

# The 21st Century's J.D.

Whether it is San Bernardino or Sandy Hook, the Sept. 11 attacks or urban police shootings, **a certain (perhaps surprising) academic field is the glue that tries to keep people's lives together**, argues John L. Jackson Jr.

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By

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Many college seniors have long considered law school an all-purpose next chapter in their lives. Even if they don't know exactly how they plan to use the degree, they commonly believe that once they figure out what they want to do for a living, the skills picked up along the way to acquiring a J.D. should come in handy.

Yet that view is significantly changing, given growing student interest in issues of social justice, escalating private investments in social impact bonds, raging social activism across the country (including on college campuses) and increasing concerns about the intractability of massive social problems linked to intolerance and economic inequality. A master of **social work**, or M.S.W., degree is quickly becoming the 21st century's law degree, especially for young people interested in making the world a better place.

I can already predict some of the loudest objections to any claim about the value and versatility of **social work** education -- besides the fact that "making the world a better place" sounds like such a cliché. For one thing, **social workers** aren't known to earn a lot of money -- by most estimates, somewhere between \$40,000 and \$70,000 a year. Hardly what people think of as lawyering salaries. On top of that, **social workers** probably have even more of a PR problem than lawyers do, despite popular jokes about the latter being unabashed liars and ambulance chasers. I've had M.S.W. students crying in my campus office because their parents were pressuring them to study something other than **social work**, usually out of concern about their job prospects.

But, ironically, it is the average newly minted lawyer who will probably have the tougher time landing a fulfilling gig in his or her field. In fact, law school applications have been dropping precipitously since about 2010, presumably because fewer people see it as a foolproof way to get the job of their dreams -- especially if they don't already know what that dream job looks like.

**Social work**, by contrast, is increasingly on the forefront of education and employment trends. For one thing, **social work** teaches marketable skills that cut across traditional disciplines and professions. Students learn how to interpret dense policy briefs and clients' subtle facial cues in equal measure.

**Social work** education is the future of all academic teaching, even if most academicians don't know it yet. It mixes training in social theory with mandatory hours of work in the field, putting those theories decidedly into practice -- something that most students clamor for. It places one-on-one or clinical work with individuals and families in the context of larger systematic concerns.

Indeed, the best **social work** programs don't make a fetish out of the dividing line between thinking and doing, between the interpersonal emphasis of the therapist and the macrostructural understandings of the social scientist. They demand both.

**Social workers** sometimes work for the government, but they also run their own successful magnet schools and nonprofit organizations addressing everything from homelessness to arts education. And they usually do all of this without flashing lights or formal decrees, which is another one of their big PR problems. **Social workers** don't spend a lot of time tooting their own horns.

Today's **social work** is not your grandfather's **social work**. That is, not if your grandfather thought that **social work** was reducible to the visits that a caseworker made to his home periodically so that the city knew he was doing OK, which is just what my mother did in New York when I was a kid.

**Social workers** are now immediately and intensely engaged in the major events of the day, whether those events are linked to poverty, mental health, prison reform or other important issues.

Think about any serious crime, no matter how tragic or bloody. The police are the first ones to get there. They tape off the scene, take statements and answer questions from reporters. Those aforementioned lawyers come later, staying through litigation and any ultimate decision about criminal culpability. But all along the way, without fanfare or press conferences, **social workers** are doing the absolutely crucial things that must get done: counseling victims, housing survivors, moving impacted children to special schools, running major local advocacy groups connected to the issues implicated in the tragedy, helping officers and lawyers think about victims and clients in holistic and humane ways, crafting social policies to avoid the worst consequences of such events in the future, and conducting research on the calamity's causes and effects.

And that doesn't even cover all that **social workers** tackle in the context of tragedy. Whether it is a San Bernardino or Sandy Hook, the Sept. 11 attacks or urban police shootings, **social work** is the glue that tries to keep people's lives together when the world seems most intent on ripping those lives apart.

The Society for **Social work** and Research (SSWR) met in Washington, D.C., last month, but very few non-**social workers** noticed. More of us should have, especially since SSWR used the conference to unveil their "grand challenges" for the profession, which include ending homelessness by 2026. To pull off something that ambitious, **social work** will need all of the would-be law students it can muster.

**BIO**

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/02/25/social-work-has-become-21st-century-law-degree-essay#.Vw72ur9VuKY.mailto>