

Forensic Social Work

(Criminal Justice Social Work)

Compiler: Fateme Mohammady

www.iraniansocialworkers.ir

Introductory Guide to Forensic Social Work (Criminal Justice Social Work)

By Kaitlin Louie

Forensic social work is a very broad and diverse field of practice that includes any kind of micro, mezzo, and/or macro level social work that assists individuals involved in the criminal justice or legal systems. Vulnerable populations that forensic social workers serve include but are not limited to incarcerated youth and adults, recently released inmates, children who are victims of neglect, and victims of domestic or sexual abuse. Forensic social workers often provide their clients with emotional support, guidance in navigating the court/legal systems, connections to relevant resources, housing application assistance, and individual and policy advocacy.

Due to the specialized needs of the populations they work with, forensic social workers tend to have a strong clinical social work background so that they can complete psychosocial and risk assessments, provide effective therapeutic services, and implement crisis interventions for clients who have often experienced severe trauma and grapple with significant social, emotional, psychological, and behavioral challenges.

Forensic social workers' daily and long-term responsibilities tend to vary widely depending on their specific role and work setting. For example, the duties of a social worker at a domestic violence crisis center will typically differ substantially from the responsibilities of a social worker at a correctional facility. Social work students who are interested in forensic social work should research the types of positions that interest them, and build their internship experiences and professional skill sets around their desired career path.

Work Settings and Responsibilities of Forensic Social Workers

Forensic social workers work in an incredibly wide variety of settings, including but not limited to courthouses, correctional facilities and juvenile hall, psychiatric hospitals, rape crisis centers, domestic violence support centers, and legal advocacy groups, just to name a few. Their daily and long-term responsibilities tend to vary according to their specific work setting and the populations they serve.

Below is an in-depth description of some of the common settings in which forensic social workers work.

Correctional Facilities

Forensic social workers can work in correctional facilities to support inmates at the moment of their incarceration, throughout the duration of their internment, and upon their release. Some of their core duties include but are not limited to:

Intake Coordination, Psychiatric Evaluations, and Support:

Forensic social workers at jails may work in intake services, providing support services, psychiatric evaluations, and risk assessments to individuals entering custody. Chase Finney, ACSW, who works as a Clinical Social Worker and Psychiatric Housing Coordinator at Jail Psychiatric Services in San Francisco, CA, described her responsibilities working at the intake jail in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com. “I triaged referrals and determined if clients required special housing and/or psychiatric services in the jail (i.e. psychiatric housing, suicide watch housing, individual therapy, medication evaluations),” she explained.

The mental health evaluations and risk assessments that forensic social workers conduct are essential in jail settings, as they allow correctional staff to understand and meet the mental and physical health needs of inmates. Inmates may suffer from trauma, mental health problems, substance abuse, and emotional regulation issues, and in these cases forensic social workers may provide emotional support and counseling, and in severe cases recommend specialized housing or a 5150 hold (an involuntary psychiatric hold).

Due to their importance in connecting inmates to the care they require, intake assessments tend to be very thorough and detailed. “As far as the tasks involved in conducting these intake assessments, I utilize a forensic

mental status exam,” Jenna Ferrara, MSW, who works as a Therapist at Jail Behavioral Health Services in San Francisco County Jail, told OnlineMSWPrograms.com. “[This exam] collects the following information: reason for referral, demographics, arrest information including charges, history of mental health (community contacts, 5150’s/hospitalizations, in custody history), history of suicide attempts and dangerous behavior as well as current risk of self harm and harm to others, substance use history, release plan, cognition, insight, judgment, impulse control, memory, appearance, mood/affect, speech, thought process/content, perceptions.”

Ongoing Psychiatric Support and Care Coordination:

Forensic social workers in correctional settings also support inmates throughout their tenure at the jail, ensuring that they receive the resources they need to address any emotional trauma, mental illness, as well as emotional or relational issues. For example, in her current role as Psychiatric Housing Coordinator at San Francisco County Jail, Ms. Finney not only coordinates the care of incoming inmates, but also provides short-term counseling and emotional support. “Because it is a fairly transient setting (average length of stay is probably 1-2 months), I mostly use brief therapy interventions and assist clients in developing coping skills while in the jail,” she explained, “I often use motivational interviewing techniques when addressing substance abuse issues.”

Regular mental health evaluations to see how clients are coping with their time in jail, and whether therapy is helping them to progress, are also important.

When working with inmates, social workers collaborate and are in regular communication with a larger team of law enforcement, legal, and medical professionals to determine the best plans of care for incarcerated clients. “We all work closely with the Sheriff’s Department and medical staff,” Ms. Finney explained, “For example, most of our referrals come from nurses, and we will sometimes collaborate with the Sheriff’s Department to create behavioral plans for problematic clients.”

Re-Entry Support and Resource Referrals:

Forensic social workers in jail settings also play a crucial role in helping inmates transition to society upon their release. “I also assist clients in developing reentry plans by providing them with information on resources,

coordinating with their community providers, and making appropriate referrals,” said Ms. Finney.

Past traumatic experiences and/or mental illness can be major factors behind individuals’ involvement in the criminal justice system; if they do not adequately address these factors and receive the proper support to do so, they may quickly return to the behaviors that resulted in their incarceration in the first place. Forensic social workers work to prevent these relapses by connecting recently released inmates and individuals on probation to mental health support personnel, supportive or therapeutic groups, and community resources. They may also follow up with individuals on probation to see if they are acclimating appropriately to daily life post-release.

Psychiatric Hospitals

Another important setting in which forensic social workers support incarcerated individuals and recently released inmates on probation is the psychiatric departments of hospitals, many of which have units devoted specifically to working with severely mentally ill youth and/or adults who are involved in the criminal justice system. The services that forensic social workers in psychiatric hospitals provide are typically very similar to those that social workers at correctional facilities offer.

Forensic social workers who work at psychiatric departments of hospitals tend to work with individuals suffering from severe psychological conditions, and may specialize in a specific population. Samantha Roberts, LCSW, who works as a Clinical Case Manager for the University of California, San Francisco’s Department of Psychiatry: Citywide Forensics, told OnlineMSWPrograms.com in an interview, “I work with clients 18 years and older who have a severe mental illness (i.e. schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder with psychotic features, and delusion disorder are some of the diagnoses) and are involved in the criminal justice system.” Forensic social workers in hospital settings often receive their clients through referrals from psychiatric services at correctional facilities, or from courts.

Care Coordination

Forensic social workers at psychiatric hospitals tend to follow their clients through multiple systems and situations, particularly if these clients have been recently released from jail. Forensic social workers at hospitals often

provide intensive wraparound services to their clients in collaboration with other medical, mental health, and human services professionals. “Intensive wraparound services” is a general term for a comprehensive, holistic, and individualized method of care coordination, mental and physical health services, and case management.

Charles Berman, ASW, who works as a Psychiatric Social Worker at UCSF’s Mental Health Outpatient Intensive Case Management Program–Forensic Team, explained how the clinic in which he works houses a multidisciplinary team that serves inmates and individuals on probation as they move through different stages in their incarceration and/or release and reintegration into society. “There are social workers, psychiatrists, peer counselors and security staff in our clinic. We all work together to provide intensive wraparound services to clients as they cycle in and out of the jail, the state hospitals, local hospitals, and the community,” he told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Forensic social workers also do not necessarily stay in the hospital setting, and can travel to locations where their clients need direct support or assistance. “I spend about 40% of my time outside the office, going to jail or the psychiatric emergency room, psych hospital, state hospital, board and cares, SRO’s, halfway houses, the court, looking for clients on the street, meeting with other providers, going to Social Security, etc.,” Mr. Berman said.

Psychological Evaluations and Therapy

Forensic social workers use a wide variety of therapeutic methods to help clients address the complex mental and emotional challenges they face. A tailored, intensive, and multi-method approach is often necessary in order to adequately address clients’ needs. “Many of my clients have schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorders, or Bipolar with Psychotic features, so using psycho-education to promote med compliance is important,” Mr. Berman said, “Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for psychosis to build insight and challenge delusions is valuable. [...] A few clients have Borderline Personality Disorder and so I teach Dialectical Behavior Therapy skills and refer to our Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) day-treatment program. Teaching basic social skills and life skills (hygiene, money management) is always valuable.”

Past traumatic experiences also factor into clients’ presenting issues and treatment plan. Understanding clients’ background and the role that certain

traumatic experiences play in the development of behavioral issues enables forensic social workers to provide compassionate and solutions-oriented therapy. “All of my clients face trauma, some extremely complex, and so I try to use exposure therapy for specific experiences or refer to our seeking safety group for globalized trauma,” Mr. Berman said, “Nearly all clients are dually-diagnosed so I use harm reduction for substance abuse.”

Support During Transition to Society

For clients who are recently released from prison, forensic social workers in medical settings provide targeted and holistic support as these individuals find their footing. “The clients that are accepted into our program are usually unemployed; many are without any housing, have no insurance and few have family support,” Ms. Roberts told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “Our clients face the challenges of trying to survive with the fewest resources possible. For instance, when a client gets out of jail, they have nothing; no place to live, no money, no food. We do the best we can to support and stabilize them during this difficult time.”

Forensic social workers who assist clients with transitioning to society can help them with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) enrollment, housing applications, starting a job search, and other important quality of life items. In addition to helping clients navigate relevant community and government resources, forensic social workers provide emotional support and general life guidance, such as day-to-day living and forming positive habits. In describing her work with clients, Ms. Roberts explained, “[We can help clients by] managing how they receive their medication, getting them assessed for in home health aides, communicating with family members, helping them learn appropriate ADLs and hygiene, helping them buy clothes, etc. [...] “We try to teach them how to live a healthy and stable life, to the best of their ability.”

Communication with Courts and Other Relevant Parties

Forensic social workers working at psychiatric hospitals collaborate with court systems (particularly mental health courts), lawyers, physicians, nurses, and mental health professionals to support clients’ well-being and progress towards release and reintegration.

Mental health courts are an important part of the criminal justice system; these specialized courts support inmates and individuals on probation by

connecting them to mental health specialists and community resources, and providing support services to assist criminal offenders in their re-entry into society. To receive these benefits from mental health courts, participants must develop and commit to a plan for behavioral changes in collaboration with forensic social workers.

Ms. Roberts told OnlineMSWPrograms.com how many of her clients are involved in California's Behavioral Health Court. "The Behavioral Health Court assists criminal offenders suffering from severe mental illness by connecting them to treatment services in their community, providing advocacy during court proceedings, and working to effectively transition clients to appropriate case management services upon their release from jail," she explained. "BHC is for people who are charged with crimes and fit certain criteria (i.e. are severely mentally ill, psychotic etc.). If they get chosen, they can opt in or out. If they opt in, they are mandated to participate in such services as medication, mental health counseling, and drug rehab."

Mr. Berman, who also works with BHC participants, described how many of them must attend therapeutic groups. "Most of our clients are mandated by behavioral health court to attend our 6-month "Thinking for a Change" group series, which is a CBT group approach to treating "criminogenic" thoughts and behaviors," he said.

Forensic social workers who work with BHC and similar courts will often monitor client progress and report back to the courts. "When we have clients who are involved in BHC, we work with the court by providing them with weekly updates about the client's progress in treatment and give recommendations to the court for rewards or sanctions that the client should receive based on their performance and behavior," Ms. Roberts said.

Even for clients who are not eligible for BHC and other programs, forensic social workers working in psychiatric medical settings often communicate with clients' lawyers to connect them to diversion programs and other post-release support.

Crisis Centers and Victim Support Programs

Forensic social workers can also work closely with the victims of violence, neglect, and other hardships to provide emotional support, therapy, legal guidance, and connections to relevant community resources. Examples of settings in which forensic social workers help victims may include but are

not limited to rape crisis centers, domestic violence organizations, and child welfare agencies, as well as correctional facilities and juvenile hall.

Similarly to forensic social workers in correctional and psychiatric settings, social workers who help victimized or traumatized individuals complete a wide variety of rigorous responsibilities. Core tasks that forensic social workers perform at crisis centers and victim support programs include crisis interventions, legal advocacy and guidance, counseling and therapy, individual and community education, and program development.

Crisis Intervention Services

Forensic social workers who work with victims of abuse or trauma provide crisis interventions on a regular basis. Leandra Peloquin, MSW, who worked for over a decade at the YWCA Rape Crisis Center in San Jose, CA as an Assault Prevention Intervention Specialist, Prevention Coordinator, Client Services Coordinator, and Director, explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com how she worked with a larger medical and forensic team to support victims. “Providing crisis intervention services to survivors of sexual violence involved covering shifts for a 24-hour hotline, answering crisis calls and responding to the hospital to support victims of sexual assault as they underwent medical/forensic exams,” Ms. Peloquin said, “In Santa Clara County, we refer to the medical/forensic exam as a SART. SART stands for Sexual Assault Response Team. That team includes the responding law enforcement officer/s, forensically trained nurse and rape crisis advocate. We also responded to pediatric SARTs (children 12 and under).”

The main job of the social worker when supporting victims in crisis is providing emotional support and guidance on practical and legal matters, such as the need for medical attention or the right that victims have to individualized legal advocacy. “We notified survivors of their rights as a victim of a sexually violent crime,” Ms. Peloquin explained, “One of those rights is to have a confidential sexual assault advocate accompany them through every part of the process. Through accompanying them, we could walk them through the process, while providing information and very important emotional support.”

Guidance in Navigating Courts and Legal System

Forensic social workers who work with victims of crimes such as rape or domestic abuse can help their clients understand their rights and navigate

the complex legal system. In addition to crisis interventions, forensic social workers can provide continual, long-term support to victims who decide to take their case to court. “As legal advocates, we would notify survivors of their rights, [...] update survivors about the status of their case, as well as explain the criminal justice system process,” Ms. Peloquin said in describing her individual work with victims at the Rape Crisis Center. Sometimes victims of sexual abuse or other crimes do not come forward until months or years after the experience, and in these cases forensic social workers inform victims of their legal options, and what the process of pursuing justice would look like in the short and long-term.

Forensic social workers in this area of work communicate and collaborate regularly with law enforcement, lawyers, and the courts in order to help victims receive the services and community support they need. “There are many steps to a criminal case, and the process can be confusing, daunting and scary. Our center had strong relationships with law enforcement agencies and the District Attorney’s office,” Ms. Peloquin said, “The development and maintenance of multidisciplinary relationships was imperative in being able to best serve our clients. As advocates, we were able to accompany survivors to interviews with law enforcement, the DA’s office and any court process (most commonly when they had to testify in court).”

Counseling and Therapy

In addition to crisis interventions, counseling, and legal guidance, forensic social workers can also provide counseling and psychotherapy to victims of violence and other crimes. According to Ms. Peloquin, victims of abuse often need compassionate support and targeted therapy (both individually and potentially in groups) to help them process and manage the mental, emotional, and behavioral ramifications of the traumas they have experienced.

“[During my time at the Rape Crisis Center, I also provided] peer counseling to survivors of sexual violence, as well as their loved ones. Counseling allowed the survivor a safe space to begin working through the trauma they experienced,” Ms. Peloquin said. In addition, as testifying in court can often be a difficult experience for victims of crimes, forensic social workers help their clients maintain resilience as they revisit past traumas. “One of the goals of legal advocacy services is to assist in minimizing the retraumatization and revictimization that survivors often

experience while going through the criminal justice system process,” Ms. Peloquin said.

Ms. Peloquin also noted that forensic social workers do not need to work at crisis and victim support centers to help victims of violence and other crimes; in correctional facilities, perpetrators are often victims of crime or traumas themselves. “Social workers do not need to work at a rape crisis center or domestic violence organization in order to provide these services, although it is the way to have the most consistent interaction,” she noted, “Social workers can also work within the juvenile detention center, jails and prison.”

Education

Social workers who assist victims of crime can also work to educate groups and the larger public about the importance of avoiding crime and building a safe and accepting community. In describing her role as Prevention Educator at the Rape Crisis Center, Leandra Peloquin explained, “My role [...] involved providing prevention education to diverse populations regarding the topics of sexual violence, dating violence, and sexual harassment. The majority of prevention education was facilitated in school settings (elementary, middle and high school and college), but we also provided presentations for the community at large.”

Forensic social workers who educate the community about crime and the criminal justice system may partner with law enforcement, legal advocacy groups, and other organizations to present to youth and adults at schools, churches, community centers, and clinics on topics such as substance abuse, domestic abuse, violence, emotional health, and physical health.

Program Development and Advocacy

Through their direct service work with victims of crimes, forensic social workers may wish to address the larger scale social problems that contribute to their victims’ experiences. Such work may involve program development, as well as political/legal advocacy. For example, during her time at the Rape Crisis Center, Ms. Peloquin played an important role in the Center’s development of targeted services for commercially sexually exploited children.

“A paramount part of working at the YWCA Rape Crisis Center was working with commercially sexually exploited children/minors

(CSEC/CSEM),” she explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “One of the ways in which the YWCA Rape Crisis Center grew services for these youth was to focus on moving towards a model that best served this special population. In my roles as Client Services Coordinator and Director, I wrote about this issue in grant reports in an effort to bring attention to the need for additional funding and specialized services for these youth. We also provided specialized training for advocates who provided intervention services for these youth.”

Legal Advocacy Groups and Pro-Bono Law Firms

Forensic social workers can also work for legal and political advocacy groups to help vulnerable populations that are involved in the criminal justice system. Social workers in these settings may collaborate with a larger team of legal professionals to represent vulnerable individuals in court matters and work on advocacy initiatives to improve services for populations in need. Important tasks that forensic social workers complete in advocacy groups include legal investigations and research, individualized and macro-level advocacy, and legal counseling and guidance.

Legal Investigative Work and Advocacy

Forensic social workers at legal advocacy organizations can provide services at both the micro and the macro levels to help individuals involved in the criminal justice system who need support, guidance, and a voice in legal proceedings. This type of work is often fast-paced, multi-faceted, and challenging, and can involve a combination of research/investigative work, meetings with clients, and reaching out to relevant parties with information on improving certain programs and policies.

Jessica Warner, LMSW, who was a Forensic Social Worker at The Legal Aid Society for over eight years, described the many kinds of responsibilities she had while working with and for children in New York City who are involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. “I [provided] systemic advocacy within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, through consultation and in-house social work expertise in a nonprofit law firm,” she explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “Every day [was] a little bit different, but some of the specific things we [did] to develop and implement law and policy reform strategies [included] identifying and researching systemic trends impacting our clients, conducting background literature reviews, investigating agency and

placement procedures and conditions through record reviews, site visits and interviews with residents, monitoring compliance with settlements by reviewing records, following up with our staff to see how client services have improved or not, and meeting with providers to raise concerns.”

Ms. Warner also coordinated and collaborated with other organizations and programs with similar missions to help NYC youth. “We also [participated] in many citywide initiatives and coalitions, [provided] internal and external trainings, [developed] testimony for city council hearings, and [wrote] letters to the governor. In doing all of this work, I [was] part of an interdisciplinary team and each case or other form of advocacy involves at least one attorney and usually a paralegal.”

Legal Counseling/Guidance

Organizations such as The Legal Aid Society also employ forensic social workers to work individually with clients. During her first few years at the Society, for example, Ms. Warner provided legal counsel, crisis intervention services, emotional support, and psychosocial assessment services to youth involved in juvenile delinquency, child protection, and persons in need of supervision (PINS) cases.

Ms. Warner mentioned her belief that direct service work is very important for forensic social workers’ professional development, even if they decide to work mainly at the macro level on policy, legal research and investigations, and large-scale advocacy initiatives. “I absolutely think all social workers should do some direct practice social work first,” she advised, “I actually think anyone who works in social services, social change, human rights, etc. (not just social workers) should work at a direct practice level first. That is how you get to know the nuances of the real issues that real human beings face. Not only do I think social workers should start there, but I also think they need to continue to stay in touch even after moving on to macro practice and/or administrative work.”

Advice on How to Become a Forensic Social Worker

The exact path to become a forensic social worker differs from individual to individual, and is dependent upon a person’s academic and professional interests. In general, however, social work students interested in forensic social work should prepare for this challenging field of work by taking

relevant coursework, seeking field internships in criminal justice settings, and participating in criminal justice-related work outside of their schooling.

Academic Training

Due to the intense and often clinical nature of forensic social work, individuals who wish to become forensic social workers typically need to complete a Master's in Social Work program from a CSWE-accredited institution in order to gain the specialized skills necessary to work in forensic environments.

Students interested in forensic social work should aim to gain a solid understanding of the challenges the populations they wish to help face (ex. minorities, domestically abused women, children in the child welfare system, inmates and juvenile delinquents, severely mentally ill individuals, etc.) by taking classes that are relevant to these populations. They should also try to build a strong set of clinical social work skills, including but not limited to conducting psychosocial and risk assessments, implementing crisis interventions, and using different kinds of psychotherapeutic methods to support individuals dealing with trauma and severe mental health issues (for more information on clinical social work skills and modalities, please see our Guide to Clinical Social Work).

In addition to the aforementioned topics, students interested in forensic social work would benefit from a solid understanding of the criminal justice system, law, and political advocacy. Classes that focus on specific issues that forensic social workers encounter, such as substance abuse and family dynamics, may also be helpful.

“I definitely recommend that social work students take courses in policy and/or law if they can. Many social work programs have one or more of each as electives. Even if the specific subject isn't particularly interesting to the student, it would be worth it just to learn more about how law and public policy work,” Ms. Warner recommended. She also recommended that students try and complete their field placement at an organization that has a mission that aligns with their interests, such as an association that does advocacy work.

While some MSW programs may have a specific concentration in forensic or criminal justice social work, many do not, and thus social work students should consciously select courses that help them build the knowledge and skills they will need on the job.

“There was no ‘forensics’ track in my program, so I took classes that I thought would be applicable, like substance abuse, person in the environment and CBT classes, because that’s the modality I identified with most,” Ms. Roberts explained.

Mr. Berman recommended that students also look into classes about care coordination for the homeless and therapy for trauma. “Get training in substance abuse, therapy for borderline and psychotic clients, trauma work, and case management experience for homeless adults,” he advised.

Internship Experiences

All of the forensic social workers whom OnlineMSWPrograms.com interviewed emphasized the importance of trying to find field internships in a criminal justice setting. “I think it is ideal to have a field placement either in a correctional institution or with individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system. The state hospitals are another forensic/psychiatric setting,” Ms. Finney said. “I think the best way to prepare (both emotionally and practically) is direct practice experience because our clients are our best teachers,” she added, “Correctional facilities are also incredibly harsh environments to work in, so it is important to assess that part of the experience as well.”

“I strongly encourage any student thinking about getting into a certain field to try and get their field placement there,” Ms. Roberts noted. She also encouraged social work students to really advocate for their field placement goals and needs during their MSW program. “First year field placement was chosen for me at my program (I worked at a senior citizens recreation center—not my main interest, but I learned a lot) but second year, I was able to sit with my field instructor and tell him specifically what I wanted,” she recalled, “Schools usually have long lists of field placements and are usually open to students finding their own placement, if it’s an agency that is amenable to having an intern.”

Volunteer Work

Social workers who wish to work in forensic settings may gain valuable experience through volunteer work that enables them to develop relevant skills and/or work with people involved in the criminal justice system.

“If students were not able to participate in field internships or employment to gain experience in this area, I would recommend volunteering at a rape

crisis or domestic violence organization,” Ms. Peloquin said, “As a volunteer, they may not be able to be directly involved with the criminal justice process (depending on the role of their volunteer work), but they can certainly learn more about it through those employed at the organization.”

Social work students should also note that volunteer work in certain criminal justice-related settings, such as correctional and psychiatric settings, may be difficult to find, and requires that students be proactive.

“Volunteering in the criminal justice system is very difficult due to liability. Depending on what area you are looking into (working with adolescents, reentry population, helping people find housing after their release from custody, or employment) there are usually ways to find opportunities, but you have to look,” Ms. Roberts noted, “Usually, schools have lists of agencies they are affiliated with that would accept a student on a volunteer basis.”

Informational Interviews and Mentors

Social workers and social work students interested in forensic work environments should also speak with people in this area of work. “It is also always a good idea to talk to professionals in the field; I did lots of informational interviews while I was in graduate school,” Ms. Finney said.

Mr. Berman similarly suggests that prospective criminal justice social workers build relationships with current professionals in the field. “Find a mentor,” he advised, “You can look to professors, supervisors, other students, etc. I have been impressed at how open social workers are to mentoring each other.”

Challenges of Forensic Social Work

Forensic social workers encounter a multitude of challenges on the job, including but not limited to shouldering the deep and disconcerting traumas of their clients; helping people manage very complex mental, emotional, and behavioral health issues; and working within a system that can make it difficult for clients to receive the services that they need.

“Generally, I’m seeing people [...] when they are experiencing a great deal of suffering and need someone to take that out on, which can be difficult to hold and return to each day,” Ms. Finney explained, “The criminal justice

system is flawed in so many ways, and it can sometimes feel like I'm a part of that system that is failing people, rather than working against it."

However, Ms. Finney also notes that the challenges of her work feed into why it is rewarding for her, as she can see the concrete and profound benefits of her work with clients, "[T]here are definitely moments when I feel of use, even if it's simply treating someone like a human being or listening to someone who has never really been listened to," she said.

Ms. Warner also noted that one of the main challenges she faces in her advocacy work for children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems is working within frustrating and problematic systems, "[It is] frustrating to experience how much regard society has for children, but for what seems to be only certain children," she said, "I think most people recognize that children are more vulnerable than adults and that they deserve our careful and thoughtful attention and care. But that doesn't always seem to extend to poor children, children of color, children with disabilities, children who identify as LGBTQI, or a myriad of other ways in which children can be and are marginalized. These children are not seen and heard enough, and when they are, they are often still ignored."

Mr. Berman explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com the challenges he has had in setting limits and avoiding overwork. "It has been challenging to set boundaries between my work and personal life that will allow this career to be sustainable in the long-term," he noted, "I have started forcing myself to leave work on time, no matter if not everything is done. Because the truth is no matter how hard you work, it will never be enough."

Leandra Peloquin cites the exposure to extreme trauma as one reason why social work students should carefully consider whether criminal justice work environments would be ideal for them. "I would often get asked how I dealt with the trauma aspect of the work," she said regarding her time at the YWCA Rape Crisis Center, "In this position, you see and hear about hurt and pain everyday and hear stories that expose you to the dark side to humanity. It is something that has to be seriously considered when working in this field, as it can lead to burn out. I would say that self-care is non-negotiable in this work. It is important to not take it all on, but just as important not to become desensitized. The work may be hard, but the clients inspire hope every day."

Ms. Peloquin also emphasized the importance of working with resilient and supportive colleagues. "As well, working with a strong team of people is

paramount, as they understand the work on a completely different level than most,” she said, “That can feed a positive energy in the work as well.”

Why People Become Forensic Social Workers

Though the challenges of forensic social work are considerable, social workers in this field find the impact of their work, and the relationships they build with clients and colleagues, to be sustaining. Ms. Peloquin noted that her knowledge of the importance of her efforts, and her direct interactions with victims of sexual violence, were key rewards of her work at the YWCA Rape Crisis Center. “In many ways everything about working at the YWCA Rape Crisis Center was a rewarding experience. I really enjoyed every facet of the work. The most rewarding experience was my direct service work clients. Everyday I witnessed such bravery, strength and resilience from those who had experienced significant trauma. It is difficult to articulate in words what an honor it is for someone to allow you to walk with them through something so tremendously difficult,” she told [OnlineMSWPrograms.com](#), “My work at the YWCA Rape Crisis Center allowed me the privilege of meeting someone’s courage right then and there. That was the work that was most profound and the work that will be forever held in my heart.”

Ms. Ferrara also described her work at Jail Behavioral Health Services as deeply rewarding for the concrete positive impact she has on clients’ well-being, and for the opportunity to see their successes in spite of their hardships. “Some of the most rewarding moments have been assisting clients who are in crisis, and helping them obtain the care they need to stabilize,” she told [OnlineMSWPrograms.com](#), “I’ve also had the opportunity to escort clients out of the jail and into the community. Bearing witness to their first breath of freedom as they leave the jail is beautiful.”

In addition to being rewarding from an emotional standpoint, forensic social work can be highly interesting on an intellectual and social level, as Mr. Berman explained in his interview with [OnlineMSWPrograms.com](#).

“I have been interested in mental health policy since high school, and the more I learned about criminal justice policy, the more I found they were intertwined as the predominant forms of social control in our society,” he explained, “When I started my MSW there was a lot of talk about serving ‘the most vulnerable,’ and clients at this intersection seem to fit this label. Also, through connections with others working in the field, I knew that this

is a time of enormous policy reforms, the largest since de-institutionalization of the state hospitals, that are increasingly transferring the responsibility for supervising adults with mental illness and criminal histories from the state institutions to county community health clinics. I wanted to be on the ground as this transition takes place.”

Ms. Roberts also cited academic and intellectual curiosity about the criminal justice system as reasons behind her decision to become a forensic social worker. “I majored in Criminology and during that time became much more intrigued by the serious injustices going on in our jails and the people that were being affected by them and then essentially being ignored,” she recalled, “I didn’t understand how this country, who imprisons the most people in the world, ignores the people they incarcerate and then are surprised when they get out and can’t function. [...] I felt compelled to see for myself what was going on in jail, and wanted to see if I could make a difference, or maybe come up with ideas of how to change things. This was a very exciting challenge to face going into grad school.”

Forensic social workers who work at the macro level may also feel their work is fulfilling due to its positive impact on society. “[The] most rewarding part [of my work] by far is that I get to stand up on behalf of marginalized children and adolescents all day every day,” Ms. Warner told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “It isn’t necessarily fun work, but I feel like I’m doing something that really needs to be done. Essentially I feel like I’m where I should be. Mostly that’s because I stand behind the values of the work, that all children deserve a safe and healthy environment to grow up in, and that that environment should be a home with a loving family rather than an institution.”

The field of forensic social work presents constant challenges, and social workers who enter this field without the proper academic, professional, and emotional preparation may find it to be difficult to sustain. However, in supporting underserved individuals through some of their most harrowing and difficult experiences, and by tackling some of our society’s most problematic systems and policies, criminal justice social workers play a vital and in many ways a rewarding role in the improvement of our society.

About the Author: Kaitlin Louie is a content writer and editor who writes articles for OnlineMSWPrograms.com. She received her bachelor's and

master's degrees in English from Stanford University, and aspires to be an author of fiction and creative non-fiction.

Please note: The opinions expressed in the interviews featured in this guide are solely the views of the interviewees, and do not represent the views or position of OnlineMSWPrograms.com and its affiliates.

This text has been translated into Persian. To study it, visit the Iranian Social Workers site.

www.iraniansocialworkers.ir