



A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS

# Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors for Social Work Competencies

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## Introduction

Social work educators serve the profession through their teaching, scholarship, and service. Social work education at the baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels shapes the profession's future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, the promotion of evidence-informed practice through scientific inquiry, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community. Social work education is advanced by the scholarship of teaching and learning, and scientific inquiry into its multifaceted dimensions, processes, and outcomes.

[The Council on Social Work Education](#)<sup>1</sup> defines social work competency as “the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being.” CSWE further articulates the demonstration of social work competence as “informed by knowledge, values, and cognitive and affective processes that include the social worker’s critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgment in unique practice situations”. Furthermore, “competency-based education is an outcomes-oriented approach to curriculum design. The goal of the outcomes approach is to ensure students are able to demonstrate the integration and application of the competencies in practice”.

*“the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being.”*



<sup>1</sup> Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs. (2015). Council on Social Work Education. Commission on Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy.

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## Grand Challenges in Social Work

Led by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, the Grand Challenges for Social Work is a groundbreaking initiative to champion **social progress powered by science**. It's a call to action for all of us to work together to tackle our nation's toughest social problems.

The Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative (GCSWI), spearheaded by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (<http://aaswsw.org/>), represents a major endeavor for the entire field of social work. GCSWI calls for bold innovation and collective action powered by proven and evolving scientific interventions to address critical social issues facing society. The purpose of GCSWI was modeled after the National Academy of Engineering, which aimed to identify some of the most persistent engineering problems of the day and then put the attentions, energies, and funding of the entire field to work on them for a decade.

The GCSWI does the same for social issues, tackling problems such as homelessness, social isolation, mass incarceration, family violence, and economic inequality. Each of the 12 grand challenges represent a broad but discrete concept where social work expertise and leadership can be brought to bear on bold new ideas, scientific exploration, and surprising innovations (Uehara et al, 2015). This groundbreaking initiative champions **social progress powered by science**. It is a call to action for all of us to work together to tackle our nation's toughest social problems.

### **Promote Smart Decarceration is a Grand Challenge of Social Work**

Promote Smart Decarceration is one of the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work. The Promote Smart Decarceration Network seeks to develop a proactive, comprehensive, evidence-driven "smart decarceration" strategy that will dramatically reduce the number of people who are imprisoned and enable the nation to embrace a more effective and just approach to public safety and well-being. This work provides an opportunity to engage and mobilize social work scholars and practitioners in developing and executing an actionable agenda for smart decarceration.

Guided by our profession's social justice orientation and commitment to working with vulnerable populations, social work scholars and practitioners should be leaders in efforts to reform the criminal justice system in the era of decarceration. **Smart decarceration** is the development of effective, sustainable, and socially just solutions to achieve criminal justice transformation.

For the country to achieve effective and sustainable decarceration—hereafter referred to as smart decarceration—the following **three interrelated goals** must be accomplished:

1. Substantially reduce the incarcerated population in jails and prisons.
2. Redress the existing social disparities—racial, economic, and behavioral health disparities—among the incarcerated.
3. Maximize public safety and well-being.

Smart decarceration is grounded in four **guiding concepts**:

1. **Changing the narrative on incarceration and the incarcerated.**  
A smart decarceration approach must soberly question the utility and function of incarceration and actively welcome currently and formerly incarcerated individuals as leaders in decarceration efforts.
2. **Making criminal justice system-wide innovations.** Criminal justice transformation that leads to smart decarceration will require advances in all sectors of the criminal justice system, including law enforcement, court systems, jails and prisons, and probation and parole.
3. **Implementing transdisciplinary policy and practice interventions.** Smart decarceration will be complex and comprehensive and will require integrating perspectives from multiple disciplines to produce substantive policy reforms and practice innovations.
4. **Employing evidence-driven strategies.** A smart decarceration approach must both generate new evidence for optimal reforms and use existing evidence to guide decision-making and program development. Methods must be integrated to continuously examine and assess the effects of policy and practice interventions, developing further evidence from which to act.

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## Purpose and Application

This tool was conceived by a members of the “Promote Smart Decarceration” Grand Challenge Education Working Group. The Education Working Group is led by Dr. Phillippe Copeland at Boston University and Dr. Stephen Tripodi at Florida State University. The Education Working Groups’ primary areas of focus are to 1) Prepare students to be social workers at the micro and macro level in the decarceration era through the transmission of Smart Decarceration knowledge and skills in traditional and online academic settings, 2) Develop and enhance micro and macro level SD field placement opportunities to practice and evaluate Smart Decarceration competencies through criminal justice involvement, and 3) Promote Smart Decarceration throughout criminal justice involvement with dynamic continuing education opportunities.

This document provides guidance for instructors and students on incorporating “smart decarceration” as a focus for social work education. It does so in a format that follows the CSWE social work competencies, incorporating smart decarceration-related practice behaviors for ready application in classroom curricula and field practicums. This document serves the following purposes:

- Edit the existing generalist practice behaviors to include mass incarceration and smart decarceration concepts. As well, provide specialized practice behaviors for the guidance and evaluation of learning and professional development of social work students in criminal justice settings
- Provide smart decarceration-focused competencies and practice behaviors to develop syllabi and curriculum for courses
- Ensure that students adhere to overall social work competencies and practice behaviors while providing social work services in criminal justice settings
- Advance smart decarceration principles in social work education and practice

This tool may be applied by classroom instructors (in both traditional and online settings) as well as field education staff and supervisors toward developing the field of social work in ways that promote smart decarceration. Finally, this tool may be used by learners/students in the application of knowledge and practice of skills in preparation for success in an era of decarceration. Possible applications for this tool include:

- Building block for creating learning experiences in the classroom in the community
- Guidance for applied behaviors in criminal justice settings or for those most impacted by mass incarceration
- Inform development and assessment of syllabi and curricula focused on addressing mass incarceration
- Evaluation tool for measuring student development and success along practice behaviors necessary for competent practice in criminal justice settings or with justice-involved populations
- Guidance for students around selecting practice behaviors for Learning Agreements in practicum placements that fulfill a criminal justice or individualized concentration

For example, this tool may be used to assist with the development of student learning agreements in order to structure their internship to address smart decarceration competencies, practice behaviors, and student educational goals.

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## Definitions of Key Constructs

**Mass Incarceration** – a period of about 40 years when jail and prison populations in the United States exponentially increased to become the highest in the world. This extends to the rapid increase in numbers of individuals under correctional community supervision (probation and parole) during that same timeframe. This teaching tool recognizes the social disparities its target population(s) face, exacerbated by the extreme rates of imprisonment of adults in the United States.

**Smart Decarceration** – effective, sustainable, and socially just solutions to achieve criminal justice transformation and reverse mass incarceration.

**Criminal Justice Settings** – justice system entities such as police departments, prosecutor’s offices, defender’s office, courts, jails, prisons, detention centers, probation and parole, and community-based organizations that serve justice-involved adults and those impacted by mass incarceration.

**Justice-Involved Adults** – from policing to reentry (e.g. arrest history and at risk for further system involvement, confined/incarcerated, defendants, on community supervision, pre-trial diversion or alternatives to traditional criminal justice proceedings).

**Adults** – our focus is on individuals across the lifespan that are engaged in the adult criminal justice system, as defined by the policies and laws in the jurisdiction of your location.

**Well-being** – the capacity to live fully and productively.

**“Impacted by Mass Incarceration”** – includes justice-involved adults, families, groups, and communities disproportionately touched by the criminal justice system, and the country at large.

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## Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) uses the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) to accredit baccalaureate and master’s level social work programs. EPAS supports academic excellence by establishing thresholds for professional competence. It permits programs to use traditional and emerging models and methods of curriculum design by balancing requirements that promote comparable outcomes across programs with a level of flexibility that encourages programs to differentiate.

EPAS describe four features of an integrated curriculum design: (1) program mission and goals, (2) explicit curriculum, (3) implicit curriculum, and (4) assessment. The educational policy and the accreditation standards are conceptually linked to each other. Educational Policy describes each curriculum feature. Accreditation standards are derived from the Educational policy and specify the requirements used to develop and maintain an accredited social work program at the baccalaureate (B) or master’s (M) level.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 1 – Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior

Social workers understand the value base of the profession and its ethical standards, as well as relevant laws and regulations that may impact practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social workers understand frameworks of ethical decision-making and how to apply principles of critical thinking to those frameworks in practice, research, and policy arenas. Social workers recognize personal values and the distinction between personal and professional values. They also understand how their personal experiences and affective reactions influence their professional judgment and behavior. Social workers understand the profession's history, its mission, and the roles and responsibilities of the profession. Social Workers also understand the role of other professions when engaged in inter-professional teams. Social workers recognize the importance of life-long learning and are committed to continually updating their skills to ensure they are relevant and effective. Social workers also understand emerging forms of technology and the ethical use of technology in social work practice.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Make ethical decisions by applying the standards of the NASW code of ethics, relevant laws and regulations, models of ethical decision-making, ethical conduct of research, and additional codes of ethics as appropriate to context of **\*mass incarceration and \*smart decarceration;**
- Use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in forensic and other practice situations **involving mass incarceration and smart decarceration;**
- Use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate **smart decarceration practice outcomes;** and
- Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior **to promote smart decarceration.**

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

**SD1.1** - Understand the value base and ethical standards of the profession, as well as relevant laws and regulations and shifting societal practices that may affect the social worker/client relationship when addressing the outcomes of **mass incarceration on adults** within agencies, institutions, and communities across various contexts

**SD1.2** - Recognize and manage personal values and biases as they affect the social worker/client relationship in the service of clients when addressing physical health and **\*well-being of adults being served within \*criminal justice settings** across various contexts.

**SD1.3** - Use formal or informal written, oral, and electronic communication as appropriate to **\*those impacted by mass incarceration** in promoting smart decarceration practice outcomes.

**SD1.4** - Consult and incorporate feedback from **those impacted by mass incarceration in support of smart decarceration** practice outcomes.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 2 – Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice

Social workers understand how diversity and difference characterize and shape the human experience and are critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status. Social workers understand that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim. Social workers also understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values, including social, economic, political, and cultural exclusions, may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create privilege and power.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences with mass incarceration in practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels;
- Present themselves as learners and engage **\*justice-involved adults** as experts of their own experience; and
- Apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse **populations among justice-involved adults**.

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

**SD2.1-** Recognize and communicate understanding of how diversity and difference characterize and shape human experience and identity for adults when addressing **the effects of mass incarceration and its broad impact on the well-being of those impacted by mass incarceration**.

**SD2.2-** Consistently apply an intersectional framework with individuals, groups and families that considers multiple factors, including age, class, color, culture, ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status when addressing **the effects of mass incarceration and its broad impact on well-being**.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 3 – Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic and Environmental Justice

Social workers understand that every person regardless of position in society has fundamental human rights such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers understand the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations, and are knowledgeable about theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights. Social workers understand strategies designed to eliminate oppressive structural barriers to ensure that social goods, rights, and responsibilities are distributed equitably and that civil, political, environmental, economic, social, and cultural human rights are protected.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Apply their understanding of social, economic, and environmental justice to advocate for human rights for **justice-involved adults** at the individual and system levels; and
- Engage in practices that advance social, economic, and environmental justice **for justice-involved adults.**

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

- SD3.1-** Integrate theory, research, and economic, social and cultural factors when engaging in advocacy strategies to **promote smart decarceration**, advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental **justice for justice-involved adults.**
- SD3.2-** Use knowledge of the effects of oppression, discrimination, and historical trauma on client and client systems to advocate for and advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice for justice-involved adults.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 4 – Engage in Practice-informed Research and Research-Informed Practice

Social workers understand quantitative and qualitative research methods and their respective roles in advancing a science of social work and in evaluating their practice. Social workers know the principles of logic, scientific inquiry, and culturally informed and ethical approaches to building knowledge. Social workers understand that evidence that informs practice derives from multi-disciplinary sources and multiple ways of knowing. They also understand the processes of translating research findings into effective practice.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Use practice experience and theory to inform scientific inquiry and research **related to mass incarceration and smart decarceration;**
- Apply critical thinking to engage in analysis of quantitative and qualitative research methods and research findings **regarding mass incarceration and smart decarceration;** and
- Use and translate research evidence to inform and improve practice, policy, and service delivery **to promote smart decarceration.**

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

- SD4.1-** Critically review and assess research evidence to improve the delivery of effective intervention practices with adults impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration and well-being.
- SD4.2-** Identify and apply relevant evidence-informed intervention practices with adults impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration and well-being.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 5 – Engage in Policy Practice

Social workers understand that human rights and social justice, as well as social welfare and services, are mediated by policy and its implementation at the federal, state, and local levels. Social workers understand the history and current structures of social policies and services, the role of policy in service delivery, and the role of practice in policy development. Social workers understand their role in policy development and implementation within their practice settings at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and they actively engage in policy practice to effect change within those settings. Social workers recognize and understand the historical, social, cultural, economic, organizational, environmental, and global influences that affect social policy. They are also knowledgeable about policy formulation, analysis, implementation, and evaluation.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that impacts well-being, service delivery, and access to social services **for those impacted by mass incarceration;**
- Assess how social welfare and economic policies impact the delivery of and access to social services by those impacted by **mass incarceration;**
- **Identify social policy at the local, state, and federal level that perpetuates mass incarceration or promotes smart decarceration;**
- **Assess how social welfare and economic policy perpetuates mass incarceration or promotes smart decarceration;** and
- Apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social economic, and environmental justice for **justice-involved adults.**

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

**SD5.1-** Advocate for social policy that advances human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice for **those impacted by mass incarceration.**

**SD 5.2 – Engage justice-involved adults (and those impacted by mass incarceration) at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in advocacy and policy change efforts that impact their overall well-being while promoting positive change.**



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 6 – Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Social workers understand that engagement is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice with, and on behalf of, diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers value the importance of human relationships. Social workers understand theories of human behavior and the social environment, and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge to facilitate engagement with clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers understand strategies to engage diverse clients and constituencies to specialized practice effectiveness. Social workers understand how their personal experiences and affective reactions may impact their ability to effectively engage with diverse clients and constituencies. Social workers value principles of relationship-building and inter-professional collaboration to facilitate engagement with clients, constituencies, and other professionals as appropriate.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks to engage with justice-involved adults and constituencies **impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration**; and
- Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage **justice-involved adults and those most impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration**.

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

- SD6.1-** Recognize the primacy of knowledge of human behavior and the social environment when addressing **the impact of mass incarceration and promoting smart decarceration** practice outcomes.
- SD6.2-** Use empathy and other interpersonal skills to engage and intervene when addressing **the impact of mass incarceration and promoting smart decarceration** practice outcomes.
- SD6.3-** Choose and implement engagement strategies based upon knowledge of health and behavioral health factors when working with **those impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration** practice outcomes.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 7 – Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Social workers understand that assessment is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice with, and on behalf of, diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers understand theories of human behavior and the social environment, and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge in the assessment of diverse clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers understand methods of assessment with diverse clients and constituencies to specialized practice effectiveness. Social workers recognize the implications of the larger practice context in the assessment process and value the importance of inter-professional collaboration in this process. Social workers understand how their personal experiences and affective reactions may affect their assessment and decision-making.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Collect and organize data, and apply critical thinking to interpret information from clients and **those most impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration**;
- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multi-disciplinary theoretical frameworks in analysis of assessment data from **justice-involved adults and those most impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration**;
- Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives based on the critical assessment of strengths, needs, and challenges within **justice-involved adults and those most impacted by mass incarceration**; and
- Select appropriate intervention strategies based on the assessment, research knowledge, and values and preferences of **justice-involved adults and those most impacted by mass incarceration**.

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

- SD7.1-** Understand, critically evaluate, apply theories of human behavior and the social environment, and other multi-disciplinary frameworks in the assessment of diverse adults, families, and groups **impacted by mass incarceration in order to promote smart decarceration** intervention practices.
- SD7.2-** Understand how personal experiences and affective reactions may affect assessment and decision-making in addressing the **well-being of justice-involved adults in order to promote smart decarceration** intervention practices) seeking guidance/instruction through supervision and consultation.
- SD7.3-** Consider the interaction among risk and protective factors, impact of trauma, brain development and resiliency with adults when addressing **the impact of incarceration and in support of promoting smart decarceration** intervention practices.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 8 – Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Social workers understand that intervention is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice with, and on behalf of, diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are knowledgeable about evidence-informed interventions to achieve the goals of clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers understand theories of human behavior and the social environment, and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge to effectively intervene with clients and constituencies. Social workers understand methods of identifying, analyzing and implementing evidence-informed interventions to achieve client and constituency goals. Social workers value the importance of inter-professional teamwork and communication in interventions, recognizing that beneficial outcomes may require interdisciplinary, inter-professional, and inter-organizational collaboration. policy formulation, analysis, implementation, and evaluation.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Critically choose and implement interventions to achieve practice goals and enhance capacities of **those impacted by mass incarceration to promote smart decarceration**;
- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in interventions **to promote smart decarceration**;
- Use inter-professional collaboration as appropriate to achieve beneficial **smart decarceration** practice outcomes;
- Negotiate, mediate, and advocate with and on behalf of diverse **justice-involved adults and those most impacted by mass incarceration**; and
- Facilitate effective transitions and endings that advance mutually agreed-on goals **to promote smart decarceration**.

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

- SD8.1** - Use self-reflection to enhance the working relationship with **those impacted by mass incarceration to promote well-being and achieve smart decarceration** practice outcomes.
- SD8.2** - Critically choose and implement interventions for practice with **those impacted by mass incarceration** based on thoughtful assessment of both client need and the quality of the available evidence.
- SD8.3** - Practice self-care to ensure the provision of effective services to **those impacted by mass incarceration** and promote both client and social worker well-being.



## Social Work Competencies & Smart Decarceration Practice Behaviors

### COMPETENCY 9 – Evaluate Practice with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Social workers understand that evaluation is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice with, and on behalf of, diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. Social workers recognize the importance of evaluating processes and outcomes to advance practice, policy, and service delivery effectiveness. Social workers understand theories of human behavior and the social environment, and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge in evaluating outcomes. Social workers understand qualitative and quantitative methods for evaluating outcomes and practice effectiveness. policy formulation, analysis, implementation, and evaluation.

#### Social Workers Generalist Practice

- Select and use appropriate methods for evaluation of **smart decarceration practice** outcomes;
- Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment, person-in-environment, and other multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks in the evaluation of **smart decarceration practice** outcomes;
- Critically analyze, monitor, and evaluate smart decarceration interventions and program processes and outcomes; and
- Apply evaluation findings to improve practice effectiveness at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels to **promote smart decarceration**.

#### Social Workers Specialized Practice

**SD9.1-** Monitor interventions in support of **smart decarceration practice outcomes to improve the well-being of those impacted by mass incarceration.**

**SD9.2-** Critically evaluate and use data to guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of **smart decarceration** interventions to improve service delivery to **justice-involved adults and those impacted by mass incarceration.**