

“Stuck in the middle”: social work educator attitudes to admissions decision-making in relation to applicants with criminal records to social work courses in England

Atrapadas en la disyuntiva: actitudes del profesorado en la toma de decisiones sobre la admisión de estudiantes con antecedentes penales en los estudios de trabajo social en Inglaterra.

Caroline Bald*, Inés Martínez Herrero** y Aaron Wyllie***

* University of Essex, UK

** UNED, Spain

*** University of Essex, UK

Declaration of conflicting interests:

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Resumen:

Cada vez hay más evidencias de la existencia de tensiones entre las ambiciosas declaraciones de principios éticos del trabajo social y la medida en que estos principios se han visto reflejados realmente en las prácticas de la profesión a lo largo de su historia. Un área en la que esto se hace evidente es en el acceso a la educación en trabajo social. A pesar de ser un tema poco investigado a nivel global, varios estudios han comenzado a destacar la posible desconexión en distintos contextos entre los valores profesionales y las decisiones relativas a la admisión de estudiantes en los estudios de trabajo social. Esto es especialmente relevante en países como Inglaterra, donde el acceso a los estudios de trabajo social depende de unos exhaustivos procesos de selección, influenciados por la presión de priorizar los intereses del mercado influenciados por la presión de priorizar los intereses del mercado y una moralización del proceso, en lugar de enfocarse en la inclusión y la representatividad del alumnado de trabajo social. El intenso escrutinio incluye verificaciones de antecedentes penales. Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de metodología mixta (encuesta online con preguntas abiertas y cerradas) sobre las actitudes del profesorado de trabajo social al evaluar la idoneidad de las personas con antecedentes penales para acceder a la formación en trabajo social en Inglaterra. El análisis de

los resultados pone de manifiesto la duda sobre si las y los trabajadores sociales reflejan adecuadamente a las comunidades a las que sirven, así como la creciente preocupación de que la deriva de las políticas ha permitido prácticas de selección moralizadoras y demasiado centradas en evitar riesgos, sin suficiente control de la arbitrariedad, en una etapa clave para la inclusión en el sector. Este estudio, por tanto, contribuye a los debates sobre las admisiones en trabajo social en Inglaterra a la vez que busca incentivar la reflexión y abrir un debate internacional más amplio, así como promover una agenda de investigación sobre los procesos y criterios de acceso a la educación en trabajo social.

Palabras clave: antecedentes penales, trabajo social, educación en trabajo social, inclusión.

Abstract:

There is growing evidence of a tension in social work between our professional ethics and the extent to which these ethics stand up to historical scrutiny. One such area is access to social work education. While a gap in research globally, growing attention highlights a potential disconnect between professional values and system influences on social work education admissions decision-making. This is especially the case in countries like England, where entry to social work studies is conditional on deeply scrutinising selection processes influenced by pressures to prioritise market interests and moralising gatekeeping over inclusion and representativity of candidates. This scrutiny includes an enhanced level of criminal record checks. This paper presents findings from a mixed methods study of social work educator attitudes in assessing suitability of applicants with criminal records to study social work in England. Thematic analysis contextualises a growing concern about the extent to which social workers are representative of the communities we service together with increasing suggestion that policy drift has enabled unchecked potentially risk averse and moralising gatekeeping practices at the key inclusive workforce stage. This study therefore contributes to the debates about social work admissions in England while, at the same time, it seeks to trigger reflection and promote a broader international discussion and a research agenda around the processes and criteria of access gatekeeping to social work education.

Keywords: criminal records, social work, social work education, inclusion.

Article info:

Received: 30/04/24

Accepted: 01/06/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5944/comunitania.28.1>

1. Introduction

The social work profession, tasked with both protecting those who experience vulnerability and acting as enabler of rights and justice, operates in unique, complex, and often

conflicted spaces (British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2021). Ascribing to ‘principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities’ (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] and International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014, para 5), social work is ethically committed to working in partnership with the diverse communities it serves. This inclusive commitment should extend to the whole social work “community” of stakeholders, its workforce, for which social work education is the first “gate” to the profession (BASW, 2021, Crisp and Gillingham, 2008).

The Global Standards for Social Work Education (IASSW and IFSW, 2020) do not make any explicit reference to social work stakeholders with criminal records, yet these standards set clear grounds for promoting the inclusion of people with criminal records in social work courses. The 2020 Global Standards document requirements for Schools of Social Work include: to seek ‘the inclusion of minority groups [of students] that are underrepresented and/or underserved’ (article 2.j) and for students to be ‘provided with equal opportunities to learn and develop regardless of [different] forms of diversity’ (article 3.b). More broadly, the standards require schools of social work to challenge ‘discriminatory behaviours, policies, and structures’ (article 3.d), and to promote ‘the principles of restorative rather than retributive justice’ (article 2.f). These see social work programmes as comprising:

‘a dynamic intellectual, social, and material community. This community brings together students, educators, administrators, and service users united in their effort to enhance opportunities for learning, professional and personal development’ (IASSW and IFSW, 2020, online, introduction to section 4)

However, who are welcome into these “communities” varies largely across the world, and the discussion about diversity and inclusivity appears to become more difficult and uncomfortable regarding the inclusion of people with criminal records within these. The debate about which should be the position of the social work profession facing people with criminal records wishing to be part of the profession has been on the table for a long time. Two point/counterpoint papers from 2000 capture the essence of the argument highlighting the dilemma is not new:

Answering the question of whether applicants with criminal records should access social work education, Magen and Emerson (2000) strongly stated no. Drawing on wider admissions research in the United States they argued that access to social work education should be a privilege, not a right. The authors highlighted recidivism rates arguing for a national ruling that no risk is worth taking when working with vulnerability. They also claimed that ‘failure to endorse the social sanction associated with a felony conviction endangers social work’s reputation’ (Magen and Emerson, 2000, p. 401). Scott and Zeiger (2000) countered these arguments by highlighting the inherent value of justice lived experience and social inequalities underpinning policing, sentencing and, ultimately, criminalisation. Their counterpoint was that if social work is to truly believe in change, then why not change post-criminalisation?

If most often less explicitly, these perspectives have continued to permeate the logics of social work programme's admissions processes and the views of those involved in these, with risk averse approaches coexisting with inclusion-oriented policies and values such as those promoted by the global standards of social work education (first adopted by the IFSW and the IASSW in 2004 and periodically reviewed since then by these organisations).

For example, social work degrees are among the courses offered nowadays to students in prisons at the National University of Distance Education in Spain (UNED, 2024) whereas social work education admissions in England involve complex and often inconsistent criminal records checks where enhanced disclosure might lead to a heavily narrative interview within a fitness to study process (Quinn and Goodman, 2023). However, in England and in most other countries, the experiences of criminal record checks of those involved in social work admissions processes continues to be under researched. A relevant but dated exception is Madoc-Jones et al. (2007)'s article based on the case study of two social work students accounts of the way their applications to a UK social work programme were processed and a survey to social work admission tutors in England and Wales. Indeed, while there is growing research about re-entry to employment following a criminal record, and, to higher education, the conversation has extended to a lesser extent to those public-facing safeguarding professions, such as social work (Brooks, 2023).

While acknowledging the need to ensure safety for communities and individuals accessing social work services, we have previously argued that criminal record checks are a blunt instrument for achieving this aim, which 'risk promoting a vision of social work at odds with its belief in the potential for change and growth, and anti-theoretical to its mission of tackling inequality and disadvantage' (Bald et al., 2022). Moreover, uncritical or poorly developed processes for assessing criminal records as an indicator of suitability to study social work risks reifying the intersecting oppression axes (notably racism, classism and sexism) reproduced by criminal justice systems worldwide (Bohrman et al., 2022).

Arguably, social work educators involved in course admissions decision-making are placed in a challenging position involving competing demands when dealing with applications of people with criminal records. On the one hand, they are bound to a professional global commitment to social justice, impelled to promote inclusion and representativity in the workforce and required to provide a clear articulation of admission criteria and procedures in schools of social work (IASSW and IFSW, 2020). On the other hand, they are domestically and locally pressured to gatekeep access to social work education, to avoid risks and to recruit the "the brightest and the best" (Hanley, 2020), i.e. the most suitable for the current employment market and for engaging with the desired conservative roles of the profession in a neoliberal global order.

Considering all this, the broader aim of the research presented in this paper was to address the knowledge gap relating to how these social work educators, "stuck in the middle," perceive and deal with decision-making in relation to admission of student candidates with criminal records in social work qualifying courses in England.

Literature review

Criminal records and their associated collateral consequences are significant barriers for individuals seeking employment and educational opportunities globally. In the United Kingdom (UK), these barriers extend to those wishing to pursue a career in social work. This literature review examines the structural injustices faced by individuals with criminal records, the impact of these records on social work education, and the barriers applicants encounter when undergoing enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. We focus on England (one of four nations making up the UK, each with its own professional regulator).

In the UK, an estimated one in four adults have a criminal record, with over 12 million people recorded on the Police National Computer as of 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Structural injustices arise when individuals with criminal records face interlocking systemic disadvantages that limit their access to employment, education, and social mobility. These disadvantages are compounded by the discriminatory effect of having a criminal record, which disproportionately impacts individuals from minoritised communities, including Black, Asian, and ethnic minority groups, as well as those from low-income backgrounds (Bohrman et al., 2022; Fitzgerald, 2020). Research by the Prison Reform Trust (Ellis, 2024) highlights how these structural inequalities reinforce cycles of poverty, exclusion, and recidivism, limiting the opportunities for people with criminal convictions to reintegrate into society. Ethnic minority overrepresentation, this research points out, is even larger among younger prisoners, which denotes the continued importance of redressing these structural trends.

The collateral consequences of having a criminal record are far-reaching and affect various aspects of life, particularly employment, involving additional punishment for an offence that has already been addressed through the criminal justice system. According to the UK Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, individuals with convictions may be required to disclose their criminal history for specific jobs, especially those involving vulnerable populations. In social work, where professionals are often required to work with vulnerable adults and children, applicants must undergo an enhanced DBS check, which reveals not only spent convictions, but also other information held by police forces.

Research by Shannon et al. (2020) suggests that the requirement for criminal record checks in sensitive professions has led to employment discrimination, even for individuals who have successfully reintegrated into society after serving their sentences. Despite recovery and rehabilitation, the stigma attached to criminal records remains

a persistent barrier, with individuals often facing exclusion from education programs and employment opportunities (Fitzgerald, 2020; Jackson and Chubb, 2024).

Regarding social work in England, individuals with criminal records can face severe barriers to gaining employment within the field. In some instances, criminal convictions, particularly those related to violence or sexual offences, are deemed irreconcilable with social work's ethical standards of safeguarding vulnerable individuals (Mason, 2019). This can result in individuals being unjustly barred from pursuing social work careers despite possessing the skills and qualifications to succeed in the field.

Moreover, and in contrast with systems in other countries where criminal records checks are conducted at the point of employment, the filtering of social work student candidates based on criminal records checks and employability potential starts at social work courses admission processes. This approach can be seen as emblematic of the perceived value and role of social work education itself in England, and the extent of regulatory and/or governmental control in its provision. If the government and professional regulator body requires the profession to train only those likely to be eligible for professional registration, a key question emerges, about what this tells us about the value of (social work) education outside of a direct practice context.

As Bald et al. (2022) have argued, the approach responds to a narrow and marketised view of both social work and higher education which does not take into consideration social work as a broader scientific discipline with varied roles to play in society, including in research, education and social justice advocacy and activism. They have also argued that gatekeeping on such grounds at the point of access to social work education is at odds with the right to education, including in social work, as a public good.

Social work qualifying programmes in England are delivered at both undergraduate and postgraduate level by higher education institutions, with accreditation by the professional regulator, Social Work England (SWE). SWE, independent but accountable to the Department for Education, is responsible for establishing and maintaining professional standards (including ethical guidelines), overseeing social work education and training, and ensuring public safety by managing the registration and fitness to practice of social workers. While SWE does not directly manage admissions, it approves and monitors the standards that universities must follow when designing and delivering social work programs. This includes establishing requirements for academic quality, professional suitability, and safeguarding measures, such as background checks for applicants. Specifically, SWE (2021, article 1.4) guidance states that course providers must 'ensure that admission processes assess the suitability of applicants, including in relation to their conduct, health, and character. This includes criminal conviction checks'. The regulator offers no position statement on applicants with criminal records including offering no note that justice lived experience is welcomed, as seen in allied professions.

SWE's approach, as a whole, seems therefore to establish a close link between criminal convictions and conduct, health and character issues. As the approach tends to be replicated in social work courses admissions criteria information, this can easily discourage people with a criminal record to apply to join the courses, assuming they would be ineligible or will need to undergo too thorough a scrutiny with little hope of success at admission and throughout the course (Bald et al., 2022).

At the particular social work courses, the admissions process is guided by SWE recommendations with the decision-making authority held locally with universities in conjunction with local social service authorities and people with lived experience. This process has been further critiqued for its lack of transparency, the burden placed on applicants with criminal records, and for failing to account enough for the social context of offending and the potential for rehabilitation (Bald et al, 2022). Harris (2018) argues that the use of DBS checks in social work education often fails to differentiate between types of offences and fails to recognise that a criminal record alone should not disqualify individuals from entry into the profession. The concern is that this process may disproportionately penalise and filter out potential social workers who could bring valuable lived experience, particularly those with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Internationally, research focusing on the impact of a criminal record on admission to social work programmes is limited, but the situation in England appears to echo the conclusions of some studies published in English about criminal records checks in social work education in other countries. This literature points to the fact that systems put in place for determining candidates' suitability in countries such as the United States, Australia or Finland are generally opaque, poorly documented and inconsistent among programmes, including within the same country (Epperson et al, 2022; Young et al., 2019; Mänttari-van der Kuip, M, 2024). No empirical research data on the topic has been found through our Spanish language systematic literature searches.

In the last decade, some pieces of research have explored the potential for more inclusive social work education policies that could support individuals with criminal records, including the use of case-by-case assessments to evaluate whether an individual's criminal history reflects an ongoing risk to vulnerable people or whether they have demonstrated rehabilitation (Ramley et al, 2019). However, these are also limited in number, provide little empirical data and leave many remaining research gaps on the topic. Additionally, there are relevant debates and approaches about criminal record checks and re-entry to employment more generally which remain largely unexplored in social work literature. For example, incorporating restorative justice principles into all aspects of social work education -including admissions- as promoted by the Global Standards, could offer a rehabilitative approach to engaging with people with criminal records, fostering a more nuanced understanding of offending behaviour and promoting social reintegration.

As the social work profession increasingly seeks to reflect the diversity of society, it is key that more inclusive, critical and restorative policies are developed to support

individuals with criminal records in accessing social work education and contributing to the profession. One necessary first step involves exploring how social work educators involved in social work courses admission processes in different contexts experience their roles in this.

Methodology

Study design

Considering the limited body of existing literature focused on admissions praxis facing criminal record checks in social work programmes in England, we adopted an exploratory survey design aimed at better understanding the views and perspectives of educators involved in these admissions. Our twofold aim was (1) to identify practices and/or procedures used to guide decision making with respect to applicants to social work programs who have a criminal record, and (2) explore social work educators' views, values and attitudes with respect to the admission of people with criminal records into social work programs.

Sampling and recruitment

Considering the absence of any nationally consistent approach to decision making with respect to social work applicants with a criminal record, our sampling approach aimed at maximising representation among the eighty-one providers of educational programmes approved by the regulator body of social work education in England: Social Work England (Social Work England, n.d.). The only inclusion criteria for participation was current or previous involvement in social work course admissions processes with a University or other provider of social work qualifying programmes approved by Social Work England.

Using the Social Work England database of approved social work education programmes (SWE, n.d.), we obtained contact email addresses of Course Admissions Tutors and/or Social Work Programme Leads from University websites. An invitation to participate in the study and explanatory statement was sent to these contacts via email by a member of the research team. In addition, the study was advertised via social media accounts of two named researchers. The social media publication included a brief description of the study, and a link to the study questionnaire webpage where an explanatory statement was provided.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected via a 30-item online questionnaire developed by the researchers and deployed via the secure Qualtrics platform. This questionnaire contained a mix of quantitative and short-answer qualitative questions addressing the key

study objectives outlined above. A copy of this questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. Quantitative responses were analysed descriptively, while a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to draw out key themes emerging from qualitative responses.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the University of Essex ethics committee. A Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was provided to all prospective applicants, in addition to appearing on the Qualtrics questionnaire landing page. Participants were asked to provide informed consent via a checkbox appearing immediately following the PIS. The questionnaire was not accessible without informed consent.

Research Findings

Sample characteristics

Responses from twenty-nine participants were obtained. Sample review showed a range of positions involved in admissions decision making as well as a depth of experience. While a representative sample was not a research aim, the sample aligns with higher education institutions spread across the country. The sample characteristics are summarised in table 1 below:

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Current job title	
Role	Count
Lecturer/Assistant Professor in social work	11
Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor	13
Principal Lecturer/Reader, Head of School (social work), or Head of Programme	3
Associate Lecturer/Teaching Fellow	2
TOTAL	29
Years in current role	
Years in current role	Count
Up to 3 years	10
3 – 6 years	12
7– 10 years	2
10 years +	5
TOTAL	29
Years in social work education	

Years in social work education	Count
Up to 3 years	4
3 – 6 years	5
7– 10 years	5
10 years +	15
TOTAL	29
Region of employment	
Region	Count
South East	6
London	4
East Midlands	4
North West	3
West Midlands	3
East of England	2
South West	2
Yorkshire and the Humber	2
North East	2
Other/illegible	1
TOTAL	29

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Thematic Findings

Using thematic analysis, seven themes were evident across the data. This paper will explore each in turn sharing educator comments for context.

Inconsistencies of process

Descriptions of the process followed where applicants with a criminal conviction make an admission application to study social work revealed significant variation across providers. Additionally, several described processes that were internally inconsistent or lacked in clarity and structure, such that different applicants with a criminal record may have different experiences of the same institution:

It is usually an informal discussion, based on whoever happens to be around at the time. The admissions lead is obviously involved, and someone who has their pulse on placements as well, but beyond this it is very ad hoc.

I'm a bit vague on what happens after interview but know that none of the teaching staff gets involved

It has always been a bit haphazard...

The first area of variation was linked with the timing of invited disclosure from applicants about any criminal conviction history. While almost half of the participants' institutions (46%) reported requiring applicants to disclose any criminal conviction history at the point of initial application, others invited disclosure at the time of interview or assessment (21%), or following an interview or assessment as part of the determination of considering an offer (36%). Several respondents noted the use of the criminal conviction information was made available via the University and Colleges Admission (UCAS) form completed by full-time undergraduate applicants. However, this was often used in conjunction with some other form of dedicated disclosure document provided to applicants for completion during the recruitment process.

Applicants have to indicate criminal convictions on the UCAS form. We then ask applicants to submit a suitability declaration that includes declaration of offences.

This inconsistency was broadly mirrored by the timing initial consideration of any disclosed convictions by admissions decision makers. This most often occurred 'following the in-person assessment/interview' (43%), followed by making determinations prior to an interview offer being made (21%), or as part of (that is, simultaneously with an applicant's interview or admissions assessment) (29%).

Against this backdrop of inconsistent approaches, a majority of respondents expressed desire for guidance to achieve a consistent approach to determining suitability for applicants to social work programmes with a criminal conviction (64% agreed or strongly agreed with this).

2. Concerns about fairness and future employability

The vast majority of respondents (93%) acknowledged the risk of unfairness and inequality arising from an absence of clear policies and procedures to guide decision making in relation to applicants with a criminal record. Linked with this, and reflective of an understanding of the inequalities that can be re-produced by the criminal justice system, a majority of respondents agreed that consideration should be given to 'circumstances and characteristics (e.g. race, gender, age, class)' when determining the suitability of applicants with a criminal record. This perspective was also reflected in open answer comments:

...as social workers we all know that a large number of (mostly disadvantaged or minority individuals) are convicted every year of crimes they didn't commit. Unfortunately, that doesn't really come into play or get discussed though. So it is not really fair.

Fairness was also considered and reflected upon by respondents as it relates to placement opportunities and employability.

The issue of placements is key - if it is unlikely that a student will get a placement then they will be unable to complete the programme so it is considered unfair to 'set them up to fail' in this sense. That is why it is important to have a placement agency perspective to give this type of perspective, although this should not be limited to a local authority perspective.

3. Support for greater transparency and consistency for both admissions staff and candidates

Data suggested that policies and procedures are in place to support decision making to guide the decision-making process in relation to social work applicants with a criminal record (76%). This was rarely accompanied by additional support for impartial decision making in such cases, however, with only 18% reporting the existence of dedicated training for those involved in admissions decisions. This emerged as a key area of need, with all respondents agreeing that training should be provided to all staff involved in the admissions process to support fair and impartial decision-making processes.

It is important for any risk assessments to be shared for comments, corrections with candidates it relates too and their views should be recorded within this clearly. Candidates need to feel included in this assessment process and participate fairly, openly and honestly about the risk assessment and how it is written, even if they disagree with the outcome.

Similarly, there was strong support for social work education providers taking a more active role in communicating their admissions process for people with criminal records (86% agree or strongly agree).

The important issues are: The university has a clear admissions process that is inclusive, transparent and fair. The candidate is given the right to discuss the circumstances of their offending and their perspective. That candidates are given clear information. For example, I cannot guarantee a local authority or other placement provider will provide a placement for the candidate. This needs to be explained prior to the candidate starting the course so that they can make an informed decision. That clear feedback is given to candidates as to why a 'no offer' decision is made at that time.

4. Need for more proactive support and encouragement for people with criminal convictions accessing social work education

I think that people with convictions are likely to have an understanding of the system that many educators and practitioners do not have, giving them a valuable insight.

There was widespread disagreement that any criminal conviction should be automatically disqualifying for admission to a social work programme (96%). However, there was a lack of consistency when it came to determining if particular offences

were disqualifying, or who should be involved in decision making. For example: 32% of respondents felt that 'Supply and/or production of cocaine' was 'automatically disqualifying', while only 12% thought that 'Supply and/or production of cannabis' was automatically disqualifying.

Findings also indicated some ambivalence about whether more support and encouragement for people with criminal records to access social work is necessary. 40% of respondents neither agreed or disagreed that social work education providers should do more to promote and support applications from people with a criminal record (60% agreed or strongly agreed).

5. The role of the University and placement providers

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the regulatory requirement to 'ensure that employers, [and] placement providers ... are involved in admissions processes' (SWE 2021, Standard 1.2), all described admissions decision making processes for people with a criminal conviction featured input from local authorities and other employers.

whereas we might be more willing to take a 'risk' with someone who has a criminal record, in line with our professional values, the University takes the same approach to every programme in terms of suitability and 'safety'. This is a broader tension, but admissions is one example of it.

I often feel stuck in the middle between the admissions team and the candidate waiting to be cleared by the committee. I sometimes develop a relationship with the candidate whilst they are waiting for the decision and will support them through a challenging time. However, I equally feel powerless to advocate on their behalf.

There was strong support overall for the involvement of local authorities in determining the suitability of applicants to social work programmes who have a criminal record (71% agree or strongly agree). However, our data also highlights some concerns and challenges associated with local authority involvement, and tensions that emerge between social work ethics and social work placement and employment providers attitudes.

I have clicked agree for the involvement of organisations because they're so important in terms of placements etc, but I do also think that sometimes this can be a limitation as organisations can be more focussed on reputation and how 'quickly' students can be slotted into high pressured roles without appropriately supporting those who may not 'slot' in quite so easily but would bring important insights and qualities to the role. Not always taking into account how much people change during their SW qualification.

We have regard to the attitude of local employers and placement providers which is becoming more risk averse.

6. The role of applicants

A significant majority of respondents (93%) agreed that ‘applicants with criminal records should always be provided with an opportunity to discuss their criminal histories prior to any decision being made about their suitability for admission’. In practice, however, respondent accounts highlighted significant variation in terms of if, and how, applicants were provided with an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process.

As previously noted, several respondents described a two-stage process of decision making following the disclosure of criminal convictions by applicants, with some applicants with more ‘serious’ criminal convictions not invited for interview / assessment.

Among those that reported inviting participation in decision making from applicants with a criminal record, the nature and type of participation varied too, ranging from the provision of written statements or reflections to be taken into account by the selection panels, to being invited to panel discussions, or ‘being approached to provide further information [only] if needed’.

The applicant is invited to write an explanation of the circumstances surrounding their conviction and why they are now applying to study on a professional programme. This is taken into account along with their references/history/UCAS information as appropriate.

The applicant may be approached to provide further information if needed but does not participate in the panel.

If an applicant with a criminal record is invited to interview /assessment, we discuss this with the panel and ask the candidate to explain the nature of the offending, the context, and what has happened since (or what they have learnt from it).

The applicant is asked to provide details of the convictions, and to write a reflective account of what happened, and how they have changed since / what they have learned from it. This reflective account is anonymised and shared with partner agencies (usually Principle Social Worker) in local authorities, and they are asked whether they would, in principle, be able to offer the applicant a placement or if the conviction would impact on the chance of obtaining employment with the agency.

The applicant can bring a support person, although this is for support only and not to present to panel on the applicant’s behalf. The panel interview the applicant about the offence and any mitigating circumstances.

Some participants’ accounts reflected some concerns linked to these processes. For example:

The applicant isn’t really involved other than providing a written account and some reflection on the offence.

I think a significant focus is how the applicant describes their crime and reflects on this. Notably, this means that if someone says "I am innocent" then they are more likely to be rejected than someone saying "I can't believe what I did, I have learned so much..."

7. The role of the regulator

Lastly, with respect to the involvement of the regulator, Social Work England, we were interested in understanding the extent of support for their greater involvement in decisions about the suitability of applicants with criminal records. Participants' replies showed a reluctance to this, as 75% disagreed or strongly disagreed that decisions should be made by the social work regulator rather than individual educator providers.

I don't think the new regulator, Social Work England, have shown themselves as likely to be flexible on this point, focusing clearly on public protection instead of equity in how they describe their role. They are unlikely to look favourable on a programme that tries to support people with criminal convictions to join the profession, and many faculties will not take this risk.

I think that there is a role for Social Work England - to review the current list of criminal convictions which will automatically exclude an individual from studying to be a social worker. The list is currently very limited, and consideration should be given as to whether other offences should be added

Our decision making relies on whether a conviction is spent or not, hence the need for more information in most cases. Each situation is dealt with on an individual basis and moving to a regulator decision would impact on this ethos.

Nevertheless, the previously discussed support of respondents for the development of guidance to achieve more consistency in the processes and criteria for determining suitability of the applicants with a criminal record to enter social work programmes with a criminal conviction, pointed to a potential role of SWE in this regard.

Discussion

Our findings highlight and establish, for the first time as we can identify, that decision-making regarding applicants to social work courses in England is inconsistent and complex. In the absence of an agreed national approach, each higher education institution appears to have developed their own process, which creates an obvious challenge for any potential applicant with a criminal record deciding where they may wish to study. More broadly, the inconsistencies in process raise considerable concerns around fairness and transparency, and the extent to which social work courses reflect the profession's stated values of social justice and rehabilitation.

A clear area of discrepancy between providers is the timing and method by which applicants with criminal records are asked to disclose any convictions or other cri-

minal record related information. While some respondents indicated that their institutions required disclosure at the point of initial application, others requested this information later in the admissions process when other elements (such as an interview, written activity etc) may have already been undertaken. The role of local authorities and other employers within decision making processes presented several findings of note.

Firstly, while many respondents expressed a commitment to inclusive admissions processes and their responsibilities for this, they also acknowledged that the attitudes of local authorities and other employers could create a de-facto barrier to entry in that (within some institutions), their determination as to suitability was final and enduring. This apparent tension between academic institutions and local authorities creates a situation where applicants can be excluded from social work education by an external party, without the need for any critical assessment of any mitigating circumstances or steps towards rehabilitation.

Moreover, it is not apparent from our findings that the applicant would be informed of the source or the basis of the decision or have an opportunity to appeal, and the opportunities for becoming involved in the processes of assessing suitability varied significantly amongst courses. The varied opportunities for the applicants to share their views and argue for their suitability to join the social work courses can be seen as positive. However, this also raises questions about fairness and the additional burden imposed on these candidates, whose admission may eventually depend not just on the nature of the offence or their readiness for studying social work, but on other aspects such as their narrative skills and their presentability as perceived by the panel.

As broader global research on the collateral consequences of criminal records has consistently established, these kinds of suitability assessment are very complex (e.g. Denver and Ewald, 2018), involving risks for bias, re-stigmatisation and re-traumatisation. Therefore, these processes should not be taken lightly in social work course admissions. This reflects concerns (Bald et al., 2022; Bohrman et al., 2022) about the unchecked gatekeeping function of social work admissions acting as an exclusionary mechanism, rather than reflecting the profession's values of justice and rehabilitation in relation to people with criminal records. The survey findings as a whole, support the need for social work courses in England to prioritise the development of transparent processes, training for all involved and guaranteed support mechanisms for dealing with these applications.

As to the potential role of the regulator, Social Work England, respondent views were mixed, with some calling for greater guidance and others expressing scepticism that greater regulatory involvement could mean a cleave towards greater risk aversion than equity. There was however strong support for more formalised and structured training on how to make decisions about criminal record information, and it may be that such training would provide an opportunity for better understanding

and addressing the significant variations in process and potential outcome which our study has identified.

It should be noted that some guidance was introduced by the regulator in the year following the survey deployment. This however only referred to two offence categories which would prohibit registration, making no reference to education. It will be important to critically evaluate whether the guidance impacted admissions decision-making.

Conclusion and recommendations

The issue of criminal records in social work education represents a significant barrier for potential social work students, particularly given the structural injustice embedded within the criminal justice system. While criminal records serve a necessary protective function in professions involving vulnerable populations, there is an urgent need for reforms to ensure that the enhanced DBS process is fair and considers the potential for rehabilitation.

This study, while exploratory in nature, highlights the inconsistencies and complexities in the admissions processes for social work courses in England when considering applicants with criminal records. The findings reveal a tension between the profession's ethical commitment to social justice and the regulatory and institutional pressures for risk aversion and moral gatekeeping. The lack of consistent national guidelines contributes to opaque decision-making practices, potentially reinforcing structural inequalities linked to race, class, and other social determinants. Moreover, the findings suggest that current processes may undermine social work's inclusive ethos, inadvertently excluding individuals whose lived experiences could enrich the profession. This exclusionary practice not only contradicts social work's foundational values but also narrows the representativity of the workforce, impacting its effectiveness in serving diverse communities.

To address these challenges, the study calls for a re-evaluation of how criminal records are used in assessing suitability for social work education. It recommends the development of transparent, consistent national guidelines that balance safeguarding responsibilities with a commitment to rehabilitation and social justice. Additionally, the paper underscores the need for dedicated training for admissions staff and increased applicant participation in decision-making processes to foster fairness and inclusivity.

By situating the findings within international debates on social work education access, this study contributes to a broader discussion on equity, diversity, and social justice in the profession, urging a reimagining of gatekeeping practices to align with core social work values.

The paper suggests the following four recommendations:

1. Development of National Guidelines for Admissions:

Organisation: Social Work England (SWE)

Recommendation: SWE should continue to establish and review participatory, transparent and consistent national guidelines for the assessment of applicants with criminal records. These guidelines should balance safeguarding responsibilities with a commitment to rehabilitation, social justice, and the inclusion of diverse lived experiences. Clear criteria and processes would help mitigate inconsistencies and reduce the risk of discriminatory practices in admissions.

2. Mandatory Training for Admissions Staff

Organisation: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering social work programmes.

Recommendation: HEIs should implement mandatory training for all staff involved in admissions decision-making. This training should include implicit bias awareness, anti-discriminatory practices, and the social context of offending, ensuring fair and impartial assessments that align with social work's values of justice and inclusion.

3. Review of Risk Aversion and Placement Barriers

Organisation: Social Work England (SWE) and Local Authority Placement Providers.

Recommendation: A collaborative review of risk-averse attitudes towards placements for students with criminal records is needed. This should involve SWE, placement providers, and HEIs working together to create a more inclusive approach that recognises the rehabilitative potential of social work education while maintaining safeguarding standards. This would involve re-examining the influence of local authority decisions on admissions and placements.

4. Review of International Position on Criminal Record Checks

Organisation: IFSW

Recommendation: Consider including an inclusive statement in the Global Definition of Social Work. A collaborative review for international comparison of decision-making processes and where relevant regulator guidance.

These recommendations aim to enhance fairness, transparency, and inclusion within social work education while maintaining necessary safeguarding considerations.

We also encourage further research on the topic, particularly larger scale research, international comparative research and research focused on the suitability assessment experiences of candidate social work students with criminal records.

References

- Bald, C., Wyllie, A., and Martínez Herrero, M. I. (2022). Criminal records and public sector professional education: The role of criminal background checks in admissions to social work courses in England. *Probation Journal*, 69(3), 337-352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02645505221116037>
- Bohrman, C., Updyke, A., Radis, B., Mohr, J., Ocean, M., Lopes, Y., & Bailly-Mompson, A. (2022). Criminal records as predictors of harm: Questioning social work's reliance on records for gatekeeping. *Advances in Social Work*, 22(2), 403–423. <https://doi.org/10.18060/24917>
- Bramley, S., Norrie, C., and Manthorpe, J. (2019). Current practices and the potential for individuals with criminal records to gain qualifications or employment within social work: a scoping review. *Social Work Education*, 40(4), 552–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1699912>
- British Association of Social Work (BASW) (2021) *The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work*. Birmingham: British Association of Social Work. <https://basw.co.uk/policy-practice/standards/code-ethics>
- Brooks, C. (2023). Higher education policies for applicants with criminal records in the United Kingdom: Are universities 'banning the box'? *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 25(1), 72-98.
- Crisp B.R. and Gillingham, P. (2008) Some of my students are prisoners: Issues and dilemmas for social work educators. *Social Work Education* 27(3): 307–317.
- Denver, M., and Ewald, A. (2018). Credentialing decisions and criminal records: A narrative approach. *Criminology*, 56(4), 715-749.9.
- Ellis, S. (2024) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile*. Prison Reform Trust. Retrieved from <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2024/>
- Epperson, M. W., McHarris, M., Ulrich, B., and Sawh, L. (2022). The box in social work education: Prevalence and correlates of criminal history questions on MSW applications. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 13(3), 581–608. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713476>
- Fitzgerald, M. (2020). *The Impact of Criminal Records on Employment and Reintegration*. Prison Reform Trust.
- Hanley, J. (2020). Left behind: exploring how mainstream social work students see themselves compared to the 'best and brightest.' *Social Work Education*, 41(4), 497–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1851361>
- Harris, S. (2018). Social Work Education and the Role of DBS Checks: An Ethical Dilemma. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 54(3), 315-326.
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) *Global definition of social work*. Retrieved from <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2020) Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training. Retrieved from <https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards-for-social-work-education-and-training/>

Jackson, S. M., & Chubb, L. A. (2024). Navigating the profession with a “black mark”: Discrimination experiences of social workers with criminal convictions. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-024-00334-y>

Madoc-Jones, I., Bates, J., Facer, B., and Roscoe, K. D. (2007). Students with criminal convictions: Policies and practices in social work education. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(8), 1398–1403. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl02>

Magen, R. H., & Emerman, J. (2000). Should convicted felons be denied admission to a social work education program? Yes! *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36(3), 401–405.

Mänttari-van der Kuip, M., Lähteinen, S., Ristolainen, H., Forsman, S., Kaitsaari, T., & Lunabba, H. (2024). *Sosiaalityön koulutus portinvartijana sosiaalityöntekijöiden ammattiin*. *Janus*, 32(2), 209–217.

Mason, M. (2019). Criminal Records and Employment Barriers in Social Work Practice. *Social Work Review*, 61(2), 45-59.

Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Criminal Justice Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/criminal-justice-statistics>

National University of Distance Education (UNED) (2024) *Students in Prisons*. Retrieved from <https://www.uned.es/universidad/inicio/en/estudiantes/estudiantes-centros-penitenciarios.html>

Prison Reform Trust. (2020). *The Collateral Consequences of Criminal Convictions: The Impact on Employment*. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk>

Quinn, K., and Goodman, P. (2023). Shaping the road to reentry: Organizational variation and narrative labor in the penal voluntary sector. *Punishment & Society*, 25(4), 998-1022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745221128102>

Scott, N., & Zeiger, S.J. (2000). Should Convicted Felons be Denied Admission to a Social Work Education Program? No! *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36, 409 - 411.

Shannon, T., Woods, A., and Shaw, S. (2020). *Employment Discrimination and Criminal Records: A Review of Evidence*. The Howard League for Penal Reform.

Young, P., Tilbury, C., and Hemy, M. (2019). Child-related criminal history screening and social work education in Australia. *Australian Social Work*, 72(2), 179–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2018.1555268>

Appendix A – Questionnaire

Statement of consent

By ticking the box below you are confirming that you have read and understood the information about this research, and agree to participate.

- I agree and consent

Q1 What is your current job title?

Q2 How long have you been in this role?

Q3 How long have you been working in social work education (in any role)?

Q4 In which region do you work?

South East London North West East of England West Midlands South West
 Yorkshire and the Humber East Midlands North East Other (please describe)

Q5 Which of the following roles have you performed in relation to social work course admissions in the past 2 years? (Multiple selections allowed)

- Admissions coordinator/lead
- Reviewing submitted applications and determining (independently or in a group) candidates to be rejected, or invited for further assessment
- Assessment/interview panel member
- Participation in recruitment events (e.g. presentations to schools; University open days)
- Other (please describe)

Q6 Does your Social Work School/Department have written policies and/or procedures guiding the decision-making process with respect to candidates with criminal records?

- Yes No Don't know

Q7 Does your Social Work School/Department provide any training to staff involved in admissions processes to support fair and impartial decision making with respect to applicants with criminal records?

- Yes No Don't know

Q8 In the past 2 years, approximately how many applicants have disclosed criminal records when applying to study social work at your University/education provider?

- 0 ○ 1 - 3 ○ 4 - 6 ○ 6 - 8 ○ 8 - 10 ○ 10+

Q9 At what stage of the admissions process does your University/education provider require applicants to disclose any criminal convictions?

- At the point of application, prior to offering an invite for assessment/interview
- At the time of in-person assessment/interview
- Following the in-person assessment/interview
- Other (please describe)

Q10 At what stage of the admissions process does your University/education provider first review and consider any disclosures of criminal conviction by an applicant? (i.e. the point at which disclosures are first seen or reviewed, and a decision made)

- At the point of application, prior to offering an invite for assessment/interview
- At the time of in-person assessment/interview
- Following the in-person assessment/interview
- Other (please describe)

Q11 Please describe the process involved in determining whether a candidate is suitable for admission on the basis of disclosed criminal convictions, including who is involved, what (if any) guidelines are used to inform the decision-making process, and if/how the applicant is involved in the decision making process.

Q12

In this section we are interested in gaining a better understanding of how decisions are made with respect to different criminal offences. For each of the following criminal offences or conviction types listed below, please indicate whether you would consider them to be:

Automatically disqualifying for admission: Irrespective of the context of the offence or any further information provided, the applicant would not be considered for admission.

More information needed: There is some concern as to the nature of the offence, and further information is needed to reach a decision, but the offence is not automatically disqualifying and we would consider admission.

Unlikely to be disqualifying for admission: The offence/conviction type is not a cause for concern is unlikely to be disqualifying for admission on its own.

	Automatically disqualifying	More information needed	Unlikely to be disqualifying
Battery/Physical assault	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Possession of cocaine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supply and/or production of cocaine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fare evasion (public transportation)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fraud or other financial dishonesty offences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shoplifting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Supply and/or production of cannabis	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sexual assault	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Public urination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Possession of cannabis	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tax evasion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Obstructing police	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Drunk in a public place	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disorderly behaviour	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Immigration offences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Drink driving	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Indecent exposure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13

Please rate the following concerns in terms of their significance to your decision making with respect to an applicant’s criminal record

	Not at all significant	Less significant	Somewhat significant	Most significant
Reputational damage to University/education provider	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Damage to public reputation or trust in the social work profession	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty of securing practice placement for the applicant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Risk of harm to other students or staff	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Risk of future offending	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Limited employment prospects post-qualification due to criminal record	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The final section of this survey asks you to indicate the extent to which you agree with a series of statements related to the admission of applicants with criminal records onto social work qualifying programmes. The aim of this section is to gain an understanding of views and attitudes towards current practices in relation to admissions processes for people with criminal convictions.

Q14 Social work education providers should do more to promote and support course applications from people with criminal records

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q15 Any criminal conviction should be automatically disqualifying for admission to a social work qualifying programme

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q16 Decisions about the suitability of an applicant with a criminal record for admission to social work qualifying programmes should be made by the social work regulator, rather than individual education providers

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q17 Local Authority representatives should be involved in determining the suitability of applicants to social work programmes who have criminal records

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q18 Decision making processes with respect to the admission of applicants with a criminal record should be consistent across all providers of social work education

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q19 The circumstances and/or characteristics (e.g. race, gender, age, class) of applicants should be considered when determining the suitability of applicants with criminal records

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q20 Placement/Fieldwork providers should be involved in determining the suitability of applicants to social work programmes who have criminal records

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q21 Applicants with criminal records should always be provided with an opportunity to discuss their criminal histories prior to any decision being made as to their suitability for admission

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q22 All staff involved in determining the suitability of applicants with criminal records should be provided with training to support fair and impartial decision making processes

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q23 Social work education providers should take a more active role in communicating their admissions processes for people with criminal records

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q24 Without clear policies and procedures to guide decision making, there is a risk that social work admissions processes will entrench and/or exacerbate the racial inequalities of the criminal justice system

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q25 Is there anything else you would like to tell us that you feel might be relevant?

