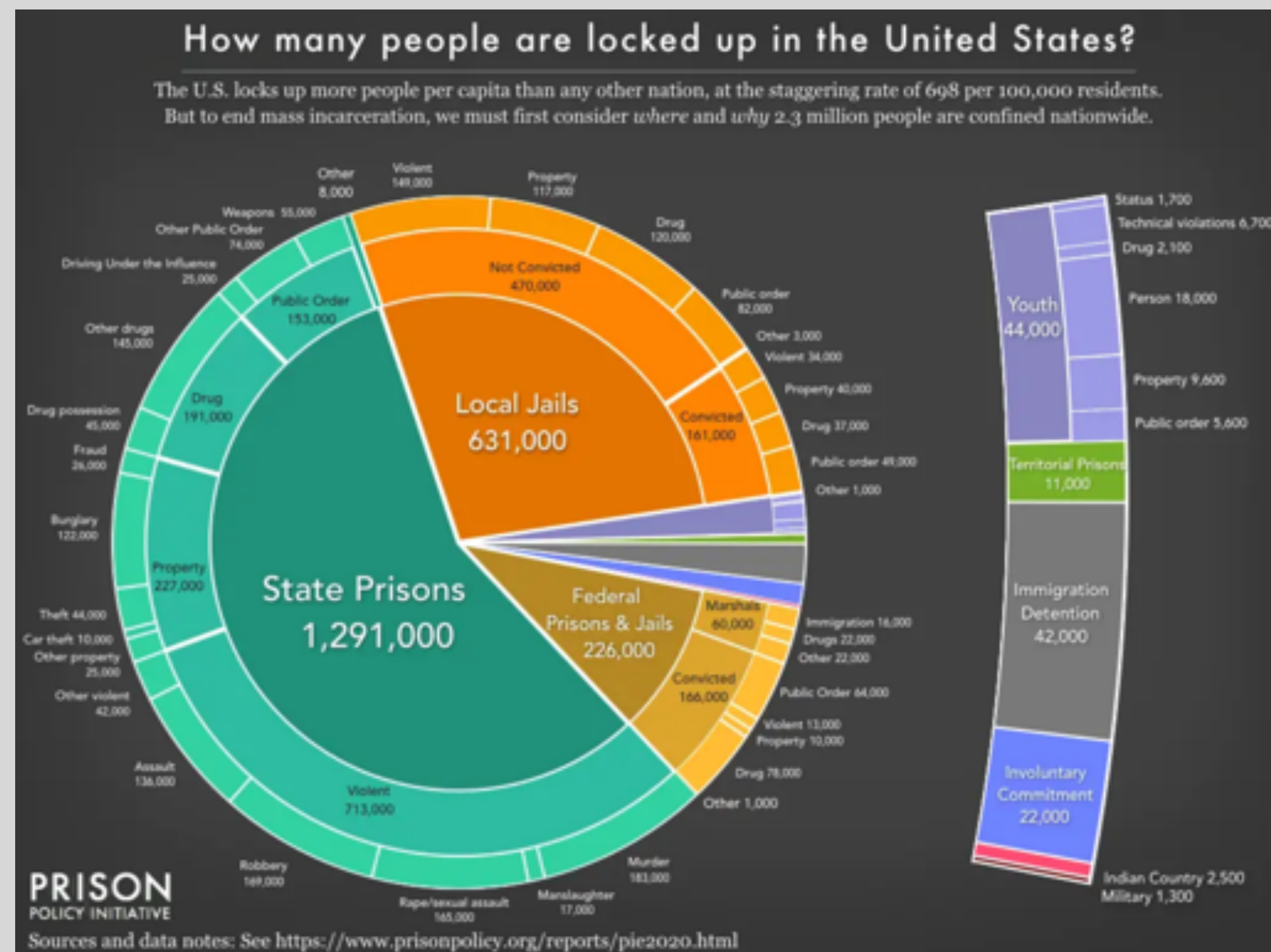
Safety Net

Safety Net is a program that aimed to reduce juvenile contact with the justice system by linking youth and families with mental health services and supports to promote healthy development. Barret and Janopaul-Naylor (2016) found Safety Net to decrease juvenile arrests by almost 60% in a previous study via the training of police officers in youth mental health and implicit bias, establishing sustainable collaboration between police officers and mental health service providers, and diverting youth to receiving care from mental health providers as opposed to the JJS. Ideally, I would like to implement a Safety Net program for the Applied Psychology Counselor Education department at the University of Northern Colorado (UNCO). According to Johnson (2016), Juvenile delinquency trends in Greely, Colorado have continued to decrease since 2009; however, the number of arrests for juveniles under 18 was approximately 1,530 in 2015. With the contacts I have at NRBH, the community members I have worked closely with at the Department of Human Services, and various police officers from the Greeley Police Department (GPD), there may be potential to implement a social justice collaboration between human service providers in the area. Barret and Olle (2016) not only call for the replication of Safety Net in other areas, but also provide an outline for how one counseling psychologist was successful in its implementation this program in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
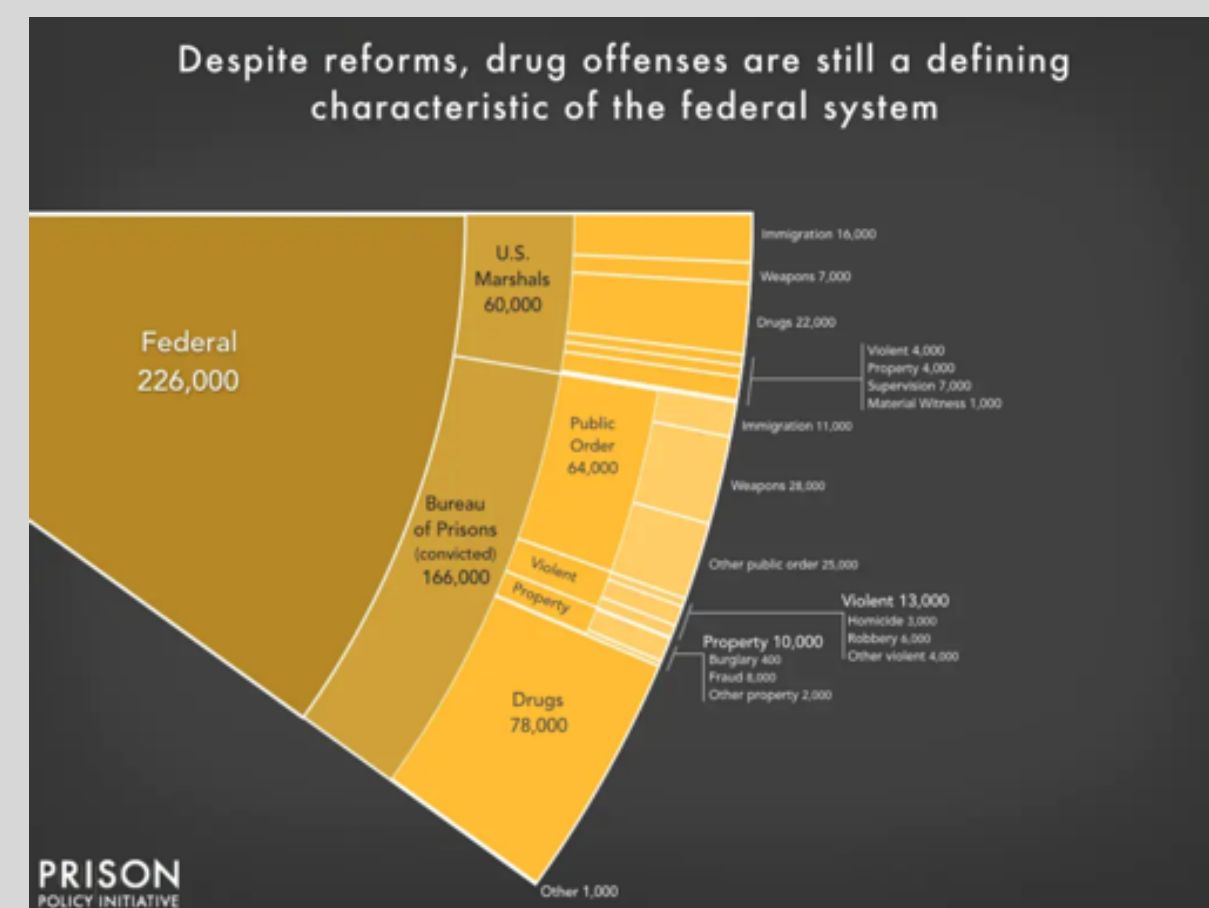
Social Justice and Social Psychology

In Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was fatally shot six times from the front by Officer Darren Wilson (Rosenfeld, 2015). At the time, Brown was with his friend Dorian Johnson who stated that Officer Wilson had grabbed Brown's neck from the inside of his patrol car and shot at him when Brown tried to escape the area. While Wilson denied shooting at a man running away from him, this event sparked political unrest in Ferguson and around the world due to the remnants of racism present in the United States. More investigations began to emerge with the deaths of both African American men (Alton Sterling and Philando Castile) and women (Sandra Bland, Meagan Hockaday, and Natasha McKenna), which revealed a pattern of endemic racism (Hammack, 2017). One could view the actions of Officer Wilson and the individual perpetrators that came to light soon thereafter as individual and separate horrors; however, from a social psychology perspective these deadly confrontations represent a larger culture plagued with injustice, inequity, and prejudice. This author will provide a background of social justice through the lens of social psychology, outline key principles for social justice research, and present a perspective project (Safety Net) for the Greeley, Colorado area that has demonstrated success in the literature.

Social psychology was born from a reaction to social injustices. Hammack (2017) outlined how social psychology had sought to explain and understand social constructs such as the desegregation movement, ethnic hierarchies, World Warr II, the Holocaust, and postcolonial independence. Often credited as the founder of social psychology, Kurt Lewin (1951) stated that he wanted to contribute to knowledge and the amelioration of social problems with the purpose of bettering society. It seems evident that the death of Michael Brown, and those similar, are not the result of implicit biases, but rather the manifestation of explicit racism and open violence. In light of the presidential election of Donald Trump, who set a precedence that sexual assault and violence toward women was excusable under the guise of "locker-room talk", a social psychological perspective to social justice is needed more than ever.

Rather than individual wrongdoings, Hammack (2017) emphasized that social injustices are the result of systemic and environmental influences. He suggested that more than "implications" for future research, social psychology needs to reveal social and cultural devastation of present inequality. Rather than *suggestions*, we need action. More than analyzing *variables*, we need to study people with the purpose of benefiting those in the minority. In order to better impact inequality, it is imperative to analyze how it has manifested throughout our history. It is evident that early philosophers normalized social inequality and thus, contributed to the myth that inequalities between groups are standard in creating cultural stability. Johnston (2011) emphasized how Plato conceptualized inequality as observable differences in the capacity of some groups compared to others and advocated that social hierarchies are natural. Similarly, Aristotle highlighted group status but never questioned hierarchical origins.
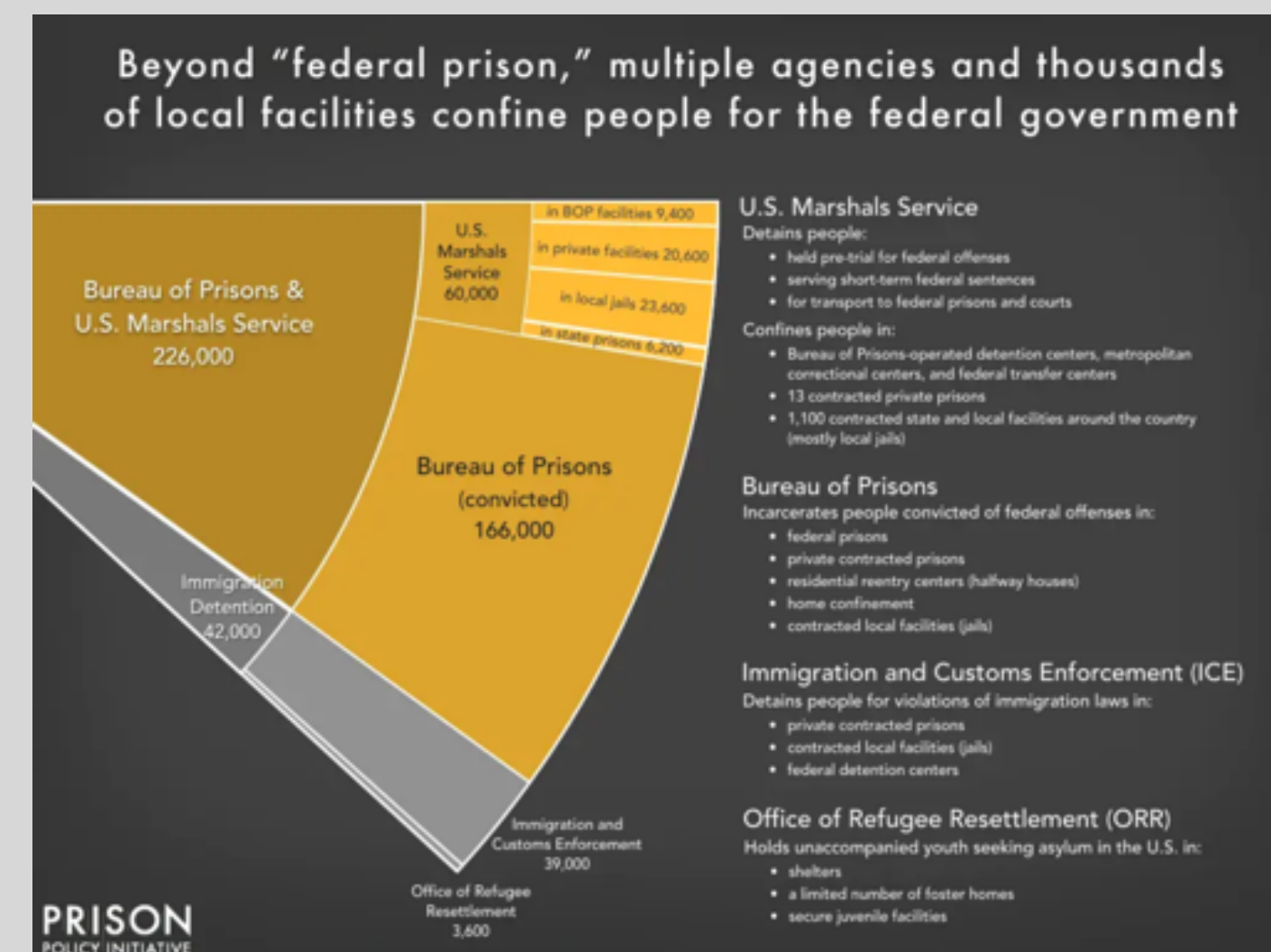

74% of people held by jails are not convicted of any crime

Social Justice Origin

Thrift and Sugarman (2018) defined social justice as equal access to basic liberties and fair distribution of goods and opportunities. These authors further emphasized that a byproduct of social justice was the recognition of differences, elimination of oppression across institutions. and the opportunity to participate equally in social and political life. Thrift and Sugarman (2018) posited that unlike Plato and Aristotle, writers such as John Locke, Voltaire, J. J. Rousseau, and Adam Smit were among the first documented to propose an increase in political representation with the purpose of reducing social and economic inequality. According to these authors, Neoliberalism, which emphasized personal freedom and agency, directly opposed social liberalism which advocated for social cooperation and participation. Social liberalism posited that laws were not meant to confine personal freedoms but sustain them. Hammack (2017) also emphasized that social injustices were bread from the "principle of desert", which stressed that what an individual deserved to receive was based on what and how they contributed to society. Thrift and Sugarman (2018) stated that neoliberalism was born from this principle and favored the elimination of capital control, free market, free trade, and diminished state responsibility of social welfare.

Despite reforms, drug offenses are still a defining characteristic of the federal system

Social Psychology Principles of Social Justice

Principle one abided by the notion that systems of authority regulate individually lived experiences; therefore, research must recognize that people are active agents, constrained by social, systemic, and structural forces that should be approached with skepticism. Having suspicion, instead of faith, in the natural order will help avoid made mistakes in the history of social psychology such as the studies on: eugenics, homosexuality as a mental illness, torture techniques, desegregation, and colonialism (Hammack, 2017). Instead of focusing on Officer Wilson, social psychology should turn its focus to the system that Officer Wilson was trained, influenced, and maintained under. The second principle called for a commitment to science where absolute truths cannot be found given our environment is constantly changing and dynamic. Breaking free from the mold of what we know, will allow us to produce research that approaches knowledge as context dependent.

The third principle emphasized an alliance with the minority. Similar to Hooker (1957) who found that it was society's treatment of sexual diversity that was the problem as opposed to homosexuality as a mental illness, social justice research needs to specifically answer how it is serving the under-represented. Lewin (1946) advocated that research needs to produce more than books and so, authors should ask how and to whom their work will be of use. The fourth principle went beyond fundamental attribution error in that it not only recognized the crux of attributing injustice to single persons, but also called for the investigation of how resistance to injustices occur. The final principle encouraged researchers to leave the "ivory tower" and personally be of service to the public. Like Hooker (1957), research questions need to be crafted in a way that can be used by those who are under-represented, and authors need to produce knowledge that is applicable to real-time action. Hammock (2017) argued that to ignore this principle, and to aim towards book publications and tenure without action, mutes the voice of social justice unintentionally by complicity maintaining inequality.

Beyond "federal prison," multiple agencies and thousands of local facilities confine people for the federal government

Implementation

Successful implementation of the Safety Net program between UNCO and the GPD will have both individual and systemic challenges. Thrift and Sugarman (2018) emphasized a systemic barrier, which is that mental health service providers stand to befit from making social problems individual issues. In a neoliberal culture where all failures are attributed to personal flaw, service providers are perpetually compensated for helping individuals "cope" as opposed to take action. Since the medical model governs how mental health service providers get paid, accumulating funding for Safety Net within UNCO and the GPD will be challenging. According to Barret and Olle (2016) the counseling psychologist appealed to his behavioral health agency by emphasizing the avenue for more patients from the Cambridge Police Department (CPD). Conversely, the psychologist attracted the interest of CPD by postulating that mental health informed police officers would eventually equate to less police department calls. Similarly, it could appeal to both parties by emphasizing the long-term benefits of community partnership. Additionally, there would need to be a universal release of information that would have to be signed by families in order for the GPD and UNCO to communicate with one another. Barret and Olle (2016) stated that their release of information excluded HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) information but did provide both the police and counseling psychologist freedom to discuss mutual cases with the purpose of ensuring comprehensive care.

The goals of Safety Net would be to educate police officers to better manage juvenile's mental health needs; therefore, individual barriers would include allotting time for families, maintaining continual communication avenues throughout the week to ensure proper utilization and maintenance of program protocols, and coordinating with mental health providers in the area. In order to ensure continuity of care for perspective clients, it would be optimal to work with NRBH to reserve a weekly intake slot for people to filter through. UNCO's Psychological Service Clinic (PSC) would be imperative as well; however, given the high comorbidity of substance use and juvenile delinquency NRBH presumably would be the primary gateway to youth receiving mental health services. Conversely, the PSC could assist in offering higher level assessments to those who needed it and could help bare a comparable case load for clients not in need of substance use treatment.

The counseling psychologist in Cambridge first assessed the needs of the six officers assigned to work with the Safety Net Program and then tailor made four, two-hour trainings focused on those needs. The end result was a training regimen focused on multicultural competencies, addressing disproportionate minority contact with police, juvenile mental health, and healthy adolescent development. My role in Safety Net's implementation would be to first be aware and knowledgeable of the environmental factors that promote injustice, lead in the planning procedure for Safety Net to run efficiently, and collaborate with UNCO, NRBH, and the GPD to delineate specific responsibilities and opportunities for community growth. I would like to work with a professor at UNCO who is passionate about social justice initiatives, familiar with the GPD, and experienced in adolescent care. Together, we could delineate responsibilities of this project to other graduate students with the purpose of providing a social justice practicum experience. Graduate students at UNCO could participate in the following: provide training for officers in juvenile mental health and youth development, direct and be available for consultation, and provide access to mental care for the families the GPD has identified as needing services.

Rather than asking officers to take on additional responsibilities to their already intense jobs, Safety Net would operate with the intent that GPD officers are not adopt the role of clinician. Instead, their duty would be to recognize and differentiate between mental health diagnoses and needs. This objective would take time and effort; however, Terrill, Paoline, and Manning (2003) found that police officers are also victims of oppressive micro and macro prejudice and so, engaging in Safety Net may be a direct avenue to better relations with the community making officers more safe and efficient over the long-term.

Data collection and measurement. Similar to psychologists making social justice efforts in the community under the restrictions of the medical model, graduate student involvement may need to be incentivized by providing course credits for this experience. If Safety Net operated under the confines of a practicum, select students would have already needed to demonstrate multicultural competence and counseling skills via the completion of prerequisite courses such as multicultural diversity and basic-level practicum. Students could be continually assessed on social justice and advocacy skills throughout the course informally and be asked to write a final paper integrating their experience in the class with relevant social justice theories and models. Additionally, their involvement in the Safety Net program could resemble the PSC training classes in that students log a specific number of hours per week (2-3 approximately) to being available for consultation, trainings, and intakes. Moreover, supervision of this class could also parallel the PSC classes in that students meet with a faculty member bi-weekly to discuss relevant cases and program obstacles. Descriptive statistics regarding juvenile arrests, intakes completed, number of clients being referred, number of clients engaging in therapeutic services past intake, and amount of GPD and UNCO hours spent maintaining Safety Net. Additionally, each semester end could offer a specific time to accumulate qualitative data from both GPD, NRBH, and UNCO personal alloting at least two official times to reassess and collaborate on Safety Net's effectiveness.

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