

[REPORT]

National Association of Social Workers  
**MEMBERSHIP WORKFORCE STUDY**

**WHO WANTS TO BE A  
SOCIAL WORKER?  
CAREER INFLUENCES  
AND TIMING**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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# INTRODUCTION

The 2004 benchmark national study of licensed social workers provided a wealth of information about social workers' roles and work environments. The study also raised new questions about the social work workforce that required further exploration. Although the 2004 findings pointed to a looming shortage of licensed social workers, there was still much to learn about why this was the case. In what ways did career decision points, educational debt, workplace stressors, and other factors influence the recruitment and retention of this professional workforce? The NASW Membership Workforce Study was an effort to respond to such remaining questions and to gain more insight into the social work workforce.

## METHODOLOGY

The NASW Membership Workforce Survey was administered online from August 30, 2007, to November 30, 2007. NASW members were invited to participate through electronic *Memberlink* newsletters, Specialty Practice Section alerts, mailed copies of the *NASW News*, and the NASW Web site. Survey responses were anonymous. The survey received a total of 3,653 responses.

Survey respondents volunteered to participate in the survey and were not randomly selected from the total NASW membership. Due to the sample being based on those who self-selected to participate, estimates of sampling error cannot be calculated. The findings are based solely on the responses and are not generalizable to the entire population of NASW members.

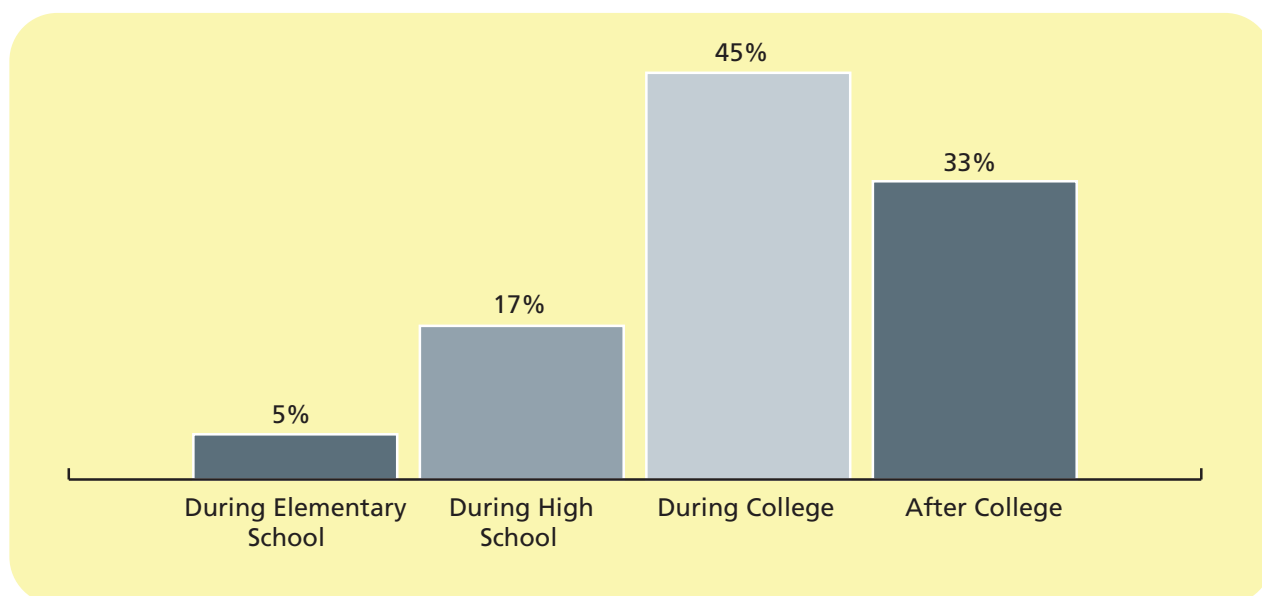
## OVERVIEW

Some people decide at a very young age what they want to be “when they grow up.” Others don’t decide until much later, and still others make this decision more than once in their lifetimes. Many factors influence the career decisions of people including role models such as parents and teachers (Quimby & De Santis, 2006; Taylor, Harris & Taylor, 2004); race, culture, and gender (Boone, 2006; Ferry, 2006); a person’s assessment of his or her abilities, talents, and preferences (Kniveton, 2004); and even the amount of student debt associated with a career choice (Arvantes, 2007; Swarthout, 2006; Pew, 2006). People who choose to pursue a career in social work are also influenced by factors such as their personal and social change values (Biggerstaff, 2000) as well as opportunities for career advancement and professional status (Bowie & Hancock, 2000).

## TIMING

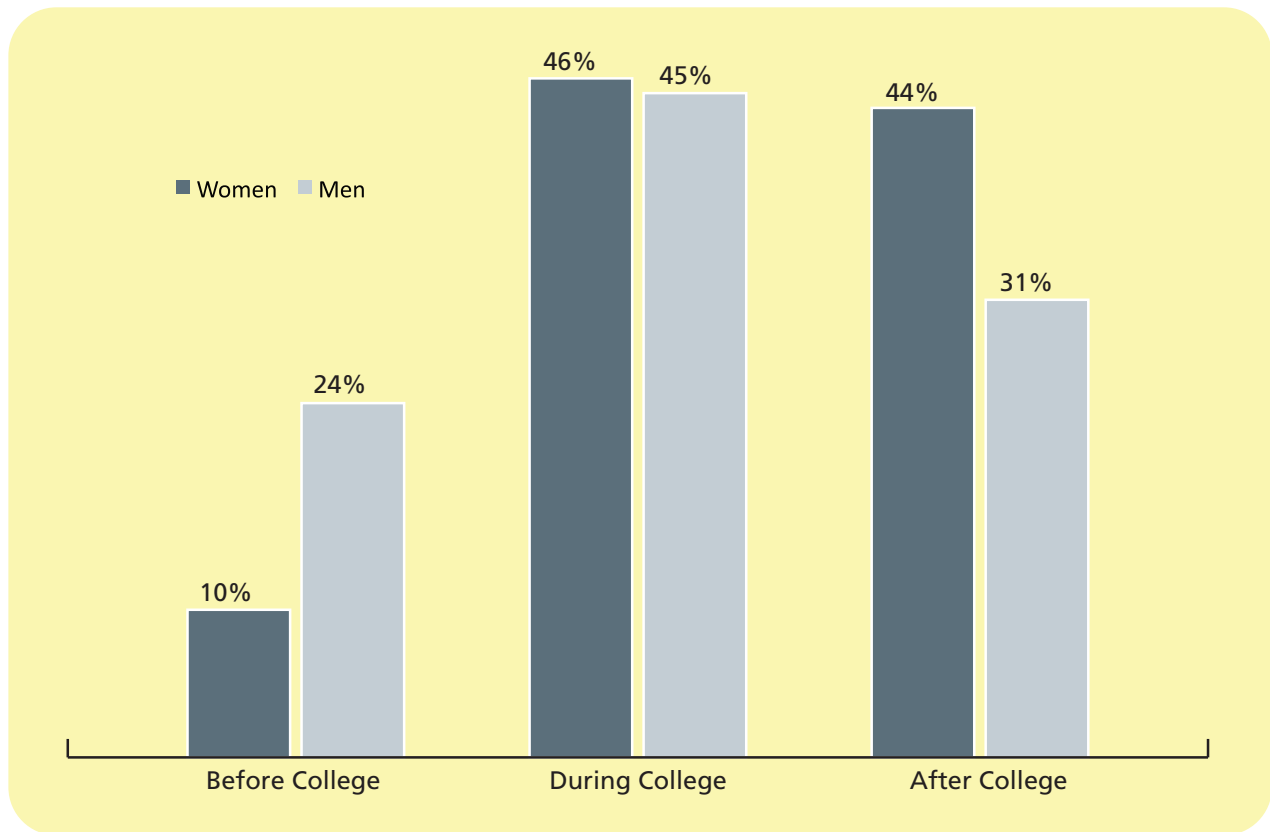
The survey participants were asked about when they first considered pursuing a social work career. Nearly half (45%) of the respondents first thought about becoming social workers during their college years; a third (33%) first considered the profession sometime after college; and 22 percent thought about a social work career prior to entering college (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. WHEN YOU FIRST CONSIDERED A SOCIAL WORK CAREER



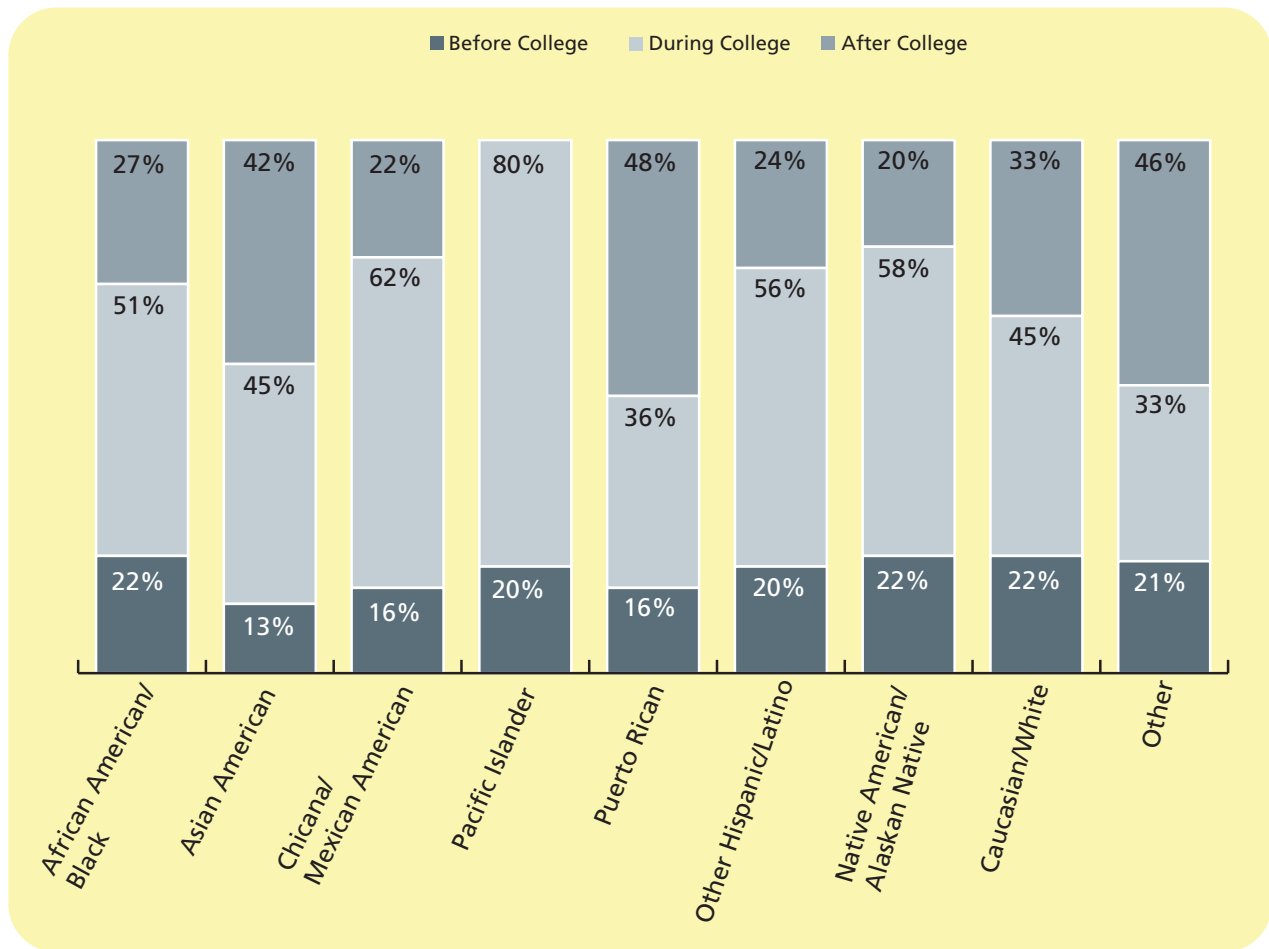
Women were more likely than men to consider a career in social work before they entered college (24% versus 10% ), and men were more likely than women to consider a social work career after college (44% versus 31%). Percentages of men and women who chose social work in college were nearly identical (46% vs. 45%) (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. WHEN YOU FIRST CONSIDERED A SOCIAL WORK CAREER, BY GENDER



There were some differences among racial/ethnic groups about their career decision points. Although nearly all groups had fewer than 25 percent of members choosing social work prior to college, there were differences between groups regarding choices made during college and after college. Those who identified themselves as “other” or Puerto Rican had higher rates of people deciding after college to pursue social work. All of those who identified as Pacific Islanders chose social work prior to completing college (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. WHEN YOU FIRST CONSIDERED A SOCIAL WORK CAREER, BY RACE/ETHNICITY

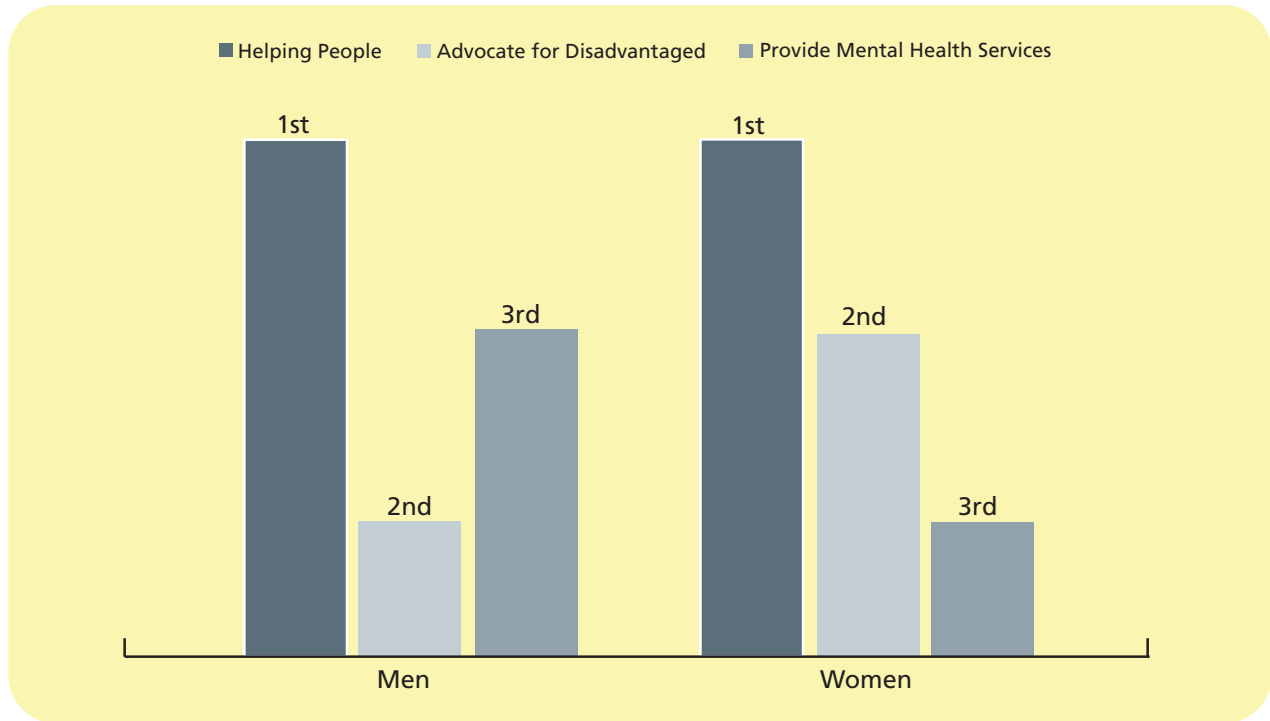


## INFLUENCING FACTORS

The respondents ranked the top three factors that influenced their decisions to pursue a career in social work. The top three factors were: interest in helping people; desire to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged populations; and interest in providing mental health services. Men and women differed slightly in their motivations. Both groups identified helping people as the leading motivator to pursue social work. However, women were more likely to identify advocating for disadvantaged populations

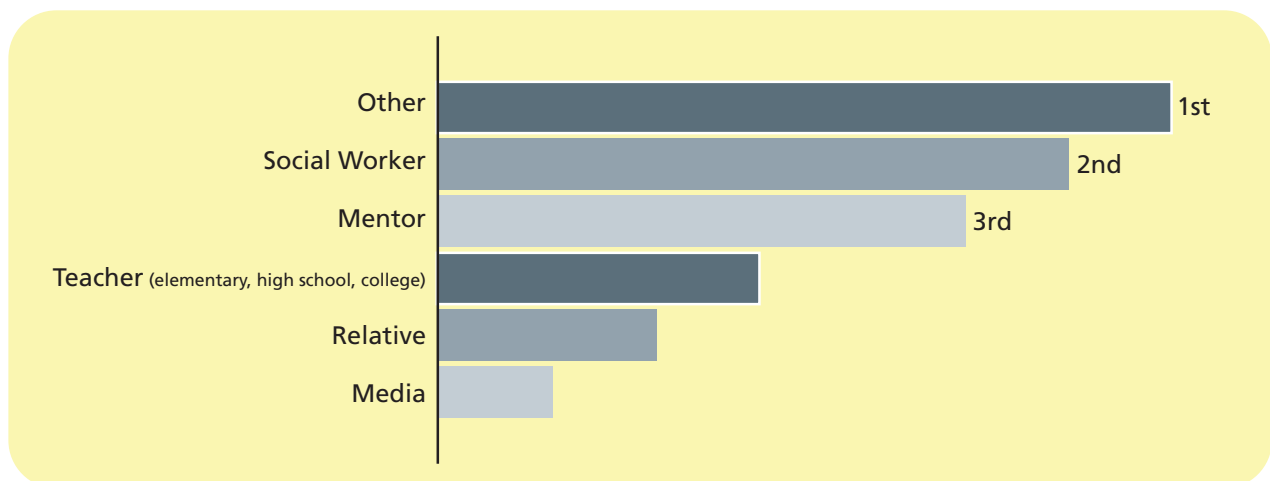
as their second most influential factor, whereas men were more likely to identify providing mental health services as their second highest motivating factor (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. TOP THREE INFLUENCING FACTORS BY GENDER, RANKED AND WEIGHTED



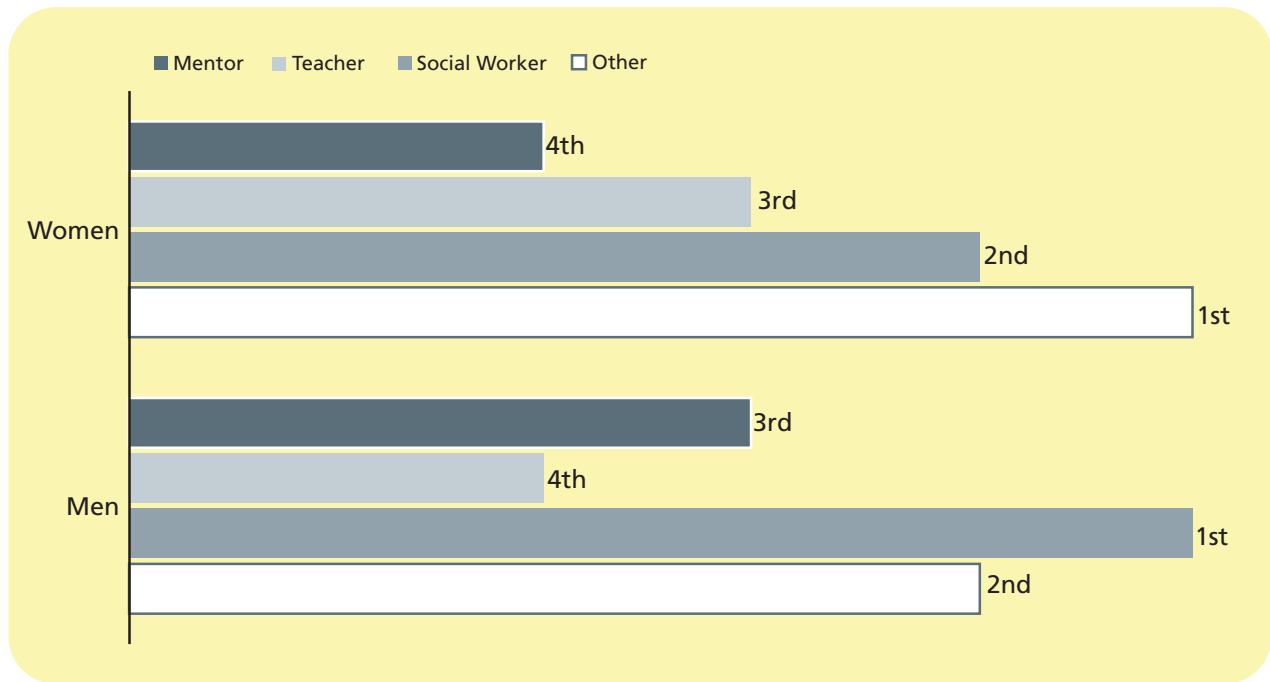
In terms of which person or entity was most influential in the decision to pursue a career in social work, the responses were surprising. Although “social worker” and “mentor” were among the highest ranking responses (second and third respectively), the highest ranking response was “other.” Teachers, relatives, and the media were among the lowest ranking influences (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5. PERSONS/ENTITIES INFLUENCING SOCIAL WORK CAREER CHOICE



There were slight differences between men and women about the people who most influenced their career choice. Women were most likely to be influenced by someone in the “other” category, compared with men, who were most likely to be influenced by a social worker. Teachers were more influential with women; mentors were more influential with men (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. PERSONS INFLUENCING SOCIAL WORK CAREER CHOICE, BY GENDER



## SECOND CAREERS

Sixty percent of the respondents ages 40 and older reported that they had worked in another career prior to becoming a social worker (Figure 7). When compared to other respondents ages 40 and older, who had entered social work as their first career, second-career social workers were slightly more likely to be male and more likely to be single (never married, divorced or widowed) (Figures 8 and 9). There was no racial/ethnic differences between the two groups.

FIGURE 7. DID YOU PURSUE ANOTHER CAREER BEFORE SOCIAL WORK? (RESPONDENTS AGES 40 YEARS +)

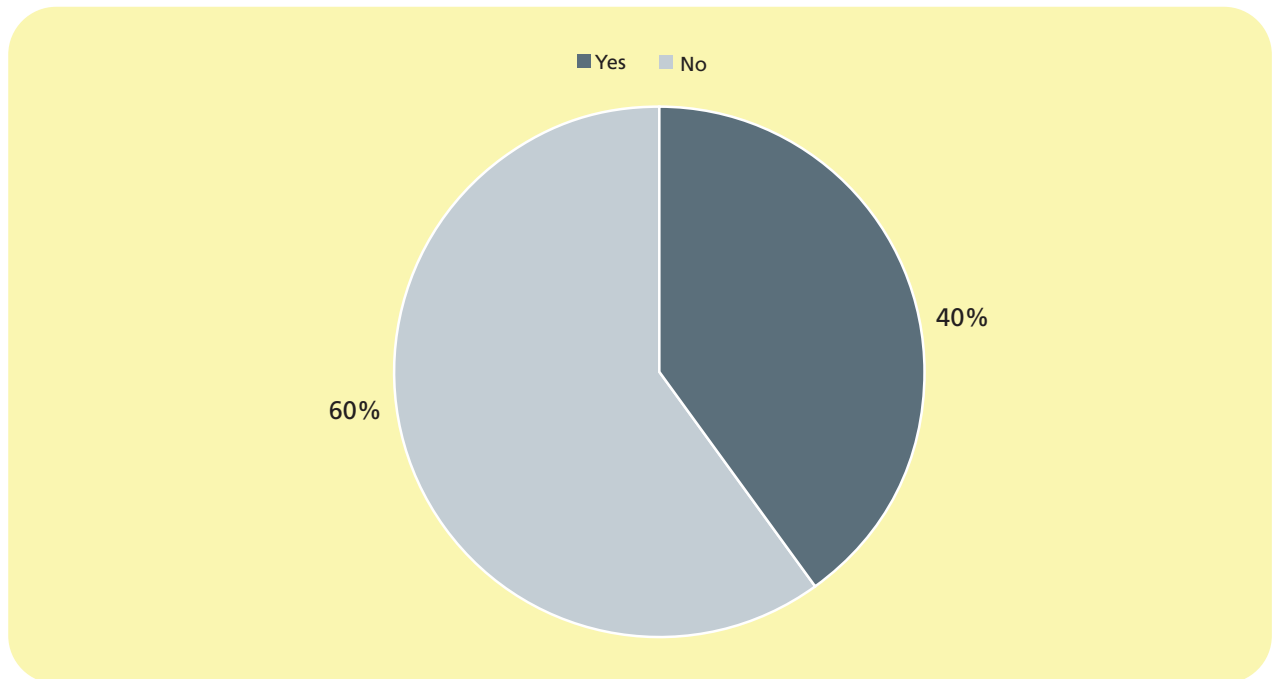


FIGURE 8. GENDER OF FIRST- AND SECOND-CAREER SOCIAL WORKERS

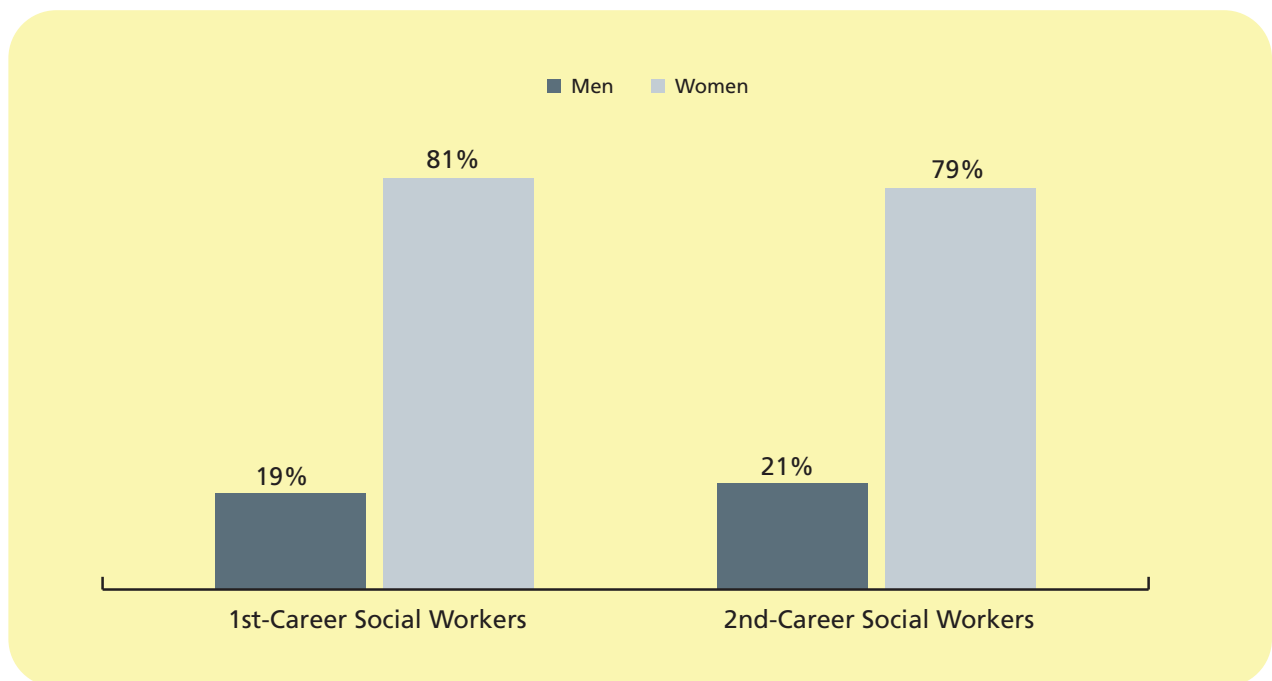
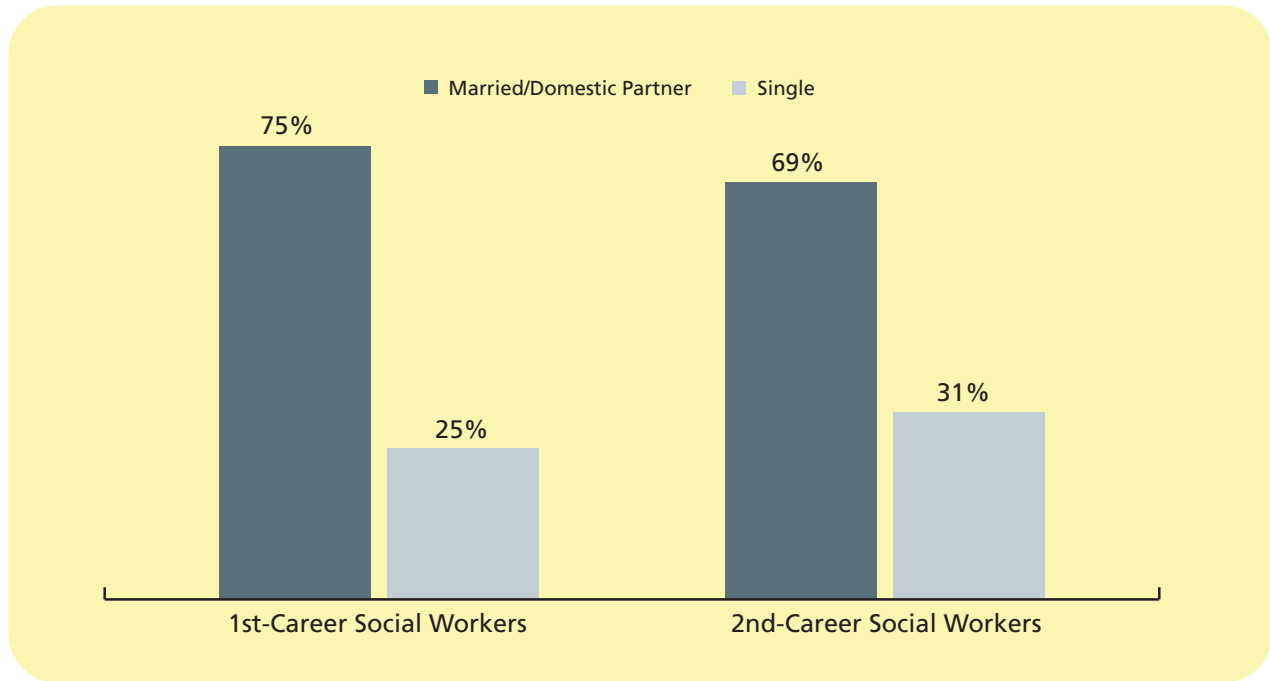


FIGURE 9. MARITAL STATUS OF FIRST- AND SECOND-CAREER SOCIAL WORKERS



Not surprisingly, second-career social workers were much more likely to have first thought about becoming social workers after college (51%) than first-career social workers (19%) (Figure 10). Second-career social workers were also more likely than first-career social workers to have been motivated to choose social work because of their interest in providing mental health services than their desire to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged people (Figure 11). Second-career social workers were also more likely to have been influenced by a mentor, as opposed to a teacher, than first-career social workers (Figure 12).

FIGURE 10. WHEN YOU FIRST CONSIDERED SOCIAL WORK, BY FIRST- AND SECOND-CAREER SOCIAL WORKERS (RESPONDENTS AGES 40+)

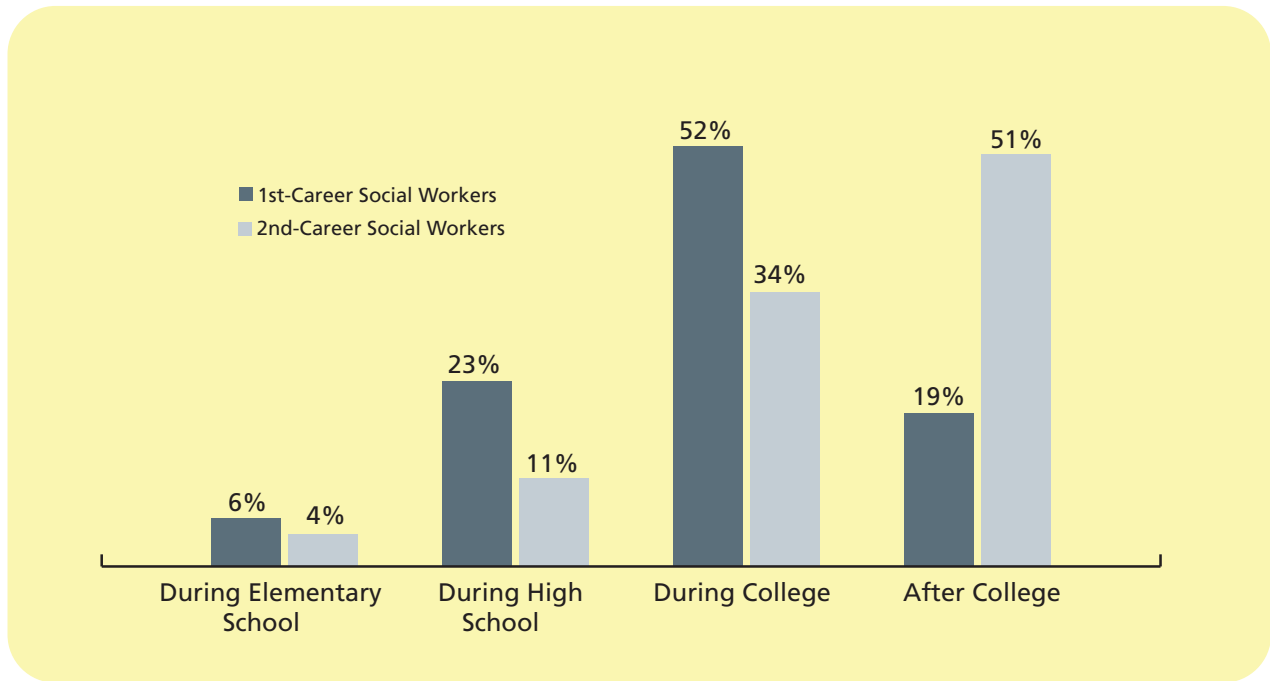


FIGURE 11. INFLUENCING FACTORS FOR FIRST AND SECOND CAREER SOCIAL WORKERS

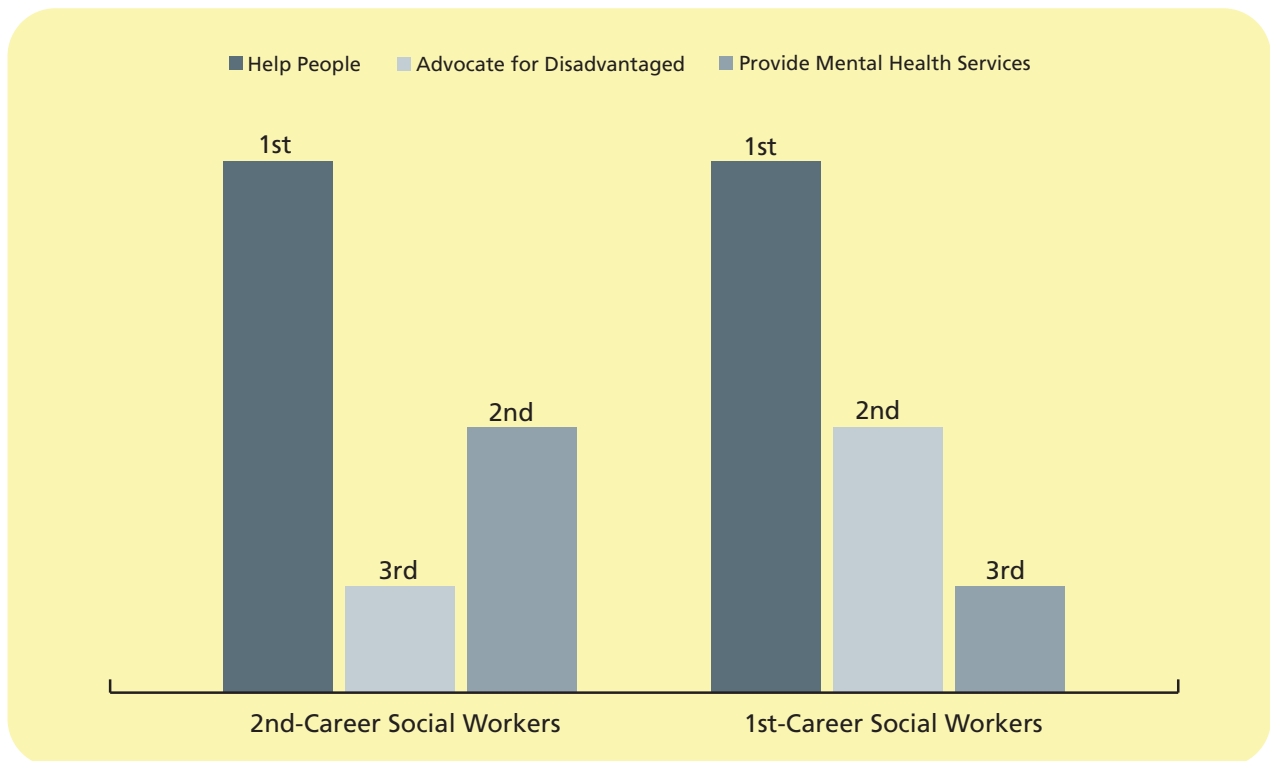
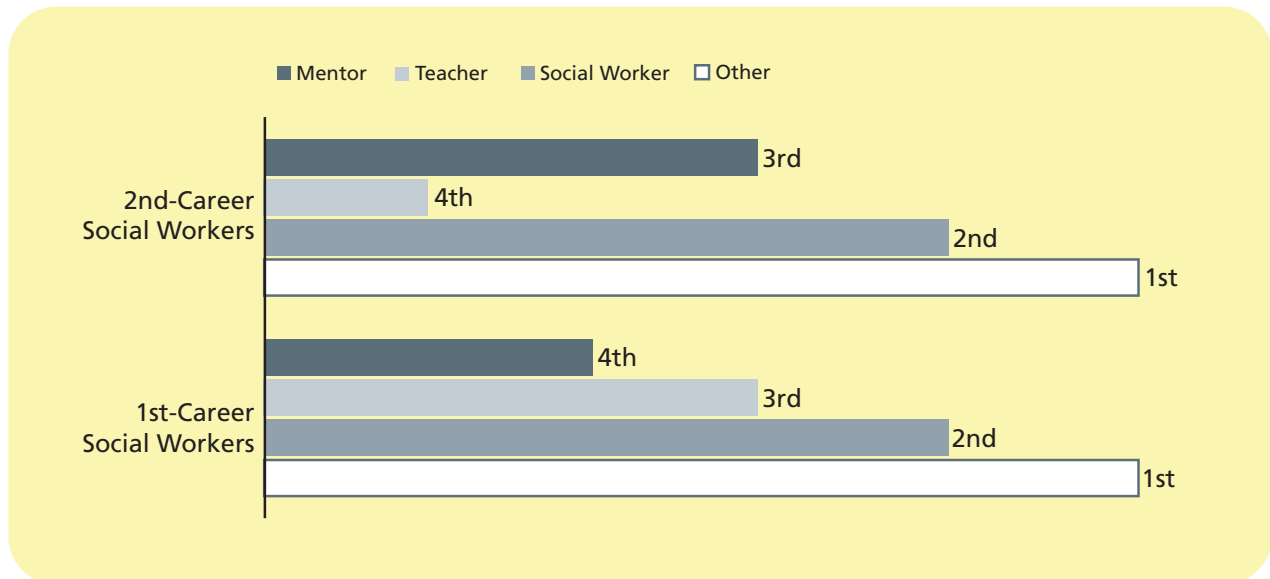
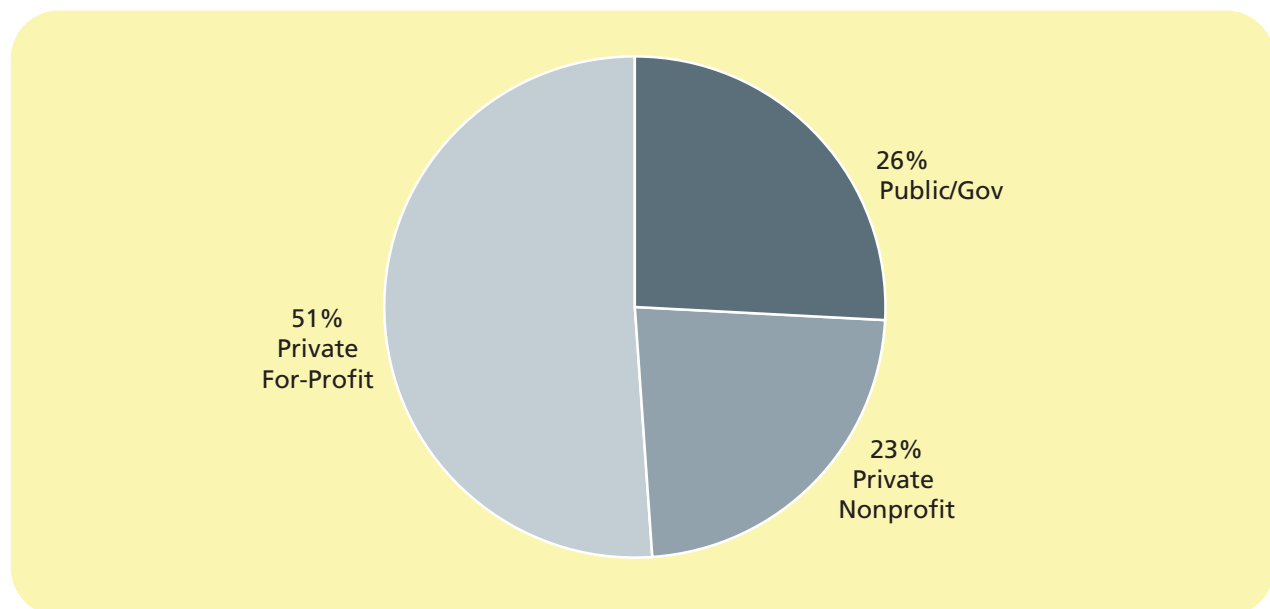


FIGURE 12. INFLUENTIAL PERSONS ON SOCIAL WORK CAREER OF FIRST- AND SECOND-CAREER SOCIAL WORKERS (RESPONDENTS AGES 40+)



Second-career social workers were most likely to have worked in the private, for profit sector (51%) prior to embarking on a career in social work. Twenty-six percent of second career social workers left careers in the public sector, and 23 percent had prior careers in the private, nonprofit sector (Figure 13).

FIGURE 13. PREVIOUS SECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT FOR SECOND-CAREER SOCIAL WORKERS (RESPONDENTS AGES 40+)



## SUMMARY

The social work profession is currently faced with an impending shortage (Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006). By better understanding the influences and career decision points of different groups of social workers, the profession increases its capacity to target its recruitment efforts most effectively. In addition, the social work profession has a unique opportunity to recruit new professionals at different points in the life span, ranging from elementary and high school students to people seeking a satisfying second career.

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