



Eliminating the Box from Social Work Admissions

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Many US social work schools ask applicants about their criminal legal history, despite evidence that this practice perpetuates racial discrimination and social inequality. In line with the profession's code of ethics, schools of social work should take steps to promote full inclusion of people with criminal legal backgrounds in education and field opportunities. This brief invites social work educators and professionals to work toward eliminating the box from applications for admission to social work programs.

What is the box?

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with one in three Americans experiencing involvement in the criminal legal system. As a result, 70 to 100 million Americans are impacted by criminal legal records. These records disproportionately impact communities of color, reflecting the racially disparate policies and practices inherent in the criminal legal system. Even a seemingly minimal criminal legal record can have a harmful impact, creating barriers to accessing employment, housing, public benefits, and education.

The box refers to the checkbox on applications across sectors asking whether an applicant has a criminal legal history, and negatively impacts applicants with criminal legal experiences. For instance, the inclusion of the box on employment applications significantly decreases the likelihood that an applicant who checks the box will receive a call back; Black applicants with criminal legal history are even less likely to receive a call back than white applicants with a criminal legal history.

In recognition of the inequities perpetuated by the box, there has been a push from system-impacted individuals, advocates, researchers, and policymakers to “Ban the Box.”

Movement to "Ban the Box"

The "Ban the Box" movement, initiated in 2004 by All of Us or None, a national group of formerly-incarcerated individuals, has led to the adoption of policies at the local, state, and federal levels, requiring employers to consider qualifications before inquiring about criminal legal records. Notably:

- The Fair Chance to Compete for Jobs Act of 2019 prohibits most federal agencies and contractors from requesting criminal background information until after a conditional offer.
- At least 37 states, the District of Columbia, and over 150 cities and counties have adopted some form of a "fair chance" policy. At least 15 states and 22 cities have extended these policies to private employers.

In the last decade, the movement has reached college campuses. In 2018, the nonprofit Common Application, used by many colleges and universities, made the decision to remove questions about criminal legal history.

Social Work Admissions and the Box

Many social work higher educational programs have historically included the box on applications for admission, and most social work programs continue to ask about previous criminal legal involvement in their application process (Epperson et al., 2022; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). Here are key-takeaways from a growing body of research on the topic:

- ☑ In a study of all accredited MSW programs in the US, 64% of MSW applications contained some form of the box (Epperson et al., 2022).
 - Applications are not usually transparent about why they are asking questions about criminal legal history.
- ☑ Applicant attrition rates are high when the box is included – most students with a criminal legal background do not complete their application when required to check a box (Rosenthal et al., 2015).
- ☑ Many programs do report accepting students with criminal legal history.
 - The most important factors influencing their decision to accept students are the nature/seriousness of offense, length of time since occurrence, and ability to secure a field placement (Curran et al., 2019).
- ☑ Most social work admissions staff are not trained on how to review applications where students disclose criminal legal involvement (Curran et al., 2019). Few programs have established criteria for decisionmaking around criminal records (Daehn Zellmer & Knothe, 2011).
- ☑ There are challenges with placing students in field opportunities with criminal legal backgrounds (Dottin, 2018).
 - Some placements require background checks and clearances.
 - Some organizations are concerned about liability.

Why should social work admissions processes eliminate the box?



1 *Removing the box from social work higher education applications is consistent with social work values and ethics.*

- The NASW Code of Ethics requires social workers to uphold principles of social justice and respect for human worth and dignity.
- Social work has historically supported societal reintegration for people with criminal legal histories.
- A key policy recommendation from Promote Smart Decarceration, one of the Grand Challenges for Social Work, is to eliminate civic and legal exclusions for people with criminal legal records (Epperson & Pettus-Davis, 2016).
- Social work education programs should take the lead in removing barriers to educational attainment to help individuals with criminal legal records avoid returning to the criminal legal system.

2 *The box perpetuates racial inequities, stymies efforts to create a diverse field of social workers, and prevents individuals with lived experiences with carceral systems from entering the field at all.*

- While criminal legal history may or may not impact an individual's acceptance into a social work program, the inclusion of the box on applications creates barriers to applying in the first place.
- The box is an emotional and logistical burden on applicants that creates barriers to social work higher education for people with lived experience with carceral systems.
- Applicants of color disproportionately face these barriers, as Black and Latinx applicants are disproportionately impacted by the criminal legal system.

Eliminating the box on admission applications is essential to align social work education with its historical intent and current ethical standards and commitment to social justice.

Call to Action

- Work to **remove** the box from social work program applications. Be transparent about why the program may ask these questions and how the information is used.
 - If the box is required by the university where the social work school is situated, **advocate** for improved practices across the university.
 - **Train** admissions personnel on clear and consistent practices for navigating criminal legal issues and supporting applicants with criminal legal backgrounds.
- During the field placement process:
 - **Be transparent** about why you are asking about criminal legal history (i.e., some agencies require a background check), and ask only if necessary.
 - **Build relationships** with placements that have holistic views and offer equitable opportunities to people with criminal legal involvement.
 - **Educate** field partners on the disparate impacts of mass incarceration on communities of color, recidivism research, and the benefits of practitioners with lived experience.
 - **Advocate** for policy changes in the field.
- **Support** students with criminal legal records in navigating potential licensure and employment barriers.
- **Advocate** for placement, licensing, and employment practices that are equitable and inclusive.

References

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