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'Compassionate' Control: Social Work and the Rise of Carceral Feminism in Progressive Era Police Reform

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Abstract: The contemporary Defund the Police movement has renewed interest in social work's role in public safety, leading some to call for increased police–social work collaborations. However, claims regarding the potential virtues and pitfalls of social work–police collaborations are largely ahistorical. To contextualize current debates, a systematic investigation into the evolution of social work and its relationship with law enforcement is necessary, particularly the impact that gender norms have had on this relationship. Drawing from the National Conference on Charities and Corrections proceedings, we examined how gendered underpinnings have shaped social work's relationship to law enforcement and the understanding of social work's role in public safety. During the Progressive Era, social workers acted as an intervention to reform police by infusing 'rehabilitative', 'protective', 'preventative', and 'quarantining' approaches in law enforcement. What emerges from the archives is a chronicle detailing how using social work as a gendered intervention for police reform during the Progressive Era fell short of addressing the root causes of carceral issues, drawing parallels between the Progressive Era reforms and today's contemporary reforms.

Keywords: Progressive Era; carceral feminism; policewomen; police reform; gender consciousness

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1. Introduction

The proper relationship between law enforcement and social work has been a long-standing debate. This ever-evolving yet consistent relationship has moved through cyclical waves of criticism, reform, and intimate partnerships underpinned by gendered dynamics. A distinct example of this is the evolution of policewomen during the turn of the 20th century, who served as interventionists in addressing issues of vice and corruption (Roberts 1976; Harrell 2022). The most recent chapter in this evolution is a new wave of reform in social work catalyzed by the Defund the Police movement, involving the redistribution of funding and crisis response calls from police to social workers. This new reform emphasizes expanding the role of treatment-minded mental health professionals like social workers in crisis response and increasing the number of female police officers (NIJ 2024a, 2024b; Watson et al. 2019). There is ongoing debate concerning whether social work is the proper solution to the problems of policing (Maylea 2021; Richie and Martensen 2020). Ultimately, claims regarding the potential virtues and pitfalls of social work–police

collaborations are largely ahistorical, leaving questions as to how social workers and police have understood their respective gendered roles in shaping public safety and social welfare, as well as the outcomes of previous efforts to reform the police with social work. The aim of this paper is to address this gap by exploring how gender has historically influenced social work's relationship with law enforcement and the understanding of social work's role in public safety. Specifically, we examine how traditional gender roles, gender-based power structures, and the manner in which social workers engage with these roles and structures during the Progressive Era have shaped the interplay between social work and law enforcement.

Historical analyses of social work in the areas of juvenile justice, child welfare, health, and mental health have highlighted the profession's social control, racial stratification, medicalization, and social welfare functions (Abrams and Curran 2004; Platt and Turney 2014; Roberts 2022; Specht and Courtney 1994; Skopol 1992). Furthermore, historical analyses of law enforcement have highlighted the ongoing surveillance, incarceration, and brutalization of Black, Indigenous, and communities of color (BIPOC) despite reform efforts (Archbold 2012; Hernandez 2013; Vitale 2018). Scholars have brought these histories together at the nexus of gender, analyzing the gendered contours of early social workers' contributions to penal systems (Freedman 1979; Kunzel 1993; Harrell 2022; Odem 1995; Pascoe 1993). Given these insights, it is likely that gender dynamics have influenced the roles, perceptions, and practices within both fields, affecting how policies are developed and implemented. Yet, there is limited critical historical research on the role of social workers as the first police matrons and policewomen.

Building on the emergent literature rooted in anti-carceral social work that critiques carceral feminism and questions social work's current role in contemporary debates around policing and public safety (Jacobs et al. 2021; Kim 2018, 2021; Richie and Martensen 2020), this historical analysis examines how the gender consciousness and gender subjectivity of social workers have historically contributed to the expansion of law enforcement's purview in the United States. The gender consciousness of social workers in this paper can be understood as an awareness of the role gender plays in their profession's societal function, which includes recognizing how gender roles and expectations shape social workers' interactions with clients, colleagues, and the community. This consciousness also extends to understanding the broader societal power dynamics related to gender and how these impact the field of social work and its relationship with law enforcement. The gender subjectivity of social workers can be understood as how social workers related to their gender. To historically root the gendered contours of the relationship between social work and policing, we drew from a century of proceedings from the National Conference on Charities and Corrections to answer the following research questions: (1) how has gender informed the social work profession's relationship with law enforcement and (2) how has gender informed the social work profession's understanding of its role in public safety? The evolving relationship between social work and police encompasses distinct eras of reform, with one of the most foundational being the Progressive Era. During this time, we show how the groundwork was laid for using social work as a gendered intervention to reform law enforcement. Understanding this historical, gendered relationship can provide insights into the evolution of both fields and potentially inform current policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

To guide our understanding of the gendered contours of social work's relationship with law enforcement, we interpret early social work through the theoretical framework of carceral feminism. Carceral feminism, first termed by Bernstein (2010), emerged from the 1970s anti-rape movement. Rooted in white feminism, it relies on the criminal legal system as a primary vehicle for resolving gender-based violence (Phillips and Chagnon 2020; Sweet 2016). This permutation of feminism manifests in 'carceral protectionism' (Musto 2016; Phelps 2024), which is understood as "a specific form of the broader framework of carceral feminism, in which 'good women' and their children are deemed worthy of

paternalistic protection. Carceral protectionism relies on a particular understanding of both vulnerability and virtue. . .” (Rodriguez et al. 2020, p. 538). Therefore, a carceral feminist framework assumes that neglect to criminalize and imprison perpetrators of gender-based violence devalues certain ‘virtuous’ survivors and undermines the state’s legitimacy as a provider of protection (Battle and Powell 2024; Kim 2021). To address this neglect, carceral feminism morphed the previous grassroots feminist movement against gender-based violence into a ‘reformation’ (Battle and Powell 2024), seeking to reform a criminal legal system that failed to adequately address gender-based violence by enhancing criminal legal punishment (Taylor 2018). An example of carceral feminism distorting grassroots efforts is the expansion of anti-trafficking laws conflating prostitution with sex trafficking, negating sex worker activism, and leading to the increased criminalization of sex workers, punishing “unvirtuous” women in the name of protecting “virtuous” victims (Bernstein 2010). Over the decades, carceral feminism has underscored racialized ideas of virtue and the worthiness of protection. Women of color feminism has critiqued carceral feminism for misguidedly criminalizing (and by proxy re-victimizing) racialized women (Gruber 2023; Palacios 2016; Richie 2012) and investing in a system designed to profit from confining women’s bodies (Sweet 2016). Despite the benevolent framing of reform, social workers’ past and present partnering with police, as well as the broader carceral apparatus, may perpetuate these harms while failing to address the root causes of crime and violence. We apply a critical anti-carceral social work lens to this issue and trace the workings of carceral feminism back to the turn of the 20th century, exploring its early manifestations during the late 1800s and early 1900s with the use of policewomen in police reform.

3. Historical Background: The Progressive Era

Historians characterize the Progressive Era as a time when the white upper and middle classes were deeply concerned about maintaining social control (Carreri et al. 2022; Kirschner 1975). This anxiety was fueled by a rapid increase in immigrant populations, growing wealth disparity, and resultant issues with crime, all of which were consequences of rapid industrialization (Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis (San Francisco, Calif), and Center for Research on Criminal Justice (Berkeley, Calif) 1982; Katz 2013; Stern 2005). Furthermore, the Progressive Era was also underpinned by a scientific charity framework (Ruswick 2013). According to Ruswick (2013), this framework was intent on systematically investigating the “pauper class” to differentiate those who were “worthy” of care from those who were considered “biologically degenerate”. Due to eugenics-based assumptions of racial inferiority, any non-Anglo immigrants as well as Black and Indigenous people were automatically categorized as degenerate (Brice 2005; Kennedy 2008; Leonard 2005a, 2005b; O’Brien 2022). Anglo-immigrants’ worthiness of care was often gauged by their perceived proximity and assimilability to Protestant, middle- to upper-class norms underpinned by the racist assumptions that non-Anglo people could not be assimilated (Haley 2020; Hounmenou 2012; McWhorter 2009; O’Brien 2022). Such attitudes were part of a broader trend in which people who needed government assistance or people who were criminalized were often pathologized as defective, dependent, and delinquent (Katz 2013; Ruswick 2013). These attitudes shaped the social welfare support offered at the time, which primarily included poor houses, asylums, youth reformatories, a network of charity organizations, and settlement houses (Katz 2013; Handler and Hasenfeld 1991). Given these well-documented understandings of racial formation and racist attitudes during the Progressive Era, we interpret the racialization of the poor and immigrant ‘degenerate’ women referenced throughout our findings as largely implicit. While the text does not always explicitly contain racist, misogynistic, or anti-immigrant sentiments, the prevailing social and cultural context suggests that these biases were embedded in the attitudes and policies of the era.

3.1. Progressive Era Social Work

Social work as a profession largely grew out of charity work organizations formed in the late 19th century aimed at curbing the rapidly growing issues pertaining to child welfare and housing caused by industrialization (Ruswick 2013; Dettlaff 2023). Throughout the Progressive Era, social workers began to evolve from proto-professional charity networks run by volunteers (Katz 2013) into an emergent field with established training programs (Hopps et al. 2018). Many charity organizations were led by social reformers who were highly involved in and influenced by the scientific charity movement and ideals of eugenics (Ruswick 2013; Kennedy 2008). The Charity Organization Societies (COS) and its leaders like Charles Loring Brace and Josephine Lowell are key examples, promoting a model where paid agents investigated cases (families) to assess people's worthiness of receiving care (Dorn 1999). The early Progressive Era saw the archetype of the "friendly visitor" (Putnam 1887) emerge—a Protestant, non-immigrant Anglo middle- to an upper-class woman who volunteered to make home visits to the poor and advocated for social reform (Hopps et al. 2018). Another hallmark of this era was the establishment of settlement houses as community centers of service provision. Settlement houses aimed to correct the assumed environmental causes of poverty by advocating for interventions like establishing a juvenile court system, creating widows' pension programs, promoting legislation, prohibiting child labor, and introducing public health reforms alongside the concept of social insurance (O'Brien 2022; Beer and Joslin 1999). Despite the dominant narrative that settlement houses for European immigrants were bastions of charity, some scholars have asserted that settlement houses aimed to quarantine immigrants and the poor, protecting the rest of urban areas from assumed degeneration and disease (O'Brien 2022; Chapman and Withers 2019).

Another significant facet of Progressive Era social work involved incorporating women into law enforcement, specifically to work with women and children in the criminal legal system and address gendered sectors of crime, such as prostitution, domestic violence, and child abuse, which were considered "women's issues" (Odem 1995; Pascoe 1993). Harrell (2022) describes how the term "social work" encompassed a wide range of social welfare-related work during this time, including overt 'corrections' work (e.g., workhouses, training schools) and carceral medical intervention (e.g., asylums). Harrell (2022) frames the language of corrections as a reference to coercive 'corrective' care, suggesting that the term "corrections" implies a punitive approach to providing care. This framing is pivotal as it shifts the paradigm of how care is understood and remembered in professional and public contexts, particularly concerning what was considered care during the early days of social work. Furthermore, scholars have extensively documented the prominent role of social workers in corrections during this era, specifically illustrating the relational interplay between social workers, and the women they sought to help, along with the unintended negative effects of early social work reform efforts (Freedman 1979; Kunzel 1993; Odem 1995; Pascoe 1993). While intended to be protective, these reform efforts often led to coercive and discriminatory practices against working-class women, such as increased surveillance, the regulation of their sexual behavior, and the enforcement of strict moral codes (Odem 1995). By acknowledging that care was administered through punitive, corrective avenues, we can begin to understand how social work's earliest conceptions of care were underpinned by carceral feminist logic. We build upon this body of literature by presenting an empirical archival analysis that focuses on how gender influenced the relational interplay between social work and law enforcement during an era that was foundational to social work's professionalization.

3.2. Progressive Era Police Work

Like social work, law enforcement was also professionalized during the Progressive Era. Some scholars describe the origins and evolution of US policing as developing concurrently and differently based on geopolitical differences (Uchida 1993; Emsley 2021). For example, scholars describe that in the American South, police originated from slave patrols formed to retain Black people as a captive labor force (Brucato 2020; French 2017). The first

official police force in the United States was founded in 1845 in New York City (French 2017), primarily instated to patrol working-class and immigrant communities. Previous to this, many state constitutions limited the size of city watches and instead relied on militias to suppress any large-scale civil disorder (French 2017; Walker and Katz 2022). Reflecting the broader Progressive Era societal reforms pathologizing the poor and immigrant classes as being biologically inferior and morally deficient (Brucato 2020), police reformers like August Vollmer and Raymond Fosdick positioned the criminal legal system as an apparatus to "harmonize" and "adjust" this new and growing population (Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis (San Francisco, Calif), and Center for Research on Criminal Justice (Berkeley, Calif) 1982). To serve as this force in social engineering, the focus of police reformers became the centralization and professionalization of law enforcement. Policing in the Progressive Era was predominantly regarded by the public as corrupt, inefficient, and ineffective (Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis (San Francisco, Calif), and Center for Research on Criminal Justice (Berkeley, Calif) 1982; Oliver 2017). This perceived corruption led to a push by leading police administrative reformers, such as Vollmer and Fosdick, to reform the police to become further removed from the local communities they served. This involved establishing metropolitan-wide and state-wide policing, developing professional organizations, moving away from a system of political appointments, and implementing new training programs (French 2017; Oliver 2017). Furthermore, the police reformer and legal scholar Roscoe Pound advocated that police should serve in part as a public health operative, "draining the swamps" that breed crime and described poor neighborhoods as "sources of infection" (Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis (San Francisco, Calif), and Center for Research on Criminal Justice (Berkeley, Calif) 1982, p. 34).

4. Methodology

The Law Enforcement-Social Work Historical Research Work Group is a collective of 9 researchers in the field of social work, all based across the United States. We initially convened in November 2021 and initiated data collection in February 2022.

4.1. Anti-Carceral Social Work as an Analytical Lens

The analytic lens of this study is situated in anti-carceral social work, a nascent subfield of social work that applies the critiques of carceral feminism and advocates for more community-driven alternative social service practices, such as transformative justice or mutual aid (Jacobs et al. 2021). Anti-carceral social work responds to mainstream or 'carceral' social work, meaning social work that is embedded within or invested in maintaining carceral systems, such as the child welfare (also referred to as family policing) system (Dettlaff et al. 2020, 2023). Anti-carceral social work scholars argue that mainstream social work practices limit liberatory social work practices while supporting white supremacy and the social control of BIPOC communities (Jacobs et al. 2021; Kaba 2021; Richie and Martensen 2020). Anti-carceral social work rejects the assumption that solutions to social welfare necessitate policing or law enforcement collaboration (Dettlaff et al. 2020). Applying anti-carceral social work as an analytical lens offers a unique perspective on the data and allows for the identification and critique of underlying carceral feminist logic.

4.2. Historical Content Analysis

To understand social work's gendered relationship to law enforcement, this study takes a historical content analysis approach. We used conference records to explore the relationship between these two fields over time. Historical content analysis is a method used to systematically study and interpret the content of historical documents and records (Stuart 2005; Danto 2008; Krippendorff 2018). It involves identifying, coding, and analyzing texts from the past to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings that might not be immediately apparent. It is an adaptation of traditional content analysis that extends its application to the synthesis of historical data in order to interpret the meaning of historical records

and fill gaps in existing historical narratives by situating the phenomena examined in the context of the times in which they occurred (Stuart 2005).

Using this method enabled us to trace the influence of certain ideologies, understand shifts in popular opinion, and explore the relationship between social work and law enforcement over time. Our analysis shows how the social work profession has historically defined itself through a critical engagement with law enforcement practices.

4.3. Data Source

The primary data for this study are the proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (originally named The Conference of Boards of Public Charities, later named the National Conference of Social Work, and then the National Conference of Social Welfare). The conference was founded in 1874, officially adopting the NCCC name in 1879, with leaders acknowledging the organization's growing interest in corrections and delinquency (Hanson n.d.; Stotzer and Tropman 2006). Convening annually until 1983, the NCCC became the longest-standing national social work organization in the profession's history, making it the ideal data source to answer our research questions. The conference produced a high volume of content, functioned as a primary meeting venue for key players in social welfare, and had an explicit emphasis on the interconnection of corrections and charity work. The NCCC proceedings are publicly available in a digital archive run by the University of Michigan Library Digital Collections[1], including transcripts of speeches from various stakeholders, reports from researchers and public analysts, conference agendas, and more.

To identify relevant excerpts from conference records, we drew a systematic random sample of the proceedings between 1874 and 1982 (for example, 1874, 1879, 1884, etc.).[2] We also supplemented these systematically sampled proceedings with additional years that contained an unusually high volume of references toward the police (1915 and 1972), for a total of 25 years of proceedings. Within these years, we conducted a keyword search including the terms "police*," "law enforcement," "patrol*," "watchmen," and "constable*" to identify references to law enforcement, identifying 769 unique references for extraction. Our unit of analysis varied based on the context needed to fully understand the content. This ranged from a few sentences to full pages, depending on the complexity and topic of the discussion. Our unit of analysis remained flexible throughout all phases of the analysis, adapting them as needed to capture the full meaning and context.

4.4. Analysis

Our analytic process entailed four phases of coding and analysis, beginning with an inductive code development phase. In Phase 1, a team of researchers divided the years under study and independently generated initial inductive codes for their assigned years. The full team then met to organize these by themes and develop a codebook, which we then piloted before phase 2. Phase 2 involved a deductive, double-blind coding method to categorize the types of speakers and sentiments expressed towards the police and social workers. The speakers were coded for law enforcement, child welfare, corrections, education, an elected official, international, labor, academic/researcher, legal, medicine/health, mental health/psychiatry, religious leader, social worker, social reformer, and other/unknown. Through this process, we identified that sentiments expressed by the speakers toward police and toward social work were often in reference to gender.

This process informed Phase 3, as we noticed that sentiment was often related to perceived function. In this phase, we coded for the various perceived functions of law enforcement, such as addressing vice, enforcing the law, addressing crime/delinquency, protecting the powerful, protecting the vulnerable, and other tasks that were perceived by the speakers as being inappropriate or ill-suited for the police. Similarly, we also coded social work's perceived functions, such as protecting the vulnerable, addressing vice, addressing crime/delinquency, providing services, research, social planning, and rehabilitation/treatment.

The results from phase three directly informed phase four, in which we wrote analytic memos for each time period based on our previous coding. These memos followed a structured format, including task/function summaries, sentiment summaries, and emerging themes. Each memo provided an analysis of the coded data within its historical context. The memos also incorporated quantitative elements tallying sentiment codes (e.g., 3 negative and 6 positive mentions of police in the 1904 memo) alongside a qualitative analysis of key quotes and themes. During this process, a clear pattern emerged in which gender appeared to play a role in shaping sentiments toward both police and social work, as well as perceptions of both the police's and social work's functions. Following this phase, we conducted an additional step of organizing and analyzing the content specifically related to gender.

Upon reviewing the memos, we observed that the data were most robust when looking specifically at the Progressive Era. One reason for this may be that until roughly the middle of the 20th century, published conference proceedings were much more voluminous, containing a greater number of articles, than in the later years of the conference's existence, prior to its dissolution in the 1980s. Given the concentration of the data, we chose to focus our analysis in this paper on the Progressive Era.

4.5. Limitations

This study has two areas of limitation worthy of consideration in the interpretation of findings. First, this study has several limitations related to our data source. The NCCC proceedings include a limited number of perspectives, given the fact that the proceedings' speakers largely represented mainstream accepted viewpoints. Given that the proceedings largely represent the mainstream viewpoints of this time, the opinions of perhaps more dissident or marginalized reformers and practitioners were less likely to be showcased at the conference. Furthermore, we were not always able to identify the historical figures who were speakers in the proceedings, particularly what specific role in society they were playing at the time of their participation in the conference. Another limitation of this dataset was that speakers often did not explicitly name racialized assumptions and tensions but rather implicitly applied mid- to upper-class, Anglo, Protestant norms and standards to other groups, particularly marginalized groups (immigrants, people in poverty, etc.).

Second, two limitations related to our analytic approach should be considered. First, though we drew search terms that could identify relevant texts from the historical literature on the police, these terms produced a substantial number of texts, and we assessed other obscure but historically relevant terms and found zero returns (e.g., "officerette"), it is possible that a small number of conversations related to the police were missing from the excerpted texts (e.g., "Protective Worker" occurs eight times across the NCCC proceedings and could refer to police–social workers). Lastly, coding for this study focused on references to law enforcement, which reflects an important though limited view of social work's relationship to criminal legal systems. Thus, our findings should be contextualized in the literature on courts, corrections, and probation to better understand how the relationship between social work and police is part of larger criminal legal systems and institutions.

5. Findings

From its beginnings as an organized profession at the turn of the 20th century, social work has interacted with the police in a variety of ways to serve varied purposes (Institute for the Study of Labor and Economic Crisis (San Francisco, Calif), and Center for Research on Criminal Justice (Berkeley, Calif) 1982; Harrell 2022; Hinton 2016). The advocacy for and creation of policewomen during the Progressive Era (Harrell 2022; Roberts 1976) represents a core, amalgamating moment in the gendered relationship between social work and police because it signifies the attempted integration of social work principles into policing and a substantial inclusion of women in policing, specifically to address issues deemed "women's issues" like prostitution, domestic violence, and child welfare. For our study, we define the Progressive Era as spanning from 1896 to the 1920s to encompass the full development

of social work's integration into law enforcement through policewomen. Our findings illustrate how social work was used as a gendered reform intervention in law enforcement during this period. This intervention was catalyzed by the initial concern of women and children being mistreated by law enforcement as well as broader concerns around upholding order, morality, and social control. As a result, social workers were instated as policewomen to provide specialized yet 'corrective' care to women and children. However, these developments were constrained by gendered restrictions that limited policewomen's ability to challenge or alter law enforcement practice. These constraints, rooted in gendered societal expectations and institutional limitations, led the social workers who became policewomen to conform more to existing law enforcement norms and structures rather than transform them. Thus, while the goal was to create a more compassionate and rehabilitative system by integrating social work principles into law enforcement, it is questionable whether this objective was achieved, as law enforcement priorities often overshadowed social work aims.

5.1. Gendered Critique of Law Enforcement

Both social workers and the police positioned themselves as stewards of 'social hygiene' throughout this era. Yet, Progressive Era reformers and social workers often criticized law enforcement for not repressing moralized crimes like prostitution heavily enough and questioned the police's inability to protect women and children at risk of moral decline (Pimpare 2004):

"Our police, our courts and the average intelligent citizens are still too much impressed by the neglect which is evidenced by dirty hands and faces and ragged clothing, and fail to realize the corrupting and blighting influences of tyrannical, unaffectionate, indecent, immoral parents, although the material comforts of life may be present to an unusual degree. Neglected homes, or, as one writer calls them, the non-functioning homes, and another, the unstable homes, are at the foundation of much juvenile vice and crime. It is the duty of the social worker to find where the application of our law is weak in the working out of these larger purposes, to educate our citizens to a more sensitive point of view in these matters, and to agitate for more effective laws". (C.C. Carstens, Secretary and General Agent Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Boston (NCCC 1909, p. 51)).

Our interpretation of this quote is that it illustrates social work's critique of law enforcement for inadequately assessing and insufficiently punishing moral crimes, such as the corruption of children. It suggests that social workers were concerned with the exposure of youth to vice and critiques legal and social actions that they perceive to be primarily reactive to physical neglect and poverty at the expense of the proactive prevention of vice among youth. The latter half of this quote emphasizes the preventative lens that social workers were particularly concerned with and the need for education and advocacy for policy changes to help prevent children from becoming involved in 'vice' or crime.

Motivated by these concerns, social workers used their social positions as middle- to upper-class non-immigrant women to become central figures in police reform efforts. They argued that women were the best equipped to work with women and children who were arrested and to deal with gendered issues such as prostitution, domestic violence, and child abuse (Kunzel 1993; Abrams and Curran 2004). Leveraging traditional gender roles, social workers positioned themselves as "guardians of virtue" (Abrams 2000), carving roles for themselves in law enforcement under the auspices of protecting women and children and addressing issues of morality and public safety. This alignment can be seen as an early form of carceral feminism, where social work practices contributed to the expansion of the carceral state by enforcing gendered social norms and moral standards through punitive measures.

"If prosecution leads to degeneration rather than to protection, our various social agencies must inevitably enter into prosecution with heavy hearts. . . For the formal protective and prosecution work, policewomen with the training of social workers should be made

available to rural communities as well as to the cities, in order that the weak spots in our scheme of police protection may be found, and that the large numbers of sex offenders may not sink into prostitution but may be saved for reputable life, and that their unfortunate experience may be lived down or may become the discipline out of which a finer character may grow." (C.C. Carstens, Secretary and General Agent Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Boston (NCCC 1915, pp. 271–72)).

Social workers asserted that police were not only ineffective at protecting vulnerable populations from 'degeneration' but also inept at preventing crime—especially gendered crime involving 'moral' transgressions. Early social workers understood the courts as a point of intervention for populations they viewed as vulnerable, as well as those they believed needed to be controlled.

"To all of us who are engaged in social work it is plain that one great hindrance to the assimilation of foreigners is found in the lack of adjustment between them and our system of law enforcement. The courts themselves and other public agencies are doing much to remedy this maladjustment, but there is still need for the work of private agencies, and this is the topic I want to discuss with you this morning." (Kate Holladay Claghorn, New York School of Social Work (NCCC 1919, p. 747)).

Social workers sought to ingratiate themselves into the courts and law enforcement in order to "assimilate" racialized immigrants and correct what they viewed as "immoral" or "degenerate" behavior, such as sex work. The courts were also viewed as an opportunity for social workers to intervene in the discriminatory treatment of women and girls:

"We say on all occasions that we consider the home the fundamental thing in our national life. If we really valued the home, such things could not happen as I saw last Thursday in the night court in the city of New York. A girl, seventeen years of age, was taken away by a policeman from her two-year-old, fatherless boy to spend three years in a prison which, with the bitterest irony, we call a house of mercy. No charge had been proved against her." (Florence Kelley, Secretary, The National Consumer's League (NCCC 1909, p. 118)).

In the above quote, Kelley equates the "house of mercy," which purportedly served as a charitable institution meant to support vulnerable women, to a prison. This parallel is apt, as residents of such institutions were involuntarily confined to these reformatories under lock and key, often by court order (Pascoe 1993; Freedman 1979). Kelley, who was a labor reform and children's rights advocate and the first General Secretary of the National Consumers League, argues here that involuntary commitment is an inappropriate solution for perceived problems of vice and public health concerns among young women and notes the court's role in contributing to their cycle of poverty. This critique aligns with broader societal efforts to find alternative approaches to address social issues during the Progressive Era.

5.2. Policewomen as an Intervention in Law Enforcement

In response to growing concerns and critiques, law enforcement began to hire social workers as police matrons to search and guard female inmates (Mishkin 1981; Segrave 2014) and also recruited policewomen, some with arresting powers (Harrell 2022). The first police matron was elected in Portland and designated the prison as a legitimate site for social services. The following excerpt from 1904 reflects this approach:

"I think we ought not to close this meeting, after hearing what Mrs. Hayman has said to us, without mentioning the first police matron of the country was elected to serve in this city of Portland, many years ago. Mrs. Hayman has introduced a new idea into our prison science. She has introduced a "Social Settlement" idea into the jail. She has introduced an innovation which we did not expect and we hope that she may carry out her purpose." (Mr. Frank B. Sanborn, Reformer, Abolitionist, and Founder of the American Social Science Association, Massachusetts (NCCC 1904, p. 592)).

Although settlement models in jails were not widely implemented, the notion that prison could hybridize with settlement house characteristics is a poignant early example of

carceral logic becoming entangled with ideas of delivering care. In the jail-cum-settlement house, police matrons would supervise and morally uplift women under their charge. The introduction of settlement houses into jails also suggests a perception that policemen could not maintain station house conditions that were salutary or morally beneficial to women and children. In this instance, social workers attempted to reform the disciplinary model built by the police (the jail) from within to protect certain women and children. By working within this model, social workers attempted to legitimize themselves by fitting their interventions within the existing carceral structures, attempting to not tread on the powers or positions of male officers but underscore how women could supplement the men's work. Alice Stebbins Wells, a prominent social worker who was the first policewoman in Los Angeles and who founded the International Association of Policewomen at the NCCC, here emphasizes the perceived value of women's contributions to police work:

"Police work, to take the place it should and will take in the broader social program, must have the best that both men and women can give it. . . I cannot refrain from making the plea that women entering police work shall receive the best grounding possible from the one best fitted to give it, whoever that may be. Only thus, in my judgment, may women effectively add to mens' highest achievement that of constructive sympathy and moral enthusiasm which is their richest contribution." (Alice Stebben Wells, Policewoman in Los Angeles (NCCC 1915, p. 416)).

Wells suggests that high-quality training is crucial for women so they can contribute to the police force. She highlights the value of women's unique perspectives, including "constructive sympathy and moral enthusiasm", as important and distinct gendered assets. These qualities, she argues, enhance the overall effectiveness of police work and complement the strengths men bring to policing.

Policewomen leveraged gendered assumptions about the nurturing, caring qualities of women and emphasized how these qualities could positively influence police departments, specifically in terms of shifting law enforcement toward taking a role in prevention and rehabilitation through moral correction and protecting those deemed capable of rehabilitation. The speaker below, a proponent of employing women in conducting police work, illustrates this shift further:

"Today the police system is concerned with methods of prevention and reform. It has become tempered, as former Attorney General McReynolds says, with 'the justice of mercy.' The status of the whole police department is undergoing an evolution towards a higher idea of plan and purposes, and the public mind is beginning to grasp the real intent and aim of a police station. Prevention of crime, corrective measures in considering moral delinquents, the saving of young girls and protection of children are recognized by all as most important factors in social progress; and while it is always acknowledged that 'the natural attitude of women is to act in response to human need,' communities have still been terribly slow in realizing that if ever human need called more insistently for the application of the natural attitude of women it was from the police department, - that point toward which is drifting, as one writer puts it, 'the reckless waste of humanity that reaches the scrap heap before ever attaining its prime.'" (Edna Annette Beveridge, Officer of the Maryland Woman Suffrage Association and Chair of the Auxillary Committee of Women Police in the Suffrage Association (NCCC 1915, p. 419)).

This speaker demonstrates how advocates of policewomen expanded the scope of police work to include more "protective" work focused on prevention and rehabilitation, which aligned with broader social work objectives of the time. It also highlights the gendered assumption of the "natural attitude" of women to respond to human needs. While policewomen expanded the scope of police work to include prevention and rehabilitation, were they actually able to redefine the overall function of policing in society?

5.3. Gendered Barriers to Reforming the Police

Although advocates like Wells and Beveridge argued that feminized qualities made women valuable assets to law enforcement, policewomen who took on roles traditionally associated with male officers were increasingly conflated with their male counterparts:

"The cartoons which have appeared in the public press have been in part responsible for the misconceptions about the real work of policewomen. We have seen many pictures of the policewoman in a smart brass-buttoned uniform, with a large badge on the lapel of her coat, a "billy" swinging at her side, a revolver in her hand, actually trying to arrest a drunken man. Invariably the picture is labeled "The Lady Cop". The subtle influence of these ridiculous pictures, of occasional articles about arrests made and the very connotation of the name policewoman, has caused many people to believe that the function of the woman with police power is the same as that of the policeman and that the chief duty is to make arrests. Nothing is farther from the truth. The policewoman does not go out to arrest disorderly men, or to apprehend women who are soliciting on the streets for prostitution; from the very beginning, the chief duty of the policewoman has been to protect and safeguard youth, and today her greatest opportunity lies in the direction of protective work" (Maude E. Miner, Secretary of the New York Probation and Protective Association (NCCC 1919, p. 134)).

This quote indicates that policewomen were mocked and ridiculed in the media, delegitimizing their social control efforts and misrepresenting their intended role. By drawing a contrast between satirical representations and their professed authentic purpose, Miner reasserts the gendered nature of policewomen's labor, emphasizing their role in the police force as providing a protective "mothering" function.

Moreover, there is evidence that policewomen were not just resisted by prejudices in the media but also faced institutional resistance by their commanding officers. The roles of policewomen were at times undermined by the prejudices of their superiors, not only limiting the potential impact of their work but also perpetuating a gendered hierarchy within the police force.

"Another element which has hampered development is the police Chief who has prejudice and fears innovations. He may have policewomen and not want them, or may oppose their appointment. In some cities policewomen have been established with men to supervise their work. This plan has proved more or less disastrous to the primary purpose of women in police departments." (Mrs. Mina C. Van Winkle, Director of Women's Bureau - Metropolitan Police Department (NCCC 1924, pp. 188–89)).

This speaker calls into question the extent to which social work was able to affect police work when faced with male supervision and sex-based discrimination in the workplace. The quote below speaks to the further limitations of policewomen:

"Time has come when we should ask ourselves if the policewoman movement has justified itself, and if we shall encourage its extension. Because of the war, we are in a position today to compare what policewomen and men have done for the protection of girls as part of the police department, with what protective officers have done, acting independently of police departments in organization. We do not find well-organized departments with women supervisors who have had actual social service training and experience, nor do we find workers selected for their special qualifications and training for this kind of service. Their work is not well defined, neither are they allowed to take initiative in developing their own ideas. They are bound more or less unavoidably by the old rules, regulations and traditions of our police departments." (Jessie F. Binford, Field Supervisor, U.S. Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Boards (NCCC 1919, p. 139)).

This speaker suggests that policewomen were tasked with providing gendered practices to specified populations but without organizational structures in police departments to actually support this work. The speaker, Jessie Binford, oversaw the Central District of the Commission on Training Camp Activities' Committee on Protective Work for Girls during and after WWI. Many cities and jurisdictions used wartime funding to explore gender-specific policing and detention initiatives, leading to a rapid expansion of gendered

carceral systems (Freedman 1981). In this context, Binford critiques the situation faced by policewomen and protective workers as they sought direction after the camps closed. She highlights the difficulties policewomen faced when transitioning from working independently to reintegrating into traditional, male-dominated departments. Being under male authority within the conventional police culture appeared to hinder policewomen's effectiveness in protective work.

In summary, the evidence suggests that social workers provide a very gendered form of labor for the police. Although social workers were meant to take a more compassionate and protective approach than their male counterparts, their roles were largely integrated into the existing structures of policing rather than fundamentally transforming them. Despite social workers being recruited under the premise of providing a "softer" approach to law enforcement based on gender stereotypes and the perceived nurturing qualities of women, social workers often contributed to (and in some cases enhanced) the oppressive forms of social control they were meant to mitigate. Social workers' presence did not lead to a significant shift in the nature of policing. The Progressive Era crystallized social workers as the reproducers and reinforcers of the racialized and gendered confines of acceptable "moral" behavior.

6. Discussion

The introduction of policewomen as a form of social work intervention during the Progressive Era elucidates the beginnings of a repetitive social work contradiction: in attempting to selectively protect vulnerable populations from harm, social workers have often relied on or worked in tandem with carceral systems, perpetuating the very issues they seek to address. The dual role of social workers as caregivers and enforcers of societal norms has perpetuated the marginalization and oppression of the communities they claim to serve both in the Progressive Era (Odem 1995; Pascoe 1993) and in modern times (Dettlaff and Boyd 2020; Dettlaff et al. 2020; Maylea 2021). This duality may indicate a carceral–care nexus underpinning the logics of social work over time—repeatedly reproducing a mirage that carcerality can be an expression of care through framings like "corrections" and "rehabilitation". We argue that this carceral–care nexus has been a defining feature of the social work profession, shaping its practices and ideologies in ways that have bolstered the conditions for reforms to be absorbed and instrumentalized by the carceral system. The absorption of social workers-turned-policewomen is epitomized by the shift from protecting women and children from the carceral system to adopting law enforcement's norms and practices. Over time, driven by carceral feminist logic, social workers have increasingly supported and become direct proponents of carceral expansion under the banner of reform and 'rehabilitation'. Yet, this shift significantly has contributed to a rise in the detainment and imprisonment of the vulnerable groups that social workers initially sought to protect, which is particularly evident during World War I (Freedman 1979, 1981).

We argue that the integration of social workers into law enforcement roles, such as police matrons and policewomen, contributed to laying a foundation for the legitimization and expansion of the carceral system, blurring the line between care and control. Contemporary examples that have grown out of the Progressive Era's legacy are "soft" courts like drug courts (Kaye 2019; Zozula 2019), the police–clinician crisis co-response (Watson et al. 2019), prison re-entry programs (Miller 2014), and the family policing system (Dettlaff and Boyd 2020; Dettlaff et al. 2020). In these settings, social workers have reinforced carceral control through coercive care, enhancing the criminal legal system's public legitimacy by presenting itself as progressive and benevolent. The language of reform and care masks the punitive and controlling aspects of police–social work collaborations. Terms like "rehabilitation," "protection," and "reform" suggest a system focused on providing care and support but which, in practice, perpetuates punitive approaches that reinforce biased norms under a benevolent guise. This guise functions as a ritualized myth, allowing carceral entities to gain legitimacy by concealing their punitive practices (Meyer and Rowan 1977). A parallel can also be drawn between the reform efforts made during the Progressive Era and the

arguments that some make today, stating that social workers should collaborate with police as a means to reform policing from within.

Over the past 30 years, scholars of race and gender have highlighted the impossibility of understanding lived reality as the product of any single axis of identity, including gender (Collins et al. 2021; Crenshaw 1991). It is equally impossible to understand the gendered contours of social work's historical relationship with the police without considering how this history is simultaneously rooted in racialized and classed gender norms. Throughout its history, social work has been predominantly composed of white, middle-class women, which has significantly influenced the profession's approach to serving marginalized communities (Wright et al. 2021). This demographic composition has led to a disconnect between practitioners and the communities they work within, buttressed by stereotypes and assumptions about racialized women and their roles as mothers and caregivers (Abramowitz 1985). Furthermore, social work as a profession and eugenics as a school of thought both took hold during the Progressive Era. Many, if not all, social workers were acculturated to these gender–race–class norms or eugenic ideals of containing or exterminating those who violate them (Katz 2013; Kennedy 2008). Here, the racialization of worthiness for care is evident in the ways immigrants and people of color were described as those of moral deficiency and criminality, as seen in a critique where a barrier to the "assimilation of foreigners is found in the lack of adjustment between them and our system of law enforcement". Furthermore, social workers criticized police for not punishing sex workers harshly enough—a crime that was highly racialized at the time (Smolak 2013). Through promoting harsher punishments for crimes more often associated with immigrant women and investing further in criminal legal systems that promoted sex-based and immigrant status discrimination, social workers inadvertently reinforced systemic inequalities and contributed to the disproportionate criminalization and marginalization of these vulnerable populations. Consequently, early social work interventions and collaborations with law enforcement relied on racialized and gendered assumptions, leading to the surveillance, control, and punishment of women who deviated from dominant norms. However, racialization was implicit in our data. The lack of explicit discussion of race and ethnicity, along with changing definitions of what it meant to be "white" during this era, limits this study's ability to make legible the role of race and ethnicity in shaping police–social work relations.

So, was the use of social workers as policewomen a successful police reform intervention? It depends on the desired outcome. One aim of early social workers, from our findings, was to make police departments more benevolent, especially towards women and children. A dovetailing aim was for policewomen to shift the orientation of police work from reactive to preventative policies. Our analysis suggests that the expectation for policewomen to identify, detain, and intervene in the lives of women and youth before "crimes" were committed did affect the direction of policing as it was used to legitimize the widening of the carceral net, contributing to a rise in the arrests and prosecution of these groups. Yet, our data also indicate that policewomen failed to create desired reforms in police departments and instead only enforced the changes the police were already amenable to. Furthermore, women were not given coercive powers, which calls into question if they were really a part of the internal machine of police departments. However, police departments were highly idiosyncratic, so it is not possible to provide more than a somewhat crude global assessment. Another potential aim more implicit in the findings was to enhance public trust in police departments by incorporating "virtuous" women into police work after years of documented disorganization and corruption. This may have been a partial success because the presence of women in these roles helped to project an image of moral reform and integrity, potentially improving public perception and trust, even as systemic issues and inequalities persisted within the police force.

Ultimately, the social work–law enforcement alignment has given a false impression of "softening" in both the Progressive Era and contemporary times. In both of these eras, social work reform efforts in law enforcement, such as adopting more 'rehabilitative' frames with the expansion of women and youth-specific facilities, are perceived as less

harsh or punitive, despite the reality that these efforts often obscure the controlling and disciplinary aspects of women's roles within the carceral system (Brown 2021; Smith 2023). By examining the gendered dynamics at play in the collaboration between social work and law enforcement during the foundational Progressive Era, we can see the proliferating effects of how women's roles and experiences were shaped by patriarchal expectations and assumptions. Scholars posit that because these roles became embedded within the carceral system, social workers could acculturate more to police departments than vice versa, creating a phenomenon of absorption (Garrett 2004; Wong 2023). Social workers acculturating to law enforcement is demonstrated in our data by calls for policewomen to have arresting power and eventually for them to receive more specialized training, which presumably included more policing-specific training. This dynamic perpetuates the carceral–care nexus, as the illusion of care and rehabilitation serves to legitimize and expand the reach of carceral systems (Musto 2016).

Finally, our analysis allows us to draw parallels between Progressive Era reforms and today's reforms. Today, there is a new wave of police/social work collaborations intended yet again to infuse more care into police work: new police-embedded social work models, police–clinician behavioral health co-response programs, and social work's involvement in providing Crisis Intervention Team training to officers (Watson et al. 2019). In both the Progressive and contemporary contexts, there has been an emphasis on collaboration between social work and law enforcement, professionalization and training, community engagement, and addressing social inequality. In both eras, there is a recognition that social issues and "crime" are intertwined, so integrating social service provision and law enforcement is seen as a solution to addressing social problems. The consistent push for collaboration reflects the underlying carceral feminist assumptions in social work that expand carceral consequences, indicating a commitment to protecting vulnerable populations and that carceral consequences are the most effective means of protection. This push for collaboration also reveals how the reliance on carcerality in social work potentially compromises the profession's purported goals of providing compassionate "care". Despite the stated objectives of reform, both professions have fallen short in addressing the root causes of social issues and addressing systemic inequities. This reoccurring shortfall underscores the need for a critical examination of the foundational assumptions guiding these reform strategies.

7. Conclusions

Our examination shows that attempts to merge social work and law enforcement have been influenced by traditional gender roles and stereotypes and underscores how the roles of social workers have frequently resulted in punitive outcomes. The limitations of past reforms can inform our understanding of contemporary efforts to address social issues and reform the criminal legal system. Recognizing historical patterns by linking social work interventions with carceral feminist logic and understanding how social work has often been absorbed by punitive structures can guide practitioners and policymakers to prioritize and promote systemic change instead of perpetuating current systems of power. By critically evaluating the gendered language and implementation of reform, future efforts can avoid the pitfalls of the past and strive for more transformative outcomes that dismantle, rather than reinforce, the carceral state. A better understanding of past reform efforts emphasizes the necessity of creating holistic, community-driven solutions that meaningfully address the root causes of social issues and move beyond surface-level changes. It also provides a cautionary tale about the extent to which social work can be expected to change police work, particularly when embedded within established institutional frameworks designed around racialized and class-based social control.

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Notes

[1] All archival data as pulled from the "Official proceedings of the annual meeting: 1882–1924". In the digital collection *National Conference on Social Welfare Proceedings* https://name.umdl.umich.edu/ACH8650.1911.001 (Access 15 February 2021). University of Michigan Library Digital Collections.

[2] We included 1982 as our final year, despite it falling one year short of our systematic sampling procedure. We included 1982 in an effort to extend the sampling frame to the last year for which proceedings were available.

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