

Introduction

Social Work's Grand Challenges

In January 2016, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) launched the Grand Challenges for Social Work (GCSW) (AASWSW, 2018; Barth, Gilmore, Flynn, Fraser, & Brekke, 2014). This major initiative is composed of some of the nation's most compelling social problems in the form of 12 Grand Challenges for the profession to address over the next decade (Williams, 2015, 2016). "Social workers are committed to advancing a strong scientific base for our profession that would provide solutions for positive transformation to several areas of need that social workers tackle daily" (Williams, 2016, p. 67). As the profession mobilizes to collectively respond to the grand challenges, it is vital to acknowledge existing evidence and information already generated by the profession in these grand challenge areas. This book highlights the evidence base of each of the grand challenges as reflected in four National Association of Social Worker (NASW) journals (*Children & Schools, Health & Social Work, Social Work, and Social Work Research*) over the past 10-plus years.

THE GRAND CHALLENGE APPROACH

The grand challenge approach is not a new one. It has been used by other disciplines, professions, academies, and nations to build solutions to pressing societal problems and foster a focused approach to addressing compelling issues. This approach allows for an integrative and collaborative effort to solve issues that are within reach but require collective effort. "A grand challenge approach offered the opportunity to both reflect on the direction of social work and anticipate and develop plans of action for emerging social problems" (Padilla & Fong, 2016, p. 135). The grand challenge framework has been used in other professions to address the gap between practice

and research, inform the public of the role of the profession in solving significant problems, fuel an interest in the profession for the next generation of practitioners and scholars, spark innovation within teaching and education, and stimulate growth in the profession (Uehara et al., 2013). It is recognized that the grand challenge approach is not only a rallying cry for the profession, but also an opportunity to promote awareness about the unique role the profession plays in addressing problems. This effort is no different for the social work profession, which views the grand challenges as an opportunity to “dramatically increase the public understanding of why the science and practice of social work is crucial not only to the quality of life but also the sustainability of our lives” (Uehara et al., 2013, p. 166). The GCSW uses scientific evidence to show what meaningful and measurable progress can be created and the interdisciplinary collaborations that can be generated over a decade. GCSW is supported by thought leaders in our profession to bring focus and synergy on a range of social, economic, political, environmental, and psychological concerns. GCSW is a call to action for social work and allied disciplines to address prominent issues that affect human well-being. These challenges are enormous and the efforts required will be comprehensive. Thus, the grand challenge approach serves multi-purposes that are important not only for the profession, but also related to issues that matter to the people, community, and broader society that social workers serve.

SOCIAL WORK’S GRAND CHALLENGES

Over the course of this decade-long initiative, the profession will work collectively to address three broad themes: Individual and Family Well-Being, Stronger Social Fabric, and Just Society (see Figure 1). These three broad areas each encompass four specific targets to compose the 12 grand challenges. The first area, individual and family well-being, includes four grand challenges centered on promoting the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities across the life span. This first area brings attention to ways that social workers can help close the health gap and stop family violence. The second area is stronger social fabric. This area examines how the profession can address the broader social environment, particularly as it relates to ending homelessness and social isolation, better utilization of technology, and generating improved responses to environmental concerns. The third broad area, just society, has four grand challenges that are centered on achieving social justice, strengthening financial capability, and increasing smart approaches to decrease the prison and criminal justice populations in this country.

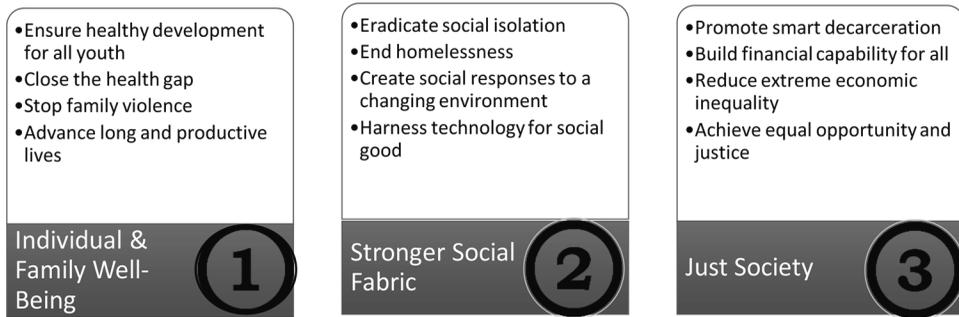


FIGURE 1. Grand Challenges for Social Work

The GCSW provide areas whereby the profession can galvanize intellectual, research, educational, and practice resources to solve social problems affecting communities (Fong, Lubben, & Barth, 2018). It should be noted that these grand challenges are not inclusive of all the issues that are meaningful and important to social workers or the communities they serve. It is further recognized that areas such as race and ethnicity and gender should be interwoven into and throughout the profession's work on these grand challenges. Although not singularly identified, these issues are important to understand and address if we are to truly be effective in solving these critical issues. "Not only do social workers create change around critical social areas, but there is also the opportunity to further the influence of the profession through our collective stance and mobilization" (Bent-Goodley 2016, p. 198). It is important not to miss this opportunity for change. The GCSW initiative builds on the accomplishments of our profession. Our profession has a tremendous body of work to use as a foundation for launching these 12 grand challenges (Sherraden et al., 2014). It would also be foolish not to acknowledge the work that has already been done in these areas to advance the science and the knowledge that shapes these areas.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book is intended to serve as a resource for social work researchers, practitioners, policymakers, faculty, and students by highlighting the contributions to knowledge, practices, policies, published research, and scholarship for each of the 12 grand challenges. The book is organized around three broad areas with published articles in each grand challenge to follow. These articles were selected for several reasons. Some are the most widely cited articles in the four NASW journals (that is, *Social Work*, *Social Work*

Research, Children & School, and Health & Social Work). Others are considered as formative in the respective area. Still, some of the articles are written in areas for which there are gaps or limitations worthy of acknowledgment. This volume will also serve as a means to promote the profession and educate the public, policymakers, and funders about the broad and effective reach of social work research and practice. As you read the breadth and depth of the articles in this book, you will find that there are innovative approaches, extensive knowledge, and formidable science that is being tested and activated across the profession. It is our hope that social work practitioners will be compelled to learn more about the approaches of these scholars and how to advance them in their own work. It is also our expectation that this book will encourage practitioners, faculty, and students to learn more about and become engaged in the GCSW. We also want this book to serve as a tool for social work scholars to identify areas where they can build on established research and support further knowledge development for the profession. For the public, we hope this volume will help to dispel myths about the profession and build greater awareness of the vast spaces that social workers are occupying in practice, research, and policy. Finally, for policymakers and funders, we expect that this book can be used to acknowledge the contributions of the social work profession to finding solutions to the big problems that they are addressing daily. At the conclusion of this book, we will summarize what has been identified and explored, and highlight gaps and areas that need further attention.

CONCLUSION

The grand challenges present us with an opportunity to be impactful in the identified areas and beyond. This initiative not only allows others to experience the impact of the profession, but also reminds social work practitioners and scholars of our contributions. Armed with this knowledge, we can better highlight the impact of our profession. We now stand with the opportunity to be intentional in advancing change and shaping discourse around issues that are timely, relevant, and important. No matter the angle or approach taken, being deliberate about strategically addressing these issues with our collective resources, energy, and voice will be beneficial for the profession and those most affected by the important work we do each day.

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