

# **LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS IN HEALTH, 2004**

## **Chapter 3 of 7**

### **What Social Workers Do**

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## Chapter 3. What Social Workers Do

### Summary of Findings

- Approximately 13% of licensed<sup>1</sup> social workers identify Health as their primary area of practice. This is the third most common practice area among active licensed social workers, following Mental Health (37%) and Child Welfare / Families (13%).
- Health is the second most common practice area among licensed MSWs.
- Health MSWs and BSWs are more similar than licensed MSWs and BSWs overall on factors including the roles and tasks they perform and demographic background.
- Health social workers work a median of 40 hours per week in their primary job which is consistent with employment patterns of social workers overall.
- Health MSWs and BSWs are equally likely to work full-time for a single employer, an employment pattern that differs from social workers overall where MSWs are less likely to work full time for one employer.
- Health social workers are most likely to work full time in hospitals and part time in hospices.
- Half have been with their current employer less than five years.
- Licensed Health social workers carry significantly larger caseloads in their primary employment than social workers overall. Thirty seven percent have caseloads of 50 or more clients, compared to 22% of social workers overall.
- Social workers in health clinics were more than twice as likely to carry caseloads of 50 or more clients as compared with hospitals, the setting with the second greatest report of high caseloads (72% v 34%).
- While most Health social workers perform multiple roles in their jobs, 89% spend 20 or more hours performing one role.
- Direct service is the role most commonly reported by social workers in Health providing some services to older adults (98%), as well as the role they are most likely to perform 20 or more hours per week (67%).
- These social workers spend more hours per week providing direct services than social workers overall (28 hours verses 20 hours).
- MSWs and BSWs in Health spend the most time providing direct services to clients in hospital settings (MSWs, 80%; BSWs 87%).

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<sup>1</sup> Health social workers represent 12.7% of respondents to the NASW/CHWS survey. Child Welfare/ Families represent 13.2% of these respondents.

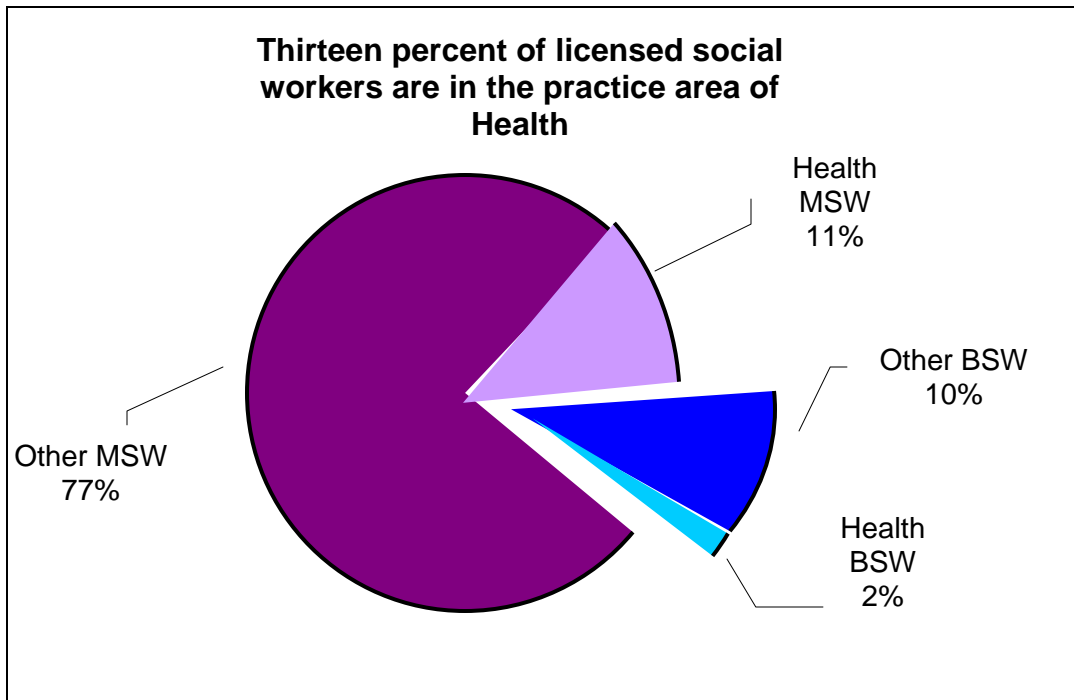
- Information/referral (88%), screening/assessment (85%), and crisis intervention (76%) are the tasks Health social workers are most likely to perform in their social work employment.
- They are most likely to spend more than 50% of their time on individual counseling (19%) or discharge planning (17%). Health is the only practice area that commits such significant time to discharge planning.
- Tasks performed vary by setting. Health social workers employed in hospitals are most likely to spend most time on discharge planning; those in health clinics on individual counseling; and those in hospices on home visits.
- Client diagnoses of chronic medical conditions, acute medical conditions and physical disabilities influence the type of tasks performed by Health social workers.
- Health social workers are more likely to report that tasks performed in their jobs are below their level of training compared to social workers overall (19% versus 13%), a factor that seems to influence consideration of job changes.
- Social workers working in health clinics are twice as likely to perceive tasks as below their skill level as compared to social workers overall (26% versus 14%).
- MSWs were more likely than BSWs to report tasks as below their level of training and skills (20% versus 11%) and were less likely to report tasks above their skill level (30% versus 43%).
- Two fifths of MSWs (42%) employed in hospices report that tasks are above their skill level, the highest percentage reported for MSWs by setting.

### **Practice Area**

Thirteen percent (n = 418) of active, licensed social workers responding to the NASW/CHWS survey indicated that Health was their practice area in their primary job. This made Health the third most common practice area among active, licensed social workers overall.

Health is the second most common practice area reported by social workers with a master's degree in social work (MSW). MSWs comprise 82% of social workers in this practice area, and BSWs 13%. Figure 1 shows the percentages of MSWs and BSWs in Health and other practice areas. While BSWs are a significantly smaller cohort, insights into the similarities and differences between these two groups is important, since the number of BSWs being produced by schools of social work is increasing and as BSWs are a major feeder into higher degree programs.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Licensed Social Workers by Practice Area and Degree**



Among all active, licensed social workers who hold more than one job, 6% of those not in Health in their primary job report Health as their focus of practice in their second job. Most of these social workers identify Mental Health (49%) and Aging (24%) as their primary practice areas. Among Health social workers, Health (33%), Mental Health (27%) and Aging (11%) are the primary focuses of practice in secondary jobs.

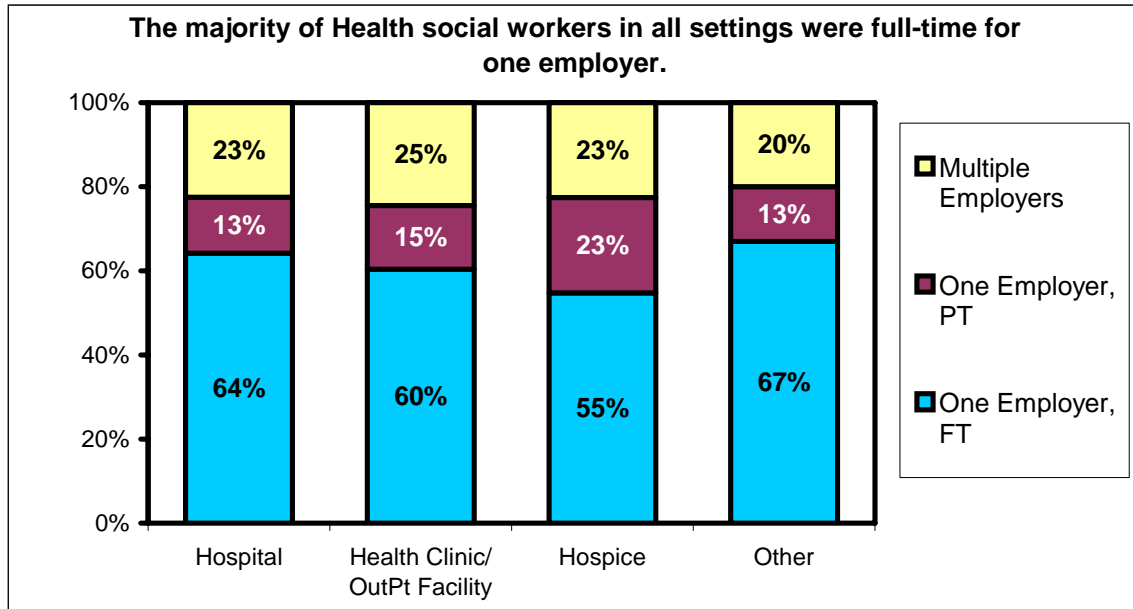
### **Employment Status**

Social workers in Health work a median of 40 hours per week at their primary job, as do social workers overall.

The median hours worked per week by MSWs and BSWs are similar, an employment pattern that differs from social workers overall. MSWs and BSWs in Health are equally likely to work full-time for a single employer (both 61%). Among social workers overall, BSWs are more likely than MSWs to work full-time for a single employer. Health BSWs are more likely than MSWs to work part-time for a single employer (24% versus 15%), while MSWs are more likely to work for multiple employers (25% versus 15%).

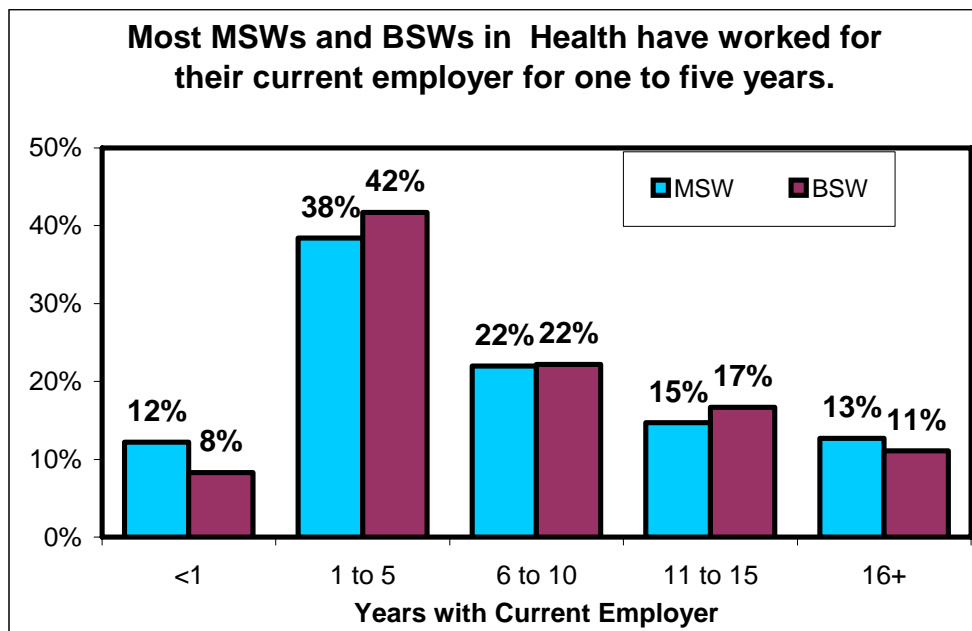
As can be seen in Figure 2, social workers in Health are most likely to work full-time for a single employer in hospitals and most likely to part-time for a single employer in hospices.

**Figure 2. Numbers of Employers of Health Social Workers, by Employment Setting**



Twelve percent of Health social workers have been with their current employer for less than one year. Half (50%) have been with their current employer five years or less, while 14% have been with their employer for more than 15 years. These figures are consistent with those for social workers overall. Little difference exists between Health MSWs and BSWs in terms of years with current employer, consistent with social workers overall (Figure 3).

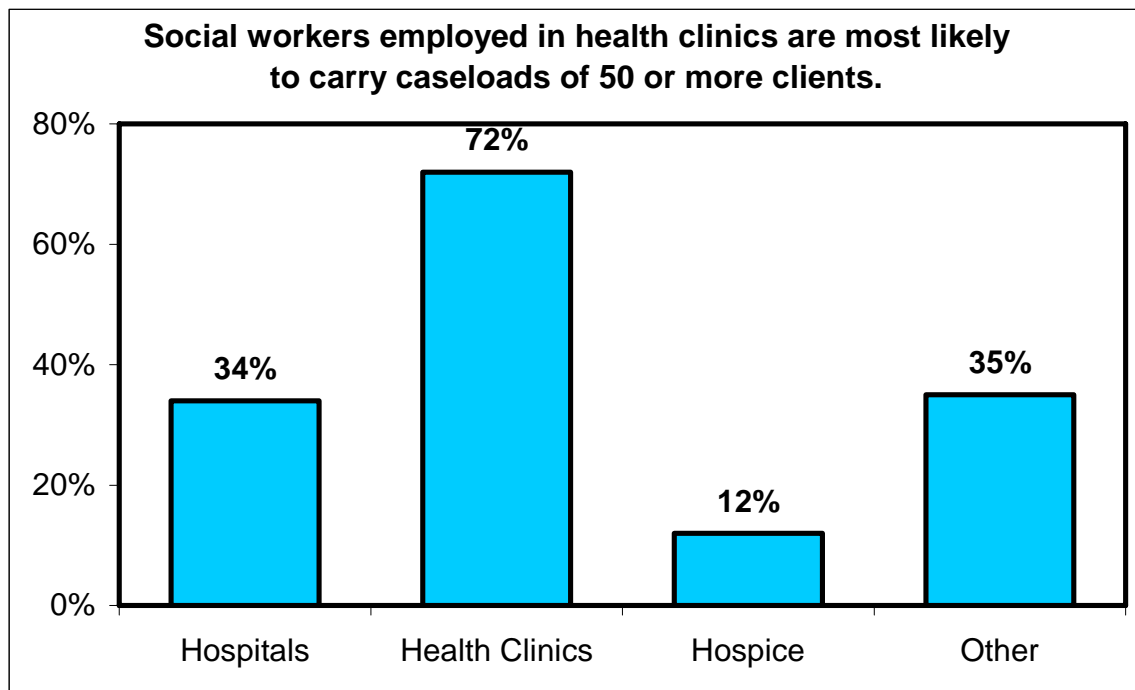
**Figure 3. Years with Current Employer of Health SWs, by MSW and BSW**



## Caseload Size

Licensed social workers in Health have significantly larger caseloads in their primary job than social workers overall. Thirty-seven percent of social workers in Health have caseloads of 50 or more clients, compared to 22% of other social workers. This varied little by highest social work degree. Figure 4 shows that caseloads of this size were most common in health clinics, where 72% of Health social workers had caseloads of 50 or more. Health social workers employed in hospitals (34%) and hospices (12%) carried much smaller caseloads.

**Figure 4. Percentages of Health Social Workers with Primary Caseloads of 50 or More Clients, by Setting**



Note: See p.41 for further description of “other” settings.

## Roles

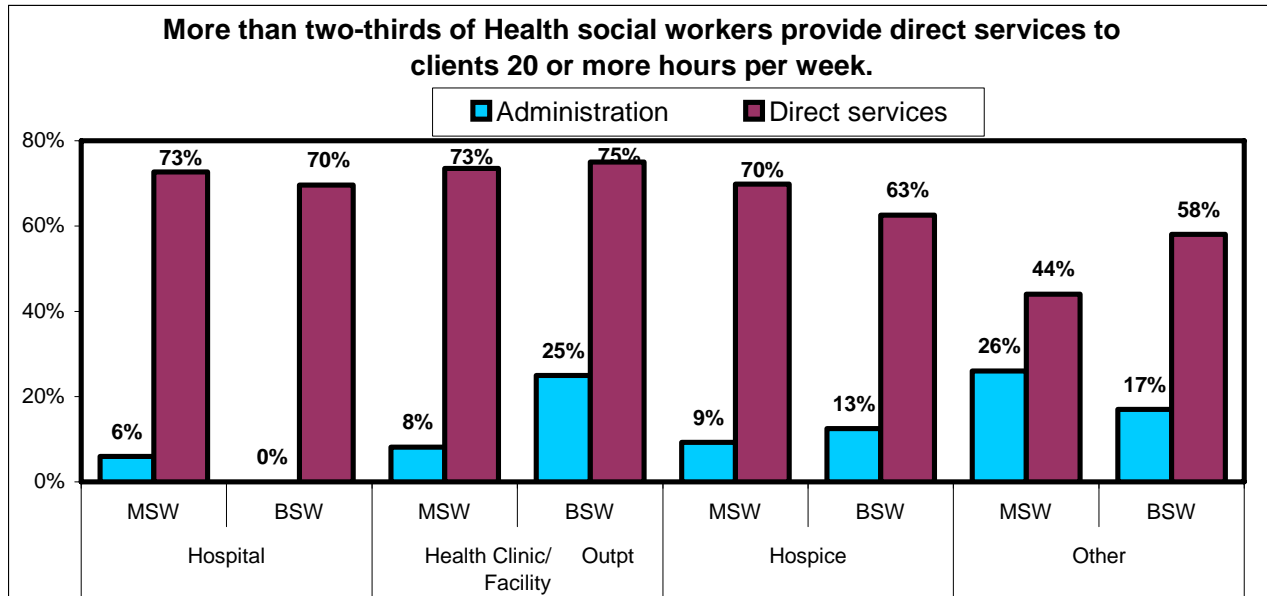
Although Health social workers participate in a wide variety of roles, 89% spend 20 hours or more per week performing one primary role. Table 1 shows that providing direct services to clients is the most common role performed by these social workers (98%), and the most likely to be performed 20 hours a week or more (67%). The majority of Health social workers spend fewer than 10 hours per week on any single role other than their major role across settings. This involvement with multiple roles but concentration on only one role (usually direct services) is consistent with the findings for other practice areas and for social workers overall.

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

Roles	All social workers		Health social workers	
	Any	20 hours or more	Any	20 hours or more
Direct services	93%	59%	98%	67%
Administration/management	50%	12%	55%	11%
Consultation	48%	4%	65%	4%
Planning	38%	3%	63%	3%
Supervision	35%	3%	47%	2%
Community organizing	18%	1%	32%	1%
Teaching	22%	2%	35%	1%
Training/Education	35%	1%	52%	0%
Policy development	15%	0%	34%	0%
Research	9%	0%	14%	0%

BSWs in Health spend slightly more time on average in community organizing than MSWs<sup>2</sup>, and MSWs spend more time on training/education<sup>3</sup>, but otherwise time spent on roles does not vary significantly by degree. There is some variation, however, by degree within setting as shown below in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Percentages Spending Twenty Hours per Week or More on Direct Services and Administration, by Degree and Employment Setting**



<sup>2</sup> p = 0.039

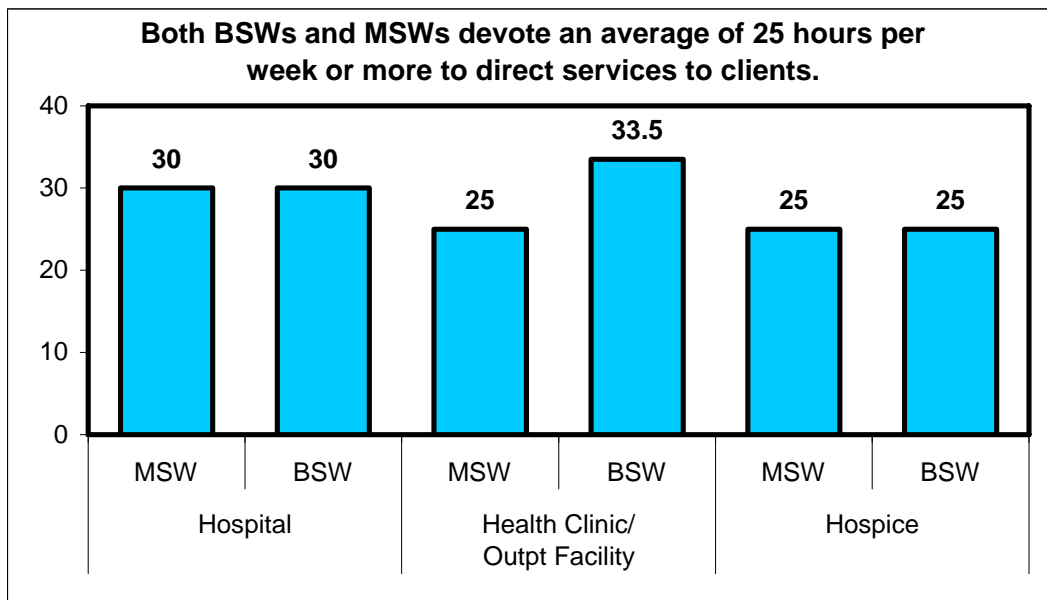
<sup>3</sup> p = 0.006

*Direct Services*

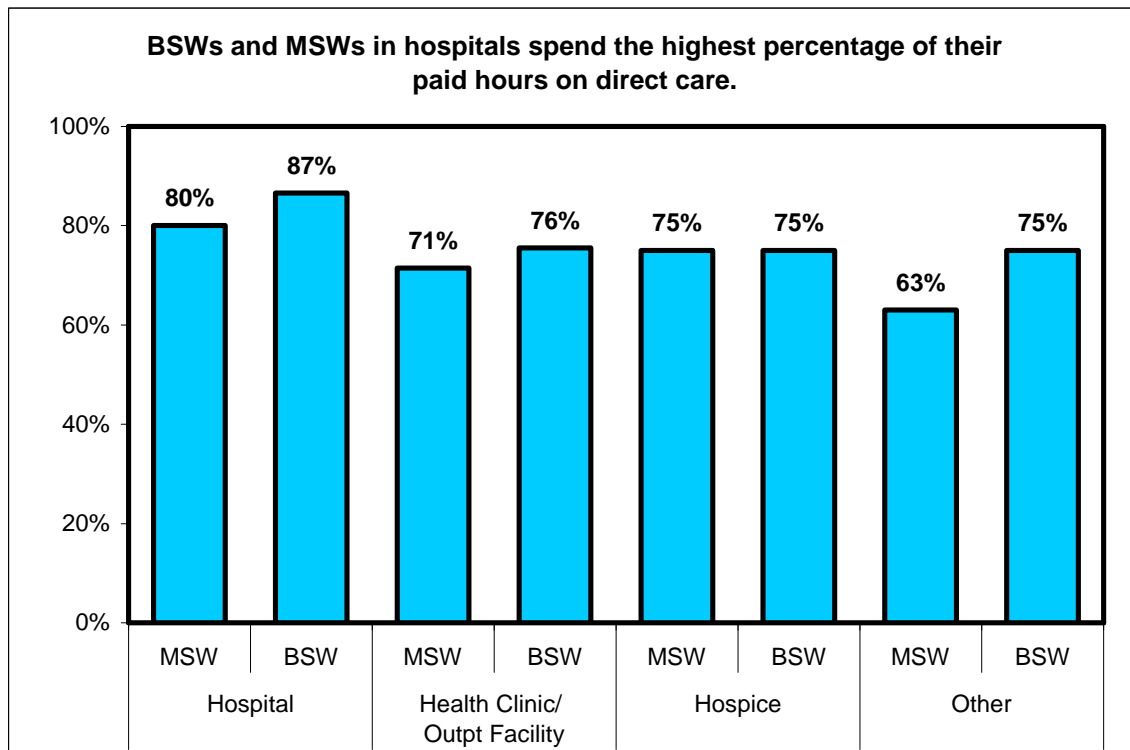
Health social workers spent a median of 28 hours per week on direct services in their primary job, with a median 75% of total hours spent on direct care services. Hours spent providing services were very different from social workers overall, who spend a median of 20 hours on direct services (a median of 68% of total hours).

Health social workers did not differ in time and percentage of time spent in this role by degree, which is again a different pattern than that of social workers overall (where MSWs spend somewhat fewer hours, but a greater percentage of their total hours, on direct care). However, they did vary by setting and by degree within setting, as seen in Figures 6 and 7.

**Figure 6. Median Hours Spent by Health Social Workers on Direct Services to Clients, by Degree and Employment Setting**



**Figure 7. Median Percentage of Paid Hours Spent by Health Social Workers on Direct Services, by Degree and Employment Setting**



### Tasks

Information/referral (88%), screening/assessment (85%), and crisis intervention (76%) are the tasks Health social workers are most likely to perform. Few of these tasks consume more than half of social workers' time. As seen in Table 2, Health social workers are most likely to spend more than half their time on individual counseling (19%) or discharge planning (17%).

**Table 2. Percentages of Health Social Workers Spending Any Time or More Than 50% of Time Performing Selected Tasks**

Social Work Tasks	Spend any time	More than 50% of time
Information/referral	88%	13%
Screening/assessment	85%	15%
Crisis intervention	76%	6%
Case management	70%	15%
Client education	70%	9%
Individual counseling	67%	19%
Treatment planning	62%	5%
Discharge planning	59%	17%
Family counseling	50%	7%
Medication adherence	44%	4%
Advocacy	39%	2%
Home visits	34%	15%
Psychoeducation	34%	2%
Program development	29%	1%
Supervision	27%	1%
Psychotherapy	26%	3%
Couples counseling	25%	2%
Group counseling	25%	0%
Program management	22%	2%

Tasks performed by Health social workers are similar regardless of degree (Table 3). This is unique from other practice areas, where MSWs and BSWs typically have different functions. It is consistent, however, with emerging findings that Health MSWs and BSWs are more similar to each other than are MSWs to BSWs in other practice areas, e.g. demographically.

**Table 3. Tasks That Health MSWs and BSWs Are Most Likely to Perform and Spend the Most Time On**

	MSW	BSW
Most likely to do...	Information/referral (88%)	Information/referral (94%)
	Screening/assessment (85%)	Screening/assessment (87%)
	Crisis intervention (78%)	Client education (70%)
	Case management (72%)	Crisis intervention (78%)
	Client education (71%)	Discharge planning (59%)
Spend most time on... (average on a 6-point scale)	Screening/assessment	Screening/assessment
	Information/referral	Information/referral
	Individual counseling	Individual counseling
	Case management	Case management
	Discharge planning	Discharge planning

Table 4 shows that information/referral, screening/assessment, and individual counseling are among the most common tasks performed by MSWs and by BSWs regardless of employment sector. There is greatest similarity in tasks performed by MSWs and BSWs in the for profit sector. In the nonprofit sector, MSWs are more likely to provide discharge-planning services while BSWs are more likely to provide client education. In the public sector, MSWs are also more likely to do discharge planning while BSWs are more likely to make home visits.

**Table 4. Top Five Tasks Most Time-Consuming Tasks, by Sector**

<b>Public MSW</b>	<b>Public BSW</b>	<b>All Public</b>
Information/referral	Case management	Information/referral
Screening/assessment	Screening/assessment	Screening/assessment
Case management	Individual counseling	Case management
Individual counseling	Information/referral	Individual counseling
Discharge planning	Home visits	Client education
<b>Nonprofit MSW</b>	<b>Nonprofit BSW</b>	<b>All Nonprofit</b>
Screening/assessment	Discharge planning	Screening/assessment
Information/referral	Screening/assessment	Information/referral
Individual counseling	Information/referral	Discharge planning
Case management	Client education	Individual counseling
Discharge planning	Individual counseling	Case management
<b>For-profit MSW</b>	<b>For-profit BSW</b>	<b>All For-Profit</b>
Information/referral	Information/referral	Information/referral
Screening/assessment	Screening/assessment	Screening/assessment
Individual counseling	Individual counseling	Individual counseling
Case management	Client education	Case management
Client education	Case management	Client education

The tasks Health social workers spend most time on vary across settings. Health social workers in hospitals spend most time on discharge planning; those in health clinics spend most time on individual counseling; and those in hospices spend most time on home visits.

Screening/assessment and individual counseling are among the top five tasks performed in all three settings in which Health social workers are likely to be employed (Table 5).

**Table 5. Top Five Tasks Most Time-Consuming Tasks and Median Category of Percent of Time Spent, by Setting**

<b>Hospital</b>	<b>Health Clinic</b>	<b>Hospice</b>
Discharge planning (11-25%)	Individual counseling (11-25%)	Home visits (51-75%)
Screening/assessment (11-25%)	Case management (11-25%)	Screening/assessment (11-25%)
Information/referral (11-25%)	Information/referral (11-25%)	Family counseling (11-25%)
Case management (11-25%)	Screening/assessment (11-25%)	Client education (11-25%)
Individual counseling (1-10%)	Client education (1-10%)	Individual counseling (1-10%)

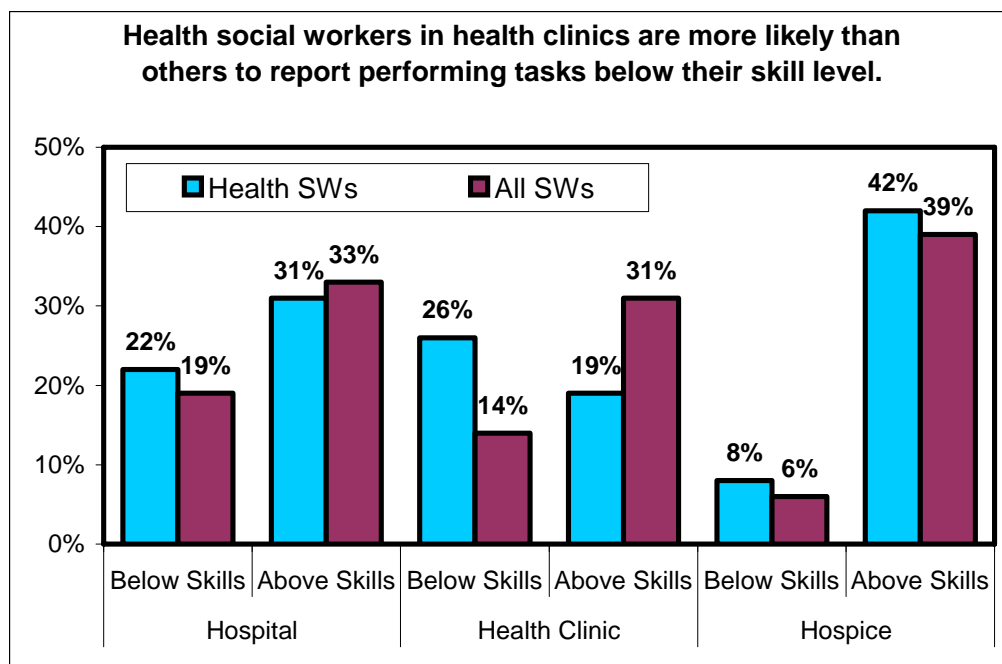
Tasks performed also vary by the number of clients within social workers' caseloads diagnosed with chronic medical conditions, acute medical conditions, or physical disabilities. For example:

- The number of clients with chronic medical conditions is significantly correlated with less time spent on psychotherapy ( $p = 0.027$ ) and program management ( $p = 0.038$ ).
- The number of clients with physical disabilities is correlated with more time spent on information/referral ( $p = 0.039$ ) and discharge planning ( $p = 0.033$ ).
- The number of clients with acute medical conditions is correlated with more time spent on information/referral ( $p = 0.015$ ), screening/assessment ( $p = 0.011$ ), treatment planning ( $p = 0.015$ ), family counseling ( $p = 0.004$ ), and discharge planning ( $p < 0.0005$ ).

### Tasks Appropriate to Training

Thirty-two percent of Health social workers report that the tasks they perform tend to be above their level of training and skills, comparable to social workers overall (34%). More Health social workers report tasks performed to be below their level of training, however, than licensed social workers overall (19% versus 13%). This is an important finding. Earlier analyses of licensed social workers suggest that social workers who perceive tasks as being below one's level of skill and training are more likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs and more likely to consider leaving the field. As seen below in Figure 8, Health social workers employed in health clinics were almost twice as likely to perceive tasks as below their skill level compared with social workers overall (26% versus 14%).

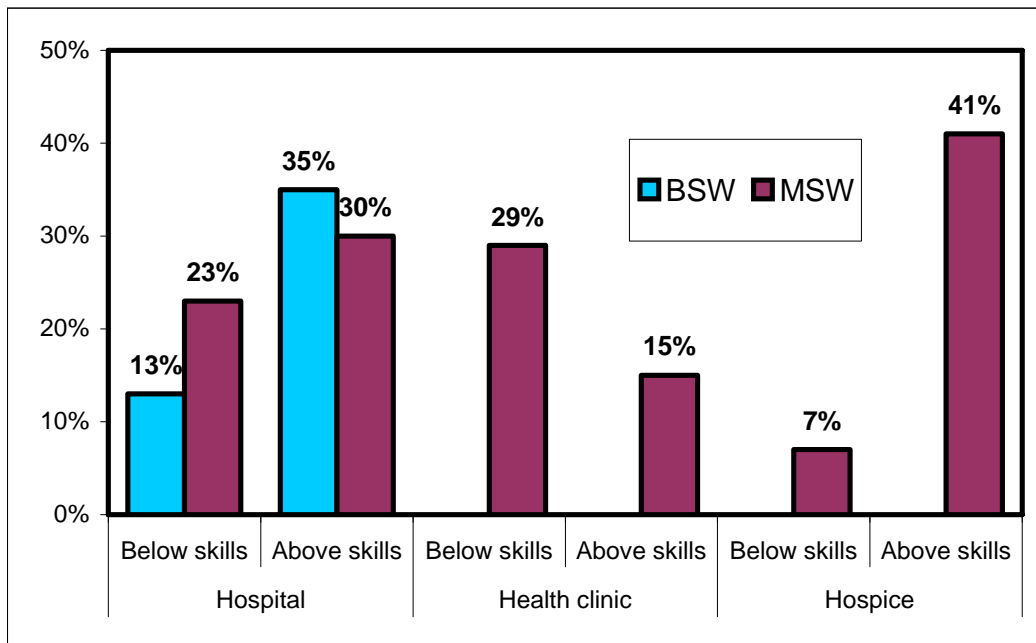
**Figure 8. Percentages of Health and All Social Workers Reporting Tasks Below or Above Their Level of Skills and Training, by Setting**



Health MSWs were more likely than BSWs to report that tasks were below their level of training and skills (20% versus 11%), and were less likely to report that tasks were above their level of training and skills (30% versus 43%). Further variation was found by employment setting as well.

Figure 9 shows that Health social workers in hospices were more likely than those in hospitals and health clinics to report that their tasks were above their level of skills (42% versus 31% and 19%), and less likely to report that their tasks were below their level of skills (8% versus 22% and 26%).

**Figure 9. Percentages of Health MSWs and Health BSWs Reporting Tasks Below or Above Their Level of Skills and Training, by Setting**



Note: There are too few BSWs in health clinics (3) and hospices (8) for meaningful comparisons, so they are omitted in the above chart.