



Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce:

**A National Study of
Licensed Social Workers**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Center for Workforce Studies
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Preface

This report is one of six prepared as part of a national study of licensed social workers conducted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in partnership with the Center for Health Workforce Studies (CHWS) of the School of Public Health at the University at Albany. It summarizes and interprets the responses of social workers obtained through a national survey of licensed social workers in the U.S. conducted in 2004. The report is available from the NASW Center for Workforce Studies at <http://workforce.socialworkers.org>

The profile of the licensed social work workforce is an invaluable resource for educators, planners and policy makers making decisions about the future of the social work profession and its related education programs. The information will support the development of effective workforce policies and strategies to assure the availability of adequate numbers of frontline social workers prepared to respond to the growing needs of individuals, families, and communities in the United States.

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Overview of the Study

Social work is a diverse profession,

unique among the human service professions in that the term *social worker* is defined so broadly in different organizations and settings. Predicted changes in the country's demographics landscape over the next several decades are expected to increase the need for social work services. However, the lack of a standard definition has left the social work profession without reliable data upon which to base future projections about the supply of, and demand for, social work professionals. In addition, available data sets were inadequate to describe the scope of professionally trained social workers who provide frontline services. To better predict the adequacy and sufficiency of the social work labor force to meet the changing needs of society, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in partnership with the Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Albany conducted a benchmark national survey of licensed social workers in the fall of 2004. Licensed social workers were selected for the sample because they represent frontline practitioners and because state licensing lists provided a vehicle for reaching practitioners who may not have had any other identifiable professional affiliation. This national study provides baseline data that can guide policy and planning to assure that an appropriately trained social work workforce will be in place to meet the current and future needs of a changing population.

A random sample of 10,000 social workers was drawn from social work licensure lists of 48 states and the District of Columbia. Licensure lists were not available from Delaware and Hawaii. The sample was stratified by region. Three mailings were conducted: The first was sent to all social workers in the sample, and two subsequent mailings were sent to nonrespondents. The survey response rate was 49.4 percent. Among the respondents, 81.1 percent reported that they were currently active as social workers.

The majority of licensed social workers in the United States have a master's degree in social work (MSW). In many states, the MSW is the minimum qualification for social work licensure. Other states, however, license social workers with a bachelor's of social work (BSW) degree, utilizing a separate level of licensure for BSW social

Overview of the Study continued

workers. A few states license social workers who do not have a degree in social work; generally, they must have at least a bachelor's degree in a related field.

More MSW degrees than BSW degrees are conferred each year, although BSW programs are rising in popularity. In 2000, social work education programs graduated about 15,000 new BSWs and 16,000 new MSWs. The number of social workers graduating with bachelor's degrees increased by about 50 percent between 1995 and 2000, while the number of social workers graduating with master's degrees rose by about 25 percent during the same period (National Center for Education Studies [NCES], 2000).

Of the survey respondents:

- Seventy-nine percent of the social workers have a MSW as their highest social work degree,
- Twelve percent have a BSW only,
- Two percent hold a doctorate, and
- Eight percent of the respondents did not have degrees in social work¹.

This report focuses on the key findings of the comprehensive study and incorporates data and analysis from the four specialty practice reports in the areas of aging, behavioral health, children and families, and health. It provides an overview of the current role and use of licensed social workers in the United States.

Background

Numerous indexes of health and well-being indicate that many individuals in this country currently lack the personal resources and access to public benefits to meet basic needs and to achieve fully productive lives. If we are to effectively address the persistence of poverty, violence, untreated mental illness and addiction, and inadequate housing, health care, and educational opportunities in this country, we must make systems of care with adequately trained personnel a priority. Social work, as a profession dedicated to helping individuals, families, and communities achieve the best lives possible, finds itself at a crossroads as it tries to ensure there will be a qualified workforce to meet the service needs of these vulnerable populations.

Dramatic changes are underway within the social service landscape. Projected changes in the population, new service delivery models, increased emphasis on accountability, and improved service outcomes based on evidence-based practice require that the social work profession reassess its current capabilities and limitations. Many public agencies, private organizations, and foundations have identified workforce planning and development as a critical component of improving health and social service outcomes for all Americans. In response to this challenge, the National Association of Social Workers has established a Center for Workforce Studies as a focal point for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data about the frontline social work labor force. The Center will provide resources for educators, workforce planners, and policymakers and will represent the social work profession in interdisciplinary forums.

Although the term social worker has been used generically to refer to someone offering social assistance, there is a need to clarify the educational preparation, knowledge, skills, and values that are embodied in professional social work (West et al., 2000). The discipline of professional social work is over 100 years old and has a well-developed system of professional education governed by national educational policy and accreditation standards (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2006). Professional social work practice is legally defined and regulated in all state jurisdictions in this country. However, there is not a universal definition of professional social work that is used by federal agencies that collect and analyze

Background continued

labor force information. Consequently, available data resources are inadequate to reliably gauge the sufficiency of the current workforce or to project future needs for the profession (Barth, 2003). There are many indicators that the demand for social work services will increase in the near future, primarily because of the changing demographics within our society. This study of the frontline social work labor force provides important data for planning and capacity-building within the profession.

Chapter 1: Characteristics of Licensed Social Workers

Key Findings:

- Social workers have advanced educational preparation and practice experience.
- Social workers are significantly older than the U. S. civilian labor force.
- Social workers are not as diverse as the populations they serve in terms of race, ethnicity and gender.
- The geographic distribution of social workers is uneven, resulting in gaps in access for those in rural areas.

Social work is the largest and most important social service profession in the United States. Social workers help people function better in their environments, improve their relationships with others, and solve personal and family problems through individual, social, and psychological counseling (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001; Volland et al., 2000). Social workers may provide counseling, education, psychotherapy, and/or other services to help their clients in a wide range of settings, including public agencies, private organizations, and private practice arrangements. Some function as members of interdisciplinary teams that evaluate and manage the care of patients in health care settings like hospitals and long-term care facilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). The approximately 310,000 *licensed* social workers represented about 38 percent of all self-identified social workers in the United States in 2004 (Bureau of the Census, 2000).

- **Social workers have advanced educational preparation and practice experience.**

A master's in social work (MSW) is the predominant social work degree for licensed social workers. Seventy-nine percent of active practitioners responding to the survey have an MSW as their highest degree, 12 percent have a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW), and 2 percent have a doctorate in social work (PhD or DSW). Eight percent do not have a social work degree.

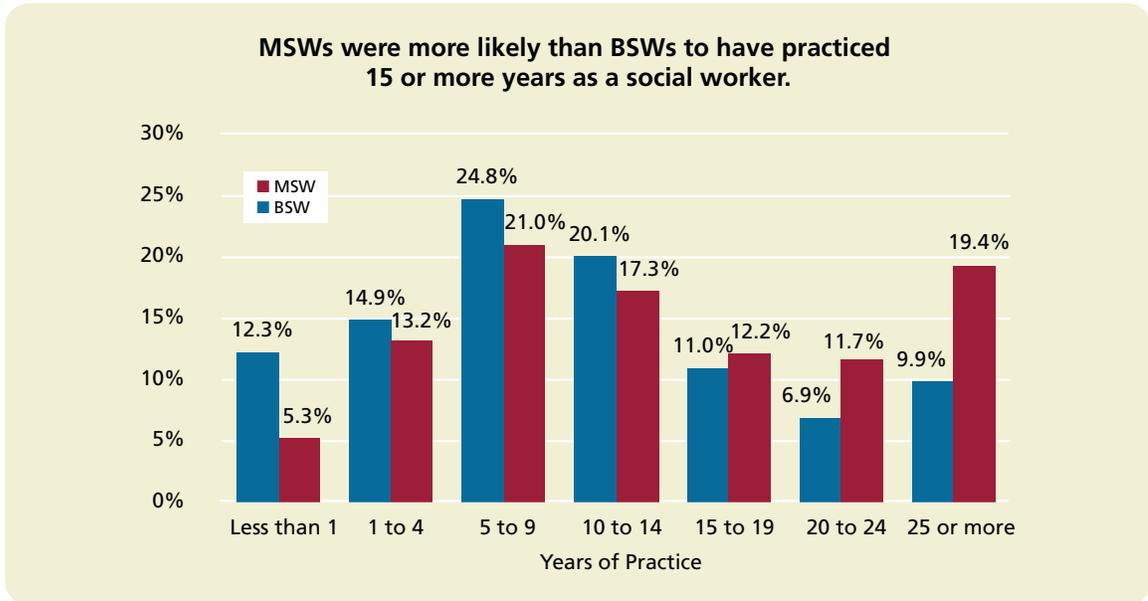
The MSW is the most common first degree at entry to the field. Fifty-nine percent of licensed social workers entered the field with the MSW. Another 31 percent entered at the BSW level. Younger social workers are far more likely to have entered the field of social work through a BSW program, reflecting growth in BSW-level social work programs. 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.

BSW programs generate graduates who often pursue MSW degrees. Sixty-three percent of first-degree BSWs in the survey subsequently received an 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. In contrast, this was the case for only 66 percent of 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. Just 42 percent of those who received BSWs in the year 2000 or later have now completed MSWs, and another 9 percent are currently enrolled in MSW programs.

Seventeen percent of social workers report less than five years of experience, and 32 percent report more than 20 years of experience. Male social work respondents have been in the field longer than females (17.0 years compared with 14.6 years). Non-Hispanic White social workers have been in the field the longest on average (15.2 years), whereas Black/African American social workers have been in the field the shortest period of time (13.4 years).

Social workers with MSWs have been in the profession for longer on average than those with BSWs (15.8 years compared with 11.1 years), whereas DSWs/PhDs have been in the field the longest (23.4 years). Figure 1 shows MSWs are much more likely than BSWs to have worked at least 20 years as a social worker.

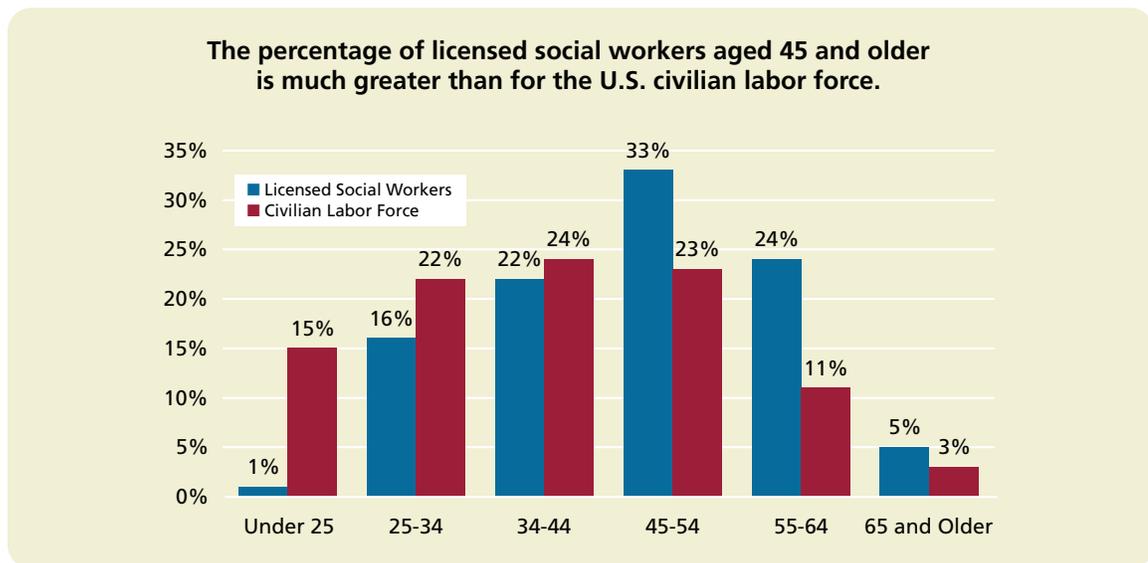
FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGES OF LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS WITH HIGHEST DEGREES OF BSW AND MSW WITH DIFFERENT YEARS OF PRACTICE



- Social workers are significantly older than the U. S. civilian labor force.

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

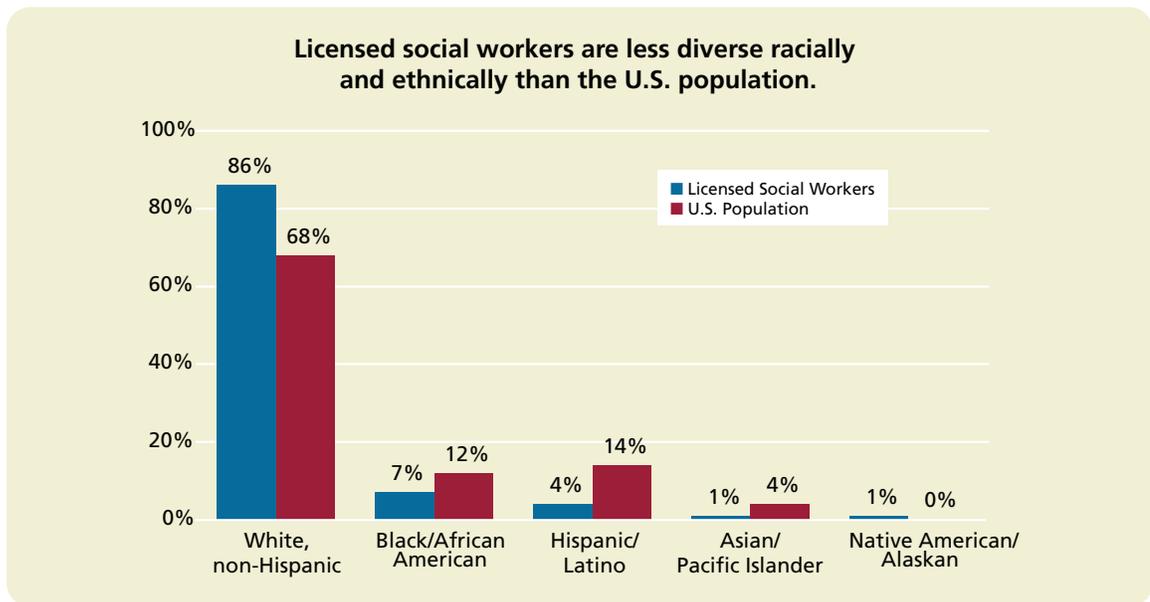
FIGURE 2. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF ACTIVE, LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE U.S. CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE, 2004



- Social workers are not as diverse as the populations they serve in terms of race, ethnicity and gender.

Social work, like most health care professions, is less ethnically diverse than the U.S. population. Figure 3 shows that licensed social workers are predominantly non-Hispanic White (86%).

FIGURE 3. RACIAL/ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF ACTIVE, LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE U.S. POPULATION, 2004

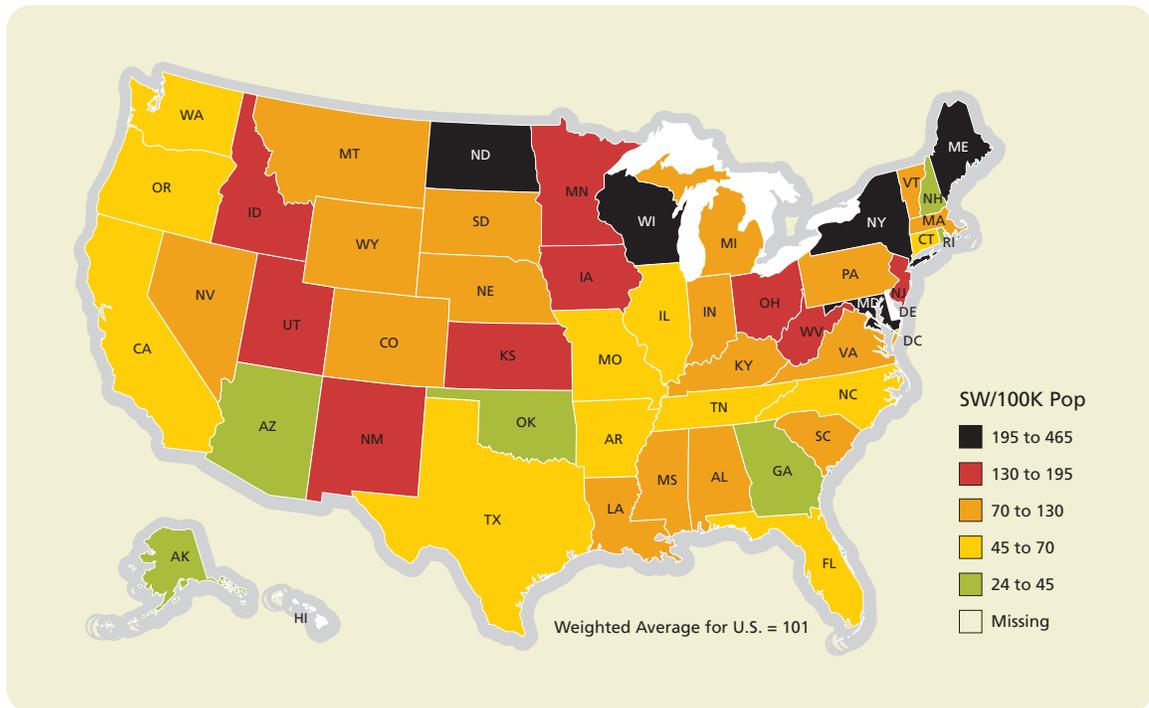


New entrants (those 30 and younger) are somewhat less likely to be non-Hispanic White (83% compared with 86%) and more likely to fall into the category of “other” (3% compared with 1%).

Data show improvement in the numbers of students of color recruited into social work education programs. This trend needs to be accelerated, and strategies must be developed to retain social workers of color who are currently in practice (Lennon, 2004).

Licensed social workers are disproportionately likely to be women (81% compared with 51% of the U.S. population), although this varies by race/ethnicity. Only 26 percent of Hispanic/Latino social workers are male, compared with 17 percent of non-Hispanic White social workers, and 15 percent of both Black/African American and Asian/Pacific Islander social workers.

FIGURE 5. LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS PER 100,000 POPULATION FOR THE 50 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, 2004

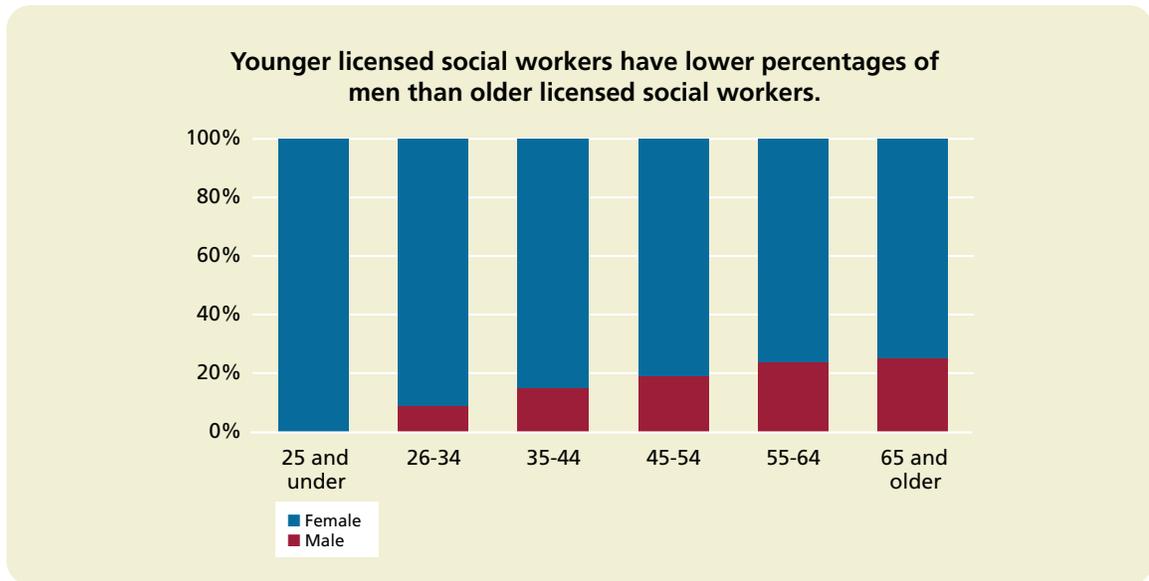


This variation in the ratio of practitioners to population is relatively large compared with similar ratios for most licensed health care professions. This is an indication of a lack of standardization of roles and utilization of licensed social workers across the states. It is also consistent with the fact that the requirements for social work licensure eligibility (e.g., education requirements) also vary substantially across the states. The data show that, with the exception of New York, large states had relatively low numbers of licensed social workers per capita.

Licensed social workers are concentrated in metropolitan areas. More than 80 percent of licensed social workers who provide services to older adults practice in metropolitan areas, whereas only three percent practice in rural areas. In addition, social workers in small towns and rural areas are more likely than those in cities to have caseloads with high percentages of adults over the age of 75 (Whitaker et al., 2006a). Social workers in rural areas who provide services to children and families are much more likely than those in small towns and micropolitan areas to work with children who have Medicaid coverage (Whitaker et al., 2006b). Health social workers are most likely to practice in metropolitan areas (85%), whereas few practice in micropolitan areas (7%), small towns (6%), or rural areas (2%) (Whitaker et al., 2006c). MSWs in behavioral health are far more likely to practice in metropolitan areas (84%) than in micropolitan areas (9%), small towns (5%), or rural areas (2%) (Whitaker et al., 2006d).

Figure 4 shows that social workers nearing retirement age are substantially more likely than young social workers to be men. Of the social workers in our study, fewer than one in 10 aged 26 to 34 (9%) and none under the age of 25 are men. In contrast, one-quarter of social workers aged 65 and older and nearly one in four social workers aged 55 to 64 (24%) are men. Social work clearly is not drawing young entrants who are men. Furthermore, the social work profession may become further female-dominated as older men age out of the workforce.

FIGURE 4. GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS BY AGE GROUP



- The geographic distribution of social workers is uneven, resulting in gaps in access for those in rural areas.

The licensure lists used to create the sampling frame for the survey showed that there were approximately 310,000 *licensed* social workers in the United States in 2004, or 101 per 100,000 in the general population. The map in Figure 5 shows, as is true for most professions, that these practitioners were not uniformly distributed across the 50 states. The ratio of active licensed social workers per 100,000 in the population varied by a factor of about 17 across the states in 2004, from 23.7 in New Hampshire to 408 in Maryland. [Counts for Hawaii and Delaware were not available.]

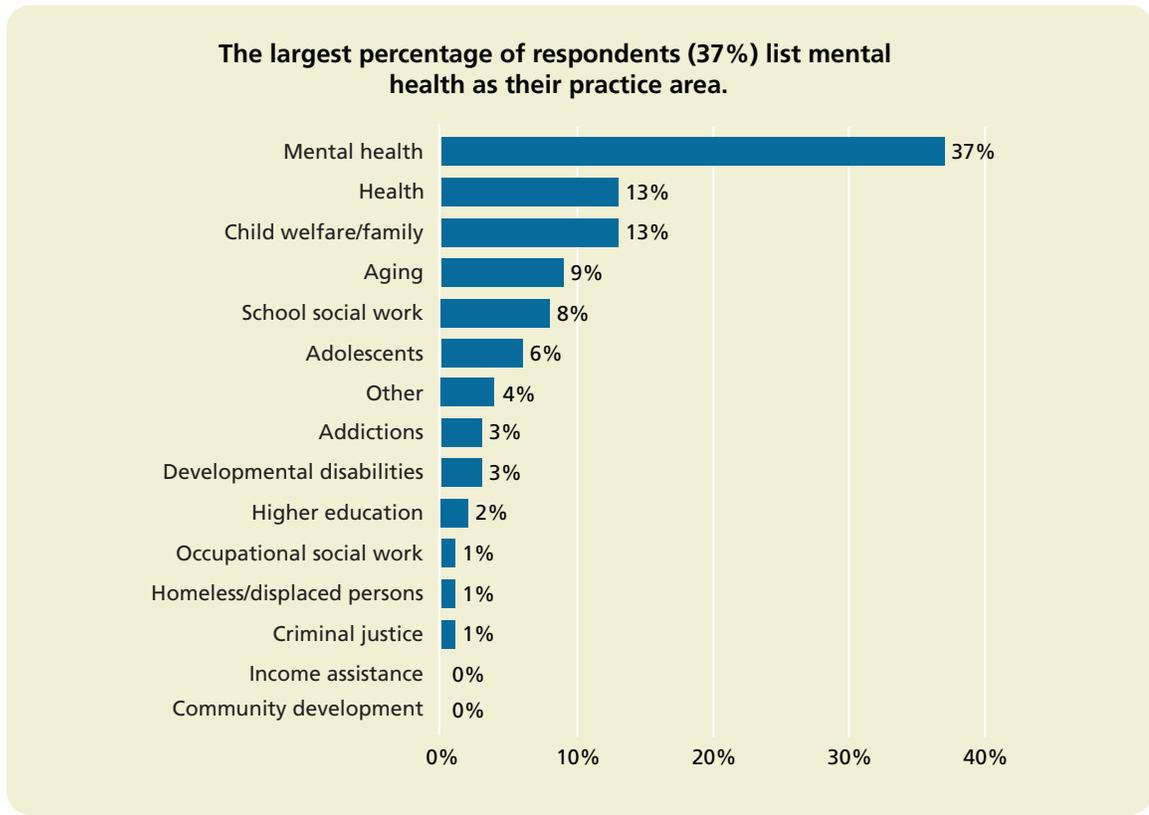
Chapter 2: Employment Settings, Roles, and Tasks of Licensed Social Work Practice

Key Findings:

- Social workers' most frequent specialty practice areas are mental health, child welfare/family, health, and aging.
 - Social workers are employed in a wide range of community settings, including public, non-profit, and for-profit organizations.
 - Licensed social workers spend the majority of their time providing direct client services.
 - Social workers perform a range of tasks related to direct client intervention as well as assistance with navigation of community resources and systems of care.
-
- Social workers' most frequent specialty practice areas are mental health, child welfare/family, health, and aging.

The most commonly reported practice areas (specialties) of licensed social workers are mental health (37%), child welfare/family (13%) and health (13%). Nine percent of social workers report their primary practice area as aging, and eight percent as school social work. Six percent report a primary practice area in adolescents. Developmental disabilities, addictions, higher education, criminal justice, homeless/displaced persons, occupation social work, community development, and income assistance are each reported by fewer than five percent of social workers, with the latter five reported by fewer than two percent of social workers (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. PRIMARY PRACTICE AREA (SPECIALTY) OF LICENSED SOCIAL WORK



- Social workers are employed in a wide range of community settings, including public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations.

Social workers are employed in a wide range of organizations. Mental health social workers are most likely to be found in private practice (38%) or behavioral health clinics (20%), and health social workers are most likely to be found in hospitals (56%). Child welfare/family social workers are most likely to be found in social service agencies (60%), whereas social workers in aging are most likely to be found in nursing homes (29%). Addictions social workers are most likely to be found in behavioral health clinics (20%), whereas adolescent social workers are most likely to be found in schools (17%) and developmental disabilities social workers are most likely to be found in social service agencies (22%).

Table 1 provides additional details on the employment patterns of social workers. It shows the percentages of active licensed social workers in different primary sectors working in a range of settings.

Respondents in the private for-profit sector are most likely to be employed in private practice (56.8%) or a hospital/medical center (8.3%). Those in the

private nonprofit sector are most likely to be in a hospital/medical center (18.9%), social service agency (16.6%), or a behavioral health clinic (16.5%). Those in the state government and local government sectors are most likely to work in a social service agency (27.7% and 22%, respectively) or a school (14% and 32%, respectively).

TABLE 1. ACTIVE LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS WITH PRIMARY EMPLOYMENT IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS BY PRIMARY EMPLOYMENT SECTOR

Primary Employment Setting	Primary Employment Sector						
	Private	Private	Federal	State	Local	Military	Total
	For-Profit	Nonprofit	Gov't	Gov't	Gov't		
Private Solo Practice	44.9%	0.8%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	5.0%	13.6%
Private Group Practice	11.9%	1.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	3.9%
Hospital/Medical Center	8.3%	18.9%	43.8%	5.5%	4.9%	5.0%	12.2%
Psychiatric Hospital	2.8%	3.4%	7.5%	7.1%	1.2%	0.0%	3.7%
Health Clinic/Outpatient Facility	4.5%	7.0%	13.8%	2.0%	6.8%	15.0%	5.6%
Home Health Agency	2.0%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	1.3%
Behavioral Health Clinic	4.7%	16.5%	8.8%	3.1%	7.3%	15.0%	9.4%
Social Service Agency	1.7%	16.6%	2.5%	27.7%	22.0%	10.0%	14.5%
Employee Assistance Program	1.2%	0.7%	0.0%	0.4%	0.5%	0.0%	0.7%
Case Mgmt Agency - Older Adults	0.4%	1.0%	0.0%	1.3%	2.0%	0.0%	1.0%
Case Mgmt Agency - Other	0.8%	2.2%	1.3%	1.5%	1.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Nursing Home	5.0%	3.3%	0.0%	0.5%	1.2%	0.0%	2.9%
Assisted Living Facility	0.3%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Hospice	2.3%	4.9%	1.3%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Group Home – Adult	0.4%	0.8%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
School	1.2%	4.9%	10.0%	14.0%	32.0%	5.0%	9.0%
Child Guidance Clinic	0.2%	0.5%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Group Home - Child/Adolescent	0.6%	2.8%	0.0%	0.4%	0.7%	0.0%	1.4%
Resource Center	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Information and Referral Service	0.1%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Insurance Company/HMO	2.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	5.0%	0.8%
Criminal Justice Agency	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	5.3%	4.4%	0.0%	1.7%
Public Health Agency	0.0%	0.1%	1.3%	5.5%	2.4%	0.0%	1.3%
Other Gov't Agency	0.0%	0.1%	6.3%	10.6%	8.0%	15.0%	3.1%
Business	0.2%	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Higher Education	0.4%	1.7%	0.0%	6.7%	1.0%	5.0%	2.1%
Other	3.6%	9.9%	2.5%	6.9%	3.9%	20.0%	6.6%

Older social workers are much less likely to practice in the areas of adolescents, child welfare/family, and school social work. Instead, 55 percent of social workers ages 65 and older (compared with just 13 percent of those under the age of 25) practice in mental health. About 9 percent of social workers over the age of 25 list aging as their practice area. Those 25 and younger are less likely to practice in aging.

Women are more likely than men to practice in health (14% compared with 8%) and aging (10% compared with 5%), whereas men are somewhat more likely to practice in mental health (41% compared with 35%) and addictions (5% compared with 2%).

Health social work seems particularly attractive to Asian/Pacific Islanders (26% of whom are in health), whereas child welfare/family social work and school social work are more popular among Black/African American social workers (17% and 11%, respectively) and Hispanics (15% and 32%, respectively). Black/African American social workers are much less likely to be in mental health (23%) than social workers overall (37%).

Licensed social workers in many practice areas are most likely to work in the private/nonprofit sector, including those in addictions (66%), adolescents (53%), aging (72%), developmental disabilities (36%), health (51%), and mental health (43%).

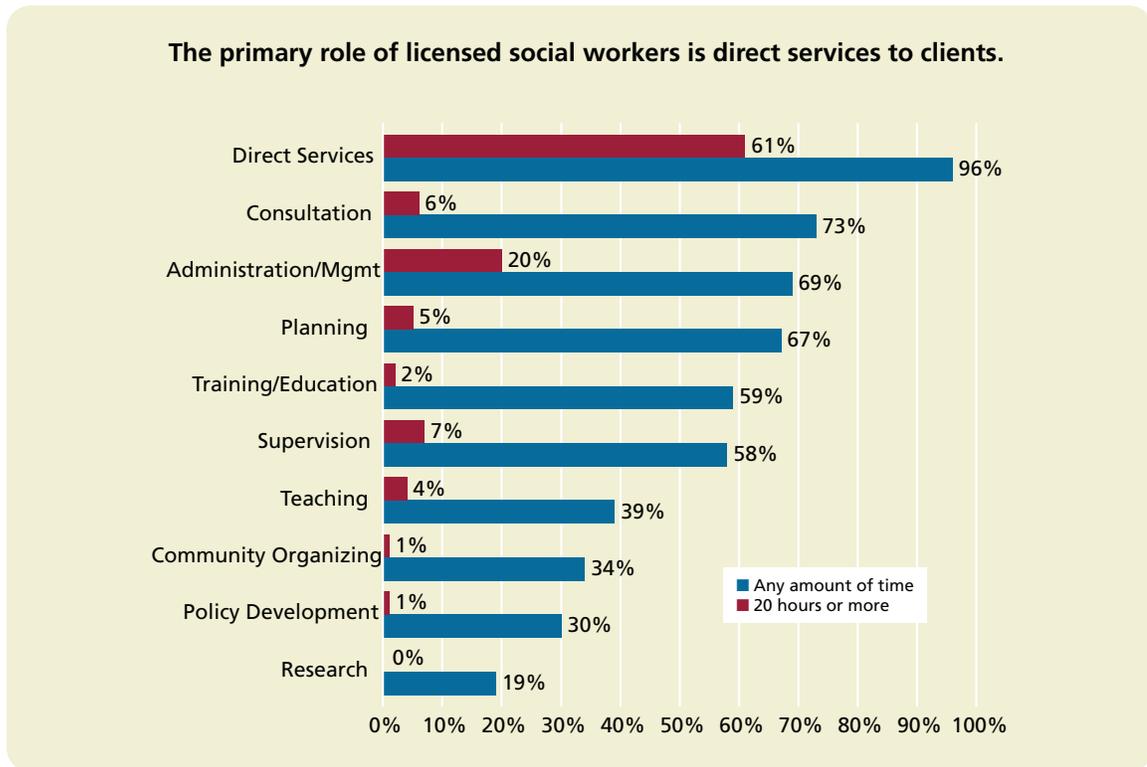
Social workers in some other practice areas are more likely to work for public-sector agencies, including those in child welfare/family (53%), criminal justice (73%), higher education (65%), and school social work (77%).

Private practice accounted for a large proportion of primary employment in mental health (37%), and notable proportions in adolescents (13%) and addictions (10%).

- **Social workers spend the majority of their time providing direct client services.**

The most common role in which licensed social workers spend any of their time is direct services (96%), followed by consultation (73%), and administration/management (69%). Frontline social workers are least likely to spend any of their time in research (19%), policy development (30%), and community organizing (34%). Relatively few social workers devote as much as 20 hours a week to any role other than direct services (61%) or administration/management (20%) (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7. PERCENTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS SPENDING ANY TIME OR 20 OR MORE HOURS PER WEEK ON SELECTED ROLES, 2004



Licensed social workers are most likely to be involved with the tasks of screening/assessment (93%), information/referral (91%), crisis intervention (89%), individual counseling (86%), and client education (86%). These are not necessarily tasks on which they spend a majority of their time, however. There are only four tasks that significant numbers of social workers report spending more than half of their time on: individual counseling (29%), psychotherapy (25%), case management (12%), and screening/assessment (10%). Fewer than 10 percent of social workers report spending more than half their time on any other task.

Chapter 3: Client Populations Served by Social Workers

Key Findings:

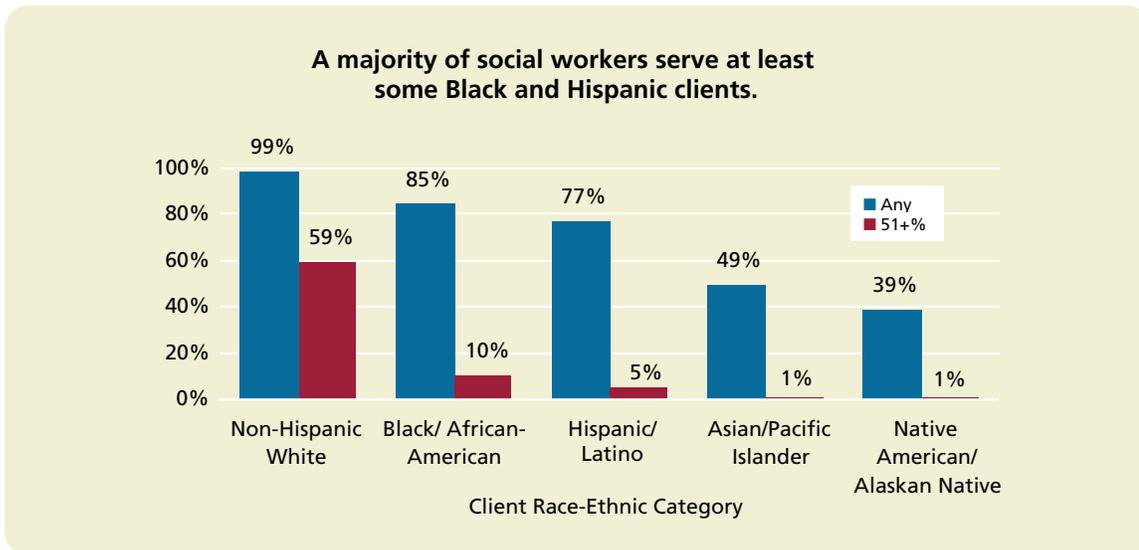
- Client populations served by social workers are diverse in race, age, and gender.
- Clients often have multiple conditions and complex problems.
- Client populations are frequently from vulnerable groups such as children and older adults or are individuals with serious physical or mental disabilities.

Social workers typically work with a wide range of client populations, many of whom live in disadvantaged circumstances. Helping clients solve problems and improve their lives is a fundamental goal of social work practice. Clients often have multiple problems and have difficulty navigating and accessing what tend to be fragmented community resources.

- **Client populations served by social workers are diverse in race, age, and gender.**

Most licensed social workers see clients who are racially and ethnically diverse. Virtually all social workers (99%) see at least some non-Hispanic White clients and most see some Black/African American clients and Hispanic/Latino clients (85% and 77%, respectively). Fewer social workers see any Asian clients (49%) or Native American clients (39%) (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF CASELOAD OF LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS, BY CLIENT RACE/ETHNIC CATEGORY, 2004

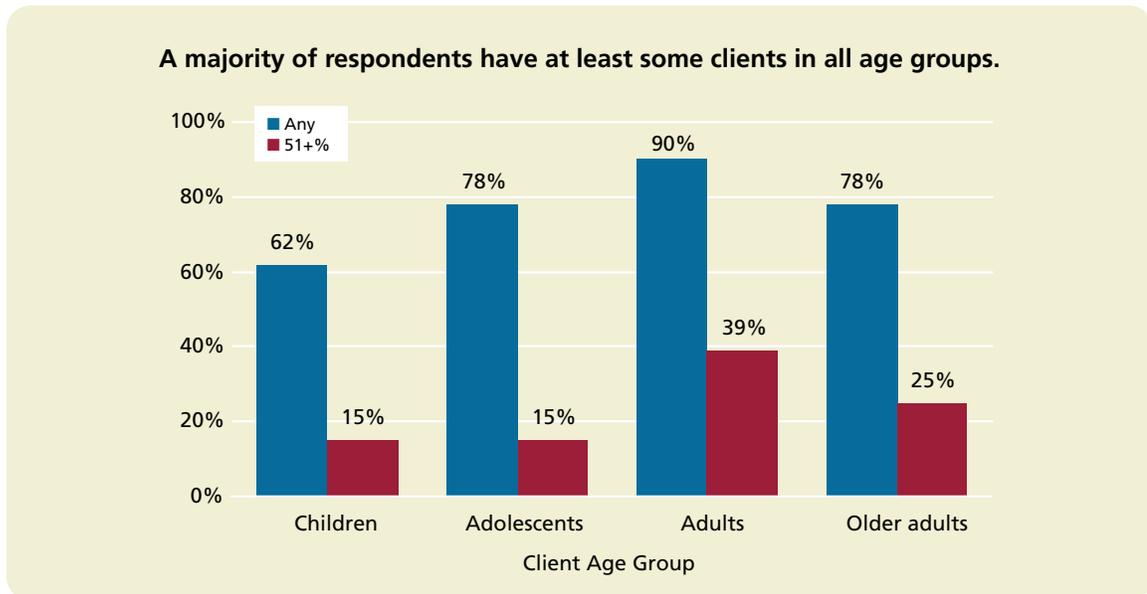


Forty-one percent of survey respondents report that more than half of their caseloads belong to a non-White minority group. Still, few social workers see caseloads that are predominantly (51% or more) composed of any single minority group. Ten percent of social workers have caseloads that are predominantly Black/African American, and five percent handle caseloads that are predominantly Hispanic/Latino. Fewer than one percent have caseloads that are predominantly Asian, Native American, or “other” race/ethnicity.

Caseloads usually have both male and female clients. More than half of social workers (51%) report that women make up 50 percent or less of the clients in their caseloads, and three percent of social workers report that they have no female clients at all. Only 14 percent of social workers work in settings in which their caseloads are 75 percent or more female.

Children, adolescents, and older adults are vulnerable populations frequently served by social workers. Figure 9 illustrates that most social workers have caseloads of mixed age ranges.

FIGURE 9. PERCENTAGE OF CASELOAD OF LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS, BY CLIENT AGE GROUP, 2004

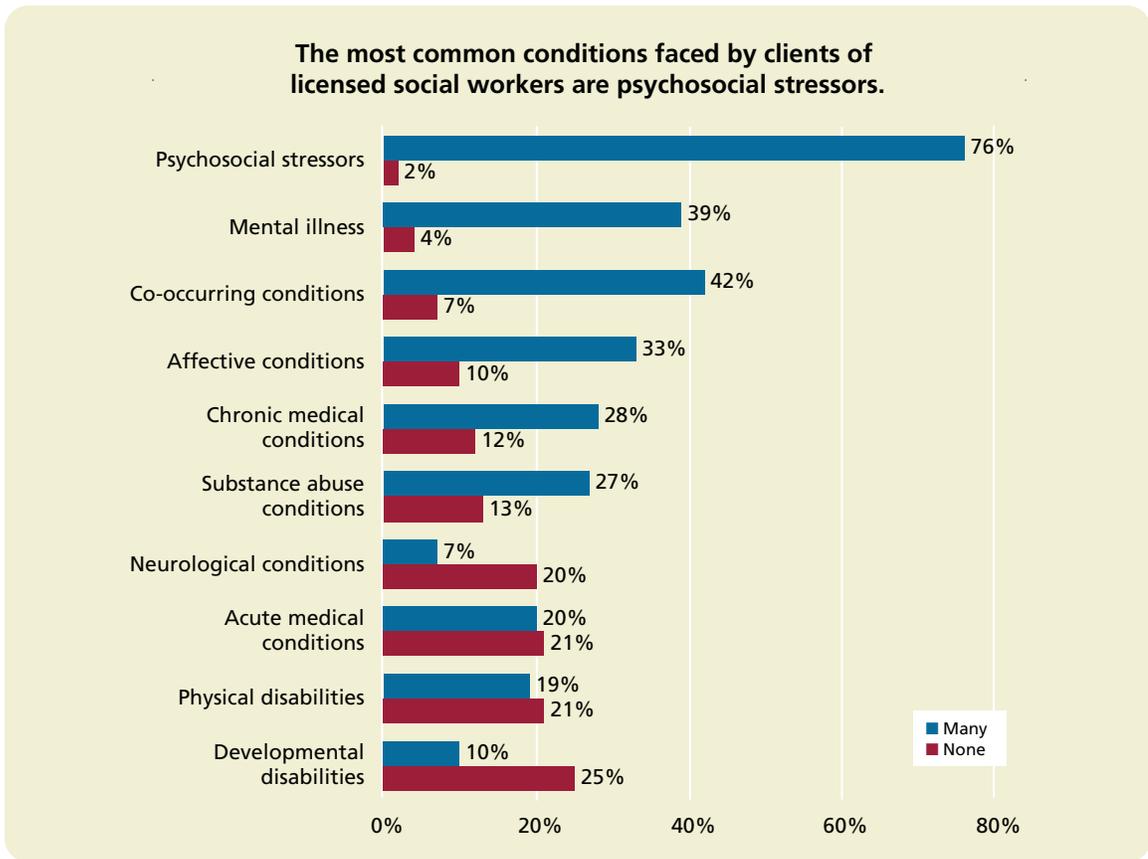


- Client populations are frequently from vulnerable groups such as children and older adults or are individuals with serious physical or mental disabilities.

Survey respondents treat clients with a variety of problems. These problems are physical, psychological, or social in nature and they may require different tasks and treatments on the part of social workers. Virtually all social workers report seeing at least some clients who experience psychosocial stressors (98%) or mental illness (96%). Many social workers have some clients with co-occurring disorders (93%), affective conditions (90%), and substance use disorders (87%). Large percentages of social workers also report serving clients with chronic medical conditions (88%), neurological conditions (80%), acute medical conditions or physical disabilities (79%), and developmental disabilities (75%).

A better indicator of the client problems that social workers confront on a day-to-day basis, however, is the percentage of social workers reporting “many” clients with given problems or conditions. Figure 10 shows that the majority of social workers (76%) report that “many” of their clients experience psychosocial stressors, and 42 percent report that “many” of their clients have co-occurring conditions. Significant numbers of clients also have mental illness, affective conditions, chronic medical conditions, and substance use disorders.

FIGURE 10. PERCENTAGE OF CLIENTS REPORTED TO HAVE MANY OR NONE OF SELECTED CONDITIONS



Older adults have a unique set of presenting problems. The most common problem reported by social workers who see a predominantly older population is chronic medical conditions. This is followed by psychosocial stressors (67%), acute medical conditions (62%), physical disabilities (61%), and co-occurring conditions (60%). Psychological conditions are much less common in predominantly elderly caseloads.

Chapter 4: Workplace Issues

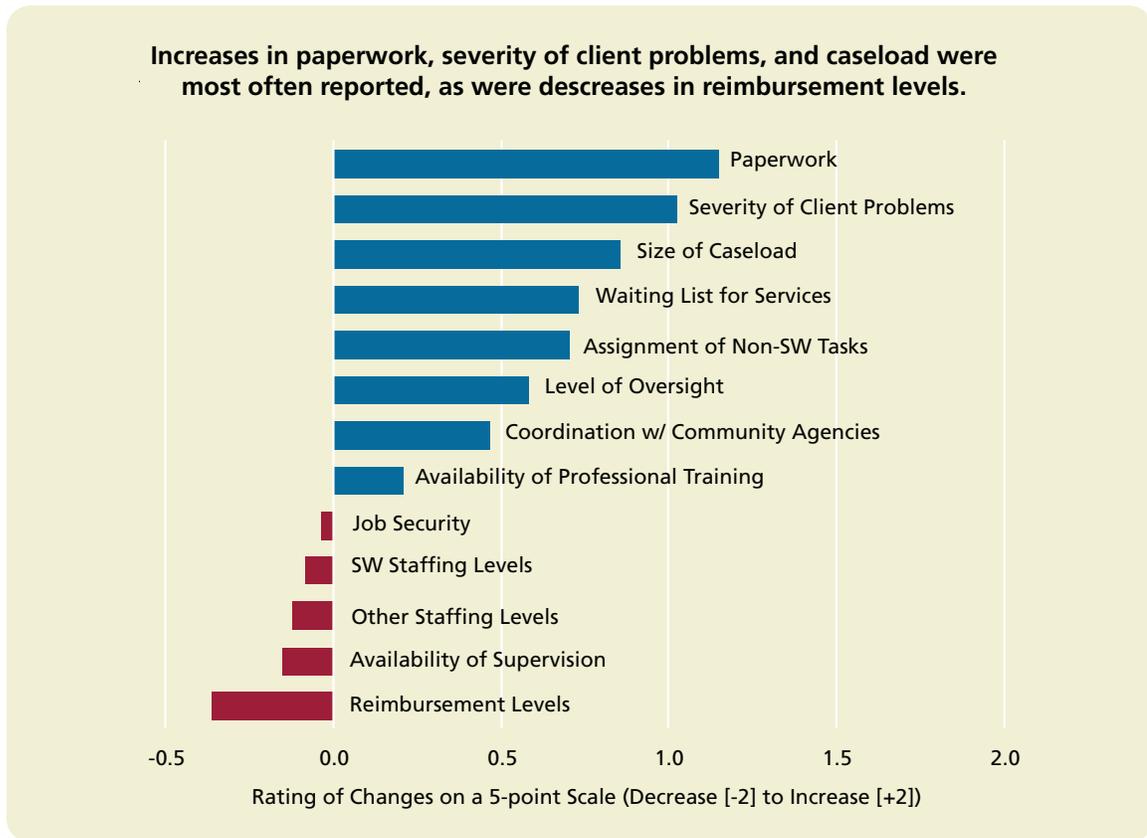
Key Findings:

- Over the last two years, social workers have experienced increases in barriers to effective practice and decreases in support systems for effective practice.
 - Overall, social workers express satisfaction with their efficacy as practitioners.
 - Social work salaries have high variability.
 - Twelve percent of respondents report plans to leave the workforce in the next two years.
-
- Over the last two years, social workers have experienced increases in barriers to effective practice and decreases in support systems for effective practice.

Overall, licensed social workers indicate that in the previous two years, they experienced increases in paperwork, severity of client problems, caseload size, waiting lists for services, assignment of non-social work tasks, level of oversight, coordination with community agencies, and availability of professional training. Most of these increases can be characterized as barriers to effective practice, except for the latter two (which are also the factors reported to have increased the least).

Social workers also report that they experienced decreases in job security, staffing levels (both social worker and other), availability of supervision, and, most of all, levels of reimbursement (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11. CHANGES IN THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE PAST TWO YEARS REPORTED BY LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS IN 2004



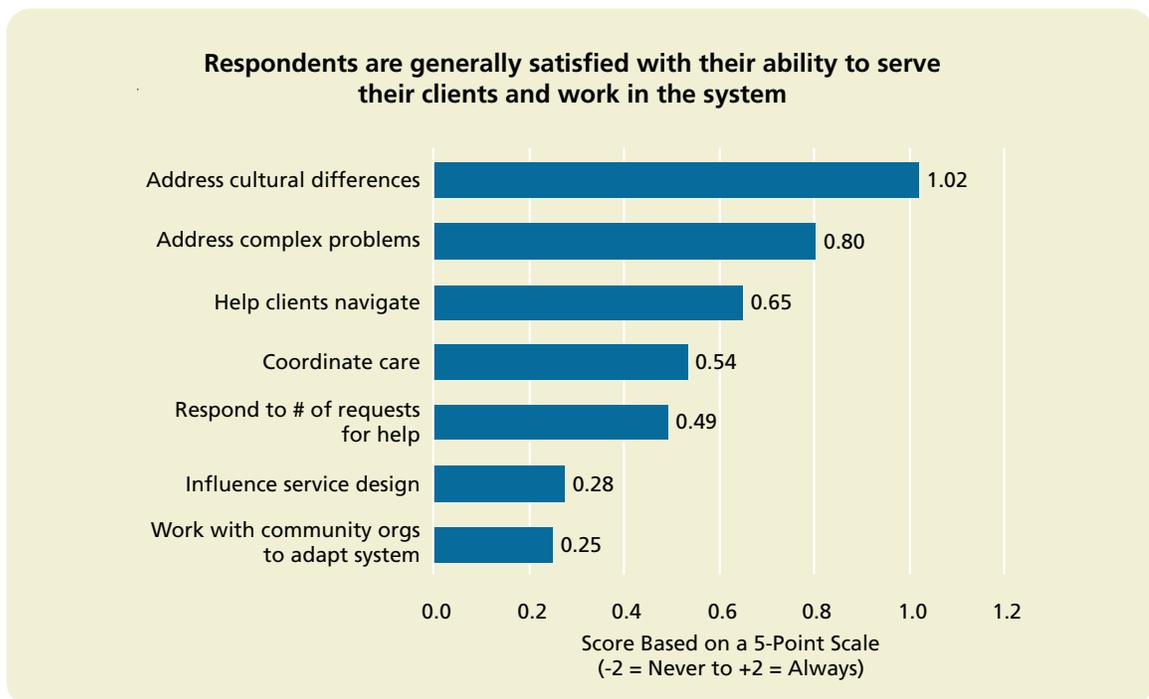
Forty-four percent of social workers reported that they faced personal safety issues on the job, and of these, 70% percent report that these safety issues were adequately addressed by their employer. Social workers in criminal justice were most likely to report personal safety issues (67%), followed by those in child welfare/family and addictions (both 52%). Those in higher education and aging were least likely to report personal safety issues (13% and 32%, respectively). Of those reporting safety issues, those in medical health were most likely to say that their issues had been addressed (84%), while those in child welfare/family were least likely (61%).

Nineteen percent of social workers reported that vacancies were common in their agencies and 53 percent reported that vacancies were either “difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to fill. Of those social workers who were able to report whether or not their employers recruited non-social workers for social work vacancies or outsourced social work functions, 27 percent reported the recruitment of non-social workers, and 20 percent reported outsourcing of social work functions. Both of these practices were somewhat more common in the public sector.

- Overall, social workers express satisfaction with their efficacy as practitioners.

On average, social workers report that they are satisfied with their abilities and skills on a number of dimensions of social work practice. Figure 12 shows that they are most satisfied with their ability to address cultural differences and complex problems, and least satisfied with their ability to influence service design and to work with community organizations to adapt the service delivery system.

FIGURE 12. RATINGS OF AGREEMENT OF RESPONDENTS WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT THEIR PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT



Women indicate significantly higher agreement than men with the statement that they help clients with a range of problems. Meanwhile, men agree significantly more than women that they are able to respond effectively to the number of requests for help and able to influence service design.

Older social workers are more satisfied with their ability to address complex problems, the amount of time they spend with clients, and their ability to address cultural differences. Younger social workers are significantly more likely to feel that they help families respond to client needs.

Social workers in public-sector agencies report the greatest satisfaction in working with community agencies and helping clients navigate the service delivery system.

Social workers in private practice consistently express more satisfaction than other social workers with their ability to help clients. There is less variation between social workers in private-sector organizations and those in public-sector agencies, but private-sector social workers generally expressed more satisfaction with their efficacy than public-sector social workers.

- **Social work salaries have a high variability.**

Social work salaries vary depending upon a number of factors, including geographic location, highest social work degree and gender (Table 2).

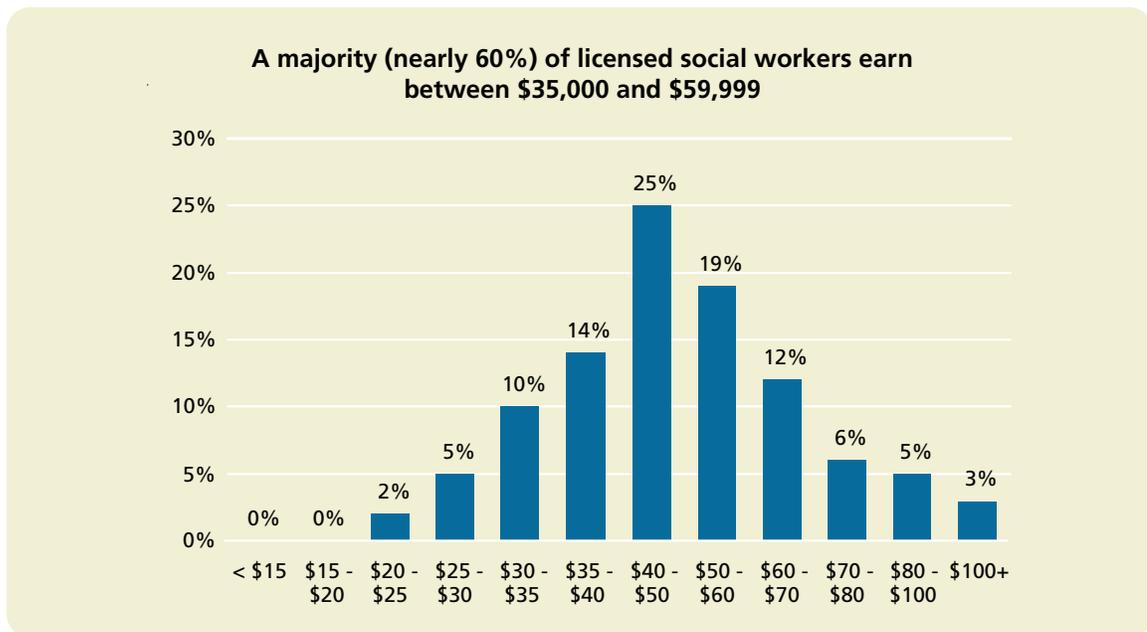
TABLE 2. VARIABLES WITH A STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP WITH ESTIMATED SALARIES OF LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS WORKING FULL TIME IN A SINGLE SOCIAL WORK JOB

Variable	General Nature of the Relation to Salary Level
Gender	Males have higher salaries
Census Division	Pacific region has highest salaries; South Central has lowest
Highest SW Degree	DSWs have highest salaries; MSWs have second highest
Rural/Urban Location	Metropolitan areas have highest salaries; rural areas have lowest
Size of Primary Caseload	Social workers without caseloads have highest salaries; 11-15 and 26-50 clients have lowest
Sector of Employment	Private practice has highest salaries; private nonprofit has lowest
Years of Experience	Each year of experience is associated with about \$419 increase in salary

Median salaries range from a high of \$55,129 among those working both full-time and part-time social work jobs to a low of \$24,067 among those working only part-time social work jobs. Subsequent analyses examine only those working a single, full-time social work job in order to ensure comparability across the categories.

Figure 13 shows that the most commonly reported salary category for full-time licensed social workers is \$40,000 to \$49,999, with 25 percent of social workers falling into this category. Nearly 60 percent of social workers earn between \$35,000 and \$59,999. A significant proportion (26%) earn more than \$60,000, and a smaller proportion (17%) earn less. Estimated annual salaries vary substantially by highest social work degree; the medians are \$33,628 for BSWs, \$46,845 for MSWs, and \$58,390 for DSW/PhDs.

FIGURE 13. DISTRIBUTION OF ANNUAL GROSS WAGES/SALARY FROM ALL SOCIAL WORK POSITIONS



MSWs salaries are highest in the practice areas of developmental disabilities and medical health and lowest in the practice area of aging. BSWs earn the highest average salaries in the practice areas of adolescents and school social work and the lowest in developmental disabilities and child welfare/families.

Salaries are higher in public agencies than in private/nonprofit-sector organizations (\$48,313 compared with \$45,329), but are highest in private practice (\$57,297). Most of this variation is in MSW salaries, however. MSWs earn a median of \$52,593 in public-sector agencies, \$47,634 in private/nonprofit-sector organizations, and \$56,449 in private practice. In contrast, there is variation of less than \$1,000 in full-time BSW salaries by sector.

Median salaries for social workers increase steadily with age. BSW salaries increase from a median of \$32,115 at ages 26 to 34 to a median of \$38,466 at ages 55 to 64. MSW salaries increase even more with age, from a median of \$43,241 at ages 26 to 34 to a median of \$54,166 at ages 55 to 64.

Table 3 shows the estimated median salaries for full-time social workers by urban/rural location and sector of primary employment. Those in metropolitan areas earn substantially more than those in micropolitan areas, small towns, and rural areas, especially in government and private practice settings. The table also shows that median salaries for those in private practice are substantially higher than those in the other three sectors.

TABLE 3. **MEDIAN SALARIES OF FULL-TIME SOCIAL WORKERS, BY RURAL URBAN LOCATION AND SECTOR OF PRIMARY EMPLOYMENT**

Sector of Primary Employment	Metropolitan Area	Micropolitan Area	Small Town	Rural Area	Total
Private Practice	\$58,747	\$47,820	\$46,415	\$34,266	\$57,357
Private, Not-For-Profit	\$46,482	\$40,658	\$36,344	\$38,542	\$44,998
Private, For-Profit	\$47,286	\$45,713	\$39,332	\$33,628	\$46,433
Government	\$51,833	\$39,681	\$41,123	\$37,906	\$48,351
Total	\$49,175	\$42,160	\$39,014	\$37,641	\$47,640

As is true in most professions, the survey responses reveal a gender gap in salaries for licensed social workers. The raw difference in average salaries for men and women working full-time in a single social work job is \$12,045, with 389 men reporting an average annual salary of \$61,040 and 1,744 women reporting \$48,995. Controlling for a number of other factors (including age, race, geographic area, highest social work degree, rural/urban setting, license required, size of caseload, vacancy patterns, practice area, employment sector, employment role, and years of experience), the average salary gap drops to approximately \$7,052. Since the mean salary for these individuals is about \$51,192, the percentage gap is about 14 percent.

- Twelve percent of respondents report plans to leave the workforce in the next two years.

Career plans are an important aspect of the workforce supply of any profession. Such information helps to clarify the reasons for outflows of practitioners from the workforce, which generate the need for new professionals to maintain the supply of practitioners and services. Table 4 summarizes the responses to a question on the 2004 survey about “career plans in the next two years.” The table shows that although nearly 70 percent of respondents plan to remain in their current positions, 7.4 percent indicate they will either retire or stop working, and another 4.7 percent indicate they will leave social work, but continue working.

TABLE 4. CAREER PLANS OF ACTIVE LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS BY AGE GROUP, 2004

Career Plans in Next Two Years	Age Group						Total
	25 & Under	26-34	35-44	44-54	55-64	65 & Over	
Remain in Current Position	53.8%	58.7%	69.4%	72.6%	75.4%	64.9%	69.8%
Seek New Opportunity/							
Promotion as SW	50.0%	39.1%	31.1%	26.2%	16.5%	4.6%	26.1%
Increase SW Hours	3.8%	7.3%	9.6%	8.7%	7.1%	3.4%	8.0%
Decrease SW Hours	3.8%	11.6%	8.7%	7.8%	13.2%	16.7%	10.3%
Re-Enter SW	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.6%	0.2%
Leave SW But							
Continue to Work	3.8%	4.7%	5.7%	4.9%	3.5%	4.0%	4.7%
Retire	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	2.9%	13.7%	33.3%	5.9%
Stop Working	0.0%	2.4%	1.8%	0.7%	0.9%	5.2%	1.5%
Pursue Additional							
SW Degree	30.8%	13.5%	7.3%	5.5%	1.6%	2.3%	6.3%
Pursue Additional							
Non-SW Degree	19.2%	10.6%	9.1%	6.8%	3.1%	1.1%	6.8%
Pursue Non-Degree							
SW Training	23.1%	17.3%	14.2%	15.0%	11.9%	9.2%	14.2%
Other	0.0%	7.1%	7.5%	6.6%	5.4%	2.3%	6.3%

Although men and women report similar career plans, women are more likely than men to plan to pursue non-degree training in social work and to increase their social work hours. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to plan to retire (8% of men versus 5% of women).

Of those social workers who plan to remain in the labor force, 4.7 percent report that they plan to leave social work but continue to work, indicating some level of dissatisfaction with social work as a career. Social workers who report plans to leave are:

- more likely to be ages 26 to 34
- more likely to have a BSW as their highest social work degree
- more likely to report that continuing education is unavailable
- disproportionately in their first four years of practice
- more likely to work in a nursing home, social service agency, or hospital
- more likely to describe their salary as very limited
- more likely to earn a smaller salary
- more likely to report that most of their clients are uninsured
- more likely than other social workers to report that they are assigned tasks below their training
- less satisfied with their access to three types of resources (agency resources, medical care, and mental health care)
- significantly less likely than others to report that their agencies engage in demonstration programs and best-practices training
- significantly more likely to report that vacancies in their agency are common
- significantly more likely to report that their employer recruits non-social workers to fill social work positions
- significantly more likely to report their employer outsources social work functions
- significantly more likely than other social workers to report that they face personal safety issues

- less likely to report that there is respect/support for social work services within their agency
- less likely to report that they receive support and guidance from their supervisors
- less likely to report that they receive or provide support on issues of ethical practice in the workplace
- less satisfied with their time available to address presenting problems, provide services to client families, address severity and breadth of client problems, address service delivery issues, provide clinical services, conduct investigations, participate in training, and perform administrative tasks
- significantly more likely than those who do not plan to leave to report negative changes in the practice of social work over the past two years, including: increased caseloads, increased severity of client problems, decreased levels of reimbursement, increased paperwork, decreased social worker staffing levels, decreased job security, decreased availability of supervision, increased assignment of non-social work tasks and decreased availability of professional training
- significantly more likely to say that they would change position due to higher salary, increased mobility, different supervision or management, ethical challenges, and stress

Although they represent a small segment of the sample, their experiences clearly highlight some of the challenges facing the profession in its efforts to ensure an adequate supply of frontline social workers for the future.

Conclusion

The 2004 survey of licensed social workers reveals much about the contributions, commitment and strength of social work professionals. Social workers represent a significant provider of professional social services to a broad cross-section of clients. Their direct services help people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds to access and benefit from social supports and services. Social workers also are key providers to the most vulnerable populations, providing a safety net of services to older adults, neglected and abused children, and people at high risk for disparate health and behavioral health service access, treatment and outcomes.

This survey also highlights challenges that are clearly facing the profession. A number of sources outside the 2004 survey predict that demand for licensed social workers in the aggregate may increase in the coming decade and beyond. The 2006-2007 Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Handbook* projects that the demand for new social workers will increase between 18 percent and 26 percent by the year 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Much of this increase is attributed to the aging of the population, which carries with it increased demand for social work services. A recent report by the Center for Health Workforce Studies, University at Albany (2005) pointed out that the projected 54 percent growth in the number of older adults in the United States between 2000 and 2020 is likely to be a primary driver of increased demand for social work services in coming decades.

On the one hand, the profession appears poised to meet this demand through its successful recruitment of students into its educational programs. There is a well-developed infrastructure of social work education that produces more than 30,000 MSWs and BSWs per year. However, given the serious challenges regarding recruitment, retention and replacement of retiring social workers that the profession now faces, there is no certainty that this educational pipeline is sufficient to fully meet future demands for new licensed social workers.

Challenge #1: Replacement of Retiring Social Workers

According to data and projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, social work is one of the occupations most affected by Baby Boomer retirements, with the retirement replacement needs reaching 95,000 in the 2003-2008 timeframe (Dohm, 2000). This projection is supported by this study, which identifies an older social work workforce compared to the civilian workforce.

This study also confirms that the social work profession is female-dominated and is likely to become more so in the future. Occupations dominated by women, like social work, are especially vulnerable with an aging workforce since women's level of workforce participation is lower than men's as they approach retirement age (Toossi, 2005). The trend of people entering the field of social work later in life is an additional concern for the profession. 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 between 2000 and 2004. This means the average career duration for licensed social workers is now about 25 or 30 years, which is shorter than for most major health professions.

Challenge # 2: Recruiting New Social Workers

The fact that many respondents report increased use of non-social workers to fill vacant social work positions and increased outsourcing of social work tasks indicates a need for more professional social workers to be available to meet the current needs of agencies and clients. The profession is challenged to recruit new social workers, particularly those interested in working with older adults. The study identifies several challenges that gerontological social workers encounter, including lower salaries, assuring that assigned tasks fit the skill level of the social worker, improving peer networks, and rebalancing the increased demands for services with the agency supports to deliver those services.

The profession must also target its recruitment to keep pace with the changing demographic composition of the United States. Social work must position itself within diverse communities as a viable career choice in a changing world to attract a broad spectrum of providers to reflect its client constituencies.

Challenge #3: Retaining the Social Work Labor Force

Once professional social workers are recruited, educated and prepared for practice, perhaps the biggest challenge is retaining this corps of workers. Although most social workers express satisfaction with their career choice and aspects of their practices, too many become discouraged by agency environments that are unresponsive to their needs for professional growth, respect and fair compensation. A profession cannot successfully retain its workforce when issues of personal safety go unaddressed. In addition, increases in demands on workers accompanied by decreases in supports not only frustrate practitioners, but ultimately drive them away from the field.

Clearly, the social work profession is at a crossroads. If there are to be adequate numbers of social workers to respond to the needs of clients in this decade and beyond, the sufficiency of this frontline workforce must not only be ensured, it must be prioritized.

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Footnotes

- 1 Eight percent of the respondents to the 2004 survey did not have degrees in social work. These individuals are older practitioners who have been permitted to retain licenses earned earlier in their careers even though the formal requirements have since become more stringent. Data related to these practitioners are not reported in tables or charts, but may be referenced in text.