

The logo features the text "Educator | Resource" in white and yellow, with "OF THE MONTH" in white below it, all set against a blue background with green vertical bars on the sides.

Educator | Resource  
OF THE MONTH

## Q&A: Educator Pedagogical Approach

### Social Work in the (In)Justice System

Henrika McCoy, PhD, Branden A. McLeod, PhD, Melissa Mahabir, LMSW, and Aaron Gottlieb, PhD  
August, 2020

This month's contributors share what brought them to their work with the criminal justice system and how they communicate its importance through their pedagogical approaches.

*Share with us what brought you to this work.*

**Henrika McCoy:** I probably arrived at this arena in an atypical way. I have always been fascinated with the law, possibly due to watching countless crime dramas and reading innumerable legal thrillers while growing up. As a result, when I got to college, I became a volunteer probation officer, and while earning my MSW I completed my concentration in criminal justice. Then, early in my career, I had a job where I was the primary therapist for adolescent males in a residential program for juvenile sex offenders. That opportunity placed me squarely in the intersection of my two interests: mental health and adolescents who were involved in a system. After leaving that position, many of my adolescent clients and/or someone in their family had some type of system contact and there were moments when I felt ill-equipped to provide the best service to my clients; thus, I returned to school and earned a master of jurisprudence in child and family law.

**Branden McLeod:** Multiple experiences, both personal and professional in nature, brought me to work on criminal (in)justice-related issues. Growing up in Philadelphia until adulthood, living in Baltimore for 14 years, and working in Washington, DC, have contributed to my perspectives toward criminal justice issues, and policing, in particular. On a personal level, I witnessed law enforcement come to my family's aid when a close family member became a victim of community-level gun violence when I was in middle school. On the other hand, I experienced unnecessary and excessive use of force by Washington Metropolitan police after graduating college. These incongruent personal experiences combined with incessant police-driven murders of Black people continue to ignite my perspective related to Black community mistrust in law enforcement. On a professional level, social work has led me to work with individuals and advocacy coalitions on policy issues related to the (in)justice system. These experiences include running groups for women and men in correctional facilities, case management, and district court advocacy and legislative advocacy. Lastly, as a Black father raising two teenagers, and as a social work researcher dedicated to social justice, I have a calling to transform the justice system and public safety.

**Melissa Mahabir:** My work in the criminal legal system was born out of an interest in doing individual, direct practice work. While I never knew I wanted to be a social worker, I always knew that I wanted to work with people in vulnerable situations who were in need of support. From personal knowledge, I knew that youths who endured trauma, who were looking for approval and a sense of belonging, or who were in need of resources could sometimes engage in criminal activities. So, my first job out of college was as a case manager with the Americorps Program working with adjudicated youths on probation who were at risk of detention or just coming home from placement. My passion for working at the intersection of social work and the criminal legal system has only deepened since then, and I now focus a good deal of my work on addressing the macro-level, widespread, oppression found at every aspect of the criminal legal system.

**Aaron Gottlieb:** As a White male who grew up in upper middle-class surroundings, I had very little interaction with the police throughout my childhood and teenage years, and the contact I did have with the police was generally positive. When I went off to college, I began volunteering at a Boys and Girls Club in Syracuse and worked primarily with low income Black youths. There, I saw that the youths and their families had far more frequent and much more negative experiences with the police and the criminal (in)justice system. I found this profoundly unfair and became motivated to work on helping change the issue. As a masters student in social work, I read Pettit and Western's article "[Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration](#)," which put numbers to the experiences I observed at the Boys and Girls Club. I found this article extremely powerful and decided that I wanted to conduct similar research that could provide context on and insight into how to address the stunning overreach and disparities in our criminal (in)justice system. As a professor, I have been inspired by students and community organizations I am a part of to continue to teach and conduct research about the criminal (in)justice system and to become heavily involved in community work around increasing community oversight over the police and changing police use of force policies.

## **2. How do you communicate the importance of this work through your pedagogical approach?**

**Henrika McCoy:** When teaching, I work very hard in the classroom to impart to my students that everything they learn should be viewed as connected to a client system. Regardless of whether they are in my research, social work and the law, or social work in a multicultural society class, I want them to use that perspective as their guiding principle. Because much of my work has particularly focused on young Black men who have been classified as "delinquent," I also make sure to remind my students of society's tendency to label certain groups with terms that are dismissive, seek to marginalize or criminalize, and seek to minimize our ability and responsibility as social workers. Thus, we must always see the injustice and seek to eradicate it, while always simultaneously building our knowledge and skills so that we can be better equipped. My research is driven by the same philosophy. I am being given the privilege to learn someone's story, regardless of whether it is via qualitative or quantitative methods or even if using secondary data. Because of my specific focus, I see my role as sharing the stories of individuals who have not or are not being

afforded the opportunity to share their own stories; thus, it is important to provide such an avenue. When possible, I always seek to have their expertise guide my work. When this is not an option, I strive to ensure that what is shared is not sterile and clinical. I believe that if we lose the core of what we are tasked with sharing we lose something fundamental to social work, the human experience. Finally, when I think about how my focus on young Black men who have contact with the system or who have experienced violence fits into my teaching (and my research), I am quite purposeful in my approach. I focus on having my students and those who read my work develop or strengthen their understanding that we live in a society that is at its core anti-Black and racist. If they begin with that fundamental fact, they can begin to see how the juvenile and criminal systems truly are (in)justice systems. They can visualize how each number represented in a data set represents a real life, how each qualitative interview conducted represents a narrative larger than the person who shared their story. My approach is designed to bring my students and others who draw from my research closer to the reality of Black lives, so that they can be equipped and ready to learn more.

**Branden McLeod:** I communicate the vital importance of understanding the critical repercussions of our current criminal justice system by linking my research and teaching. My publications investigate the intersection of fatherhood and the criminal justice system involvement. Fathers that experience justice system involvement often experience stigma, discrimination, and collateral consequences. My research endeavors to unpack how the criminal justice system potentially attenuates fathers' roles and analyzes the factors that mitigate, sustain, and strengthen paternal involvement and family well-being. I interject these criminal justice-related themes into my courses in social policy analysis and community-based policy practices. Each fall, I teach a Policy II course for advanced-year MSW students. In this course we move beyond policy history and policy analysis. The learning in the foundation-year Policy I course develops into service-learning. Service-learning challenges students to use community-based policy practice skills for social change at the local and state levels. Students apply course content by attending political candidate forums and participating in grassroots policy actions through semester-long task force-based policy projects. In past semesters, student task force groups have addressed issues related to bail, sentencing, and police reform.

**Melissa Mahabir:** Although I am not in the classroom, as a social worker my philosophy is that we should learn from those directly affected by the issues we are concerned about. After working with youths, the majority of my professional career has been devoted to working with justice-involved women, specifically those who are survivors of domestic violence and trauma. Criminalized survivors' experiences of violence often directly contribute to their justice involvement and, as such, those experiences should be given added weighted in decisions related to how or if they are prosecuted and sentenced. I work as a consultant on projects that help raise awareness and advance justice for criminalized survivors and am currently supporting the state-wide implementation of the New York Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act. My approach in this work has always been to learn from and take direction from those directly impacted by the criminal legal system. I am tremendously indebted to the wisdom incarcerated and formerly incarcerated

women have shared with me. It has not only shaped my work in the criminal legal system, but has shaped how I practice social work and community organizing in general. I aim to support their leadership and uplift their narratives as they hold the keys to truly transform beliefs, practices, and policies.

**Aaron Gottlieb:** I communicate the importance of this work in my teaching primarily through my direct engagement in research and advocacy. As a researcher, I have published work that highlights the negative consequences of over-policing and mass incarceration and that investigates the effectiveness of existing efforts to reduce the use of incarceration or to mitigate its harms. As a teacher, I created a new class that focuses on criminal justice policy approaches to ending mass incarceration for adults. I emphasize policy because I believe we, as a country, have created a broken criminal (in)justice system through our policy choices. Thus, structural policy change is necessary to address the injustice. I begin the course by providing an overview of how we got here. I break down the remainder of the course into 2-week modules covering the following areas: policing, presentencing, sentencing, conditions of confinement, reentry, and gender-responsiveness. The first week of each module focuses on the major issues within the area of study and the second week focuses on solutions. In the week on solutions, there are two goals: (a) to identify a long-term vision toward abolition, and (b) to identify practical initial steps that will help build momentum toward that long-term goal. As a professor, I bring in research and numbers, but also highlight my experience working with community organizations and policymakers to change policing. I also bring in guest speakers who are directly involved in this change work. The course assignments require students to engage in advocacy, to think critically about the criminal (in)justice system, and to come up with solutions to address issues they have identified.



[Henrika McCoy](#), PhD, MJ, MSW, is an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago [Jane Addams College of Social Work](#). Her research focuses on the intersection between unmet mental health needs and juvenile offending among African American boys and the violent victimization experiences of young Black men. Dr. McCoy's work has been supported by the National Institute of Justice, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities.



[Branden A. McLeod](#), PhD, MSW, is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago [Jane Addams College of Social Work](#). Dr. McLeod's research examines how fatherhood is affected by involvement in the criminal (in)justice system. His research unpacks how this system potentially attenuates the role of fathers and the factors that mitigate, sustain, and strengthen paternal involvement and family well-being.



Melissa Mahabir, MSW, LMSW, is a social worker with expertise in domestic violence, trauma, and sentencing mitigation. She has worked for many years with criminalized survivors at [STEPS to End Family Violence](#) and the Legal Aid Society in New York, is a board member of [Reentry Rocks](#) (a nonprofit reentry organization for women), and is currently helping to lead implementation of the New York Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act (a newly passed law that codifies more meaningful sentence reductions for domestic abuse survivors in the criminal justice system).



[Aaron Gottlieb](#), PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago [Jane Addams College of Social Work](#). Dr. Gottlieb's research examines policy approaches for reducing incarceration and racial disparities in incarceration. He teaches courses in criminal justice policy and is actively working toward increasing police accountability through community oversight. He was recently appointed to Chicago's Police Use of Force Work Group, a collaborative project of community members, the mayor's office, and the Chicago Police Department.