research article

'Already doing the work': social work, abolition and building the future from the present

Dom Hunter, dom.hunter@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk
University of Manchester, UK

Lauren Elizabeth Wroe, lauren.e.wroe@durham.ac.uk
Durham University, UK

Social work internationally is currently subject to debate. Some call for the abolition of social work, detailing legacies of harm, inadequate practices and theoretical limitations. Central to abolitionist thought is the tradition of community work to build alternative futures in the present, an area currently receiving less attention. This article adopts an auto-ethnographic method, drawing on the authors' experiences of social work in the UK – in childhood and as a professional career, respectively – to consider the limitations of social work responses to childhood harm, alongside existing community harm-reduction practices. Four themes are identified that capture the limitations of social work intervention, as well as acts of community care and resistance. These are: the extent of engagement with context and community knowledge; resources for caring; legacies of harm; and the role of social work in relation to community harm-reduction work. Implications for research methods and social work practice are discussed.

Key words social work • abolition • class • community • families

Introduction

Background

In this article, we engage in current debates about the future, or, more specifically, the end, of 'social work' in both the UK (Featherstone et al, 2021; Garrett, 2021) and internationally (Richie and Martensen, 2019; Rasmussen and James, 2020; Maylea, 2021; Nourie, 2022). We do so by presenting a dialogue between the authors about their experiences of social work in their personal and work lives in the UK. This auto-ethnographic approach grounds our discussion about both the limitations of established social care responses to harm in childhood and alternative forms of community harm-reduction practice in everyday experiences of the system. It is an experiment in alternative methods of knowledge production. While both authors are

experienced practitioners in social work and community accountability processes, respectively, this article contends that 'community safety is not a certification that we place on our resumes' (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020: 21) and is interested in exploring how communities create safety away from, and often in response to, professionalised forms of 'care'.

Social work with young people and families

In particular, this article is concerned with social work that is carried out as a function of the state in the lives of children, young people and their families. We recognise that social work as a profession or 'field' (Garrett, 2021) constitutes a broader range of activities, with social workers working in the voluntary and community sector, and, at times, actively resisting state intervention in people's lives (for example, such charities as Social Workers Without Borders and Article 39). Drawing on Wacquant (2010), we imagine social work as a welfare component of the state, frequently conditional or coercive in both design and delivery, which has a disciplining function, often in tandem with the state's more obviously punitive penal or prison functions. For Wacquant, both are leveraged as means of social control.

It is pertinent to consider the role of social workers in the lives of children, families and their communities. In May 2022, a national review (hereafter, the Review) into children's social care in England reported its findings (MacAllister, 2022). The Review highlights a 129 per cent increase in children subject to Section 47 (child protection) enquiries. Citing evidence from Bywaters (2020), the Review warns of significant disparities in how this involvement is distributed, with the poorest 10 per cent of children ten times more likely to be on a child protection plan. The Review notes that many of the problems that contribute to children being placed on a child protection plan are a result of poverty, mental illness, substance misuse and domestic violence; it also notes a reduction in funding for early help services and an increased (and unsustainable) spend on statutory children's social care. At the same time, research demonstrates that while child protection investigations have risen significantly, they are uncovering less abuse, raising questions about the purpose and efficacy of this sort of child protection work (Bilson and Munro, 2019). These findings challenge the praxeological foundations of social work with children and families, a critique levelled by Maylea (2021: 6) to the profession as a whole, who notes: 'We have no clear response to the practice reality that helping people exist within an unfair system only perpetuates that unfair system.'

Noting the impact of poverty and the steep rise in statutory involvement in children's lives, the Review (MacAllister, 2022: 42) places a strong emphasis on the idea of 'community', noting that 'Communities can provide the organic, responsive help that services simply cannot'. The report makes 107 references to 'community', with an emphasis on services 'recognising and unleashing' community potential, and ensuring that services do not 'crowd out' community forms of help (MacAllister, 2022: 42). These proposals are largely concerned with situating state services in local communities or engaging community members and families with child welfare services. Community 'potential' is presented as an untapped and undeveloped resource *for* the state, while the conditions of the Review (Blackwell, 2021) and the political ideology of the commissioning Conservative government indicate that both the Review and the 'levelling up' agenda it aligns to will fall short of serious action to

resource local communities, whether through welfare, jobs or redistributive social policy (Tomaney and Pike, 2020). In the following section, we explore what abolitionist praxis has to say about the limitations of statutory responses to harm, including the role of social workers, outlining where this literature presents opportunities to think about communities and harm reduction in ways that are less state-centric and more transformative.

Abolition and social work

In recent years, conversations have emerged, largely within the US, that apply an abolitionist lens to social work. The tradition of abolitionism questions the role of police and prisons in reducing harm or creating safety, highlighting their formation in the social control of racialised and working-class communities (Rodriguez, 2019). Abolitionist scholars describe how these state institutions were constituted to enforce an unjust racial order rooted in colonialism and, as such, require systemic change, rather than reform (Vitale, 2017). Abolitionist analysis understands that the disciplining function of prisons and the police, sometimes referred to as 'carceral' logic or power, exists within an array of state apparatuses beyond the criminal justice system (sometimes referred to as the prison–industrial complex [PIC]) (Gilmore, 2007). For example, immigration detention centres reproduce racial capitalist logic (Gilmore, 2007), schools 'identify, isolate and then train' students in such a way that they are primed to enter the justice system (Graham, 2016), and social work that, though making claims to 'social justice', embraces the same 'carceral logic' as the police and prisons facilitates family separation and deportation (Jacobs et al, 2021). Roberts (2020), with particular reference to 'family regulation' social work (that is, child protection and fostering), similarly argues that, like policing, it is 'designed to regulate and punish black and other marginalized people'. Picking up this debate in *The British Journal of Social Work*, Maylea (2021) argues that social work is beyond reform, pointing to what he describes as irreconcilable issues, including: tensions with the theoretical foundations of social work; challenges with the professionalisation of social work; social work's legacies of harm; and, finally, social work's inability to mitigate (and complicity in) oppression and harm. Some disagree, arguing that 'dissenting social work' presents opportunities for a 'neo-social work' that can begin to address the root causes of social problems by combating white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, embracing progressive technologies and critical theories, and collectivising through unionisation and movement building in collaboration with communities and 'user' networks (Garrettt, 2021: 14).

Building new futures from the present

Alongside these critiques of social work, abolitionist thought has also been concerned with building new futures from the present. Sultan and Herskind (2022) refer to abolition as a 'verb, a practice', one that 'consists of the actions we take to build safety and to tear down harmful institutions'. This idea that abolitionist praxis is simultaneously about building and dismantling is echoed by Gilmore (quoted in Lamble, 2019), who contends: 'those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.'

Abolitionist activists and scholars, often directly involved in community organising at a local level, provide rich examples of collective organising around harm and violence. Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020) describe the Oakland Power Projects and speak about their work facilitating 'know your options' training to develop community skills in relation to a wide array of commonplace emergencies, such as learning how to administer Naloxone (in response to opioid overdose). In the same text, the SOS Collective describe their development of 'safety network strategies', which facilitate neighbours to call on support from others when confronted with interpersonal violence on the streets, rather than having to involve the police. This work involves: building 'meaningful, accountable' relationships in local neighbourhoods; reaching out to areas in the immediate aftermath of violent incidents; supporting local residents to get to know local business owners; 'know your rights' training; collective discussions about violence; and training for local businesses, organisations and people to 'recognize, prevent and intervene in violent incidents without relying on law enforcement' (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020: 19).

These scholars and activists point out that marginalised communities have been responding to harm of all forms before, during and often despite professional interventions, and they will continue to do so after professional agencies leave their families and communities (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Hunter, 2020). They argue that through love, hope and the will to survive, structurally excluded communities develop practices that comprehend the messiness and exhausting pain that they have to contend with (Sins Invalid, 2017; Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). Abolitionism, while critiquing the state and its harm-reduction infrastructure, also centres alternative forms of community care, from mutual aid to harm-reduction programmes grounded in community knowledge, as well as informal and unpaid care work (Woodly et al, 2021). In doing so, abolitionist praxis problematises the state's interference with communities, that is, the ways in which the state undermines the ability of, and resources available to, communities to support each other and causes harm in the process.

We propose that there is value, and urgency, in not only examining the harms that social work causes and how it might redeem itself (or not), but also considering how social work can support the work already being done in communities to build safety. This article takes a dual focus, drawing on our experiences of social work – in our childhood and professional life, respectively – to consider the limitations of state responses to childhood harm and their relation to existing community harm-reduction practices. In doing so, we hope to add to and expand the current debate about social work abolition, and experiment in alternative methods of knowledge production that are seated in dialogue about, as well as experiences of, harm and practices of protection.

Methodology

This article adopts an auto-ethnographic approach, in which we draw on our separate experiences as social worker/academic and scholar with lived experience of childhood social work intervention to engage in critical dialogue about social work and community harm-reduction practices. We present and then analyse an event in the childhood of one of the authors in a working-class community in the north-east of the UK, which set in motion various youth justice, mental health and child protection interventions by social workers. We consider: 'To what extent did statutory interventions

alleviate harm and offer support?'; 'What community harm-reduction practices were taking place in the context of these statutory interventions?'; and, finally, 'What can we learn about building communities of care with or without "social work"?'

Auto-ethnography as critical social work praxis

Evidence-informed methodologies remain dominant in social work (Tunstill, 2019), yet alternative modes of knowledge production are on offer. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe auto-ethnography as a process that seeks to connect personal experiences with sociocultural and political structures. The goal of the auto-ethnographer, then, is not merely to reveal their story, but to trace the linkages from their story to the functions and mechanisms of the social, cultural and political world the stories take place in (Witkin, 2014).

Within social work research, auto-ethnography has been used to frame critical reflection (Jensen-Hart and Williams, 2010), explore tensions between service providers and families (Dumbleton, 2013), and as an opportunity to contest stigmatising labels (Witkin, 2014). For Trotter et al (2006), auto-ethnography encourages a reflexivity that is vital due to an inclination among social workers to manufacture risk and to be sceptical of clients' accounts. For the social work auto-ethnographer, the aim is to encourage discussion, debate and an exchange of ideas in order to facilitate positive social change (Gibbs, 2016).

Adopting an auto-ethnographic, dialogic approach, the authors simultaneously present a reflection on social work while exploring the value of auto-ethnography as a critical methodology in social work scholarship. What follows are four excerpts from a conversation the authors engaged in about the events on Dom's 14th birthday. Through these discussions, we considered, from our unique subjectivities, the nature of social work intervention and the extent to which it supported or undermined community practices of helping.

Analysis

We began by discussing the events that took place on, and around, Dom's 14th birthday. The discussions were framed by the following questions:

- Where did statutory interventions locate and seek to alleviate harm, and to what effect?
- What community harm-reduction practices took place, and how were they supported or not by statutory interventions?

We audio-recorded our discussion and had it professionally transcribed, and then thematically analysed the transcript (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using NVivo software to organise the material and to identify salient themes within the discussion. These themes and extracts from the discussion are presented in the following.

Ethics

This article has been written independently of an academic institution, though we are both currently engaged as a PhD candidate and researcher, respectively, at UK

universities. The auto-ethnographic events shared in this article have previously been published by Dom in his books *Chav Solidarity* (Hunter, 2018) and *Tracksuits, Traumas and Class Traitors* (Hunter, 2020). The individuals directly referenced within the piece who are still living have been anonymised as far as possible. The details shared in this article have been previously published in the two books just referenced. When relevant, we have used pseudonyms to protect individuals' identities.

Limitations

The reflections in this article are based on a single auto-ethnographic account of childhood harm and harm-reduction infrastructure. Their generalisability is mediated by this fact. The auto-ethnographic account details events that occurred in the mid-1990s. While this may seem anachronistic, given the contemporary focus of the debates this article hopes to contribute to, we hope the discussion and its reference to the background literature make clear the relevance of these experiences to contemporary social work practice and debates.

The authors

Dom is a white, cis-gendered male from a Traveller family in a lower-working-class community in the East Midlands. From the ages of 10–25, his time was spent split between periods of street homelessness, young offender institutions, secure care homes and adult prisons. His mum was a 13-year-old mother who went through severe trauma and developed drug, alcohol and severe mental health difficulties. All of Dom's family have spent the majority of their lives living within informal economies and spent time ensnared by the criminal justice system. In his two books *Chav Solidarity* and *Tracksuits, Traumas and Class Traitors* (Hunter, 2018; 2020), Dom has engaged (auto-) ethnography as a method to examine state violence against poor and working-class people via the criminal justice system and social services.

Lauren is a white, cis-gendered female from a lower-middle-class family in the north-west of the UK. Lauren's dad was in the army and Lauren's mum worked as a probation officer and youth offending team officer for the local council. Both of Lauren's parents received Open University degrees in their later adult life. Lauren went to university when she was 19 and completed a degree, master's and PhD in psychology, and then trained as a social worker, working on migrant rights and as a researcher on innovation in children's social care. She works from a class-conscious, anti-racist and feminist perspective. Lauren has been involved in anti-capitalist, anti-racist and feminist activism and solidarity work for 15 years. Dom and Lauren know each other through this work.

A childhood experience of harm: Dom

In the week leading up to my 14th birthday, my mum went missing. While she was absent from our home, I was responsible for looking after my sisters and ensuring that the authorities were unaware of my mum's absence. Towards the end of the week, my dad informed me that she was with some men known to me as having violent tendencies. My dad told me that unless I stole some things from a safe at a house in the suburbs, my mum would be kept with the men. On the night of my 14th

birthday, I robbed and assaulted two adults in their home. I was caught by the police shortly afterwards. I was charged and sentenced. After spending ten months in a young offender institution, I was placed into a secure care home, where I spent another four months, and finally moved into an open care home for several more months.

Our discussion

In the following sections, we present four themes identified through our discussion of the events of Dom's 14th birthday and the statutory 'harm-reduction' responses triggered by them. Following the burglary, the police, youth offending services and social workers were all re-engaged with Dom's family, resulting in a custodial sentence and separation of Dom from his family in subsequent residential placements.

Contexts

Discussing the interventions triggered by the events on Dom's 14th birthday, we noted a lack of engagement with the wider social context. In a process that intensified during the 1980s (Waquant, 2009), consecutive UK governments pursued policies that criminalised communities at the periphery of the 'labour force', dismantled protections for workers, increased the privatisation of public spaces and attacked welfare provision. These policies and practices increased economic hardship in marginalised communities, often in tandem with the stigmatisation of poverty through political discourses (Tyler, 2020) that blamed individuals for their circumstances.

For Dom, the material and psychological impacts of government-instrumented poverty were critical to his childhood experiences. While the interventions that ensued seemed to be intended to instil in Dom the consequences of his actions, with questions being asked about 'feelings' and 'motivations', the driving factors behind the events were highly circumstantial. As Dom reflected, the economic conditions that both he, his parents and their peers were in meant that they were "trying to eke out survival". However, had professionals sought to understand this context, Dom would likely not have shared the information, knowing from his personal and family experience that both he and his family members would be punished for the acts committed, and that the interventions would do little to alleviate the difficulties his family and community were facing. The statutory interventions, the custodial sentence and the family separation that followed, at best, passed over and, at worst, compounded these issues. Dom described a hyper-individualised and simultaneously depersonalised set of interventions from professionals that he was required to engage with. Whether performatively or not, the latter did not seem to matter:

> 'Yeah, you know, the people, the screws, some of them were supposedly, we had to have sessions with them. In the young offenders [institution]. Then, in the secure care home, there was, like, lots of support worker-type people, who were, like, you know, "Oh, do you want to learn to cook?" But also going, "Okay, how are you feeling?" That kind of stuff. And yeah, in the regular children's home, that wasn't really the case, different people from outside, whether they were social people, working for social work, or some other wing, would be visiting. But I didn't see many more than twice. It was like they'd pass on the case or someone else would take it on or whatever …

maybe there was one who maybe came three times over the course of six or seven months, and they were like … those people would be more focused on the events that happened, or my previous behaviour I think would be … so not just that, but the thing that got me inside the time before and the time before that. And like, yeah, wanting me to articulate stuff, and me not being willing to do that.' (Dom)

Dom reflected that the responses were not only generic, but also not meeting any of his needs, and his acquiescence to them was born out of a need to endure the professionals and interventions coming his way, and of the limited alternatives available to him. Together, we reflected that while the dominant ideology underpinning the interventions was to instil in Dom and his family a willingness or ability to change, the actual professional engagement – a sporadic carousel of ever-changing professionals – did not seem to be, as Dom reflected in our discussion, "really embracing it that hard". This being the case, whose needs did these practices meet? For Dom, they provided cover for the statutory agencies, carrying as they did both punitive measures that disciplined Dom for the crimes he had committed and the appearance of supporting Dom with psycho-educational training to support his 'transformation' into a good, law-abiding citizen.

Dom reflected that the youth justice and child protection responses positioned the 'bad choices' of both him and later his parents as the precipitating factors for the burglary, for alcoholism and for employment in the informal economy or sex work. At no point did the response consider the economic hardship that Dom and his community were navigating or the social marginalisation that working-class and Traveller families endure. All of these inform not only the choices that are made, but also, and importantly, the options that are available to people and how they are treated by professionals.

Through our discussion, we asked: what would a holistic, helpful response have looked like? For Dom, the response needed to take into account the well-being and the context of the community as a whole. We discussed an example that Dom shared in his auto-ethnographic book *Tracksuits, Traumas and Class Traitors*:

> The primary source of care in the community that my mum received was the solidarity of two Sri Lankan women who lived several floors below us in Lenton Flats. One night, a few weeks after we moved in, they found her unconscious in the lift. They brought her up to our flat, where I was getting my sisters ready for bed. One of them nipped home to get a kettle and a clean towel. With water boiled from the kettle, they filled up the bath and washed my Mum. They heated up some lentils and rice in their own flat and brought it up to feed her. Once my sisters were tucked up in bed, I hovered around the doorway – I was still a racist little shit, and no doubt assumed the two brown women were going to rob us. They asked me questions and I gave them one word answers. They got me to fetch some bedding and laid it out on our settee. My mum was mumbling and cussing, but she didn't resist any of the kindness shown. One of the women helped her into a pale blue nighty that belonged to one of the two of them, and put her into bed, pulling the bedding over her, while the other tidied up the house. They took it in turns to stay with us for the next few days, and instead of my mum

getting back up as she would normally have done, she rested. Nothing was asked of her, and I think she quickly realised that nothing was expected of her by these two women. Nor did they expect anything from her children. They occasionally engaged with my sisters, but for the most part they let us be. After five days, they left. They said they would pop up over the weekend, and they did. They remained one part of a community who found different small ways to relieve the pressure. (Hunter, 2020: 213)

Dom reflected that it was his neighbours' "community knowledge" of the practical and emotional context of his family that allowed them to help. With minimal resources, they offered material and emotional support, without assessing or classifying his mum's behaviour, and nothing was expected in return. This care work was sustained by shared experiences and local knowledge, and was an example of the ways in which communities perform the care roles that are professionalised through social work and that community members are able to do without the violent legacy, or the resources, of the state.

Resources

While our reflections in the previous subsection foregrounded the disconnect between statutory interventions and the economic and emotional contexts of people's lives, in this subsection, we reflect on who is resourced to 'help'. We considered three things: (1) that community knowledge is a resource; (2) that the state/social workers have a monopoly on material resources as 'amassed sites of social capital' (Dillon et al, 2021: 292); and (3) that community harm-reduction practices are undercut by this statutory/professional monopoly. The example of Dom's neighbours supporting his family spoke to the ways in which community knowledge of the rhythms, patterns and ways of being that exist within a geographical area are understood and 'known' by its members (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020). This is not an intrinsic 'knowledge', but one that is learned by members' attentiveness to others and their shared environment. Dom reflected that at school gates, newsagents, barbers, pubs and so on, discussions, debates and a sharing of ideas occur, through which localised knowledge is built and community members conduct their own "on-the-ground research". In contrast to this, social workers enter into communities with both resources of the state and their own social capital accumulated via their specialised training, which then informs and hinders their interaction with individuals and families. During our discussion, Dom recalled a morning where, having dropped off his sister at nursery, he had an interaction with an older man, a neighbour who knew Dom and his family:

Lauren: 'Where, the … is it, Wasam? The old guy–'
Dom: 'Yeah, Wasam.'
Lauren: '–like, tells you to not be mean to that kid, and then gave you some whiskey. And I just thought about the ways in which we, in social work, we professionalise this idea of relationships, or like bystander behaviour, or "supporting communities to look out for each other" or something. When, like … yeah, just when you were talking then, I just thought of that, you know, the way in which there's a real unhelpful professionalisation

of things that people do for one another all of the time anyway. And the focus should be on the ways in which actually, you know, the social conditions we live in can make it harder and harder and harder for us to look out for each other. But often we still do.'

Dom: 'You can imagine a social worker having a field day with an 80-year-old man giving me some whiskey. [Laughs.]'

Lauren: 'Right, yeah! Exactly, just being, like, "Oh God, who's this 80-year-old man that's grooming Dom?" Like, yeah.'

Dom: '[Laughs.] Yeah.'

Lauren: 'Yeah, and the way that through this kind of individualised model, we're taught, social workers and people who work in youth work, or whatever, we're taught to read really normal interactions as risky and potentially dangerous. And like, and it just takes more and more and more power away from people, from families, from communities. When everything that they do is read through the lens of risk and dangerousness, or something. Yeah.'

In this discussion, we reflected on the form and content of interpersonal relationships, and the ways in which they are shaped by institutional power and the allocation of resources. Relationship-based social work has been positioned as a means of bridging the gulf between professionals and 'service users'/families, drawing on the emotional literacy of practitioners to bring feelings and trust into these interactions (Trevithick, 2003). However, the gulf between professionals and the institutions they represent goes beyond the feeling or character of interpersonal relationships; rather, they are deeply structurally embedded, and they are forged through decades of institutionalised power and violence (as noted by Maylea [2021]). Reflecting on Dom's experiences, the social worker, whatever their philosophical approach, was understood by Dom and the community as fundamentally representing the state and attempting to interact with communities that are, in turn, attempting to avoid state intrusion. Social workers are thus inherently challenged to generate equitable relationships with 14-year-old Dom in the same way that Wasam is able to. Lauren reflected that it is likely that a social work assessment could have understood the relationship between Dom and Wasam as potentially risky, when, in fact, Wasam had witnessed Dom interact with another boy, leaving him in tears, and de-escalated the incident by sharing a sip of whiskey, while reminding Dom of the context that the other young boy lived in. Dom reflected that he appreciated who and what Wasam represented, along with the manner in which Wasam carried out his intervention. To view the interaction as risky would be to ignore the ways in which Wasam used his community knowledge to carry out a practice of care with the resources available to him.

As we spoke about Dom's experience, we discussed a later period in Dom's life where he was supported by others in the houseless community that he was part of and the ways in which their tacit knowledge of trauma and marginalisation meant that they were able to offer support in a form that would not have been available within state services. Dom shared a time when he was homeless in the late 1990s and was stabbed and left to bleed out. A fellow houseless person found him and took him to an abandoned factory building where she and her friend had made a home. There, they cleaned up and sealed the wound, and took care of him while he recovered. This involved ensuring he had food, water and a place to rest; it also included sourcing him the crack cocaine he had become addicted to over the years.

Reflecting on this, we discussed the ways in which intervention by statutory agencies may have emphasised the need for Dom to change in order to become a respectable citizen, and that access to food and shelter would likely have been under the proviso of entering 'drug recovery'. In other words, the terms of the support would have been set by the statutory agencies and policies via which they operate. Rather than dictating to Dom what was needed, the two women who took him in, having had direct experience with houselessness, addiction and poverty, were able to respond without judgement to what Dom defined as his needs. For a time, they included him in the distribution of their limited resources without stipulations.

We reflected on how the way we think about resources, who has them and who decides who gets what is key to supporting community responses to harm. While social work engages with communities with historically limited resources and the state and capitalism reproduce that resource limitation, how can it meaningfully understand, diagnose or treat the issues within them? We reflected that people like Wasam and the two women are not resourced for the care and support they provide others within their community and, in fact, likely experience significant marginalisation themselves. This is one of the ways in which this on-the-ground care and support work is undermined by the limited scope of, and accumulation of resources in, social work and the state.

Reproduction of harm

In this part of our discussion, we focused on the historical harmful legacies of social work and the ways in which individuals from marginalised communities respond and resist. From its origins, social work has been tasked with responding to the behaviour of socially and economically marginalised individuals. These responses have shifted over time as different theoretical and conceptual frameworks have gained primacy and shaped policy. In this subsection, we reflect on the ways in which individuals and communities know, and resist being targeted by, statutory agencies:

Lauren: 'Do you think you had a sense at the time why you were resisting these various things that were, like, thrown at you?'

Dom: 'Yeah, I mean, I'd had it pretty well instilled in me that any of the … I don't think that was the terminology, but any of the state institutions were basically just cops, and you didn't engage with them. That'd been hammered in from a pretty early age.'

Lauren: 'Yeah.'

Dom: 'Like, yeah, you do your time. You do your time in care, you do your time in the institution, you do the time in prison, and you keep your head down and keep quiet.'

Lauren: 'Right, okay. By like, family or friends or–?'

Dom: 'Yeah, family. Because the family, lots of people in the family had been taken … like when they were children … lots of my uncles and aunts, and my mum for some period, they'd all been taken into care from the Travellers side of the family.'

Lauren: 'Right, yeah.'

Dom: 'So, they had this big hatred of the social services, doing that. And it was like, yeah … all those people, all they can do for you is keep you locked up longer.'

Lauren: 'Yeah, which is what happened.'
Dom: 'Yeah.'
Lauren: 'Yeah. And more likely so if you are a young person from a Traveller family, or whatever, as well. Disproportionately, as well.'

We discussed the ways in which Dom's knowledge of his community's historical interactions with the state and social services shaped his interaction with them. Evidence had been presented to Dom throughout his life that the state and social services were a threat to him and others from a Traveller background. This evidence came in the form of uncles, aunts, cousins and those from the extended family being extracted from their families and into the care and criminal justice system. Throughout the years leading up to Dom's 14th birthday, Dom understood that like the majority of his own family, he too would be extracted in such a way, just as he had heard and seen happen to others.

In comparison, Dom reflected on an experience a few years prior to the events leading up to his arrest on his 14th birthday when he had been caught by the assistant manager of the local video store trying to break in after closing time. The store was part of a multinational chain and, as such, had strict policies and procedures regarding attempts to steal merchandise. The assistant manager, however, knew Dom and knew others from the local community who had sway over him. Rather than calling the police, the assistant manager called two young men who dealt drugs from a house a few doors down from the store. The three men sat with Dom and discussed possible responses to his actions. The two young men who had been called reminded Dom that he should not be robbing from local neighbourhood stores. Dom argued that it was not a local store. One of the men countered that Dom was lucky it was local people who worked there; otherwise, he would be getting carted off right now. They decided that Dom would clean the windows of the store every Sunday morning before he went to church for the next two months. The aim for these members of the local community was to end harm, rather than reproduce it by inflicting punishment in the form of criminalisation; they utilised their relationships grounded in the community to respond to Dom and to ensure he was not severed from the community.

Role of social work

In the final section of our discussion, we reflected on the role of the social worker, or of 'social work' as a profession, or 'field' (Garrett, 2021), and its relationship to existing community harm-reduction practices. Together, we acknowledged the harmful role that social workers can play when they 'intervene' with families (Morley and Ablett, 2016) and the work that is often done by family members, friends and neighbours to mitigate these harms. We also imagined social workers as individuals who often enter their training striving to give care and reduce harm, rather than intending to categorise, control and bureaucratise people and their families. Finally, we considered what role social workers might play in the future of care and harm reduction, drawing on abolitionist ideas about community safety work.

The following is an example of the how members of marginalised communities are often needed not only to provide the care that social workers fail to provide, but also to use what little resources they have to repair the harm that social work intervention can cause. Through our discussion, Dom shared an example of where the community he was raised in supported his family around health visitor and social

worker visits when his younger sister was born towards the end of 1990. Dom shared that his mum was subject to regular visits from health visitors and social workers, each of which caused a great deal of anxiety and stress due to previous experiences of watching family members being taken into care and being detained herself for mental health reasons, and the looming threat of her children being taken from her. One couple who lived nearby visited them each night before the visit to offer support. They entertained the children and made sure everyone had been fed. They supported the family through the visits, and as the visits decreased, they maintained contact but with a lighter hand. We talked about the ways in which statutory visits become a drain on the capacity of families, with friends and neighbours having to use their resources to support them through periods of statutory intervention. Dom noted that these neighbours drew on their experiences in, and familiarity with, the community, giving them a contextual understanding of his family's situation. The family were not a 'case' to them, but neighbours, and the couple were able to see Dom's family beyond the 'risks' that were at play. Dom's mum's anxiety was abated as the couple supported the family without having power over them, knowing that their 'intervention' would not later be held against them.

There are organisations on the ground who are seeking to develop abolitionist or transformative justice approaches to some of the most serious harms that children and their families can face. Kaba and Hassan (2022) outline paths for transformative justice practices, which bring together the skills in a community to respond to incidents of interpersonal harm. These processes simultaneously take into account the historical and contemporary violence of state institutions, and rather than emphasising punishment and retribution, they centre accountability to one another, empathy, curiosity and growth of all involved. This work is about the building of communities and the relationships within them, rather than external agencies entering to resolve issues in a decontextualised manner. This relationship building is often cited as key not only to developing the work, but also to preventing, responding to and recovering from the harm and trauma related to experiences of abuse and violence (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020), where increased trust, knowledge (including knowledge of the ways in which abuse can be related to experiences of racism, poverty, ableism and adultism) and relationships supports guardianship, accountability and healing.

In the transformative justice text *Beyond Survival*, Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020: 22) note: 'Some of the people with the most practice working on violence are deeply embedded within the criminal legal system or other punitive structures'. This logic can be applied to social workers. Acknowledging these tensions, we reflected on the role of social workers in supporting children, young people and families in moments of crisis or where support is needed:

Dom: 'Yeah, I guess so. A social worker will be like, "Oh, last year, I was part of putting ten kids into care, and it cost the state this amount of money. What with that amount of money could this community centre do around those issues?" Maybe they've identified causes for those issues. I feel like a lot of community centres have bought into a lot of the existing frameworks. So, they're maybe not the best places, but like, for example. It could be like, okay, so you're doing … there's been an escalation over the last five years of knife crime in the neighbourhood. That's something that these three,

four kids have been taken away from their families because of. Rather than us in two years' time be taking another three, four kids, five, six kids out of their families, what can this community … what are they already addressing? Is it as baseline as just youth provision? Is it just giving the kids something else to be doing? In that case, we can use our resources and we can be engaged in that work. If it's something else, then what are the responses people are already having? Because, you know, usually there are some.'

Lauren: 'Yeah.'

Dom: 'And we don't have to … I think it's part of this thing that happens at the moment is, we militarise it, we throw money at the police to do youth provision. It's like, X, Y and Z person here are doing voluntary youth provision. Let's fund that, let's find ways to increase their capacity and skill sets around that. Like, so the role of the social worker in that is less of a social worker, and someone who has to use traditional community organising skills. And maybe also they become not the right person to do that work. And then someone from that community is employed to do that work, rather than someone who's been through a social working training pattern. Or, it becomes something that is embedded within social working training.'

Lauren: 'Yeah. In a sense, you're kind of defunding yourselves?'

Dom: 'But surely … we'll work under the assumption that someone wants to be a social worker because it's a job in which you get paid in theory to look after people, or care for people, or do some good. So, the instrument in which you do that good, does it matter? You'll know better than I, but I can't imagine there are that many people … no, actually, I know there are some, but not everyone who signs up for a social worker degree or training goes, "What I want to do is, like, tick boxes and bureaucratise to death a bunch of people."'

Lauren: 'Yeah.'

Dom: 'You know, people aren't going, "Oh, I'm not doing that work, that sounds like you have to speak to far too many—" whatever.'

Lauren: 'Yeah, "Oh, I don't want to talk to kids."'

Dom: '"If I can't tick boxes I'm not interested."'

Some have argued that the mere presence of social work in a community devalues, de-radicalises or diverts power (Maylea, 2021); however, drawing on Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020), we thought of communities as having agency, and as a transitional move, they might tap the 'amassed site of social capital' (Dillon et al, 2021) that social workers and their organisations harness. This conceptualisation runs counter to the proposals from MacAllister (2022), where community care is framed as a resource to be tapped by services. It also complements the debate on the praxeological limitations of social work by looking to positive practices of care and the ways in which they can be materially supported. We imagined social workers as having training and resources that might be of use, and who, carrying only their skill set, knowledge and resources, could enter into dialogue with a wide range of community members and be supported by that community to find their appropriate role. This could include:

- offering professional skills in facilitation, mediation, de-escalation or listening (including mediation with other professional agencies who may be undermining community-based work);
- drawing on academic and practice theory to share learning and support the development of ideas and approaches to addressing harm; and
- negotiating material and financial resources for community-based projects from their own or other organisations.

Conclusion

This article is written in the context of two debates within social work discussed at the start of this article: the former is at the centre of current debates (MacAllister, 2022); while the latter has appeared from the margins attempting to disrupt the centre (Maylea, 2021). The former highlights a crisis in children's social care, where an increasing number of children are subject to statutory assessment or child protection plans (MacAllister, 2022) that are not uncovering increasing levels of abuse (Bilson and Munro, 2019), do little to address need and, at times, aggravate family problems. The latter is concerned with the abolition of social work, where social work is understood as part of the problem (Maylea, 2021), often disproportionately targeting racialised and poor families (Roberts, 2020), and closely aligned with the 'carceral' logic and practices of policing and prisons (Jacobs et al, 2021). We have sought to extend these debates by deconstructing established state practices, while highlighting existing community harm-reduction practices that point to new ways of organising care in the future.

As Gilmore (2007) reminds us, abolition is a positive thesis and framework for building new practices of care from the present, and there are numerous examples of long-standing responses to harm that subvert, exist despite and resist state 'harm-reduction' practices. In this article, we have sought to explore the limitations of current social work responses to harm, while also reflecting on existing forms of 'social work' within communities that generate positive change. Situating these practices within the contemporary abolition and transformative justice literature (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Kaba and Hassan, 2022), we have begun to reflect on the role of social workers in relation to community harm-reduction or 'community safety' (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020) work, troubling the idea that communities are a resource to be tapped by professional organisations (in the absence of significant investment in community infrastructure, wages or benefits) and centring the importance of localised, grass-roots community building as a means of preventing, responding to and recovering from violence and abuse. Could, then, the role of social work(ers) be one of facilitating the transfer of resources (economic, cultural or social) from the state into the community in order to be put to use within existing or newly developed harm-reduction practices that are directed by the needs of its members?

To explore these issues, we have used an auto-ethnographic approach to ground our thinking in everyday interactions with the social care system. In adopting an auto-ethnographic approach and presenting a discussion between the authors as the basis of our article, we are experimenting in alternative methods of knowledge production. Our contention is that there is a body of knowledge that exists within marginalised communities that is not only hard earned, but hard thought, and that its

peer review occurs outside school gates, inside the laundrette and in whatever small spaces it might find refuge from surveillance or intrusion by the state. While we write this for an academic journal from our positions as academics and researchers, the work primarily happens beyond the confines of these institutional spaces. Our suggestion is not that as researchers, we seek to extract this knowledge from communities, but that communities are afforded the space and the resources to do the work that is currently afforded to academics and professionals.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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