



Exploring the Experiences of Social Workers in a Correctional Facility

Lyka B. Batingal¹ & Ella Jane D. Maghanoy² & Klent Brian M. Ganub³
Genesis B. Naparan⁴ & Daisy R. Catubig⁵ & Remy Richie Jadman-Ferrater⁶ & Alfer Jann Tantog⁷

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} Saint Columban College, Pagadian City, Philippines

Correspondence: Lyka B. Batingal, Saint Columban College, Philippines

Email: lyka.batingal@sccpag.edu.ph; remyrchieferrater@sccpag.edu.ph

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of social workers practicing within a correctional facility in Zamboanga del Sur. Specifically, it examined their daily routines, programs for Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs), challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and recommendations for future correctional social work practice. Anchored on Role Theory, the study used a qualitative case study design. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with two registered social workers assigned in the correctional facility, with two correctional staff included for triangulation. Findings revealed that social workers' daily routines involved conducting morning meetings, monitoring PDL engagement, and facilitating livelihood activities. They implemented therapeutic, livelihood, and educational programs intended to support welfare development and rehabilitation. However, they encountered administrative workload, multiple role demands, and difficult PDL behavior, including emotional distress and noncompliance. To manage these pressures, they maintained professional composure and practiced collaborative work management. Their support systems included family, co-workers, and institutional leadership. The study concluded that correctional social workers make meaning of their work by balancing helping responsibilities with institutional expectations, requiring patience, preparedness, adaptability, and stronger organizational support.

Keywords: Correctional Social Work, Correctional Facility, Persons Deprived of Liberty, Coping Strategies, Role Theory

Introduction

Correctional facilities are not only spaces of custody and supervision; they are also institutional settings where rehabilitation, welfare development, and preparation for community reintegration are expected to take place. Within this environment, social workers are tasked to provide psychosocial assistance, counseling, case management,

rehabilitative programming, and support for Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs). These responsibilities place correctional social workers in a complex practice setting where they must respond to human needs while also working within rules, security protocols, and institutional expectations.

Globally, correctional systems continue to face the pressure of large detained populations. The World Prison Population List reported that millions of people are imprisoned worldwide, with prison and jail congestion remaining a major concern across regions (Fair & Walmsley, 2024). In the Philippines, prison and jail congestion has also been identified as a persistent issue affecting service delivery, safety, and rehabilitation. Reports have described the country's correctional facilities as highly congested, with continued concern over overcrowding despite decongestion efforts (Commission on Audit, 2024; GMA Integrated News, 2024; Philippine Information Agency, 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). Such conditions increase the demands placed on correctional personnel, including social workers.

Correctional social work therefore involves a balance between care and control. Social workers are expected to uphold human dignity and support rehabilitation while working inside an institution where discipline, order, and compliance are emphasized. Literature on correctional and forensic social work describes this as a difficult environment because professional helping roles may conflict with custodial expectations (Casey, 2023; Toi, 2015). Workload, emotional strain, institutional pressure, and insufficient support may also contribute to stress and burnout among social workers (Maddock, 2024; Malik et al., 2022).

Despite the importance of social workers in correctional settings, local research on their experiences remains limited. Much of the discussion on correctional facilities focuses on overcrowding, security, and the situation of PDLs, while fewer studies document how social workers themselves experience the work, manage challenges, and sustain their professional practice. This study addressed that gap by exploring the experiences of social workers in a correctional facility in Zamboanga del Sur. It focused on their daily routines, programs implemented for PDLs, challenges encountered, coping strategies, support systems, and recommendations for future social workers.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Role Theory, particularly the work of Biddle (1979), which explains how individuals perform roles based on the expectations attached to their social or professional position. In organizations, a role is not only a job title but a set of expected behaviors, duties, and obligations shaped by the setting where the person works. This framework is suitable for understanding correctional social work because social workers in correctional facilities must perform their professional helping role while also

following institutional rules and expectations.

Role Theory is useful in explaining role conflict, role ambiguity, and role strain. Role conflict occurs when a worker experiences incompatible expectations, such as the expectation to support rehabilitation while also complying with security-first institutional priorities. Role ambiguity occurs when role boundaries are unclear or when workers are uncertain about how to prioritize tasks. Role strain occurs when multiple expectations must be met despite limited time, resources, or support (Bowling et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). These concepts are relevant to correctional social work because practitioners may be expected to serve as counselors, case managers, facilitators, compliance workers, and institutional personnel at the same time.

Through this theoretical lens, the experiences of correctional social workers are not treated merely as individual difficulties. Instead, they are understood as responses to the demands of a structured correctional institution. Role Theory helps explain how social workers make meaning of their work, negotiate multiple responsibilities, cope with pressure, and maintain professional identity while serving PDLs in a controlled environment.

Methodology Research Design

The study used a qualitative case study design. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand the experiences, meanings, and practice realities of social workers within their natural work environment. The case study design, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), allowed the researchers to examine a bounded case involving social workers assigned in a correctional facility in Zamboanga del Sur. This design supported an in-depth understanding of correctional social work practice within a specific institutional context.

Research Environment and Participants

The study was conducted in a correctional facility under the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology in Pagadian City, Zamboanga del Sur. The facility served as a detention and rehabilitation setting for PDLs. It was selected because it provided a real work environment where social workers carried out welfare development, rehabilitation, and support services within a correctional context.

The main participants were two registered social workers assigned in the selected correctional facility. Both had direct experience providing services to PDLs. Two correctional staff members who regularly worked with the social workers were also included for triangulation. The main participants were coded as SW1 and SW2, while the

staff informants were coded as ST1 and ST2 to protect confidentiality.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

The researchers served as the main instrument of the study and used a semi-structured interview guide. The guide contained open-ended questions focused on the daily routines, programs, challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and recommendations of correctional social workers. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language and were audio-recorded with permission. Field notes were also used to capture contextual details during the interviews.

Data Analysis and Ethics

The data were analyzed using categorical aggregation and the constant comparative method following Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly, coded, compared, and grouped into categories and subcategories. Triangulation was conducted by comparing the accounts of social workers with the observations of correctional staff. Ethical standards were observed through informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and non-maleficence. No names of participants or identifying details were disclosed.

Results and Discussion

Six major categories emerged from the study: daily routine of social workers in the correctional facility, programs implemented for PDLs, challenges encountered by social workers, coping strategies used by social workers, support systems for social workers, and recommendations for future social workers.

Daily Routine of Social Workers in the Correctional Facility

The first finding showed that the daily routine of social workers primarily involved conducting morning meetings, monitoring PDL engagement, and facilitating livelihood activities. These activities reflected the structured nature of correctional social work, where social workers participate in institutional routines while also providing welfare-related support to PDLs.

Conducting morning meetings was described as a regular part of the day. SW2 explained that "every morning we have a morning meeting," showing that social workers begin their routine by gathering and preparing PDLs for the day's activities. Staff accounts supported this, with ST2 noting that social workers gather PDLs and assist them in their

daily routines. The morning meeting served as a starting point for organization, interaction, and preparation before other welfare development activities.

Social workers also monitored PDL engagement. SW2 shared that they observe the mood of PDLs every morning, encourage them to participate, and approach those who do not join. This indicates that social workers are attentive not only to physical presence but also to emotional readiness and participation. Correctional rehabilitation literature emphasizes the importance of structured participation in activities that support development and reintegration (Byrne, 2020; UNODC, 2023). Monitoring PDL engagement therefore reflects the social worker's role in encouraging involvement in the rehabilitative process.

Facilitating livelihood activities was another part of the daily routine. SW1 stated that social workers conduct, facilitate, and guide activities for PDLs. SW2 added that when there are no donation drives or special activities, PDLs conduct livelihood activities as part of the day's schedule. These activities keep PDLs engaged in productive routines. Education and vocational training in correctional settings have been linked to improved employment preparation and post-release outcomes (Davis et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2025). Thus, livelihood activities may contribute to discipline, skill development, and readiness for community reintegration.

Programs Implemented for Persons Deprived of Liberty

The second finding showed that social workers implemented or facilitated therapeutic, livelihood, and educational programs for PDLs. These programs addressed psychosocial, productive, and learning needs inside the facility.

Therapeutic programs included counseling, Therapeutic Community Modality Program activities, recreational activities, music therapy, and physical conditioning. SW1 described TCMP as one of their main programs for the welfare of PDLs and also mentioned conducting counseling. SW2 confirmed that rehabilitation programs included group and individual counseling sessions. These programs support emotional adjustment, behavior management, and welfare development within the facility. Correctional social workers are expected to provide psychosocial support and rehabilitative services even within custodial environments (Casey, 2023; UNODC, 2023).

Livelihood programs involved skills-based activities such as tailoring, bakery, rug making, and other productive work. SW1 explained that training providers such as TESDA visit the facility to teach skills that may help PDLs after release. Staff accounts also confirmed that livelihood activities are part of the facility's routine. Such programs are aligned with the rehabilitative aim of correctional institutions because they provide practical skills and productive engagement. Vocational education and work-related programs may improve employability, self-efficacy, and motivation among incarcerated

individuals (Davis et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2025).

Educational programs included Alternative Learning System sessions, seminars, workshops, and learning activities. SW1 mentioned that ALS was available for PDLs who needed educational support. Staff accounts also confirmed the presence of learning sessions and educational activities. Education supports personal development and preparation for reintegration, especially for PDLs whose schooling or skills development may have been interrupted. These findings show that social workers contribute not only to immediate welfare but also to the long-term development of PDLs.

Challenges Encountered by Social Workers

The third finding revealed that social workers encountered challenges related to administrative workload, multiple roles demand, and difficult PDL behavior. These challenges demonstrate that correctional social work involves both direct service responsibilities and institutional pressures.

Handling administrative workload was a major challenge. SW1 shared that paperwork and compliance requirements sometimes arrive one after another, causing tasks to pile up. Staff accounts supported this by noting that social workers must balance fieldwork, compliance, and activities. Administrative workload may reduce time and energy for direct helping functions, especially when documentation and reporting requirements are heavy. Work-related pressure and high demands are commonly associated with social worker stress and burnout (Maddock, 2024).

Managing multiple role demands was another challenge. SW1 described having to handle three designations while also managing activities such as seminars and Women's Month events. This finding shows that correctional social workers may be expected to perform several tasks beyond direct social work service. Through Role Theory, this reflects role strain, where one professional position carries several expectations at the same time (Biddle, 1979; Bowling et al., 2017).

Managing difficult PDL behavior was also identified as a serious challenge. SW2 described situations involving suicidal tendencies, loss of self-control, fighting, and noncompliance. The participant emphasized that social workers cannot simply scold PDLs but must understand the situation and remain professional. Staff accounts also mentioned obedience to instructions and the need to adjust to different behaviors. Suicide and self-injurious behavior remain important concerns in correctional settings, requiring preventive and professional responses (Stijelja & Mishara, 2022). This finding shows the emotional and ethical demands involved in correctional social work.

Coping Strategies Used by Social Workers

The fourth finding showed that social workers coped with challenges by maintaining professional composure and practicing collaborative work management. These coping strategies allowed them to continue performing their responsibilities despite pressure.

Maintaining professional composure involved staying calm, firm, empathetic, and responsible. SW2 emphasized the need to balance rules and empathy because PDLs are still human beings who may be hurt by their situation inside the facility. SW1 also shared that even when the work is difficult, assigned tasks must still be completed. Staff accounts supported this, describing social workers as stable under pressure and able to give instructions without raising their voice. This coping strategy reflects the correctional social worker's attempt to balance professional care with institutional expectations.

Practicing collaborative work management involved sharing tasks, asking for assistance, and relying on coworkers when the workload became heavy. SW1 described how the Unit Welfare Development team helps when there is too much work. Staff accounts also mentioned team building, communication, and sharing ideas as ways of managing challenges. Workplace support is important in correctional settings because social support may reduce stress and burnout among correctional personnel (Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Lambert et al., 2010). Collaboration therefore functions as both a practical and emotional coping resource.

Support Systems for Social Workers

The fifth finding showed that social workers perceived family, co-workers, and leadership as important support systems. These sources of support helped them remain motivated, guided, and capable of sustaining their professional practice.

Family support provided emotional strength and personal motivation. SW1 identified her child and family as the reason she continues to endure the difficulty of the work, while SW2 also directly named family as a support system. Staff accounts supported the idea that a stable family life helps the social worker function better inside the facility. Research on correctional work suggests that social support may buffer the effects of stress and work-family conflict (Armstrong et al., 2015; Namazi et al., 2021).

Co-worker support was also important. SW1 referred to her Unit Welfare Development group as a work family, while SW2 emphasized collaboration and teamwork with colleagues. This support allowed social workers to share responsibilities, coordinate activities, and manage demanding tasks. In correctional settings, coworker support has been linked to lower stress and better job functioning (Ellison & Caudill, 2020; Lambert et al., 2010).

Leadership support involved guidance, supervision, and direction from the administration, senior officers, and the warden. SW1 shared that senior personnel guide and teach her because she is still new in service. SW2 identified the administration and warden as consistent sources of support. Leadership support helps social workers understand institutional expectations and perform their roles with more confidence. Supervisory and administrative support have been recognized as important resources for reducing stress and strengthening work outcomes in correctional settings (Lambert et al., 2016).

Recommendations for Future Social Workers

The sixth finding presented the participants' recommendations for future social workers assigned in correctional facilities. The recommendations were summarized into three major points: be patient, be prepared, and be adaptable.

Patience was emphasized as a necessary quality. SW1 stated that future social workers must be patient, while SW2 said that correctional work requires patience, compassion, and professionalism. Staff accounts similarly described patience as essential when working with PDLs. This recommendation is important because correctional social workers encounter complex behaviors, institutional rules, and emotionally demanding situations that require calm and respectful responses.

Preparedness was also recommended. SW1 emphasized mental and spiritual readiness because handling PDLs is not easy. SW2 advised future social workers to assess themselves and determine whether the field is truly suited for them. Staff accounts added that future practitioners should read about correctional facilities and observe related realities before entering the field. This suggests that correctional social work requires not only academic preparation but also emotional and practical readiness.

Adaptability was the third recommendation. SW1 advised future social workers to apply their professional knowledge inside the facility for the welfare of PDLs. Staff accounts also emphasized the need to be flexible and to test whether theories can be applied to real correctional practice. Adaptability is important because correctional social workers must adjust their approaches to the needs of PDLs, the rules of the institution, and the realities of the work environment.

Conclusion

The study found that social workers in correctional facilities make meaning of their experiences by navigating the demands of a controlled institutional setting while continuing to perform helping and rehabilitative functions. Their work involves daily routines, program facilitation, PDL engagement, administrative compliance, behavioral

management, and coordination with personnel. These responsibilities show that correctional social work is both a helping profession and an institutionally shaped practice. The findings also show that correctional social workers experience role-related pressures. They carry multiple expectations as welfare providers, counselors, facilitators, compliance workers, and institutional personnel. Despite these challenges, they sustain their practice by maintaining professional composure, collaborating with coworkers, and relying on support from family, colleagues, and leadership. Overall, the study emphasizes that effective correctional social work requires patience, preparedness, adaptability, emotional control, teamwork, and stronger institutional support.

Recommendations

Correctional social workers should continue strengthening patience, emotional regulation, professionalism, and adaptability in performing their duties.

Correctional facility administrators should provide clearer role designation and balanced workload distribution to reduce role strain among social workers.

Facility leadership should continue strengthening supervision, mentoring, and guidance for social workers, especially those who are new in correctional practice.

Government agencies and policymakers should provide adequate staffing, relevant training, and sufficient resources for rehabilitation and psychosocial services in correctional facilities.

Social work educators should include more discussions, case examples, and field preparation related to correctional social work in the curriculum.

Future social workers should prepare themselves mentally, emotionally, and professionally before entering correctional settings.

Future researchers may conduct wider studies involving more correctional facilities, social workers, correctional officers, PDLs, and family members to deepen understanding of correctional social work practice.

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