



Call for Papers for an Online Workshop on the Topic of

Care in Custody: Perceptions and Practices of Social Work in Prisons

Monday, 7th September 2026, online workshop

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Social workers in prisons navigate a range of tensions and are often positioned between competing logics of rehabilitation and punishment or risk management. Their work lies at the intersection of providing support and imposing constraints, as well as between adherence to professional ethical principles and the logic of the criminal justice system.

As part of the ongoing research project *“Social Work in Swiss Prisons: Elements, Limits and Articulations”* (2022–2026), we explore these challenges facing social work within the Swiss criminal justice system and seek to gain a deeper understanding of social workers’ lived experiences and the strategies they employ. How do social workers perceive these challenges? What strategies have they developed to navigate the complexity of their field of practice? How do detained people articulate their experiences with social workers and with social support in prison more generally?

To compare our findings from Switzerland with international research and conceptual approaches to prison social work, we are organizing an online workshop to facilitate exchange and discussion among scholars in the field across different continents and legal systems. The workshop aims to share and discuss how social workers are embedded within various criminal justice systems and to examine their tasks and responsibilities. In this context, conceptual notions such as rehabilitation and risk orientation, as well as differing perspectives, particularly those of professionals and detained people, offer valuable insights for engaging with this topic.

We invite contributions on social work in prisons across diverse national and institutional contexts in both the Global North and the Global South, structured around three thematic strands. First, contributions may focus on various tensions, professional concepts, and mandates shaping prison social work. Second, we welcome analyses of contextual factors, organizational structures, and professional training across countries and continents. Third, we encourage contributions that foreground the perspectives of detained people and their lived experiences with social work professionals.

Theme 1: Social Work between Rehabilitation and Risk Prevention

In its liminal position between rehabilitation and risk prevention, social work bears responsibility for two competing objectives. On the one hand, following McNeill (2012), social work seeks the “legal,” “psychological,” “moral,” and “social” rehabilitation of detained people. On the other hand, observations from Switzerland indicate that the profession is also shaped by risk-oriented approaches, thereby fulfilling institutional expectations aligned with surveillance and control within the criminal justice system, as is the case in many European countries. Social workers additionally act as intermediaries between the “inside” of the prison and the “outside” of the communities from which detained people come and to which they may eventually return.

However, there remains limited knowledge about how social workers in contexts beyond the Global North navigate rehabilitation processes for affected individuals both inside and outside of prisons.

Possible questions to be addressed by contributions:

- How is the role of social workers at the boundary between the “inside” and “outside” of prison shaped across different contexts and continents?
- How can rehabilitation be addressed in the context of risk orientation, and where are the limits of social workers’ commitment in prison?
- How can social workers build links between institutions, communities, and the lives of released people?

Theme 2: Structure, Tasks, and Responsibilities – Social Workers in Prison Settings and their Training in International Comparison

Criminal justice social work is embedded in a complex web of legal regulations, institutional responsibilities, and professional self-conceptions. The tasks of social workers vary across countries and national criminal justice systems, ranging from supporting detained people through casework and counselling within prisons (e.g. in cases of substance use, psychosocial support, or administrative matters) to preparing them for release (e.g. employment, housing, family, and relationship issues), as well as engaging with community actors (e.g. associations, foundations, and probation services) to provide support after release.

Moreover, the ways in which social workers are embedded within prison systems differ considerably across countries, resulting in varying degrees of professional autonomy and distinct professional profiles. Social workers may be involved in a broad range of interventions throughout the criminal justice process, from pre-trial detention and imprisonment to reintegration after release.

Possible questions to be addressed by contributions:

- How are the tasks, responsibilities, and scopes of social work in prison - both within and beyond institutions - organized across different countries around the world?
- How are social workers positioned at the interface with other professions within various criminal justice systems?
- How do the education and training of social work professionals prepare them for the specific challenges of prison settings?
- To what extent do criminal justice systems support or constrain the professional autonomy of social work in prisons?

Theme 3: The Perspectives of Detained People – Experiences and Meanings of Social Work in Everyday Prison Life

Social work in prison is fundamentally oriented toward the lives and prospects of detained people. According to the *Statement of Ethical Principles* of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), social workers respect the inherent dignity of all human beings, promote human rights, and advance social justice. However, how do detained people experience the support provided by social work? What expectations, hopes, or frustrations do they associate with it? And what significance do social workers have for their rehabilitation? Contributions in this strand aim to foreground the experiences of detained people and to critically reflect on these experiences in relation to professional practice.

Possible questions to be addressed by contributions:

- How do detained people experience the support provided by social work professionals in everyday prison life?
- What significance do detained people attribute to social work for their own prospects?
- To what extent can the experiences of detained people inform and improve the range of social work in prisons, particularly regarding rehabilitation?

Abstracts of max. 300 words should be sent until 30th April 2026 to Martin Böhnel (martin.boehnel@hevs.ch).