

Do Catholic Social Work Programs “Prefer” the Poor? Results from a Content Analysis of MSW Program Syllabi

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The social work profession has long wrestled with how to prioritize the needs of those in poverty while maintaining its professional identity. While the debate continues at a conceptual level, the struggle may not be represented through information provided to social work students. Through a content analysis of course syllabi of Catholic MSW social work programs, analysis suggests an absence of textual reference to those clients who live in poverty. Instead, requiring that students confront issues of poverty in their courses, and in particular their practice courses, is surprisingly rare. Further analysis suggests increasing import placed on the concept of diversity, at times as a proxy for a more direct confrontation of the role of social class and its impact on client well-being and experience. Implications for social work educators and researchers are discussed, with particular attention to the ways by which findings inform pedagogy in foundation social work courses.

Social work has historically been identified by its dual focus on change at the individual and societal levels. Conversations among the founders of the profession are well known for the struggle to identify the most appropriate way to address issues of justice among marginalized populations (Addams, 1911; 1990; Reynolds, 1934; 1951; Richmond, 1917; 1922). Porter Lee, the creator of the “case method,” described the dichotomy between attention to the individual and society in his book, *Social Work as Cause and Function* (1937). In more recent years, scholars have continued to consider the merit of addressing issues of social justice within social work curricula (Nagda, Spearmon, Holley, Harding, Balasone, Moise-Swanson, & De Mello, 1999; Brenden, 2007; Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Finn & Jacobson, 2003; Abramovitz, 1998). One well known example of this is the critique by Specht and Courtney (1994) regarding the growing curricular focus on clinical practice

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as a distraction from social work’s historic mission to address social conditions that disproportionately affect poor.

Despite the ongoing nature of these arguments, the stated value placed by the profession on social justice is clear. Specifically, the second paragraph of the NASW Code of Ethics (COE) states, “Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.” (NASW, 1999, p. 1). The term “social justice” is referenced multiple times in the COE and is listed as one of the core ethical principles of the document (NASW, 1999). Similarly, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) stipulates that American social work programs’ foundation courses should help students to “understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination, advocate for human rights and social and economic justice, and engage in practice that advance social and economic justice” (CSWE, 2008, p. 5).

In the Catholic context, orders of priests and nuns have long supported the goals of American social work education by sponsoring schools of social work, offering bachelor’s, master’s (MSW), and doctoral social work degrees. Presently, there are 12 Catholic universities and colleges offering the MSW, the degree associated in social work with advanced clinical and policy practice, and the focus of this article’s content analysis.

Catholic schools of social work mission statements consistently reflect a desire to incorporate the teaching and values of the Catholic Church into their curricula. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is based on church doctrine and Catholic social movements that have been incorporated into church teaching since the late 19th century (Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis Office for Social Justice; http://www.osjspm.org/social_teaching_documents.aspx, 2008). While all aspects of CST are considered important for Catholics, most scholars and theologians agree that the issue of Catholic solidarity with the poor represents a central tenet that has grown into mainstream teaching from its early roots in worker’s rights and liberation theology (Pope John Paul II, 1995; Twomey, 2005). Additionally, Christian social work scholars have called for practitioners to renew their efforts to change the systems that create unjust social conditions, using their faith as a guide (Wolterstorff, 2006). Social work students join scholars in their interest in learning more about the role of religion and spirituality to aid them in becoming professional social workers (Sheridan & Amato Von-Hemert, 1999; Van Soest, 1994).

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Given the historical connection of the profession of social work with advocacy for the poor, this project examines how MSW programs at Catholic schools integrate Catholic Social Teaching, and specifically the “preferential option for the poor” (Twomey, 2005), using a content analysis of foundation year course syllabi.

Literature Review:

Social Justice and CST’s Preferential Option for the Poor

The study of social justice has been considered in the context of multiple helping professions (e.g., international practice, social and economic policy, community organization, ethical decision-making, and just relationships), including social work (Longres & Scanlon, 2001). However, a clear definition of the term and its meaning has not been firmly established in social work (Hong & Hodge, 2009). Rather, social justice has been considered at multiple levels, including as an approach called “just practice”, which encompasses five key themes, including meaning, context, power, history, and possibility (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Social justice has also been applied as a theory that challenges power, its creation and influence in society (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Others have discussed this concept as a method of change that aims to serve disadvantaged populations (Reisch, 2002; Wilkin, 1998; 1999; 2000). Social justice is also referred to as a state of being, where “all members of society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (Gibelman, 2000, as cited in Reisch, 2002, p. 349).

The Catholic Church has also maintained stated importance of the concept of social justice, and has sought to identify this concept within its official documents throughout history. Since the late 19th century and the publication of the Papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, most Catholic scholars believe that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has focused particular attention on poverty and the poor (Cooney, Medaille, & Harrington, 2002). Within CST, however, the concept of the “preferential option for the poor” has evolved over time, an evolution that in many ways mirrors the struggle of the social work profession to address the unique needs of people living in poverty.

The concept was first articulated as part of the liberation theologies of Latin America and was formalized in the Latin American Bishops’ Conferences in Medellin, Columbia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979 (Twomey, 2005). The “theologies of libera-

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tion” explored the relationship between theology and political activism and sought to analyze theology from the perspective of the poor. The report of the Medellin Conference called for the Catholic Church in Latin America to become a church that evangelizes and witnesses specifically to the poor, in an act of solidarity of the poor, an evangelizer and witness “to be the evangelizer of the poor and one with them, a witness to the value of the riches of the Kingdom, and the humble servant of all our people” (Conference of Latin American Bishops, 1968). In its application, this option for the poor served to organize peasants in Latin America into more self-reliant “Christian-based communities,” which began to create solidarity among their participants.

In the United States, however, consideration of the preferential option did not formally begin until the late 1970s; this consideration has vacillated in its doctrinal centrality since. The approach within the United States differed some from that of the liberation movement, focusing more on responsibility to the larger community, rather than specifically to that of the poor. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1986) explained the option in this way: “As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental ‘option for the poor’...to enable all persons to share in and contribute to the common good”, stating that the “deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986, para. 16).

Similarly, Pope John Paul II moved the Church incrementally toward greater emphasis on the commonality of the human good, which is achieved through universal participation. He stated, “Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel responsible for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess” (Pope John Paul II, 1987, sec. 42). In the latter phase of his papacy, Pope John II sought to address this query by encouraging a more universal love, stated as a “preferential yet not exclusive love for the poor” (Paprocki, 1995, para. 5). In other words, while the church is to show a special solicitude for the poor, this focus is not in lieu of that on those who are not poor, reflecting the continuing debate in the laity and institutional church worldwide regarding the role the church should play in advocating for the poor in political and economic terms (Cooney, Medaille, & Harrington, 2002; Twomey, 2005).

Debates across both the profession of social work and the Catholic Church suggest that understandings of social justice, and

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specifically the attention to the poor, have shifted in priority and nature over time. The proposed study seeks to examine how these ideas are juxtaposed in the context of social work education among Catholic MSW programs. Findings assist in more specifically identifying strengths and weaknesses among Catholic MSW programs in the areas of ‘preferential option for the poor’.

Methodology

Course syllabi for introduction to social work practice courses were sought from all 12 accredited MSW programs at Catholic institutions; 11 of the 12 schools provided syllabi, and 38 total syllabi were included in the analysis (i.e., not all schools provided all syllabi). Initially, a sample coding manual was developed and a subset of eight syllabi (four each from two schools) was coded by three trained coders (two graduate level research assistants and one faculty member). The coding was then reviewed; discrepancies between coders was used to further develop the coding manual in order to more clearly and comprehensively delineate sub-categories related to poverty and social justice (e.g., “economic disparity”). Using the revised coding manual, another subset (four syllabi, one from each of four schools) was coded by four trained coders, including the three previously mentioned and an additional trained faculty member. The coding manual was finalized, organized with attention to the prominence of poverty as assessed through the following domains:

1. *Course Content Descriptions.* The degree to which poverty is identified through reading titles, assignments, and course descriptions, particularly in comparison to language related to other areas (e.g., individual psychopathology);
2. *Course Assignments.* The extent to which course assignments require students to assess client’s socioeconomic background and analyze clients’ poverty as a variable affecting client circumstances;
3. *Themes in the Course.* The extent to which course content (i.e., textbooks, articles, assignments) emphasized the structural problems that cause poverty and the degree to which solutions to these issues use ideas from the church’s social teaching regarding the “preferential option for the poor.”

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During the coding process, two of the four authors presented preliminary findings related to this project at a conference related to social justice in social work education. Feedback from this conference encouraged the authors to expand the initial analysis (of syllabi from Practice I and HBSE courses) to the entire foundation year (i.e., addition of Policy and Research syllabi). This response was in large part due to the argument that the majority of course content inclusive of social justice, and particularly a focus on the preferential option of the poor, was thought to be maintained in the Policy curriculum domain. Feedback also forced clarification regarding terms that may be used as proxy for social justice (e.g., “economic justice”, “equal opportunity”).

Once the coding manual was amended to include these revisions, it was used to guide the coding of all syllabi across all four aspects of the foundation year. Syllabi were blind coded by the same three independent and trained raters who had contributed to the prior coding process. Twenty percent of the syllabi were coded by two raters in order to establish inter-rater reliability; through this process, all inconsistencies were discussed and resolved through consensus between all three raters. At the conclusion of the coding, all syllabi were again coded by one of the four coders in order to clearly verify each count that resulted from the three coders who had coded previously. As each syllabus was coded, numerical data on the content analysis was entered into a table in order to assess patterns of frequency. Through this process, key themes from the analysis emerged. They were examined both within content areas (e.g., research, human behavior, policy, direct practice), within schools, and across all syllabi.

Findings

Key results derived from the content analysis are summarized beginning in Table 1. This table demonstrates quantitative counts of key words identified in the codebook, specifically words that indicate a potential interest in and focus on preferential option for the poor in social work syllabi (see Table 1).

Table 1: Quantitative Counts of Incidence of Word(s) in Syllabi

Coded word related to poverty	Research	Practice I	HBSE	Policy	Average across classes
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Diversity	2.1	5.3	3.9	3.2	3.625
Social Justice	0.8	2.4	3.1	5.3	2.9
Strengths	0.3	6.1	1.5	0.78	2.17
Poverty	0.4	0.2	0.7	3.4	1.175
Oppression	0.3	1	1.6	0.89	0.9475
Power	0.1	0.4	0.7	0.56	0.44
Poor	0.1	0.56	0.2	0.8	0.415
Illness	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.225
Social Class	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.225
Inequality	0	0	0.4	0.2	0.15
Marginalization	0	0.1	0	0.3	0.1
Disorder	0	0	0.3	0	0.075
Stratification	0	0	0.2	0	0.05
Inequity	0	0	0.1	0	0.025
Pathology	0	0	0	0	0

As indicated in Table 1, poverty was rarely mentioned in syllabi outside of the policy domain (thereby in some ways validating sentiments expressed regarding the exclusive nature of policy classes in addressing economic disparity). Interestingly, other terms associated with poverty, such as “poor,” “inequality,” “social class,” and “stratification,” were relatively absent even in the policy courses.

Although the average counts for coded words related to poverty within the policy and practice syllabi do not differ significantly from those of all course syllabi, a look at the greatest discrepancies between practice and policy syllabi suggests two important trends. First, in terms of content, practice syllabi contained reference to “diversity” more than two times and “strengths” more than five times more than policy syllabi; in contrast, policy syllabi identified the words “poverty” and “social justice” each about three times more often than practice syllabi.

Table 2 shows the coding results for the MSW foundation course assignments. In cases where there were discrepancies between coders (e.g., an area was coded as a 1 by one coder and a 2 by another), scores were averaged and the average of the two scores was entered. Table 2 represents the averages for each of the identified assignment topics across each course title; each course includes the average of all schools’ syllabi coding results. The ta-

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ble is then completed to include the average of the assignment coding results across all four courses.

Table 2: Coding Results for MSW Foundation Course Assignments

	Research	Practice	HBSE	Policy	Averages across classes
<i>Clients identified as poor/working class</i>	2.44	2.23	1.18	2.63	2.12
<i>Clients whose class status is not identified</i>	5	3.75	4.89	3.58	4.30
<i>The students' option to customize assignments based on placement or personal experiences</i>	2.72	4.8	3.4	2.31	3.31
<i>The discussion of how unjust distribution of economic and social resources contribute to client problems</i>	2.81	1.92	1.45	3.15	2.33

The extent to which topics are presented/discussed, according to a scale of 1-5 (1=not at all, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=very much)

In terms of the assignments from the different schools, assignments in research, practice, and HBSE appeared to contain relatively few references to people in poverty, as well as to the structural issues that cause poverty. In contrast, policy assignments did focus more on poverty-related issues. Across all four courses, coding revealed an average of 3.31 rating (i.e., more often than ‘sometimes’) for assignments that offered the option of customizing based on students’ particular background and/or ideas, rather than assignments that the instructors assigned based on predetermined specific issues and clients.

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Both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the content analysis reveal that few of the syllabi refer to poverty; when syllabi do, they tend to include it as a descriptor within the general category of “diversity.” Indeed, Table 1 suggests that for these syllabi, “diversity” may have been intended to somehow refer to include the other descriptors coded (e.g., poverty, poor, inequality, social class, inequity). Further, with the possible exception of the policy and research assignments (both of which averaged 2.81/5, indicating that at least some of the syllabi did focus on structural issues), analysis of HBSE and Practice assignments revealed little emphasis on the structural problems of poverty; instead, assignments within these domains tended to allow students to define the scope of their assignments in ways that do not require attention to poverty.

Limitations and Discussion

Before discussing the study findings, it is critical to address limitations to this study. First, while the geographic and historical diversity of the 11 programs sampled makes for potentially compelling findings, it is necessary to recall that syllabi were not available from one program from the comprehensive list of 12 Catholic MSW programs. Methodologically, one could argue that the content of syllabi may not adequately or comprehensively represent all that is taught in the classroom. In other words, it is possible that individual instructors infuse courses with content that highlights a preferential option for the poor in ways that are not demonstrated through the syllabi. However, other content analyses (e.g., Hong & Hodge, 2009) that examine the presence of concepts related to social justice within social work education have also used syllabi as a foundation unit of analysis that can provide a meaningful starting point for future inquiry. Finally, this analysis did not include examination of ways by which the field practicum, a key aspect of the MSW program, addresses issues of poverty and social justice. Although recent research suggests that attention to poverty rarely underlies the motivation of MSW students to be clinicians (Perry, 2009), it remains critical to examine ways that field placements seek to engage clients who struggle with poverty and social injustice. We were also not always able to review in detail the assignment content within each course, as some syllabi included only summaries or overviews of student assignments.

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Despite these limitations, 92% of all Catholic MSW social work programs are represented in this analysis. While that is not exhaustive, it is sufficiently comprehensive to allow identification of meaningful themes within the syllabi. Further, although syllabi certainly cannot represent the entirety of the educational experience, the syllabi outline key course concepts, and create an initial student impression of a course. It is safe to presume that concepts articulated in the syllabus have primary meaning for the composition and content of the course, particularly as all of these courses are typically required in the first year of the MSW student’s program.

The findings of this study indicate that Catholic MSW programs are not presently systematically training their first-year students to learn and struggle with the Catholic Social Teaching of preferential option for the poor. It appears from our analysis that there is no preferential option for the poor consistently expressed in the course syllabi and assignments within Catholic MSW programs in our study. As might be expected, there is some evidence that the policy and research foundation courses do expose students to some policy and research issues related to poverty and the poor. In contrast, however, evidence suggests that a similarly concerted effort in foundation Practice and HBSE courses as exhibited through course syllabi is nearly imperceptible. Given that many students seek to become clinicians (D’Aprix, Dunlap, Abel, & Edwards, 2004) and therefore may be more likely to prioritize and have more interest in their HBSE and Practice courses, the lack of focus on the poor in those courses is particularly troublesome. Further, although social work students may not enter MSW programs with an inherent interest in work with clients living in poverty (Perry, 2009), it is useful to consider how the curriculum can help students explore their potential role as social workers engaged with this client group.

Three concepts emerged from our analysis that may be either proxies or rivals for a focus on poverty and the poor: diversity, strengths, and social justice. We address each of these terms now, with discussion about the possible implications of these concepts for social work education:

Diversity: This term was mentioned an average of three times in each syllabus, and diversity had a significant impact on the composition of many of the course assignments. The power of diversity as a potential proxy for a range of social and economic injustices is a major concern of other educators and philosophers

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(e.g., Michaels, 2006). Taken in isolation, there is nothing particularly concerning about the mention of diversity as a value in foundation social work courses; in fact, the presence of this term suggests that the field has responded to the call of CSWE to address more directly the diverse world in which social workers serve (CSWE, 2008). However, when paired with a lack of attention to the poor and discussion of the structural causes of poverty, it raises the question of whether or not diversity is meant to serve as a substitute for a larger discussion of poverty and the economic injustices characteristic of the environments of so many social work clients. In other words, have issues of income level and social class been eclipsed within a larger, descriptive rubric of diversity? This concern is further supported by the number of assignments that allowed students to create a case of their own using a range of client identifiers that reflected racial/religious/sexual orientation/socioeconomic diversity, but that failed to privilege issues of poverty for the specific clients that the students were to describe.

Strengths: Perhaps reflecting the increasing influence of the strengths perspective in the field of social work, the practice syllabi averaged over six mentions of client strengths, bumping the overall foundation average to 2.17 per syllabus. Again, this finding at first glance suggests that social work syllabi are appropriately responding to the emphasis on client strengths characteristic of the field over the last two decades (Saleebey, 2008). However, it is also notable that client strengths did not appear to be regularly directly linked to client abilities to manage the challenges associated with poverty. The tendency to look at client strengths in isolation, denuded of oppressive social and economic structures, has been a hallmark of left-wing critiques of conservative social policy for the past two decades (Abramowitz, 2006; Piper, 1997). This lack of structural analysis of poverty makes it possible for students to draw the implication that poor clients struggling with depression are dealing with depression for the same reasons that wealthy or even middle-income clients experience depression. The notion that being poor might in itself be a risk factor for depression (or other DSM-related mental health problems) appears to be largely absent from these syllabi.

Social Justice: Interestingly, as this paper critiques social work syllabi for not paying sufficient attention to social justice as related to CST, findings suggest that the term “social justice” was the second most frequently used term in our analysis. In some ways, this finding was expected, as the impetus to ask more about the

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presence of social justice within MSW programs came from noting the frequent use of it as a term within social work. This term is used to refer to a wide range of social, economic, and even mental health problems addressed by social workers; however, the lack of continuity runs the risk of further diluting the meaning of the term. While the lack of a consistent definition for social justice is hardly new (Finn & Jacobson, 2003), findings from this study suggest that the various definitions of social justice referenced in these syllabi do not appear to include a specific preferential option for the poor. Instead, this term seems to serve more as a universal reference, used often in the “introductory objectives” section of the syllabus while failing to contribute more substantively to course content.

Implications

For practice and future educational endeavors, we propose the following three recommendations geared toward strengthening MSW programs in their efforts to serve the next generation of social work students. We offer these recommendations to our colleagues teaching in Catholic MSW programs; however, implications also have direct relevance to MSW programs in other private schools of social and in state universities:

1. Attend to poverty explicitly and systematically in social work foundation courses.

MSW students are relatively open to hearing what social work is and can be during their first year of graduate study. They also bring their own hopes to their work. In many cases, these students desire to practice with clients similar to themselves, and are often not personally coming from a lived experience of poverty. This is not meant as a criticism of new social work students as much as a reflection on the reality that Specht & Courtney (1994) identified almost 15 years ago: many incoming social work students aspire to work as therapists and intend to focus on mental health concerns most explicitly, often with clients with similar backgrounds to themselves (Perry, 2009). To bring the issue of poverty into that educational context is to challenge social work students to reflect on their identity as social workers within the historic context of the profession. This attention to the role of economic status seems to be of particular salience at this point in American life, as our country faces severe economic credit and housing crises.

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In particular, exposure to basic concepts of Catholic Social Teaching through MSW curricula within the unique and legitimate mission of Catholic schools may facilitate the grappling with these ideas. Doing so need not be oppressive of students who belong to other faiths or who do not identify with faith at all. Rather, presenting this information as a component of the foundation level MSW education could provide a way to think about poverty and social justice that is consonant with and strongly supportive of social work values. This approach would also be supported by CSWE EPAS (2008), given its attention to social and economic justice. Such exposure within these programs could also be further emphasized through other aspects of the student experience, such as through promotion and orientation materials.

2. Exercise caution in offering the option to customize foundation-level assignments.

Although it can be pedagogically valuable to allow students to customize their assignments based on their own interests and comfort level, this approach, particularly within foundation courses, will likely significantly limit students’ access to issues of poverty. In other words, if students are given the chance to choose the clients they write about and do not have first-hand practice experience with clients who are poor, the poor may fail to register as relevant clients for them to consider. Although this change may result in less accessible foundation courses for students, the challenge facing clients who are poor merit increased attention by students to this issue. By depriving students of this opportunity to grapple with the challenges of serving the poor, we appear to be missing a key instructional opportunity during the MSW foundation year.

3. Avoid the diversity trap in dealing with social justice issues related to poverty and the preferential option for the poor.

Based on our analysis, it is clear that all MSW programs examined are supportive of student interest in social justice on behalf of their clients. The problem is not that these syllabi reveal a covertly prejudicial or classist cabal of educators; rather, it is the conflation of diversity with socioeconomic issues that is of most concern. Surely there are real differences between our social work clients and between many of us in the classroom; some of those differences are reflected in our gender, sexual orientation, race, or religious identity. As we aim as a profession to exercise respect,

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tolerance, and empowerment based on these differences, we may have inadvertently lost sight of a population (the poor) that arguably suffers the most serious long-term negative life outcomes (e.g., health, life expectancy, educational attainment, exposure to violence), regardless of their race, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation (Iceland, 2006).

Conclusion

This content analysis and discussion has highlighted the important challenges facing social work educators as we aim to prepare the next generation of Masters’ level social workers. Although raising thorny issues of social justice and poverty will not endear us to all of our students, addressing them is imperative for the effective service of the profession to those in need. Poverty continues to be the dominant social crisis in our society, and our current economic circumstances suggest it is of heightened concern. Even though Catholic schools of social work are backed by religious doctrine that supports work specifically with the poor, they inadequately address the impact of poverty. Instead, poverty tends to be used more as a descriptor of diversity than as a warning bell alerting to structural injustice. This approach raises important questions regarding what social work means by “diversity,” and whether or not our use of that term adequately includes what we want social work students to know about social justice. ❖

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Do Catholic Social Work Programs “Prefer” the Poor?

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