



Social Work and Policing: Towards a Joint Vocational Training Curriculum*

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Introduction

The overall objective in the project "SWaPOL – Social Work and Policing" was to develop and support strategic partnerships between social work organizations and the police. Together, researchers and practitioners in the partner countries (Austria, Belgium and Portugal) developed a five-day joint training course that can be integrated in existing training schedules in academic institutions in social work and in police academies. The purpose of the project SWaPOL was, first, to develop a training curriculum for continuous vocational education for social workers and police prevention officers, second, to carry out pilot trainings in all partner countries, and third, to develop respective training material that can be used in the future. In this policy brief some of the 'frequently asked questions' about the SWaPOL training will be addressed. The need for the joint training, target groups, training contents and didactics will be explained and implications for social welfare policies and security policies will be discussed.

Why is there a need for a joint training for social work and police?

Educational systems are highly differentiated and the compartmentalization in different studies wrongly implies a clear separation of responsibilities in practice. However, a number of thematic overlaps exist between professions. The profession of social work has numerous overlaps with other professions such as medicine, psychiatry, childcare, religion, media work, pedagogy, criminal justice, and it is sometimes forgotten that those professions are inter-related.

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Problems of social disorder call for a collaboration of social work and policing

Also, policing is not limited to the police force but extends to other institutions such as private security firms and the military forces in cases of controlling or guarding social activities in civic life. This training for social workers and police officers is intended to find common solutions to problems of social disorder in public space, and here social workers and police officers sometimes meet with good intentions, but sometimes they have different views of a problem: Vulnerable people such as substance users, migrants and homeless persons are in need of social help and medical care, and at the same time they are considered a problem of social disorder and crime. Therefore, police and social work follow different social responsibilities, with the police as the official institution for order maintenance and protection of safety in a society, and social work as a support organisation for the protection of individual wellbeing in a society. This also means that police and social workers differ in their relationships with the people they serve – the general citizen on the one hand and the individual recipient of services on the other hand.

Despite substantial differences, social work and police are both public service institutions with occasional overlaps in daily practice when collaboration is required. The SWaPOL project embarked on developing and offering a joint training to foster joint actions. The proposed SWaPOL training for social workers and police officers has been established as a forum for exchange about job responsibilities for the benefit and wellbeing of all persons in a society.

Who exactly are the target groups for this joint training?

The target group for this training is composed of master's students and practitioners in social work and police crime prevention officers

On the side of social work, this five-day training can either be integrated in other courses as part of the studies in social work, or it can be offered as a separate continuous vocational training alongside professional activity. On the side of the police, this training is considered as a continuous training for police officers in special crime prevention units and can be integrated in vocational training schedules in police academies on a local or federal level. In each case, representatives of the other profession shall be invited.

The training participants on both sides have to be chosen carefully. On the side of social work education, the training is intended to reach out, either, for advanced students on a master's level who already have some practical experience in social work, or for acting professionals in street-work, youth work, community work, drug prevention, probation work and other areas of responsibility. Correspondingly, on the side of the police, this training is not dedicated to young police recruits, but rather to police officers who want to take extra training in crime prevention and community safety. Overall, this



training particularly underlines the need for cooperation and collaboration between social work and police practitioners; hence some experience on the job is helpful to benefit most from participating in the training.

What will be taught?

An exchange about professional cultures is important before topics are discussed in detail

The SWaPOL training is organised in three modules scheduled for one-and-a-half days each. Module 1 supports the exchange between participants of the two professions in regard to their organisational structures, work methods and work ethics. It was found very important to dedicate sufficient time to an exchange about professional cultures, identities and stereotypes that are prevalent between the two professions. This personal encounter in trainings on neutral grounds can help participants to build trusting relationships and reduce prejudice. In Module 1, concepts of crime prevention and harm reduction are compared and possibilities for joint interventions are discussed.

After general discussions on work images and experiences of situations in practice, Module 2 goes into more detail on these topics. The case of substance use in public space is one of many points of conflict between social workers and police officers. The consumption of psycho-active substances is a problem for police and social workers, who nevertheless call for different reactions. Seen as a health problem (addiction), social workers apply methods of harm reduction. Seen as a criminal offence (drug dealing), the police argue they must enforce the law. Without communication between actors in the field, this difference in interpretation leads to deep-seated controversies. However, there is no quick solution to this ambivalence between harm reduction and law enforcement. Social workers and police prevention officers can reach a compromise in organising joint prevention programmes that integrate knowledge from both sides. A shared expertise on substances, motives for substance use, the complexity of risk factors for developing a drug dependency and a common understanding of prevention and harm reduction allow the police and social workers to establish a better collaboration.

Substance use and homelessness are the selected topics for this training

Module 3 is dedicated to the problem of homelessness, which is at first clearly located in the realm of social work. Homelessness is a multifaceted and complex social problem, and it concerns several fields in social policy. A homeless person may be someone without a job, someone with a mental health problem, someone with an addiction problem, someone without any financial resources, or a combination of it all. The most vulnerable groups, such as low-skilled workers, migrants, and the young population, have been particularly affected by the recent health crisis in Europe. But why is homelessness a problem to



the police? Today, city life is rather anonymous, and some people are irritated even when they are asked for directions. In direct confrontation with homeless persons, also with beggars, mentally ill and intoxicated persons, irritation turns into discomfort and anxiety. Some people experience this confrontation as intrusive and react disparagingly. Alternatively, people turn to the police and complain about drunkenness, begging, racketeering, noisiness and homelessness as signs of social disorder in public space. Accordingly, social disorder is a multi-dimensional social problem that is not predominantly a matter between the police and a homeless person, but rather a matter between three parties: the police, the homeless, and the general public who raise complaints about social disorder. And this is exactly what makes homelessness a case for community policing. Therefore, police and social workers must join forces to act as conflict managers and peace-keeping officers.

What is the didactical concept?

The SWaPOL training is based on recent high school didactics

The SWaPOL training is inspired by recent concepts in high school didactics such as "student-centred learning" and "constructive alignment" (Biggs and Tang, 2011). First, according to the "ECTS User Guide" published in 2015 by the European Commission, "student-centred learning" is characterised by the following principles:

- Reliance on active rather than passive learning
- Emphasis on critical and analytical learning and understanding
- Increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student
- Increased autonomy of the student
- A reflective approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both the student and the teacher.

Secondly, "constructive alignment" has a strong focus on certain cognitive, affective and (psycho-)motoric competences as learning outcomes. Students should be able to repeat facts, but more importantly to interpret something in their own words, apply general concepts to specific situations, deconstruct situations and analyse its structure, generalise from specific situations to overall concepts, form a synthesis from single cases, and evaluate situations according to given criteria. Moreover, participants in the training shall develop an insight and understanding of the logic behind personal commitments to the job on the other side. Finally, participants should develop capabilities for acting together and practice their behaviour in interactions, for example, in social conflict situations.



The main elements in the training are keynote presentations, exercises and excursions

Each of the three modules is composed of three elements: (1) keynote presentations; (2) games and exercises; and (3) excursions and field trips. First, keynote presentations are expert inputs by high-ranking guest speakers from the Ministry of Interior or police headquarters, academics in social work, criminology, pedagogy, social geography, and practitioners who work in social work facilities. Secondly, games and exercises are important to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. This includes role-play in an improvisation-theatre, word clouds as a means to express stereotypes, the "drug wheel" to discuss substances and the international drug control conventions, quizzes and other playful elements of interaction. Sufficient time shall be allocated for open discussions that may arise on specific topics. Thirdly, excursions and field trips are important to exchange views on observations while walking together through hot-spot areas and during visits to social service facilities, e.g. in-patient facilities for substance users, youth centres, homeless facilities etc. The SWaPOL training is not suitable for online courses. Pilot trainings showed that face-to-face interaction is crucial when stereotypes and stigmata shall be resolved.

What are the policy implications?

Overall, a reduction of stereotypes and prejudice that may normally inhibit the creation of trust and confidence between different professions will lead to an improvement in the collaboration between social workers and police officers. However, it is equally important to respect differences between responsibilities and vocational work methods to find a compromise in the division of labour. The training can improve attitudes towards each other and hence motivate participants to share information and act together in joint prevention projects.

This training can be integrated in existing training schedules on both sides and shall be provided to social workers and police prevention officers on a regular basis in order to guarantee sustainability.

Furthermore, the convergence of practices entails a convergence of policies. When social workers and police officers meet on the ground, also social policies and security policies converge. Social policies are concerned with poverty, migration, substance use, aging societies, youth violence and respective social inequalities; security policies are concerned with law enforcement, public order and peacekeeping.

However, there is not always internal agreement on tactics. Rather, a variety of conflicting approaches to achieve certain goals exist, and not all approaches are favourable for collaborating in inter-professional partnerships. On the side of



Community policing is the best suited strategy to present the police as a social service provider

security and justice policies, strategies such as "zero tolerance", deterrence and retributive principles are counter-productive and incompatible with social policy approaches. Also, insisting on intervention upon calling as a conventional form of policing undermines creative efforts in pro-active prevention work. Advice on self-protection and consultations between police and urban designers can help reduce opportunities for crime: Changing the physical and social environment may reduce opportunities for motivated offenders (Clarke, 1995). However, the most important policing concept for working towards a partnership approach, we want to suggest, is community policing (Kappeler et al., 2020). Community policing is defined by the US Department of Justice[‡]:

"Community policing focuses on crime and social disorder through the delivery of police services that includes aspects of traditional law enforcement, as well as prevention, problem solving, community engagement and partnerships. The community policing model balances reactive responses to calls for services with proactive problem-solving, centred on the causes of crime and disorder. Community policing requires police and citizens to join together as partners in the course of both identifying and effectively addressing these issues" (Fisher-Stewart 2007, pp. 3-4).

Social workers need to accept the invitation for cooperation by the police

On the other side, in regard to models in social policies, we may ask: What kind of social welfare regimes are best suited to respond to this offer by the police to collaborate? It has become clear that radical approaches in social work that consider the police as a hostile opponent in a battle for power is not conducive for collaboration. The SWaPOL training can be productive only if all parties in the course see themselves as democratic public service providers. The nexus between social welfare and social control, and respective institutions of social support and public order, needs further research in theory and practice.

Conclusions

At least two conclusions can be drawn from this recent project: First, the SWaPOL training project has been a promising inter-governmental and inter-disciplinary experiment that links institutions in order maintenance (police), social support services (social work), and respective vocational training institutions. This training project demonstrates that communication away from daily routine and under neutral moderation can unite organisations with very different vocational responsibilities for the benefit of vulnerable people in society. On the other hand, the pilot trainings left participants partly frustrated as they realised they

[‡] Community policing as a special strategy has become established primarily in the United States of America, although the British police had already taken on a preventive function when it was founded under Sir Robert Peel in 1829 (Maguire et al., 1997).



cannot fundamentally change the system that produces social inequalities in the first place. Substance use and homelessness cannot be easily resolved as they are two phenomena that are deeply entrenched in the social structure. Only the treatment of the socially disadvantaged can be changed to make living conditions more bearable for all.

**SWaPOL trainings
can be sustainable only
if courses are given
regularly to scholars in
social work and policing**

Second, each discipline naturally creates its own logic, its own culture and a professional identity with the help of artefacts such as clothing (e.g. uniforms) or specific languages. Hence, also stereotypes and prejudices about others develop at an early stage of professionalisation. However, this project also showed that inter-disciplinary approaches in vocational training systems are often met with reservation. The recruitment of participants for trans-disciplinary trainings requires the support and encouragement from higher-level administrations on both sides, in the Federal Police as well as from social work associations and municipalities. On the other hand, it has become clear that readiness for collaboration for prevention and harm reduction cannot be ordered when personal conviction and dedication of the workers on the ground are missing. The conception of the SWaPOL training as a voluntary further specialisation in the job is hence a solid compromise.

All in all, the SWaPOL training can help in establishing a positive image about other professions and incorporate the idea of collaboration in professional cultures in the police and in social work. Sustainability, in terms of longevity of positive relationships between social workers and the police can be guaranteed if the idea of collaboration is systematically integrated in existing vocational training schedules.



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Teaching material for the SWaPOL training ("Handbook for Trainers" and a "Curriculum") is available in English, German, Dutch and Portuguese, and can be downloaded for free from the project webpage: <http://www.swapol.eu/>.

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