

Is a Law Enforcement/Social Worker Hybrid Model a Natural Next Step?

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By **Christine M. Sarteschi and Daniel Pollack** | May 13, 2021 at 10:15 AM



A hybrid is a mixture of two different things, resulting in something that has aspects of both. Illinois State representative Jaime Andrade Jr. (D-Chicago) recently filed a [bill](#) mandating that, in order to receive a permanent position as an

Illinois law enforcement officer, all probationary officers would first have to have earned a bachelor's degree in social work or a minor in social work. Would this cut down on the number of law enforcement misconduct incidents? Would it curtail the number of lawsuits and associated costs?

It is important to note that there are major differences between a minor and a major in social work. Minors typically only require five or six classes. Majors, alternatively, would require many more classes as well as the completion of 500 hours of fieldwork (internship) in a student's senior year. It would take much more effort to complete a social work major than a social work minor.

The bill doesn't elaborate on why he chose social work over other related majors. Perhaps it is because the social work curriculum is uniquely different from the other related disciplines. Social workers are trained to be generalists. They work in a wide variety of settings to meet the complex needs of individuals, families, agencies, communities, and groups. Social workers are trained in human behavior, diversity, mental illness, socioeconomic issues, problem solving, critical thinking, and have a strong focus on systems and person-in-environment.

Reactions to Rep. Andrade's proposal thus far have been mixed. Nathan Hastings, a deputy sheriff in the Tazewell County Crime Prevention Unit, referred to the proposal as a "[game changer](#)." When it comes to those in a mental health crisis, "[it allows \[for\] a better understanding of what that individual is going through](#)."

Tazewell County Sheriff Jeff Lower has concerns about the proposal. He noted that only about [25% of his department have four-year degrees](#), a figure on par with other law enforcement agencies across the country.

Lower believes that [“it’s not the education that makes the person. It’s the person. It’s the hiring practice \[and\] the vetting of their history. My belief is that it’s the hiring practice that makes the difference- not the degree.”](#)

Research about higher education among police is relatively scarce. Studies indicate that between [25% and 45% of officers in the United States have a college degree.](#) A 2019 study by [Gardiner](#) of 958 municipal and county law enforcement agencies found only 28.6% have four-year degrees. Even less is known about what effect college education has on the quality of policing.

Gardiner also found that some agencies are purposely choosing to keep entry points minimal to encourage recruiting. Currently, there is a [shortage](#) of police recruits. Mandating additional requirements would likely deepen the problem.

Police unions may also be a barrier to mandating certain degrees for police. Gardiner observed that they have a great deal of influence on education practices. Though they were at first unsupportive of college requirements in general, once implemented, they were seen as a bargaining tool to secure higher pay and [“became a matter of professional pride.”](#) Whether police unions would feel that same way about social work degrees is unknown.

While most officers are doing good work, some would argue that their lack of training has led to occasional deadly results. It is estimated that [25%](#) of officer-involved shootings involve the killing of mentally ill persons. Crisis Intervention Training (CIT), [which aims to teach de-escalation techniques when dealing with mentally ill individuals,](#) is not mandatory. Given that over [1,400 mentally ill persons](#) have been shot and killed by police officers since Jan, 1, 2015, we can no longer tolerate voluntary training for officers.

Law enforcement officials are sworn to uphold the Constitution and to protect communities from injustice. Policing today requires and demands maximum effort and results. In light of a call by some activists to defund or abolish the police, the time is ripe for a re-envisioning of policing and the training of those who serve and protect.

Civil lawsuits against law enforcement officials can be time-consuming and costly. The most frequently used vehicle for bringing a civil rights lawsuit is Section 1983, Title 42, of the United States Code. This statute creates a cause of action for damages in favor of an individual who has been deprived of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution by someone acting under color of state law. Every year, hundreds of lawsuits alleging police misconduct are filed. The cost of settling some of them is made public; others are veiled behind confidentiality agreements. In total, they cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, if not more. A detailed [database](#) of police misconduct settlement amounts is kept by The Thurgood Marshall Institute. Regarding New York City:

“In 2015, *The Wall Street Journal* released an analysis of settlement totals from instances of police misconduct among the ten largest local police departments in the nation. Many of the cases involved in the analysis involved alleged beatings, shootings, and wrongful imprisonment. The analysis determined that, between 2010 and 2014, New York City spent \$601.3 million on police misconduct cases. In 2015, the city paid \$5.9 million to the estate of Eric Garner, who died after being put in a police chokehold. Additionally, a report released by the New York City Comptroller’s Office disclosed that the city spent nearly \$270 million to resolve police misconduct claims in fiscal years 2017 and 2018. A recent analysis of data published by the New York City Law Department, detailing information on civil actions alleging police misconduct, showed that in 2019 the city was responsible for over \$68 million in payouts to resolve nearly 1,400 civil lawsuits filed against the department.”

The creation of a social work/law enforcement hybrid seems like a natural progression. Aspects of the work police are already doing are somewhat akin to social work, but they lack the proper training. Mandating training in social work could be one step to remedy this concern.

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