

LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS SERVING OLDER ADULTS, 2004

Chapter 7 of 7

Perspectives on Social Work Practice

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Chapter 7. Perspectives on Social Work Practice

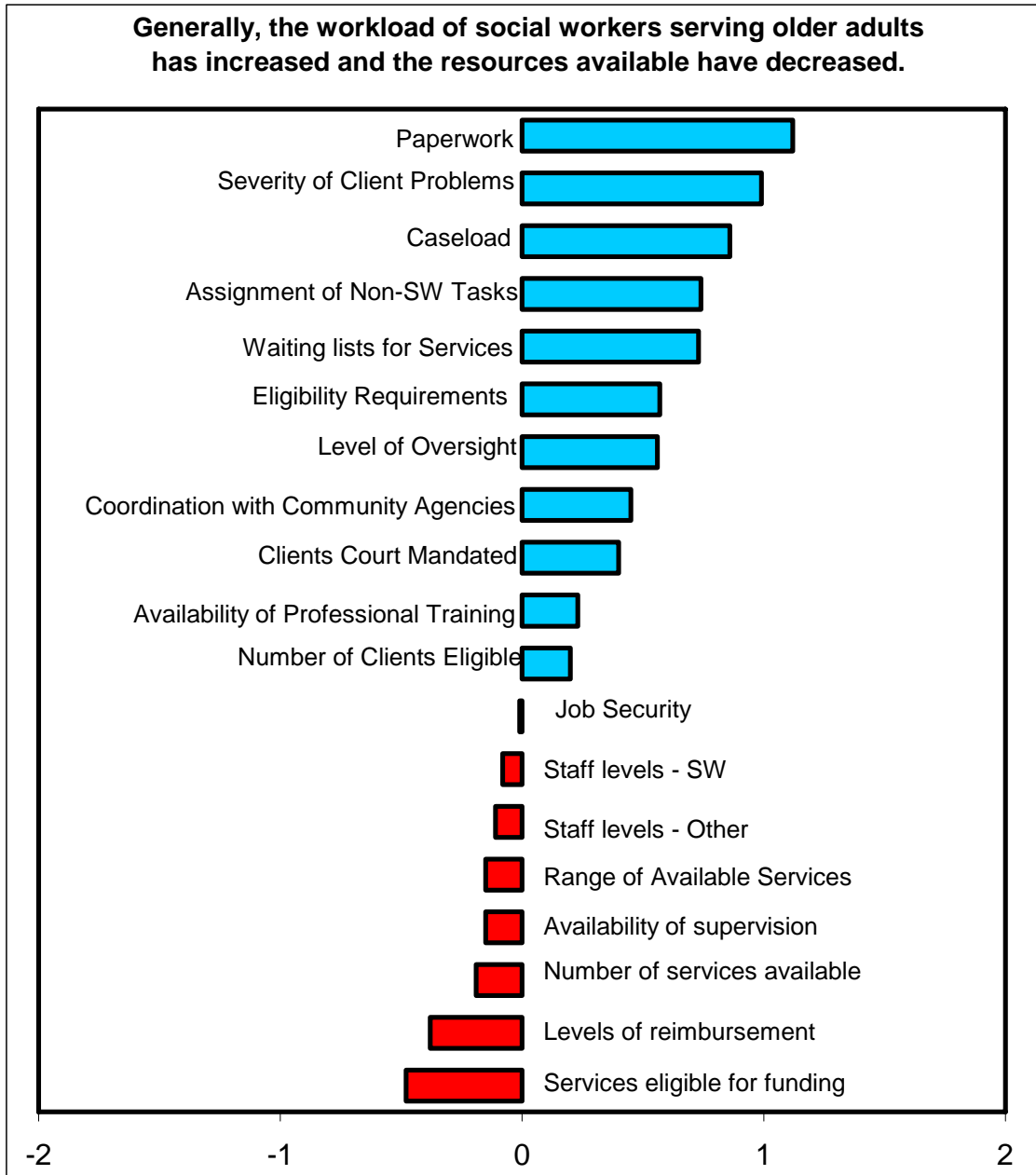
Summary of the Findings

- Social workers have experienced increased demands in their work, but decreased resources and supports over the past two years. Increases in paperwork, caseload size, severity of client problems and waiting lists for services are most frequently reported changes in practice.
- Social workers serving older adults believe they are effective in helping clients with a range of problems (92%), improving the quality of life of clients (89%), helping clients address key issues (85%), helping clients meet objectives (79%) and resolving crisis situations (79%).
- Social workers in Aging and those carrying caseloads of more than 50% older adults evaluate their skills and knowledge related to work with older adults more highly than those seeing fewer older clients.
- Social workers place the highest importance on the availability of services, training and education, and caseload size to improve care for older adults.
- A substantial majority of licensed social workers plan to continue providing services to older adults over the next 5 years, and believe opportunities in the field will increase.
- Social workers in Aging are more likely to plan to retire in the next two years than other social workers serving older adults (6%).
- Higher salary, lifestyle/ family concerns, more interesting work and job stress are the primary reasons given for considering job changes.

Changes in Social Work Practices and in the Service Delivery Systems

Licensed social workers providing some services to older adults report substantial changes in social work practice and the service delivery system in the past two years that have increased barriers to service. More than three-fifths of these social workers report increases in paperwork (74%), severity of client problems (70%), caseload size (67%) and waiting lists for services (60%).

Figure 1. Mean Reported Increases or Decreases in Factors Affecting Social Work Practice and the Service Delivery System



Perspectives on changes in social work practice among social workers serving older adults generally mirror those of social workers overall, as well as social workers who do not serve older clients. Differences reported among social workers serving older adults are seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Percentages of Social Workers Reporting the Following Changes in Factors Related to Social Work Practice and Service Delivery Systems

Social Work Practice Factors	MSWs	BSWs	50% or less of Caseload, Not Practice Area	More than 50% of Caseload, Not Practice Area	Practice Area is Aging
Practice of Social Work					
Paperwork increased	72%	80%	73%	72%	79%
Severity of client problems increased	69%	77%	70%	72%	70%
Caseload increased	67%	71%	67%	69%	66%
Waiting lists for services increased	59%	64%	60%	58%	60%
Assignment of non-SW tasks increased	56%	62%	57%	57%	60%
Level of oversight increased	50%	48%	51%	46%	50%
Levels of reimbursement decreased	46%	46%	46%	44%	44%
Other staffing levels decreased	33%	31%	33%	34%	32%
SW staffing levels decreased	34%	32%	36%	29%	29%
Job security decreased	28%	31%	31%	27%	24%
Availability of supervision decreased	29%	28%	27%	35%	29%
Availability of training decreased	16%	17%	16%	19%	16%
Coordination w/ community agencies decreased	11%	6%	12%	6%	7%
Service delivery system					
Eligibility requirements increased	51%	52%	53%	48%	49%
Services eligible for funding decreased	50%	51%	53%	41%	46%
Court-mandated clients increased	39%	40%	46%	23%	27%
Number of clients eligible increased	37%	46%	37%	38%	51%
Number of services available decreased	41%	36%	44%	35%	31%
Range of services available decreased	39%	34%	42%	34%	27%

Social workers in Aging are much more likely to report increasing numbers of clients eligible for services, which likely reflects their practice focus on serving the growing aging population. They are also less likely to experience reductions in the range of services available or increases in services to court mandated clients. Social workers with caseloads of 50% or less older adults reported the highest levels of change among the groups serving older adults in terms of increases in eligibility requirements for services, services available for funding, the number and range of services available, and number of court mandated clients.

Although there was variation in the changes reported across settings, increased paperwork was among the top three most frequently cited changes in all seven settings associated with higher levels of older adult clients. Increased severity of client problems was among the top three changes in six of these settings.

Table 2. Most Frequently Cited Changes in Practice of Social Work and Service Delivery System, by Employment Setting

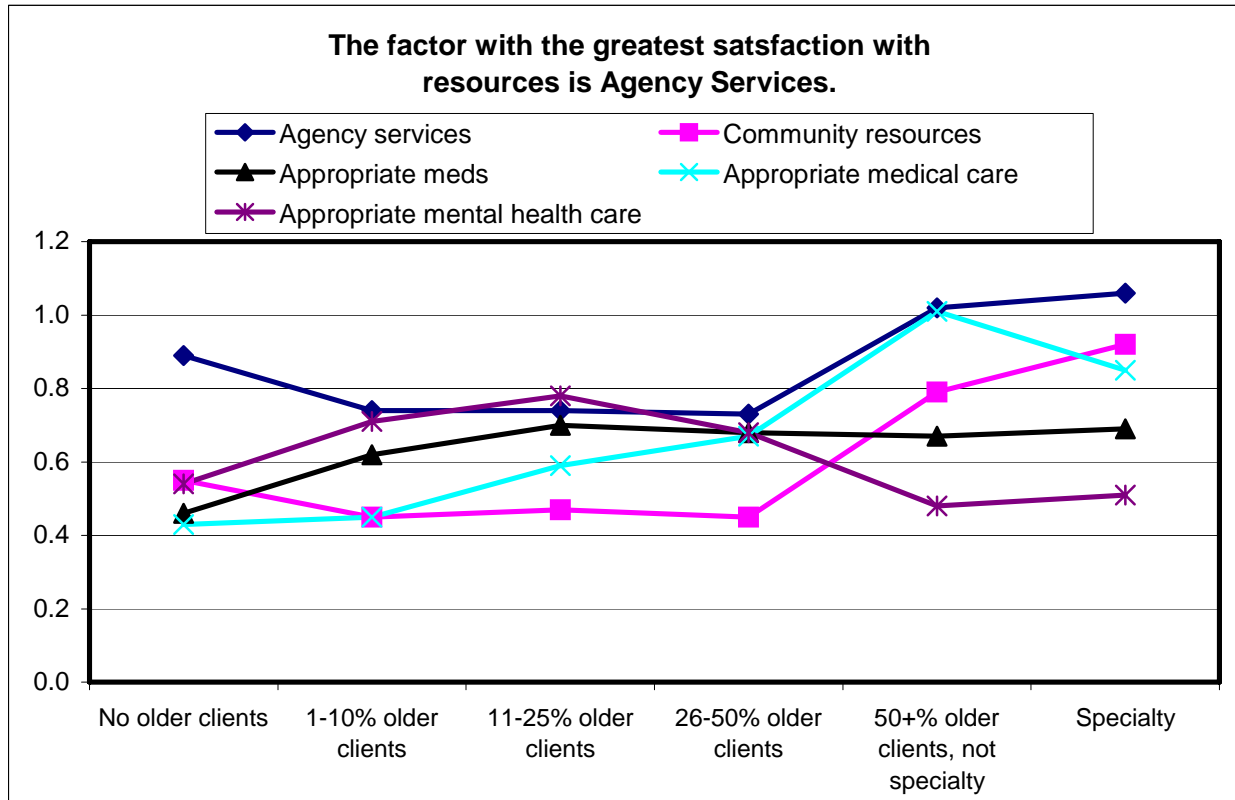
Employment Setting	Changes in Practice
Private Practice	Paperwork increased (67%)
	Services eligible for reimbursement decreased (60%)
	Assignment of non-social work tasks increased (57%)
Hospital	Severity of client problems increased (77%)
	Caseload increased (72%)
	Paperwork increased (66%)
Home Health Agency	Waiting lists for services increased (78%)
	Paperwork increased (67%)
	Severity of client problems increased (64%)
Social Service Agency	Paperwork increased (83%)
	Severity of client problems increased (71%)
	Caseload increased (70%)
Case Management Agency	Paperwork increased (83%)
	Severity of client problems increased (76%)
	Assignment of non-SW tasks increased (76%)
Nursing Home	Paperwork increased (90%)
	Severity of client problems increased (76%)
	Assignment of non-SW tasks increased (61%)
Hospice	Caseload increased (72%)
	Severity of client problems increased (66%)
	Paperwork increased (59%)

Satisfaction with Resources and Skills

Social workers place the highest importance on the availability of services in assisting them to provide care to older adults, followed by training/education and caseload size.

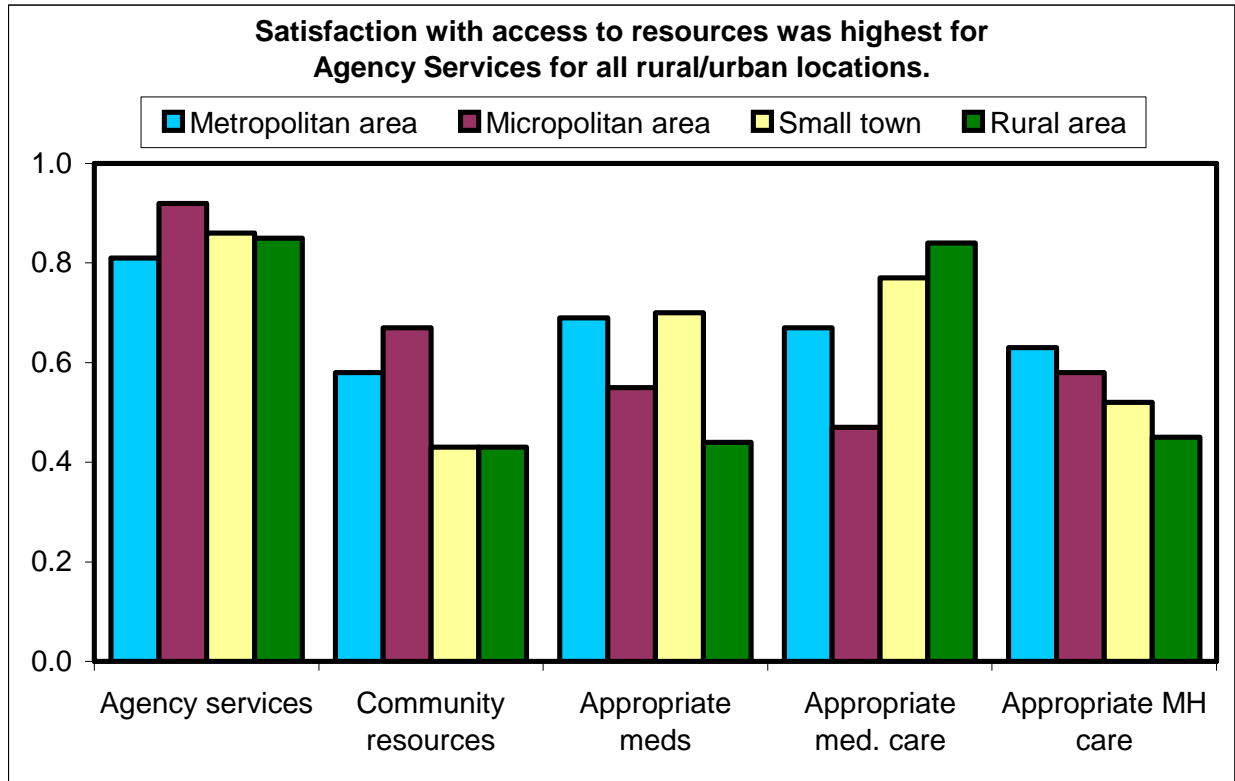
As seen in Figure 2, satisfaction with access to resources increases with the percentage of older adults in one's caseload, with the exception of access to mental health care which decreases. It will be important to further examine why access to mental health care differs. It may be a function of factors including availability of funding, resources, and the skill levels of social workers serving older adults.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with Access to Resources for All Clients



Although there is little variation in access to agency services by demographic area of practice, social workers in rural areas are less satisfied on average than others with their access to community resources, appropriate medications, and appropriate mental health care (Figure 3). They are more satisfied, however, with their access to appropriate medical care. Those serving older adults in rural areas are more likely than other social workers to be employed in healthcare settings such as hospitals or nursing homes.

Figure 3. Levels of Satisfaction by Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults with Access to Resources, by Location



Social workers serving some older adults believe that they are highly effective in helping all clients in their caseloads, not just those older than age55, in assisting with a range of problems (91%), improving the quality of life of clients (87%), helping clients address key issues (86%), resolving crisis situation (80%), and helping clients meet objectives (79%) . Their levels of agreement with their ability to effect changes in working with clients are seen in Table 2.

**Table 3. Mean Level of Agreement with Statements about Satisfaction/Efficacy
(on 5-point scale from -2 to +2)**

Statement/Factor	All Who Serve Older Adults	MSW		BSW	
		Not Practice Area	Practice Area	Not Practice Area	Practice Area
Help clients address few key problems	1.44	1.23	1.18	0.97	1.03
Help clients resolve crisis situations	1.19	1.08	0.96	0.94	0.79
Help clients with range of problems	1.17	1.44	1.56	1.36	1.37
Help clients meet objectives	1.04	0.98	0.94	0.86	0.70
Work with community orgs to adapt system	1.01	0.00	0.29	0.65	0.49
Improve quality of life	0.96	1.14	1.34	1.16	1.38
Satisfied with ability to coordinate care	0.88	0.50	0.73	0.58	0.56
Satisfied with ability in cultural differences	0.78	1.05	0.97	0.84	0.66
Effectively respond to number of requests for help	0.65	0.52	0.69	0.54	0.47
Help families respond to client needs	0.64	0.69	1.25	0.86	1.14
Satisfied with ability to address complex problems	0.54	0.85	1.13	0.85	0.84
Satisfied with ability to help clients navigate	0.54	0.55	1.00	0.85	0.87
Satisfied with ability to influence service design	0.22	0.18	0.32	0.31	0.38
Satisfied with amount of time spend with clients	0.11	0.75	0.35	0.37	0.14

Social workers were asked whether the amount of time was adequate to address client needs. There is not a clear relationship between satisfaction with the time available and extent of involvement with older adult clients, but social workers in Aging are significantly less satisfied than others not in Aging with their time to address presenting problems¹, address severity of problems², address breadth of problems³, and provide clinical services⁴. They are, however, significantly more satisfied with the time available to access basic services⁵, provide services to client families⁶, and address service delivery issues⁷.

Social workers who serve older adults report different mean levels of satisfaction with their efficacy and resources depending upon the location of their practice, as shown in Table 4.

¹ p < 0.0005

² p < 0.0005

³ p < 0.0005

⁴ p < 0.0005

⁵ p = 0.027

⁶ p = 0.031

⁷ p = 0.002

Table 4. Mean Satisfaction of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults with Selected Professional Factors (on 5-point scale from -2 to +2)

Statement/Factor	Metropolitan Area	Micropolitan Area	Small Town	Rural Area
Improve quality of life	1.19	1.14	1.14	1.00
Help clients meet objectives	0.96	0.94	0.94	0.70
Help clients with range of problems	1.44	1.38	1.29	1.40
Help clients address few key problems	1.20	1.10	1.13	1.13
Help clients resolve crisis situations	1.06	0.87	0.94	0.69
Help families respond to client needs	0.78	0.79	0.72	0.93
Satisfied with ability to help clients navigate	0.64	0.64	0.80	0.62
Satisfied with ability to coordinate care	0.53	0.49	0.59	0.62
Effectively respond to number of requests for help	0.55	0.42	0.38	0.54
Work with community orgs to adapt system	0.13	0.23	0.51	0.23
Satisfied with ability to address complex problems	0.87	0.79	0.92	0.77
Satisfied with amount of time spend with clients	0.64	0.65	0.48	0.76
Satisfied with ability in cultural differences	1.05	0.81	0.81	0.83
Satisfied with ability to influence service design	0.19	0.27	0.15	0.45

Self-Assessment Of Geriatric Skills And Knowledge

Social workers who work with older adults are more comfortable with their skills than their knowledge. They rate their psychosocial assessment skills the highest on average (4.35 on a five-point scale), followed by their direct service/intervention skills (4.32), their treatment/service planning skills (4.20), and their case management skills (3.78). They were least satisfied with their end-of-life/palliative care skills (3.38).

They gave the highest rating of their knowledge to theories of aging (3.88), and the lowest rating to their knowledge of psychopharmacology of older adults (3.23).

Table 5. Self-Assessments of Skills and Knowledge of Social Workers who Work with Older Adults

Skill or Knowledge Category	Low	2	3	4	High	Not Applicable
Skills for Older Adults						
Psychosocial assessment	2%	4%	10%	27%	57%	2%
Treatment/service. planning	2%	4%	12%	34%	46%	2%
Direct service./intervention	2%	3%	10%	31%	52%	2%
End-of-life/palliative care	13%	15%	18%	22%	27%	6%
Case management	8%	10%	14%	26%	36%	7%
Knowledge for Older Adults						
Theories of aging	3%	7%	19%	38%	31%	1%
Cultural differences	3%	8%	24%	38%	26%	1%
Aging policies	7%	15%	27%	31%	19%	2%
Psychopharmacology	9%	17%	29%	30%	14%	2%

Average self-ratings vary by the extent of involvement with older adult clients as shown below in Figures 4 and 5. There are few differences between those in Aging and those in other practice areas with caseloads of more than 50% older adults, but those who see older clients as more than 50% of their caseload evaluate their skills and knowledge more highly than those who see older adults as 50% or less of their caseload.

Figure 4. Average Self-Ratings of Skills Related to Treating Older Adults

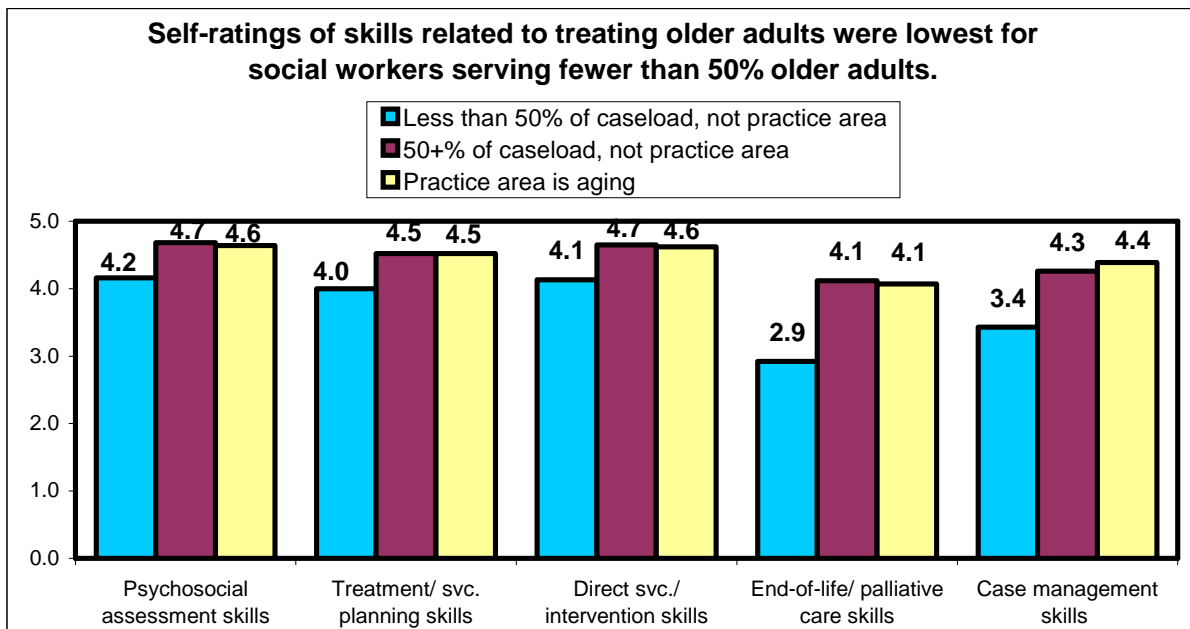
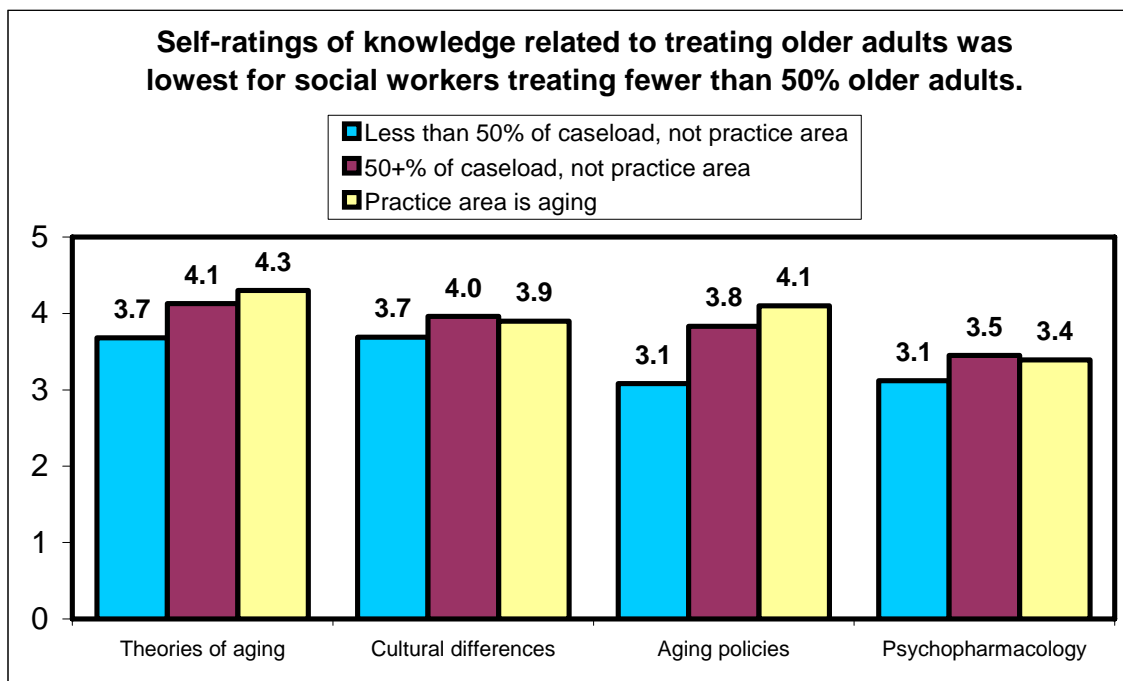


Figure 5. Average Self-Ratings of Knowledge Related to Treating Older Adults



Career Plans

To help understand the likely future stability of the social work workforce, two questions were included in the survey about career plans. The first asked about career plans in the next two years. The second asked about the most important factors that would influence a decision to change the current position.

More than 70% of social workers serving older adults plan to remain in their current position over the next two years. Many respondents plan to leave the field (retirement, 6%; leaving the field but remaining employed, 7%; and become unemployed, 1%). Sixteen percent of inactive licensed social workers reported plans to return to the field. Seven percent of these social workers plan to pursue a social work degree.

Table 6 shows that those in Aging were most likely to indicate they would retire in the next two years. It also shows that respondents with no involvement with older adults were more likely to indicate they would seek a new opportunity or pursue non-degree social work training than either those with 50% or more of their caseload as older adults or those in the practice area of Aging.

Career plans do not vary by degree with the exception that BSWs are more likely to pursue a higher social work degree than MSWs (19% versus 3%). MSWs in Aging are less likely than other groups to plan to remain in their current position (65%), as seen below, and are twice as likely as MSWs NPA to plan to retire (10% compared to 5%). Interestingly, BSWs in Aging are much less likely than BSWs NPA to plan to leave social work for some other field (2% versus 9%).

Table 6. Career Plans in Next Two Years of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults, by Involvement with Older Adults

Career Option	None (N=600)	MSW, NPA (N=1257)	BSW, NPA (N=141)	MSW, Aging (N=186)	BSW, Aging (N=65)	All Licensed SWs Serving Older Adults (N=1813)
Remain in Current Position	70%	72%	70%	65%	74%	71%
Seek New Opportunity/Promotion as SW	30%	25%	27%	30%	20%	26%
Pursue Non-Degree SW Training	18%	17%	15%	15%	5%	16%
Decrease SW Hours	8%	12%	6%	9%	11%	10%
Increase SW Hours	9%	6%	2%	9%	7%	8%
Pursue Additional Non-SW Degree	7%	7%	11%	5%	11%	7%
Other	6%	7%	4%	9%	3%	7%
Pursue Additional SW Degree	8%	3%	21%	3%	17%	6%
Retire	5%	5%	6%	10%	8%	6%
Leave SW but Continue to Work	4%	5%	9%	5%	2%	5%
Stop Working	2%	1%	4%	1%	2%	1%

Note: Sums do not total 100% because respondents could select multiple options.

The majority of social workers who currently serve older adults indicated that they either do not plan to change their level of involvement with older adults (40%) or they plan to increase their time working with older adults (25%) in the next five years. Eight percent plan to reduce their time with older adults, and 4% plan no future work with older adults. Nearly one in four, however, is “unsure” of their plans.

That said, the majority of social workers who serve older adults report that they expect future opportunities to work with older adults to increase. This varies by degree, practice area, and involvement with older adults, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Plans of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults to Change Involvement with Older Adults, by Current Highest Social Work Degree and Current Level of Involvement

Change Plans	MSW			BSW		
	Less than 50% of Caseload, Not Practice Area (N=1009)	50+% of Caseload, Not Practice Area (N=248)	Practice area is Aging (N=186)	Less than 50% of Caseload, Not Practice Area (N=93)	50+% of Caseload, Not Practice Area (N=48)	Practice Area is Aging (N=65)
Increase time	26%	31%	20%	19%	27%	23%
No change	39%	42%	43%	29%	52%	34%
Reduce time	6%	8%	9%	6%	8%	15%
No future work	5%	1%	1%	6%	2%	0%
Unsure	24%	18%	27%	41%	10%	28%

Note: Sums do not total 100% because respondents could select multiple options

Among social workers who serve older adult clients, there were also variations in career plans by employment setting. Table 8 shows that the majority of social workers in all major settings that serve older adults were planning to remain in their current position. Those in hospitals and nursing homes were more likely than those in other settings to report they would remain in their current position, suggesting a greater stability for those employers.

Those in home health agencies were much more likely to plan retirement or “other” activities than those in any of the other settings. Those in nursing homes were more likely to seek new opportunities as social workers or to pursue a new degree, either social work or non-social work. None of those in hospices reported they were planning to retire.

Table 8. Career Plans in Next Two Years of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults, by Employment Setting

Career Option	Hospital (N=283)	Home Health Agency (N=37)	Social Service Agency (N=157)	Case Mgmt Agency (N=31)	Nursing Home (N=91)	Hospice (N=74)
Remain in current position	72%	62%	62%	61%	70%	64%
Seek new opportunity/promotion as SW	25%	22%	33%	29%	30%	30%
Pursue non-degree SW training	15%	8%	14%	16%	11%	12%
Decrease SW hours	9%	5%	8%	16%	14%	14%
Pursue additional non-SW degree	8%	3%	11%	10%	12%	5%
Leave SW but continue to work	7%	0%	7%	10%	9%	4%
Retire	7%	14%	8%	6%	4%	0%
Other	5%	19%	4%	0%	4%	8%
Pursue additional SW degree	4%	0%	9%	3%	12%	7%
Increase SW hours	4%	11%	6%	3%	4%	9%
Stop working	0%	3%	1%	0%	2%	4%

Note: Sums do not total 100% because respondents could select multiple options

Variations in career plans among social workers who serve older adults by practice location are shown in Table 9. The majority of respondents in all geographic areas indicated they would remain in their current positions over the next two years. The second most common response was to seek new opportunity promotion as a social worker. Larger percentages of those in small towns and rural areas indicated they would pursue an additional social work degree.

Table 9. Career Plans of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults, By Rural Status of Primary Employment Setting

Career Option	Metropolitan Area (N=1321)	Micropolitan Area (N=163)	Small Town (N=98)	Rural Area (N=42)
Remain in current position	71%	74%	71%	71%
Seek new opportunity/promotion as SW	26%	20%	29%	29%
Pursue non-degree SW training	16%	13%	14%	12%
Decrease SW hours	11%	9%	10%	7%
Pursue additional non-SW degree	8%	7%	9%	5%
Increase SW hours	8%	5%	6%	7%
Pursue additional SW degree	5%	7%	11%	10%
Leave SW but continue to work	5%	5%	4%	2%
Retire	6%	6%	2%	2%
Stop working	1%	2%	1%	0%

Note: Sums do not total 100% because respondents could select multiple options

The majority of social workers who serve older adults in all four location categories plan to maintain the same involvement or increase their involvement with this population over the next five years. Table 10 shows patterns that are similar for all four geographic categories, with some differences across geographic areas. Relatively small percentages of respondents in each of the four geography types indicated they would reduce their involvement with older adults.

Table 10. Plans of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults to Change Involvement with Older Adults, by Location of Primary Employment

Change Plans	Metropolitan Area (N=1321)	Micropolitan Area (N=163)	Small Town (N=98)	Rural Area (N=42)
Increase time	25%	27%	19%	22%
No change	38%	32%	38%	47%
Reduce time	7%	8%	6%	6%
No future work	7%	9%	7%	11%
Unsure	24%	24%	31%	15%

Social workers reported several primary factors that might cause them to consider changing jobs: higher salary (72%), lifestyle/ family concerns (53%), interesting work (38%) and job stress (35%). These factors are similar across groups of social workers by degree, level of involvement with older adults, and practice location.

Table 11. Reasons that Social Workers Would Consider Changing Jobs

Job Change Reason	% of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Higher Salary	72%	1309
Lifestyle/Family Concerns	53%	965
Interesting Work	38%	685
Stress of Current Job	35%	637
Personal Reasons	35%	627
Location	33%	589
Better Benefits	33%	590
Increased Mobility	23%	419
Lighter Workload	23%	408
Opportunities Training/Education	19%	335
Different Supervisor/Mgmt	14%	260
Peer Support	9%	166
Increased Responsibility	9%	164
Quality of Supervision	9%	159
Other	9%	157
Agency Mission	8%	148
Ethical Challenges	7%	119

Greater percentages of those in Aging and those with larger caseloads of older adults identified better fringe benefits and different supervisor/management as important factors in job changing considerations, suggesting greater discontent with those factors than other respondents.

The majority of social workers who provide services to older adults plan to continue working with this population over the next five years (73%), and the majority also report that they expect opportunities to work with older adults to increase as shown by involvement with older adults in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers Serving Older Adults Expecting Increased Opportunities to Work with Older Adults in the Future

