

LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS SERVING OLDER ADULTS, 2004

Chapter 3 of 7

What Social Workers Do

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Chapter 3. What Social Workers Do

Summary of the Findings

- Mental Health (43%), Health (18%) and Aging (16%) are the most common practice areas for social workers working with any older adults. BSWs are much more likely to report their practice area as Aging (32%) than MSWs (13%). Social workers carrying caseloads of more than 50% older adults are most likely to report Aging as their primary practice area (45%) followed by Health (35%). Those serving caseloads of 50% or fewer older adults report Mental Health (58%) as their primary practice area.
- A majority of social workers across most practice areas provide services to older adults.
- Ninety-three percent licensed social workers in the practice area of Aging and 56% in Health carry caseloads that are more than 50 percent older adults.
- Consistent with social workers overall, social workers who serve older adults work a median of 40 hours per week in their primary job. They are less likely to work full-time than social workers who do not work with older adults, and are slightly more likely to work part-time or for multiple employers.
- BSWs are substantially more likely than MSWs to work full-time for a single employer (69% versus 56%), while MSWs are substantially more likely to work for multiple employers (27% versus 15%).
- Social workers in Aging and social workers who have caseloads of more than 50 percent older adults are more likely to change jobs than those carrying caseloads of 50 percent or fewer older adults.
- Almost half of licensed social workers who provide some services to older adults have been with their current employer less than five years.
- Caseload size increases with involvement with older adults: 46 percent of social workers in Aging carry caseloads of more than 50 people, compared to 33 percent of those with caseloads of more than 50 percent older adults and 25 percent of those with 50 percent or fewer older clients.
- Nursing homes, case management agencies for older adults and hospitals are the settings in which social workers carrying caseloads of 50 or more older adults are most commonly employed.
- While most social workers perform multiple roles in their jobs, 85 percent of social workers serving older adults spend 20 or more hours performing one role.
- Direct service is the role most commonly reported by social workers providing some services to older adults (95%), as well as the role they are most likely to perform 20 or more hours per week (63%).
- Social workers in Aging are less likely to spend 20 or more hours on direct services (55%) than other social workers serving older adults (NPA more than 50% caseload, 66%; NPA 50% or fewer, 65%). They spend more time on administration than other social workers (13%, 9%, 10%).

- MSWs with caseloads of more than 50 percent older adults spend the highest median hours on direct care (28 hours) and MSWs in Aging spend the fewest hours (20). There is no variation among BSWs.
- Social workers in hospitals spend the most time per week in direct services (84%); social workers in case management agencies spend the least (50%).
- Social workers perform varied tasks in their jobs. The tasks they are most likely to perform for *any* clients, not just those 55 years of age or older, include: Screening/assessment (86%), information/referral (85%), individual counseling (78%), treatment planning (75%), and crisis intervention (75%).
- Social workers were more likely to spend more than half of their time on individual counseling (32%), psychotherapy (29%), case management (12%), and home visits (10%).
- More than 90% reported performing activities specifically with older clients including communicating with families, using community resources, acting as advocates and using agency resources. The large number of social workers reporting acting as an advocate for older adults, especially among MSWs in Aging, highlights the importance of advocacy for older adults.
- Thirty-two percent of social workers working with any older adults reported that tasks they perform tend to be above their level of training and skills, while 13% report that their tasks are below their level of training.
- Social workers in Aging are more likely to report performing tasks below their skill level than other social workers serving some older adults. This factor influences consideration of a job change.

Practice Area

Mental health (43%), Health (18%), and Aging (16%) are the most common practice areas for social workers working with any older adults. Practice area is important, as it is an indicator of how social workers view their mission and role.

Figure 1 shows that striking differences in practice area exist among social workers providing services to older adults by highest social work degree. MSWs are more likely to report Mental Health as their primary practice area (48%) followed by Health (18%) and Aging (13%). In contrast, 32 percent of BSWs report Aging as their practice area followed by Health (22%), Mental Health (13%) and Child Welfare/Family (12%).

Figure 1. Most Common Practice Areas of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults by Highest Social Work Degree

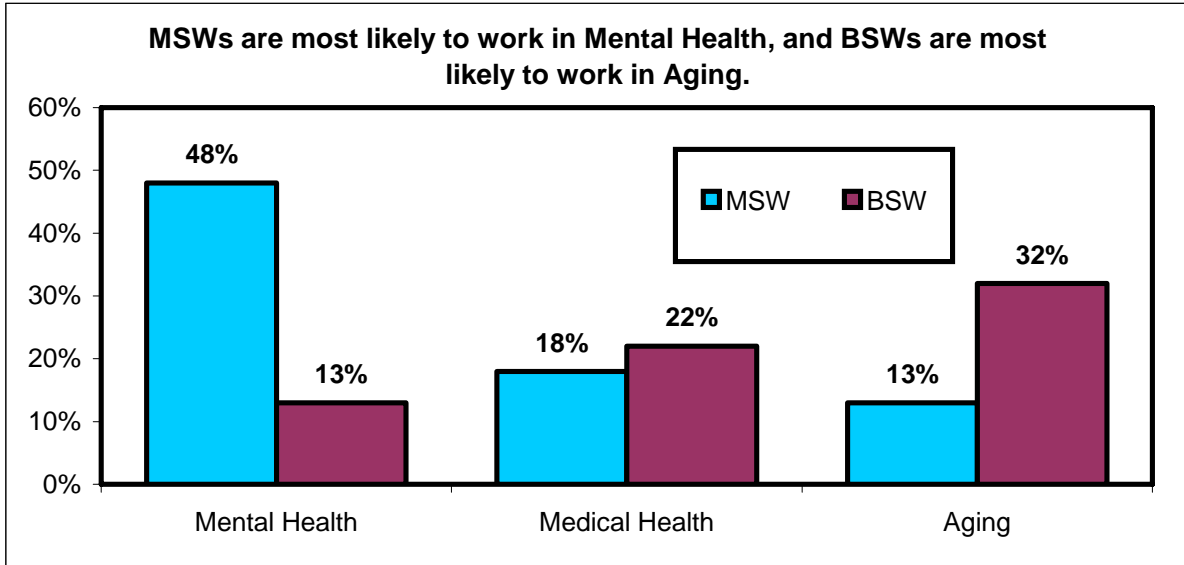


Figure 2 shows that Aging is the most common practice area for social workers with caseloads that are more than 50% older adults (45%). Mental Health is the primary practice area for those seeing 50 percent or fewer older adults (58%), but the practice area for only 12% of those seeing predominantly older adults.

Figure 2. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers in Selected Practice Areas by Emphasis on Older Adults

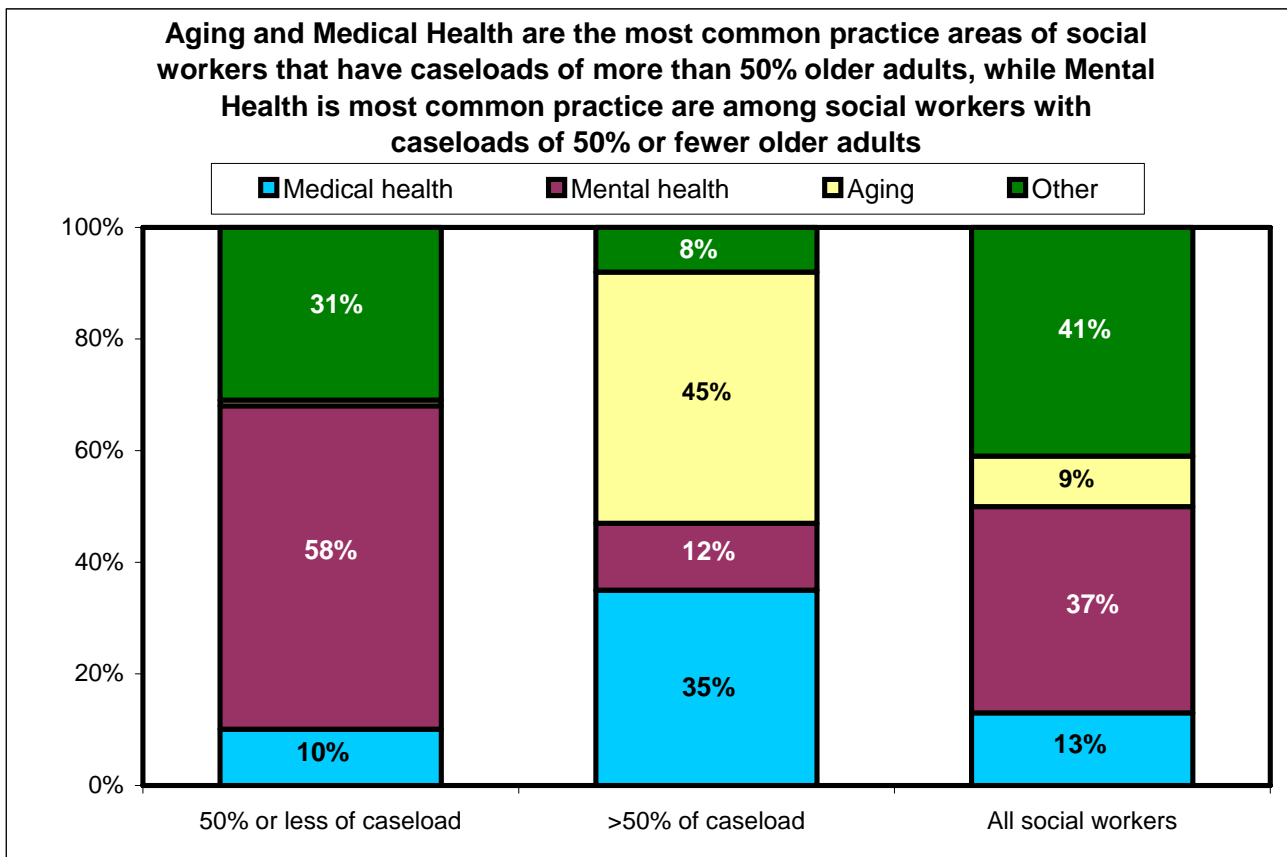


Figure 3 shows that a majority of licensed social workers in almost all practice areas provide services to at least some older adults. Social workers in practice areas focused on children and adolescents are the exception, but many within these practice areas serve some older adults (Child Welfare/Family, 47%; Adolescents, 26%; School Social Work, 27%). Skills and knowledge related to working with elderly clients are therefore clearly relevant across the profession, even among social workers focusing primarily on much younger populations.

Figure 3. Percentages of Caseload of Older Adults by Practice Area

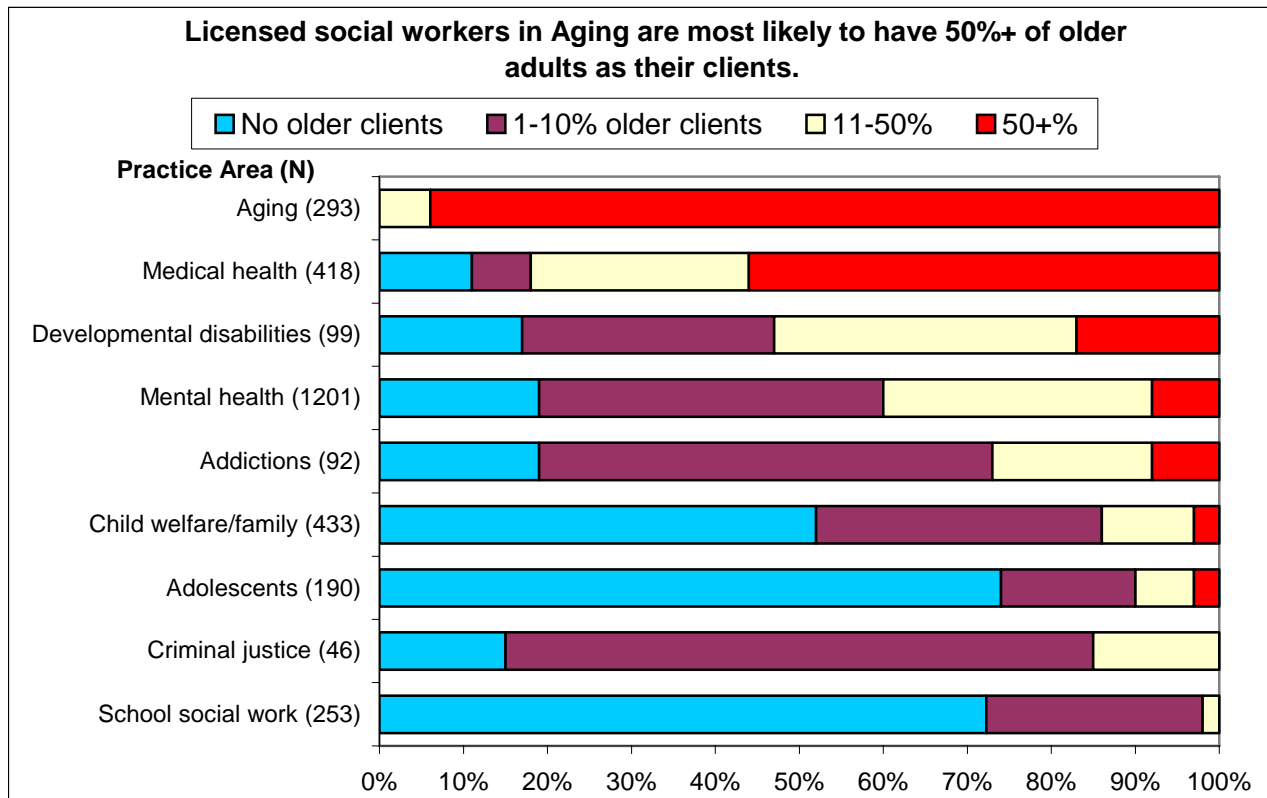
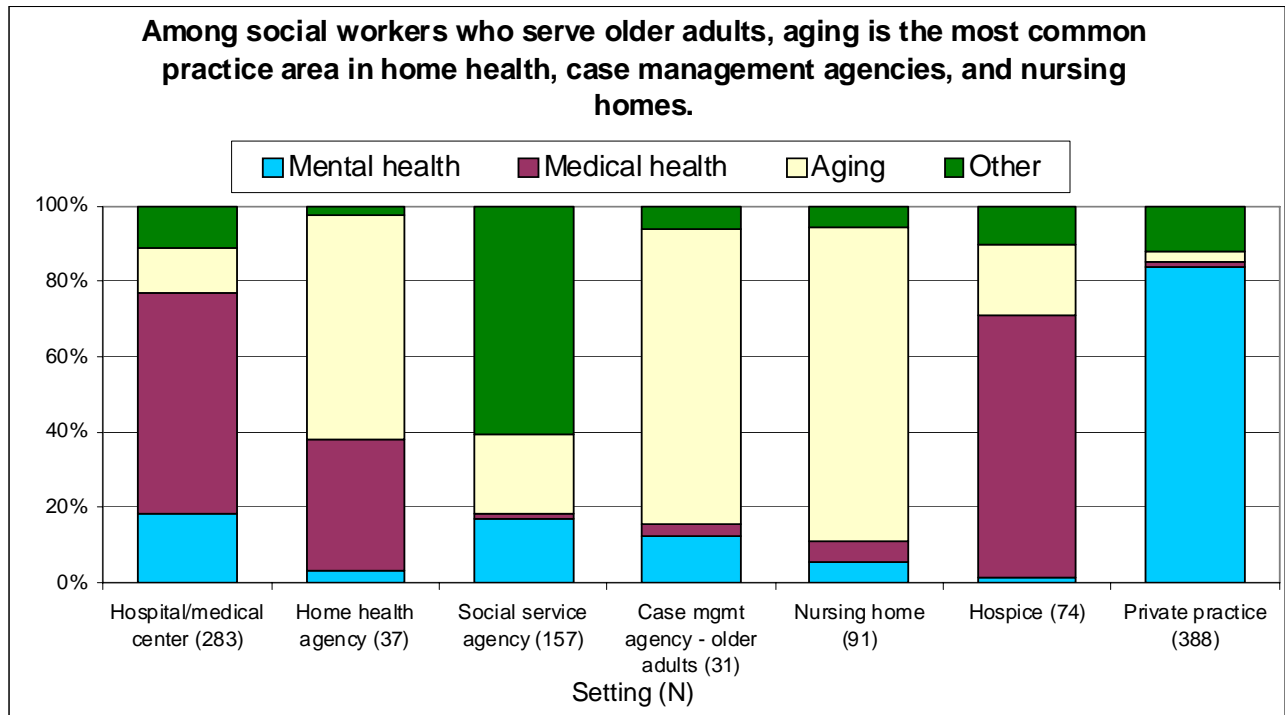


Figure 4 shows that practice areas appear to be keyed to employment setting. Aging is most common in home health agencies, case management agencies and nursing homes. Social service agencies differ from the other settings presented in that only 40 percent of social workers who see older clients in social service agencies have a practice area in one of these three fields.

Figure 4. Percentages of Selected Practice Areas Represented in Different Practice Settings

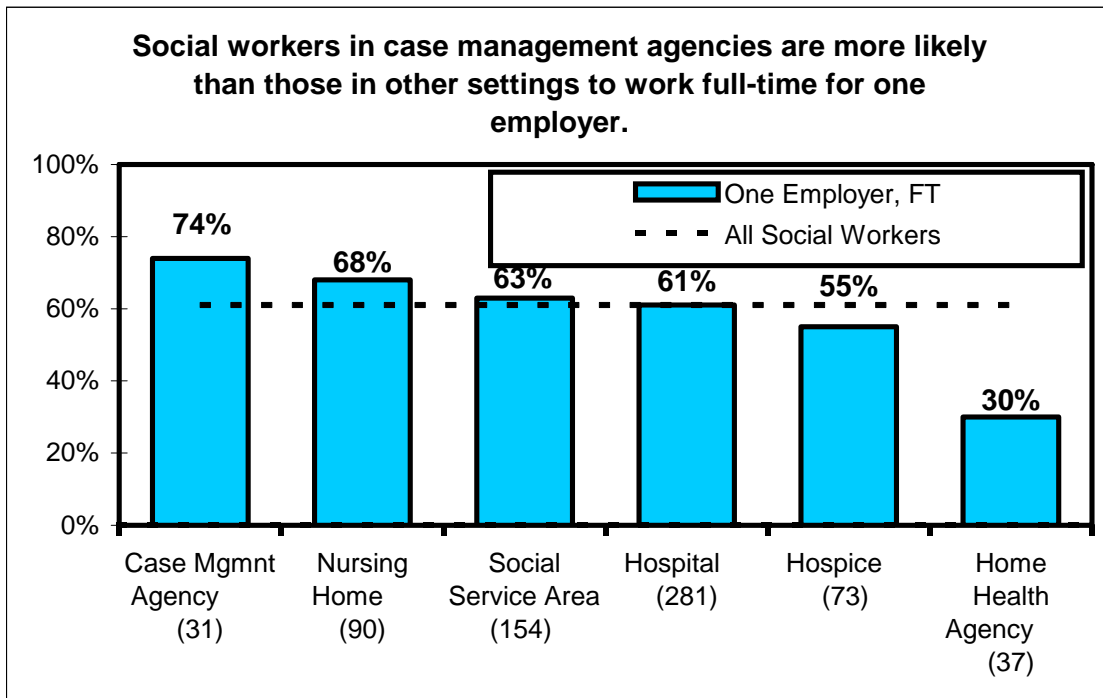


Employment Status

Social workers who serve older adults work a median of 40 hours per week at their primary job. BSWs are substantially more likely than MSWs to work full-time for a single employer (69% versus 56%), while MSWs are substantially more likely to work for multiple employers (27% versus 15%). These patterns are consistent with employment patterns observed in the social work workforce overall.

As can be seen in Figure 5, among social workers employed in settings where older adults are most commonly served, licensed social workers are most likely to work full-time in case management agencies for older adults (74%) and least likely to work full time in home health agencies (30%). Part-time work for a single employer and employment for multiple employers were both most common in home health agencies (22% and 49%, respectively).

Figure 5. Percentages of Social Workers Employed Full-Time with one Employer by Service Setting Full-Time Social Workers



Ninety percent of social workers who work with older adults have been with their current employer for at least one year (Figure 6). Almost half have been with current employers five years or less. Nineteen percent have been with their employer for more than 15 years.

Figure 6. Years of Service with Current Employer of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults, by MSW and BSW

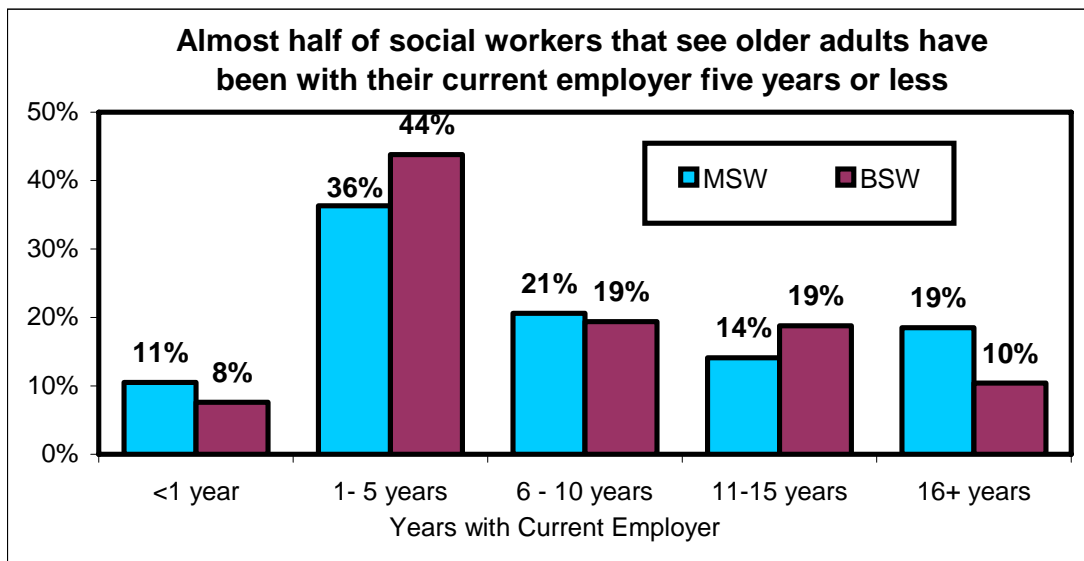
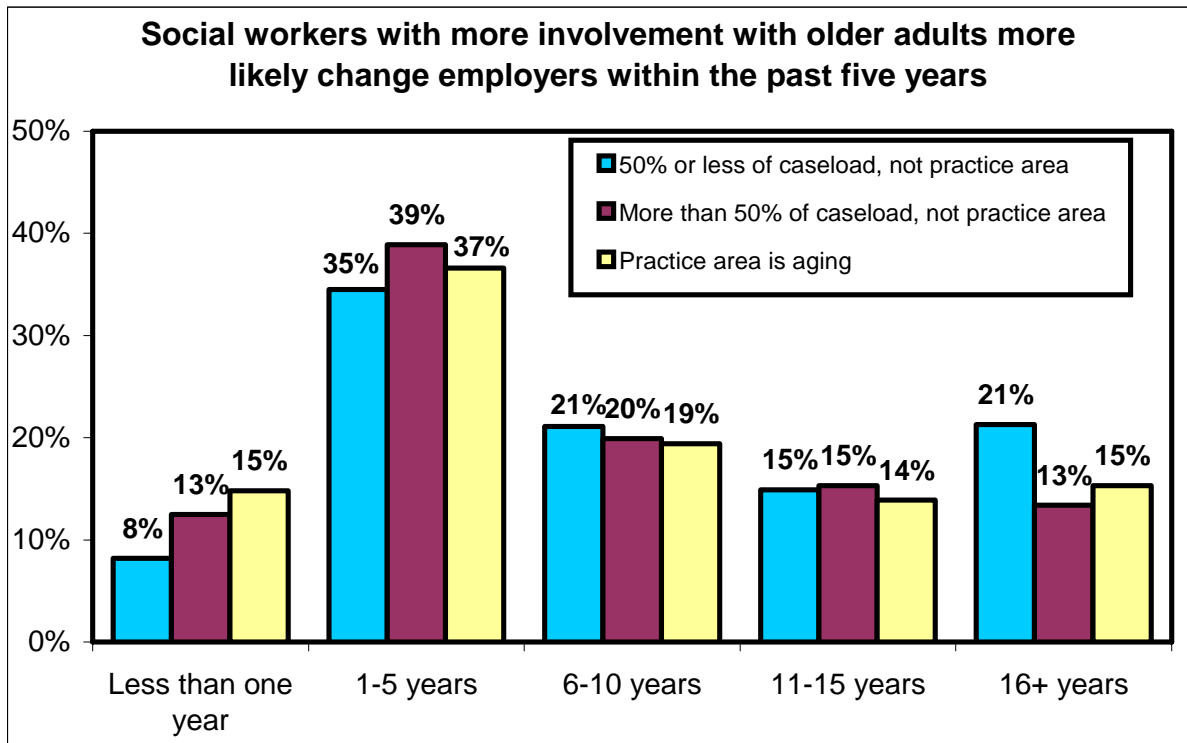


Figure 7 shows that licensed social workers with a practice area in Aging and social workers who see predominantly older adults are more likely to be new to their job in the past year than those serving fewer older adults (15% and 13%, versus 8%). They are less likely to have been with the same primary employer for 16 years or more (15% and 13% versus 21%).

Since the average number of years of experience across these groups does not differ, it appears that social workers who are more involved with older adults are more likely to change employers than social workers serving fewer older adults. Future workforce studies will want to address the reasons for this change which may include increased opportunities as the field of Aging grows and/or dissatisfaction with current employment. Retention is clearly an important issue for social workers who serve older adults.

Figure 7. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers with Different Levels of Involvement with Older Adults, by Years with Current Employer

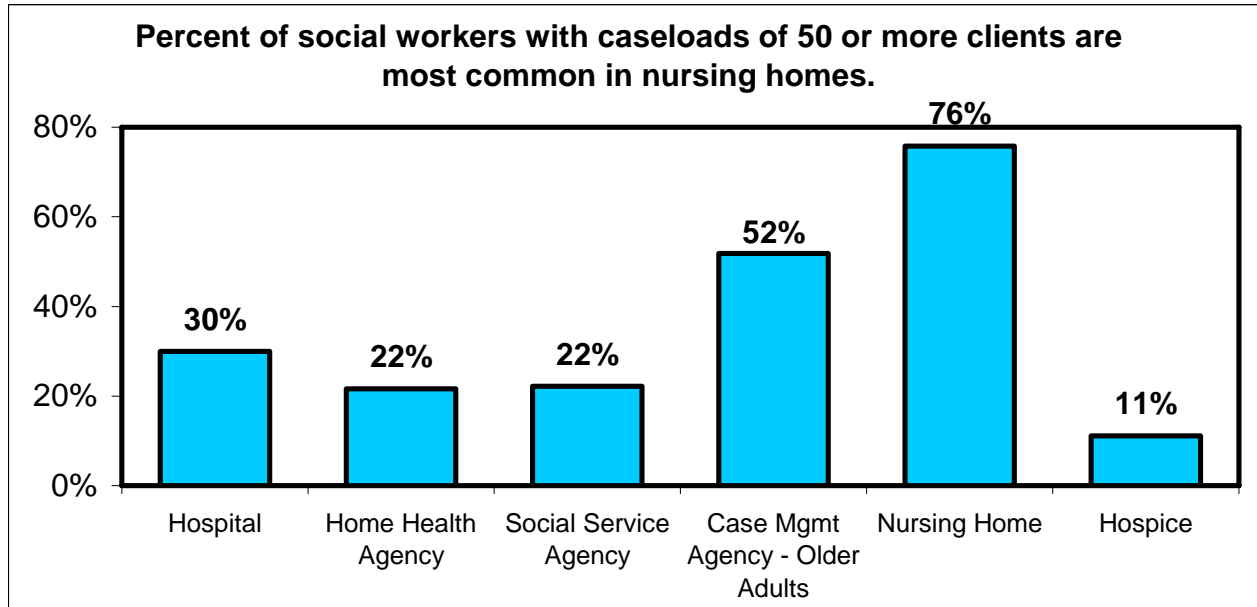


Caseload Size

Social workers who see any older adult clients have significantly larger caseloads in their primary job than social workers who do not work with older adults¹. Average caseload size increases as the extent of involvement with older adults increases. Nearly half (46%) of social workers in Aging have caseloads of 50 or more clients, compared to one-third (33%) of those who have caseloads of more than 50% older adults, and one-quarter (25%) who serve 50% or fewer older adults in their caseloads. Caseloads of 50 or more clients are most common in nursing homes (76%), case management agencies for older adults (52%) and hospitals (30%).

¹ p < 0.0005

Figure 8. Percentages of Social Workers with Caseloads of 50 or More Clients by Primary Employment Setting



Roles

Although social workers who provide some services to older adults participate in a wide variety of roles, 85% spend 20 hours or more per week performing one primary role (Table 1). Providing direct services to clients is the most common role performed by these social workers, and the most likely to be performed 20 hours a week or more (63%). The majority of social workers spend fewer than 10 hours per week on any single role other than their major role across settings in which older adults are commonly served.

Table 1. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers Serving Adults who Spend Any Time or 20 or More Hours per Week Performing Selected Roles

Roles	All social workers		Social workers serving older adults		Social workers not serving older adults	
	Any	20 hours or more	Any	20 hours or more	Any	20 hours or more
Direct services	87%	54%	95%	63%	88%	47%
Administration/management	52%	15%	51%	10%	50%	19%
Consultation	48%	4%	48%	3%	51%	4%
Planning	41%	3%	38%	3%	50%	3%
Supervision	38%	4%	35%	3%	45%	6%
Community organizing	20%	1%	18%	1%	22%	0%
Teaching	23%	2%	22%	1%	24%	2%
Training/education	37%	1%	35%	1%	40%	1%
Policy development	17%	1%	15%	0%	19%	0%
Research	10%	0%	9%	0%	13%	1%

BSWs who serve older adults spend less time providing direct services than MSWs, and slightly more time performing administrative tasks. Social workers in Aging are also less likely to spend time on direct services and more on administrative tasks than social workers not in Aging.

Table 2. Percent of Licensed Social Workers Serving Some Older Adults who Spend 20 Hours or More In Specific Social Work Roles

Roles	Not Practice Area (NPA)	Practice Area is Aging	MSW	BSW
Direct services	65%	55%	65%	59%
Administration/management	10%	13%	9%	13%
Consultation	3%	5%	3%	4%
Planning	2%	3%	2%	4%
Supervision	2%	6%	2%	5%
Teaching	1%	1%	1%	0%
Community organizing	1%	1%	1%	2%
Training/education	1%	1%	1%	0%
Research	0%	0%	0%	0%
Policy development	0%	0%	0%	0%

Social workers in hospitals spend significantly more time than other social workers providing direct services² and significantly less time on administration/management³, community organizing⁴, and supervision⁵ (Figure 9). The reverse is true in social service agencies. Social workers in nursing homes spend more time planning⁶, while those in home health agencies spend less time on direct services and policy development⁷. As has been noted, social workers in Aging are most likely to work in the latter two types of settings.

² p < 0.0005

³ p < 0.0005

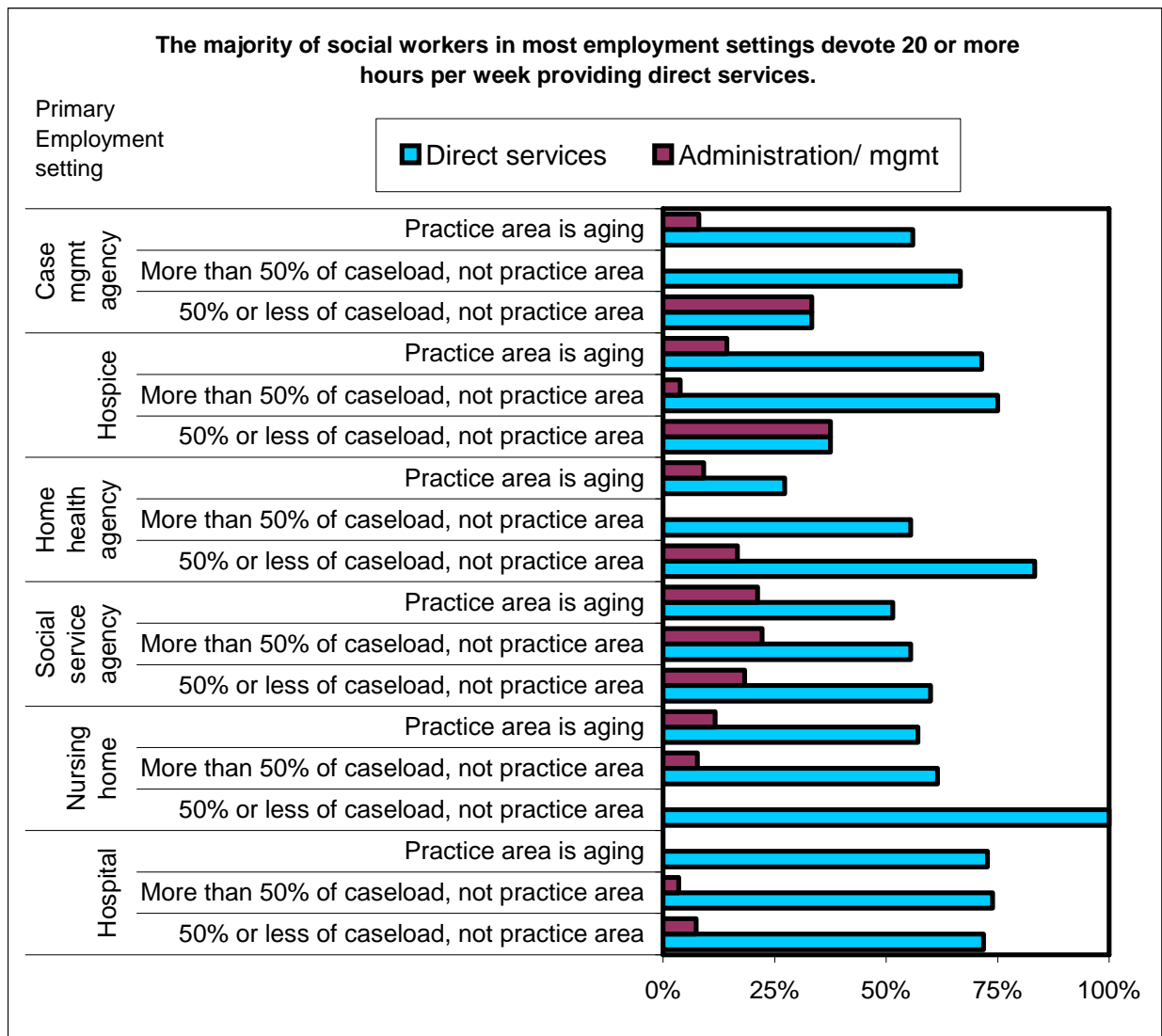
⁴ p = 0.004

⁵ p = 0.039

⁶ p = 0.040

⁷ p = 0.004 and p = 0.001, respectively.

Figure 9. Percentages of Social Workers Spending 20+ Hours Per Week in Direct Services and Administration in Selected Settings



Direct Services

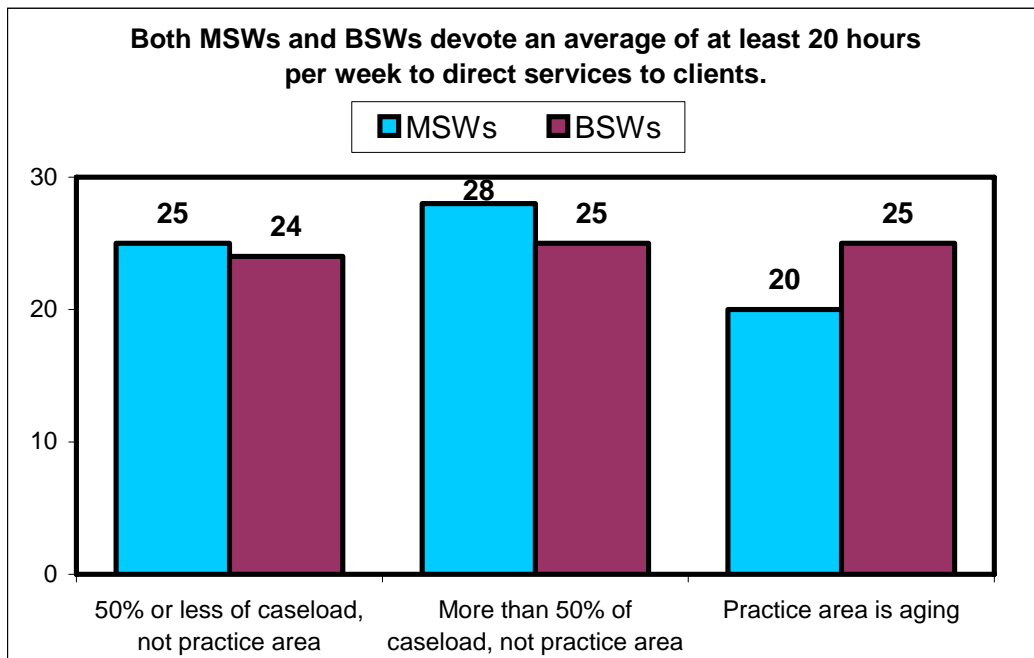
Social workers who provide services to older adults spend a median of 25 hours per week and 75 percent of their time on direct services in their primary job. Substantial differences do not appear among BSWs, but they do among MSWs. Social workers not in Aging who carry caseloads of more than 50% older adults spend the most hours on direct services per week; 25 hours, while those in Aging spend the fewest; 20 hours.

Table 3. Median Hours per Week of Direct Service to Clients for Selected Groups of Licensed Social Workers

Category of Licensed Social Worker	Direct care Hours Primary Job	Percent of Total Hours Spent on Direct Care
All seeing any older clients	25	75%
Practice area is Aging	20	67%
More than 50% of caseload, not practice area	25	78%
50% or less of caseload, not practice area	24	75%
No older adults	20	63%
All social workers	20	68%

Figure 10 shows that the median hours spent on direct care varies slightly by involvement with older adults among MSWs, but not among BSWs.

Figure 10. Median Hours per Week of Direct Service to Clients by MSWs and BSWs, by Emphasis on Older Adults



The percent of total hours spent on direct services varies among settings in which older adults are frequently seen, from a high of 84% for social workers employed in hospitals to a low of 50% for those working in case management agencies for older adults (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentages of Total Hours Spent on Direct Care Among Social Workers Serving Older Adults

Employment Setting	
Hospital	84%
Home health agency	75%
Hospice	75%
Nursing home	67%
Social service agency	63%
Case mgmt agency - older adults	50%
All seeing any older clients	75%

Tasks

Table 5 shows that screening/assessment (86%), information/referral (85%), individual counseling (78%), treatment planning (75%), and crisis intervention (75%) are the tasks social workers serving some older clients are most likely to perform for *any* clients, not just those 55 years of age and older. Of these tasks, social workers were more likely to spend more than 50% of their time on individual counseling (32%), psychotherapy (29%), case management (12%), and home visits (10%).

Table 5. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults Spending Any Time or More Than 50 percent of Time Performing Selected Tasks

Social Work Tasks	Spend Any Time	More Than 50% of Time
Screening/assessment	86%	9%
Information/referral	85%	7%
Individual counseling	78%	32%
Treatment planning	75%	5%
Crisis intervention	75%	4%
Client education	67%	6%
Case management	65%	12%
Family counseling	55%	4%
Psychotherapy	53%	29%
Psychoeducation	49%	5%
Discharge planning	45%	8%
Couples counseling	42%	2%
Medication adherence	37%	2%
Advocacy	35%	2%
Group counseling	34%	3%
Home visits	33%	10%
Program development	31%	1%
Supervision	28%	2%
Program management	27%	3%

Social workers serving older adults perform multiple and similar tasks within their jobs, regardless of degree. The most common are information/referral and screening/assessment. MSWs in Aging and BSWs across practice areas are also highly likely to do case management. In contrast, individual counseling is the task that MSWs NPA most frequently perform.

Notably, differences exist in how social workers' time is concentrated on different tasks; MSWs not in Aging spend most time performing individual counseling and psychotherapy. All others (BSWs and MSWs in Aging) spent most time on screening/assessment and case management.

Table 6. Tasks That MSWs and BSWs Serving Older Adults Are Most Likely to Perform and Spend the Most Time On

	MSW	BSW
Most likely to do...	Screening/assessment (85%)	Information/referral (94%)
	Information/referral (82%)	Screening/assessment (88%)
	Individual counseling (79%)	Case management (75%)
	Crisis intervention (76%)	Crisis intervention (74%)
	Treatment planning (75%)	Client education (67%)
Spend most time on... (average on a 6-point scale)	Individual counseling	Case management
	Psychotherapy	Screening/assessment
	Screening/assessment	Information/referral
	Information/referral	Individual counseling
	Case management	Home visits

Table 7 shows how performance of tasks varies by social workers' level of involvement with older adult clients.

Table 7. Percentages of Social Workers Spending Any Time Doing Selected Tasks

Task	No Older Clients	50% or Less of Caseload, Not Practice Area	More than 50% of Caseload, Not Practice Area	Practice Area is Aging	All Social Workers
Information/Referral	81%	82%	86%	86%	75%
Screening/Assessment	77%	85%	85%	81%	74%
Treatment Planning	72%	77%	68%	63%	66%
Crisis Intervention	78%	76%	76%	65%	68%
Case Management	64%	59%	70%	70%	58%
Individual Counseling	69%	81%	72%	64%	68%
Group Counseling	38%	37%	32%	21%	33%
Family Counseling	55%	55%	54%	51%	50%
Couples Counseling	20%	49%	27%	18%	30%
Medication Adherence	28%	37%	45%	27%	30%
Advocacy	39%	31%	40%	41%	32%
Psychotherapy	43%	64%	35%	21%	44%
Psychoeducation	46%	56%	40%	21%	42%
Client Education	62%	65%	72%	60%	58%
Supervision	39%	29%	28%	28%	30%
Program Development	42%	31%	31%	30%	31%
Program Management	35%	26%	25%	29%	27%
Discharge Planning	35%	38%	59%	55%	36%
Home Visits	44%	25%	41%	51%	34%

The frequency of performing some tasks varied with involvement with older adults. Information/referral, treatment planning, case management, and home visits increased with increased involvement with older adults (Figure 11). Individual counseling, couples counseling, group counseling, psychotherapy, and psychoeducation decreased (Figure 12). Other tasks follow a u-shaped curve; they are common among social workers whose caseloads contain between 1% and 50% older adults, take less time among social workers with caseloads that are predominantly older clients, and are more frequent among those in the practice area of Aging. These include supervision, program development, and program management (Figure 13). Finally, some tasks are an “upside-down u-shape” more frequent among those with predominantly older adult caseloads than among those who see fewer older adults, but are less common among those in the practice area of Aging than among those with predominantly older adult caseloads. These include screening/assessment, crisis intervention, family counseling, medication adherence, advocacy, client education, and discharge planning (Figure 14).

Figure 11. Frequency of Selected Tasks, by Level of Involvement with Older Adults

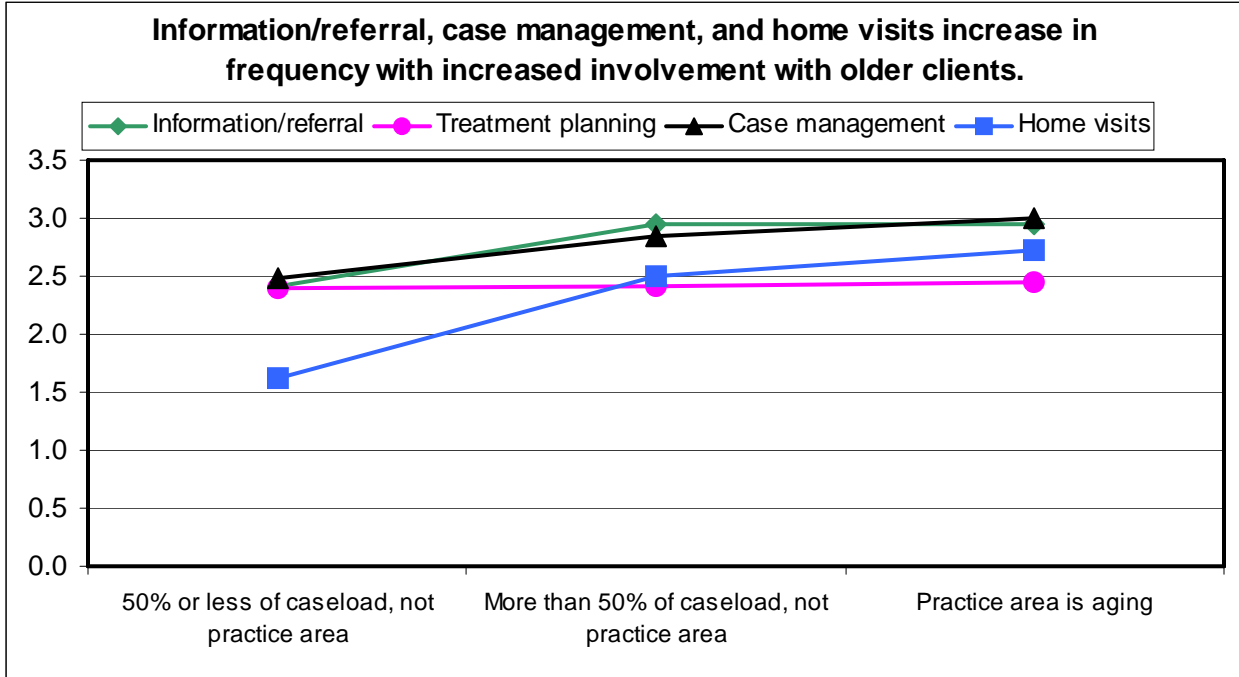


Figure 12. Frequency of Selected Tasks, by Level of Involvement with Older Adults

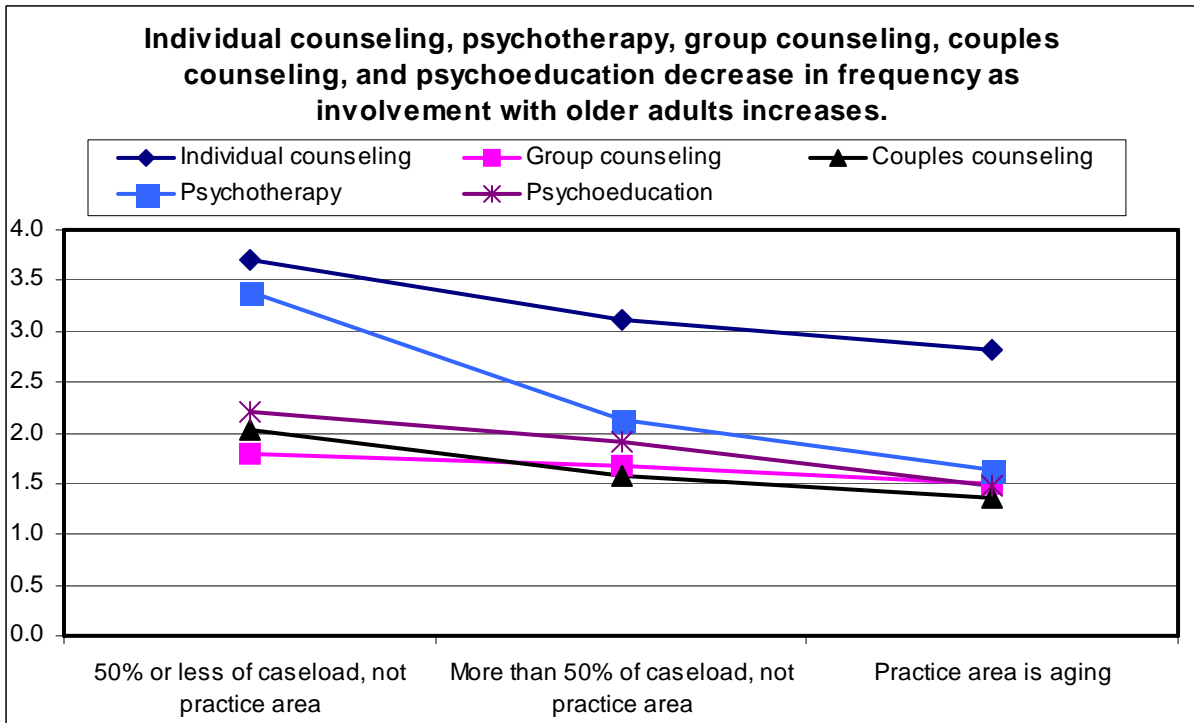


Figure 13. Frequency of Selected Tasks, by Level of Involvement with Older Adults

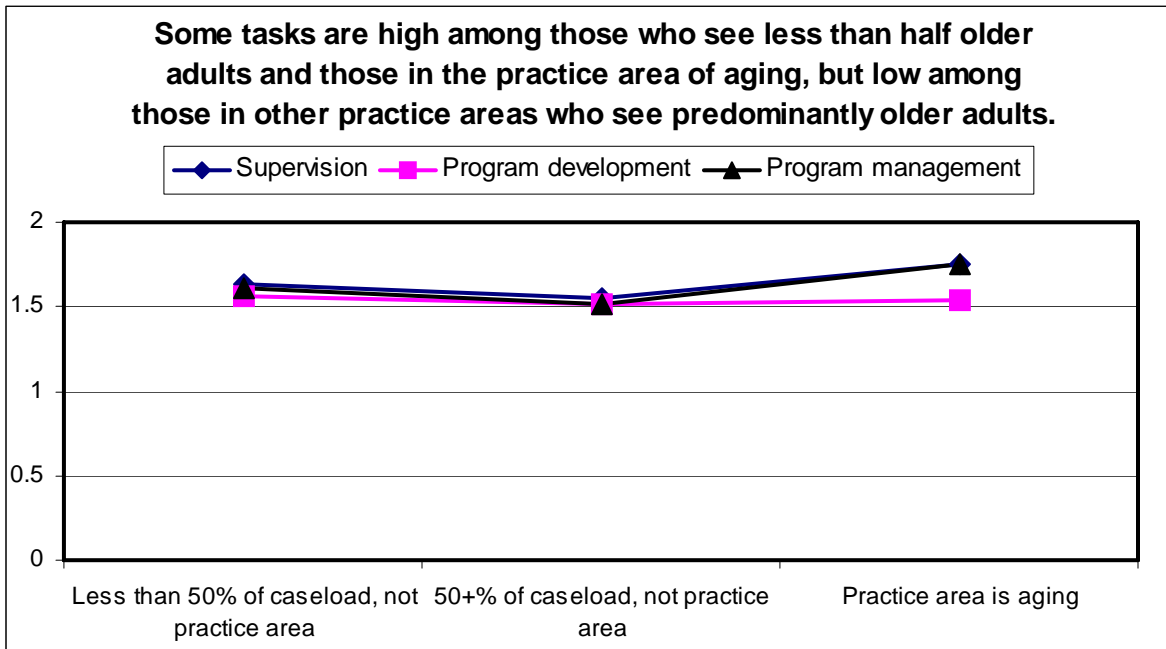
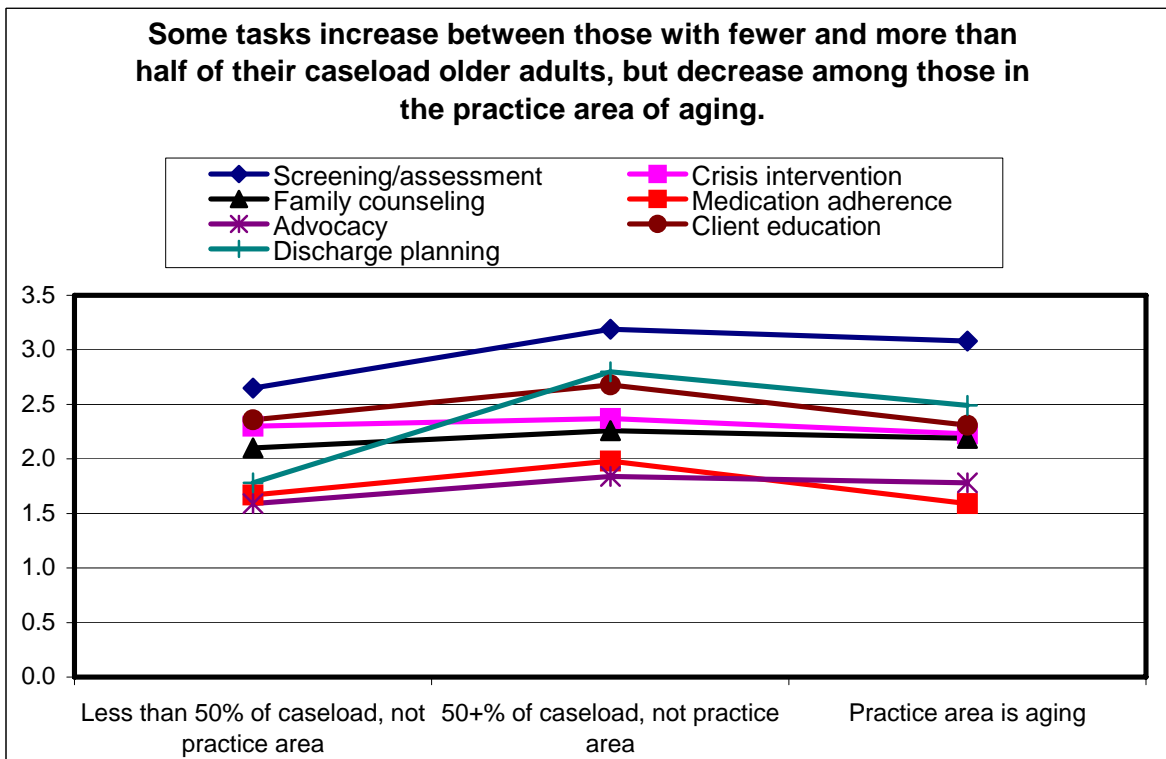


Figure 14. Frequency of Selected Tasks, by Level of Involvement with Older Adults



Thirty-two percent of social workers working with any older adults reported that the tasks they perform tend to be above their level of training and skills, while 13% report tasks tend to be below their level of training. This is not substantially different from the responses of social workers who do not work with older adults.

Figure 15 shows that social workers in Aging were less likely to report that tasks were above their skill levels (27%) and more likely to report tasks below their skill level (19%) than those not in the Aging practice area (33% versus 11%). However, BSWs in Aging were more likely to report tasks above their skill level than MSWs in Aging (34% versus 27%), and less likely to report tasks below their skill levels (11% versus 21%). Significant differences do not appear across practice areas by degree.

Figure 15. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults Reporting Tasks Above and Below Their Training/Skill Level

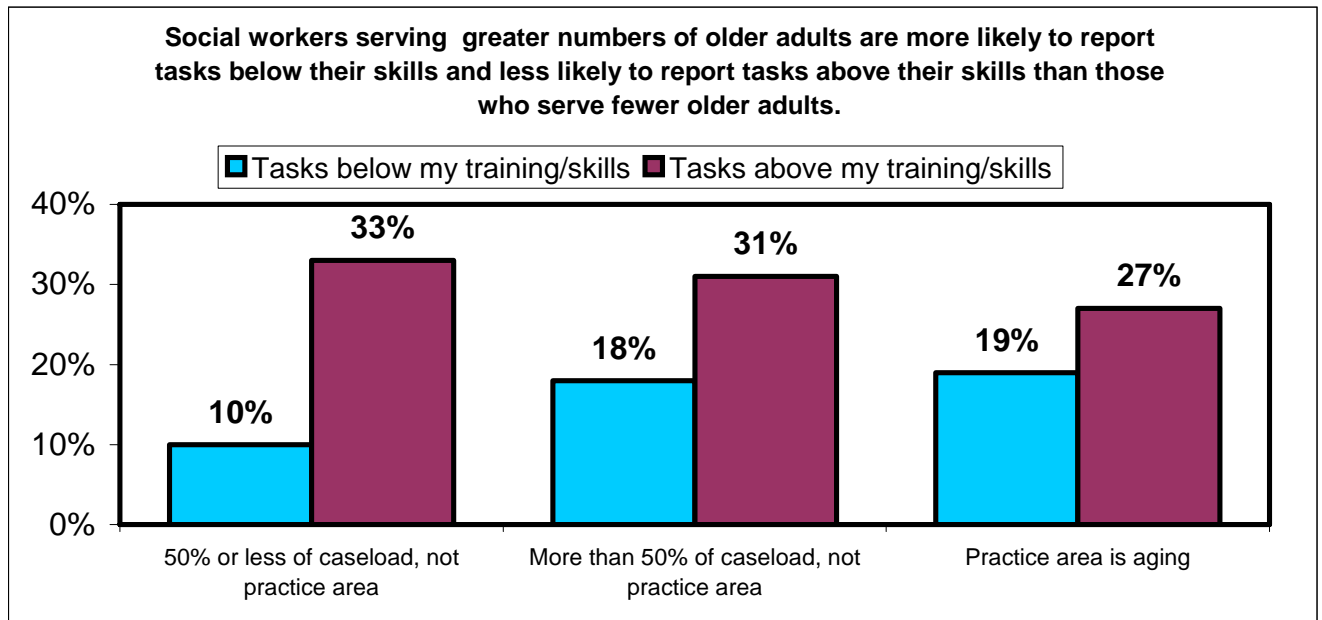


Table 8 lists tasks that licensed social workers serving older adults perform more often and less often in selected employment settings.

Table 8. Services to Clients Reported As More Common and Less Common in Different Employment Settings by Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults

Employment Setting	Do Significantly More...	Do Significantly Less...
Hospitals	Information/referral *** Screening/assessment *** Crisis intervention *** Client education ** Discharge planning ***	Supervision of staff *** Program management *** Advocacy/community org * Home visits *** Psychotherapy *** Program development **
Social Service Agencies	Case management *** Advocacy/community org * Supervision of staff ** Program management * Home visits ***	Information/referral * Treatment planning ** Medication adherence *** Discharge planning *** Psychotherapy *** Psychoeducation * Group counseling *
Nursing Homes	Information/referral ** Discharge planning ***	Psychoeducation *** Client education ** Couples counseling *** Psychotherapy *** Home visits *** Individual counseling ***
Hospices	Home visits * Client education ** Family counseling ***	Psychotherapy *** Discharge planning ***
Home Health Agencies	Home visits *** Advocacy/community org * Information/referral **	Psychotherapy ***
Case Management Agencies	Case management *** Home visits ***	Couples counseling *** Group counseling *** Psychotherapy *** Psychoeducation ***

* p=<0.05

** p=<0.01

*** p=<0.001

To better understand how social workers serve older adults, they were asked about the frequency with which they performed selected activities. More than 90% reported that they communicate with families (95%), use community resources (95%), act as advocates (94%), and use agency resources (92%) when serving older adults. 87% participate in interdisciplinary activities on behalf of older adults. Fewer reported that they train social work students (41%), or participate in research (26%). Using a composite scale, Table 9 shows that BSWs in Aging do more of each of these tasks than MSWs, except for training social work students. The frequencies of most activities were significantly higher for social workers in Aging than for social workers not in this practice area among both MSWs and BSWs. However, substantial differences do not appear between social workers with caseloads more than 50% older adults NPA and those in Aging. Of particular interest is the increased emphasis on advocacy among those in the practice area of Aging.

**Table 9. Average Frequencies of Tasks in Providing Services to Older Adults
(5-point scale from “Never = 1” to “Always = 5”)**

Tasks in Providing Services to Older Adults	MSW			BSW		
	Not Aging	Aging	p-value	Not Aging	Aging	p-value
Interdisciplinary Activities	3.11	4.04	<0.0005	3.64	4.00	0.002
Communicate with Families	3.50	4.17	0.029	3.96	4.28	<0.0005
Use Agency Resources	3.32	4.13	0.029	3.89	4.14	0.040
Use Community Resources	3.40	3.96	0.302	3.83	3.94	0.058
Act as Advocate	3.40	4.33	0.006	4.03	4.35	<0.000
Participate in Research	1.29	1.54	0.001	1.41	1.66	0.394
Train SW Students	1.69	2.13	0.221	1.80	1.95	0.010

The frequency of performing tasks targeted to older clients varies by setting, as shown below.

Table 10. Selected Services for Older Adults Identified as More or Less Frequent by Employment Setting (based on a 5-point scale from “never” = 1 to “always” = 5)

Employment Setting	Do Significantly More...	Do Significantly Less...
Hospitals	Interdisciplinary activities *** Communicate with families *** Use community resources *** Use agency resources *** Act as an advocate for clients *** Train social work students **	
Social Service Agencies		Interdisciplinary activities *** Communicate with families **
Nursing Homes	Interdisciplinary activities *** Communicate with families *** Act as an advocate for clients *** Train social work students *	
Hospices	Interdisciplinary activities *** Communicate with families *** Use agency resources *** Act as an advocate for clients ***	
Home Health Agencies	Use agency resources ** Use community resources *** Communicate with families ***	
Case Management Agencies	Use agency resources *** Use community resources ***	

* p=<0.05

** p=<0.01

*** p=<0.001