

# **LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2004**

## **Chapter 2 of 4**

## **Demographics**

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**March 2006**

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## Chapter 2. Demographic Profile of Licensed Social Workers

Social work is the largest and most important social service profession in the U.S. With as many as 840,000 practitioners, depending on the definition used, the profession is second only to RNs in terms of numbers of practitioners. The approximately 310,000 *licensed* social workers in the U.S. represented about 38 percent of all self-identified social workers in the U.S. in 2004.

### Demographic Characteristics

The demographics of a health profession provide important clues about its current status and especially about the types of people attracted by its employment opportunities, education programs, programs and services, and clients. The discussion below focuses on the three most important demographic characteristics: gender, age, and race-ethnicity.

#### *Gender*

Licensed social workers are disproportionately women (81% compared to 51% of the U.S. population). Table 1 shows that this percentage is comparable to the 78% of self-reported social workers in the 2004 Current Population Survey who were women.<sup>1</sup> It is also comparable to the 79% of NASW members who were women in a 1995 survey.<sup>2</sup> It is significantly lower than the percentage for RNs in 2000 (95%).

**Table 1. Percentage of Selected Professions Who Were Female in Selected Years**

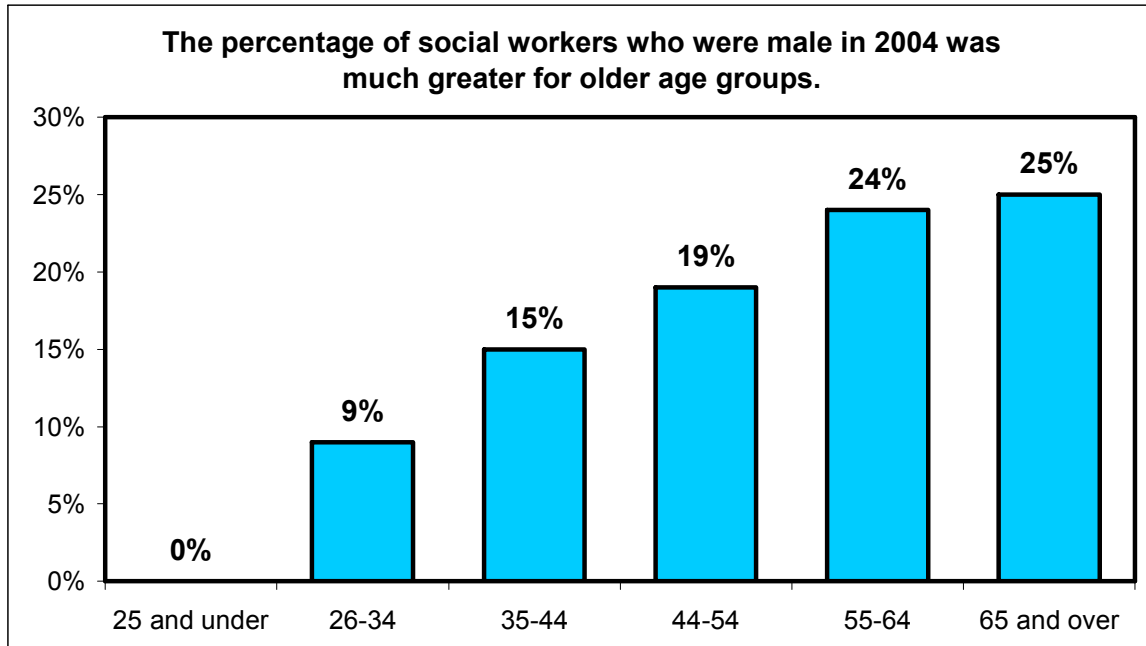
Profession	Percentage Female
Licensed Social Workers (2004)	81%
Self-Reported Social Workers (2004)	78%
NASW Members (1995)	79%
Registered Nurses (2000)	95%
Civilian Labor Force (2004)	51%

The survey responses show that social work is not attracting young entrants who are men. Figure 1 shows that the percentage of licensed social workers who were male was progressively smaller for younger age cohorts, declining from 25% of those 65 and over to fewer than 10 percent of respondents who were less than 35. In addition, a larger percentage of male licensed social workers (8%) than females (5%) were planning to retire in 2004. If this pattern continues, social work will become even more female-dominated as older men age out of the workforce.

<sup>1</sup> Current Population Survey, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Gibelman and Schervish, 1997

**Figure 1. Percentage of Licensed Social Workers Who Were Male, by Age Group, 2004**



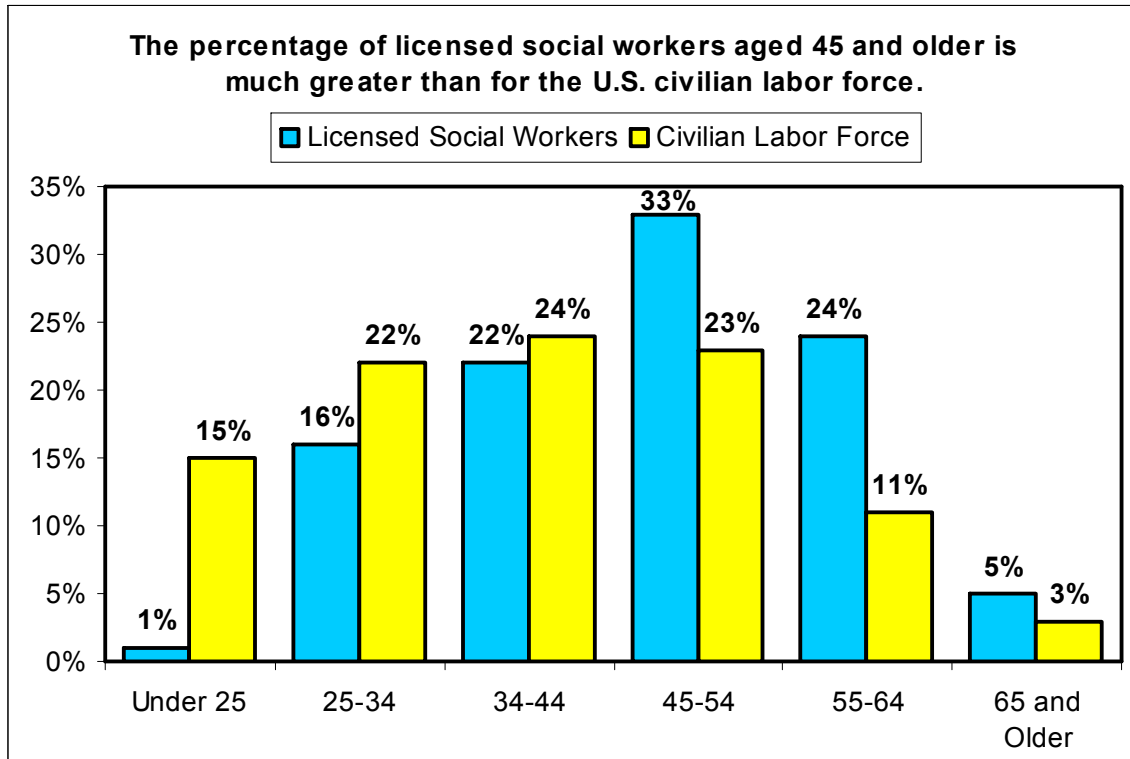
If this shrinkage in the pool of potential new practitioners continues in the future, it could make filling any future labor market shortfalls more difficult. To the extent that this pattern may reflect a decline in attractiveness of the profession for both men and women, this finding could be a precursor to broader recruiting problems for licensed social worker positions in the future.

The gender trend for licensed social workers is different than for RNs, another predominantly female health profession. Although the percentage of RNs that is women is greater (~94% in 2000), the trend for RNs is toward more men, although the rate of change is slow. RN students are now approximately 11 percent male.

### *Age*

Licensed social workers were significantly more likely to be in older age groups than the U.S. civilian labor force in 2004. Figure 2 shows that a higher percentage of social workers are ages 45 to 54 (33% compared to 23%), ages 55 to 64 (24% compared to 11%) and 65 and older (5% compared to 3%).

**Figure 2. Age Distribution of Active, Licensed Social Workers and the U.S. Civilian Labor Force, 2004**



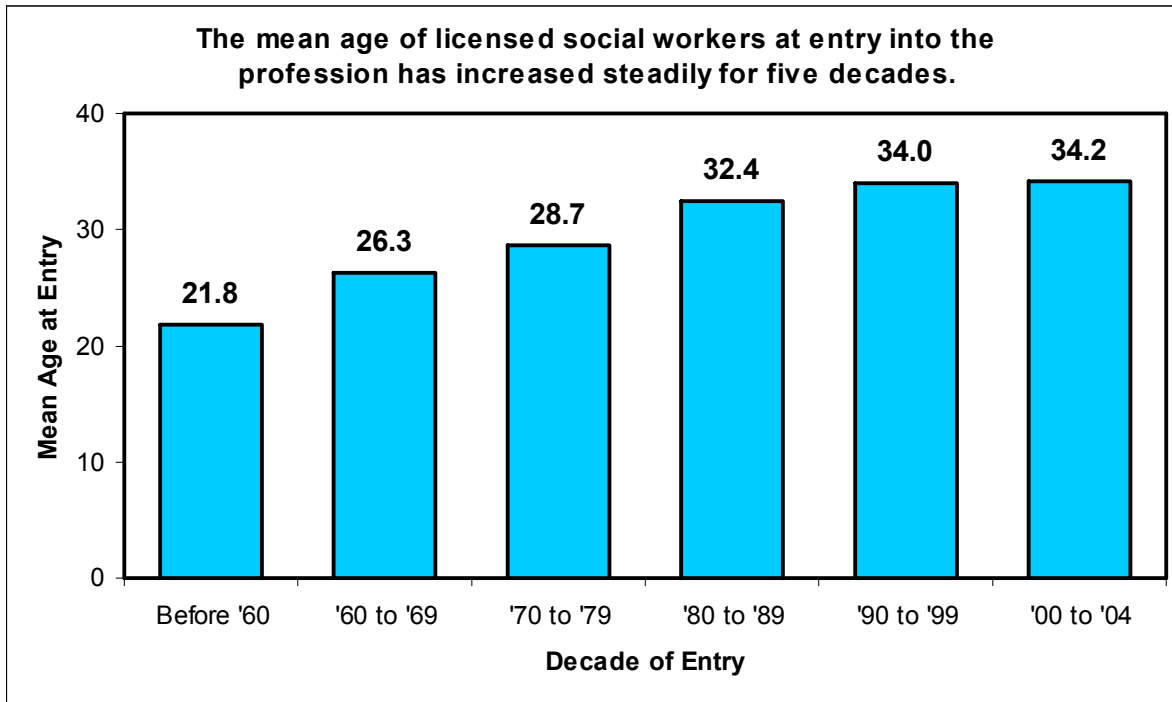
The median age of licensed social workers (49) is significantly older than that of professional social workers (40) and the broader Civilian Labor Force. Table 2 shows that their median age was also significantly older than that of RNs (45), nurse practitioners (44), and dentists (44).

**Table 2. Median Ages of Selected Health Professions and U.S. Civilian Labor Force**

Profession	Median Age	Year
Professional Social Workers	40	2000
<b>Licensed Social Workers</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>2004</b>
Registered Nurses	45	2000
Nurse Practitioners	44	2000
Dentists	44	1999
Civilian Labor Force	39	2000

The mean age of entry into the licensed social work profession has increased over the years, from 26.3 years old for those who entered prior to 1960, to 34.2 years old for those who entered in 2000-2004 (Figure 3). This trend is similar to that for RNs, which has also seen a significant shift toward older entry into practice.

**Figure 3. Mean Age at Entry Into Licensed Social Work, by Decade of Entry**



This shift in entry age is important because it means that the typical career for licensed social workers spans only 25 or 30 years. It also means that many licensed social workers bring significant previous life experiences to their work.

A larger percentage of licensed social workers continue to work past traditional retirement ages than the U.S. civilian population (5% compared to 3%), with a median of 20 hours per week for workers in this cohort.

#### *Race/Ethnicity*

Social work, like most health care professions, is less ethnically diverse than the U.S. population. Table 3 shows that in 2004 licensed social workers were predominantly non-Hispanic White (85%). New entrants (i.e., those 30 or younger) were somewhat less likely to be Non-Hispanic White (83% compared to 86%) and more likely to indicate Other (3% compared to 1%).

**Table 3. Racial/Ethnic Composition of Selected Groups of Social Workers and the U.S. Population**

<b>Race-Ethnic Category</b>	<b>Licensed Social Workers. 2004</b>	<b>Social Workers (Self-Report), 2001</b>	<b>U.S. Pop, 2001</b>
Non-Hispanic White	84.5%	64.6%	71.0%
African-American	6.8%	23.2%	12.2%
American Indian	0.5%	1.3%	0.7%
Asian American	1.4%	2.6%	4.0%
Hispanic	4.3%	8.3%	12.1%
Other	1.4%	-	-

The implications of racial-ethnic balance are often linked to the cultural competence of the front-line workers providing services to racial-ethnic minorities. Imbalances can be overcome to some extent by appropriate education, but some people respond better to providers with the same heritage and background.

### **Educational Background**

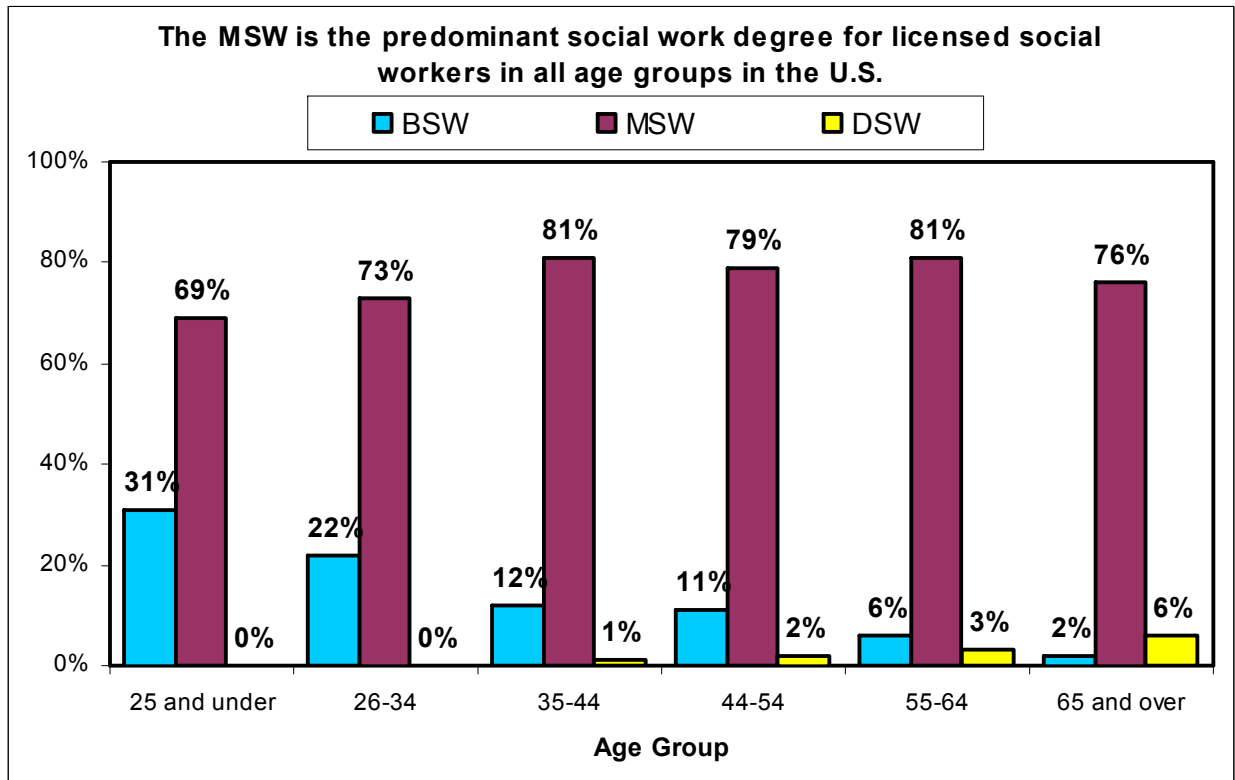
The MSW is the most common first degree at entry to the field. Fifty-nine percent of licensed social workers entered the field with the MSW. Another 31% entered at the BSW level. Younger social workers are far more likely to have entered the field of social work through a BSW program, reflecting growth in social work programs, particularly at the BSW level. Non-degreed social workers account for most of the remainder (8%), with a very small number of social workers reporting a DSW or PhD as their first social work degree.

#### *Highest Degree*

The 2004 survey responses reveal that the Master's in Social Work (MSW) is the predominant social work degree for both men and for women. Nearly four out of five (79%) of active, licensed social workers in this survey had a MSW as their highest social work degree. Twelve percent have a BSW only, and 2 percent hold the DSW or PhD. Eight percent of licensed social workers do not have degrees in social work. Men are more likely than women to have an MSW (81% compared to 78%) or a DSW/PhD (4% compared to 2%).

Highest social work degree patterns varied by age group. Figure 4 shows that higher proportions of those in the lowest age cohorts have BSWs, and this percentage declines steadily for older age cohorts. The figure also shows that the percentages of respondents with DSW/PhD degrees increases steadily from 1% of the 35-44 cohort to 6 percent of the 65 and Over cohort.

**Figure 4. Percentage of Licensed Social Workers with Selected Highest Social Work Degrees, By Age Group, 2004**



While the number of BSWs entering into social work positions has increased nationally, the percent of BSWs continuing their education to complete MSW degrees has declined.

### *BSWs*

BSW programs are an important feeder for MSW programs. Sixty-three percent of first-degree BSWs in the survey subsequently received a MSW, although later BSW recipients have been less likely to receive subsequent MSWs than early BSW recipients. Eighty percent of the social workers who completed a BSW program between 1960 and 1969 subsequently completed an MSW, but the percentage fell to 66 percent of the social workers who completed a BSW in the 1970s, 62 percent of those who completed a BSW in the 1980s, and 58 percent of those who completed a BSW in the 1990s. Forty-two percent of those who received BSWs in the year 2000 or later have now completed MSWs, and another 9% are currently enrolled in MSW programs.

The likelihood that those receiving BSWs as their entry-level degrees will continue on to get a higher degree varies by race/ethnicity. Eighty-nine percent of Asian BSW graduates in the survey subsequently received MSWs or DSW/PhDs, compared to 63 percent of non-Hispanic white BSW graduates, 59 percent of African-American BSW graduates, and 54 percent of Hispanic BSW graduates.

### *Current Enrollment*

Relatively few (3%) licensed social workers reported that they were currently enrolled in a social work degree program. Roughly two-thirds of these were enrolled in MSW programs, while one-third were enrolled in a DSW or PhD program. Interestingly, 45 percent of these current social work students were age 45 or older, suggesting interest in educational advancement nearly the same as for younger age groups. The average age of MSW students was 41.4, while the average age of DSW/PhD students was 44.7.

Seventeen percent of the current social work students (26% of MSW students and 3% of DSW/PhD students) were men. Nine percent were African-American, 7 percent were Hispanic/Latino, and 3 percent were Asian, although this varied by type of program. The MSW students in the survey were overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white (84%) or Hispanic/Latino (9%), while African-Americans and Asians were more heavily represented among the DSW/PhD students, at 17 percent and 7 percent, respectively. Fifty-three percent of those now enrolled in MSW programs had BSWs.