

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

***SUPPLEMENT***

**Chapter 5 of 5**

**Perspectives on Social Work Practice**

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## Chapter 5. Perspectives on Licensed Social Work Practice

### Changes in the Practice of Social Work

Although individual responses varied, social workers as a group indicated that over the course of the last two years, they had 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 can be characterized as barriers to effective practice, except for the latter two, which were also the factors reported to have increased the least (Figure 1).

Social workers also reported that they had experienced decreases in job security, staffing levels (both social worker and other), availability of supervision, and levels of reimbursement, with the greatest decrease indicated for the latter.

**Figure 1. Rating of Changes in Social Work Practice Over Past Two Years**

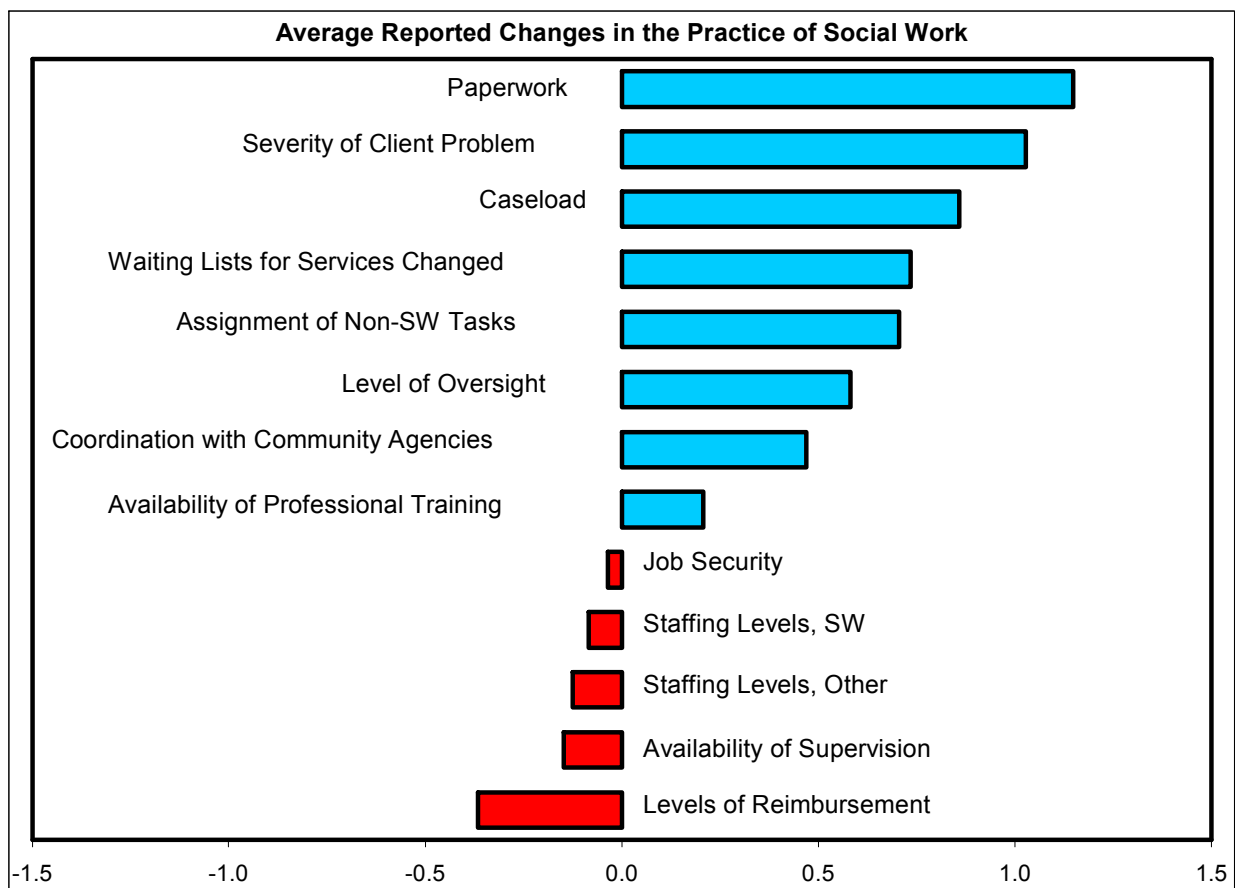
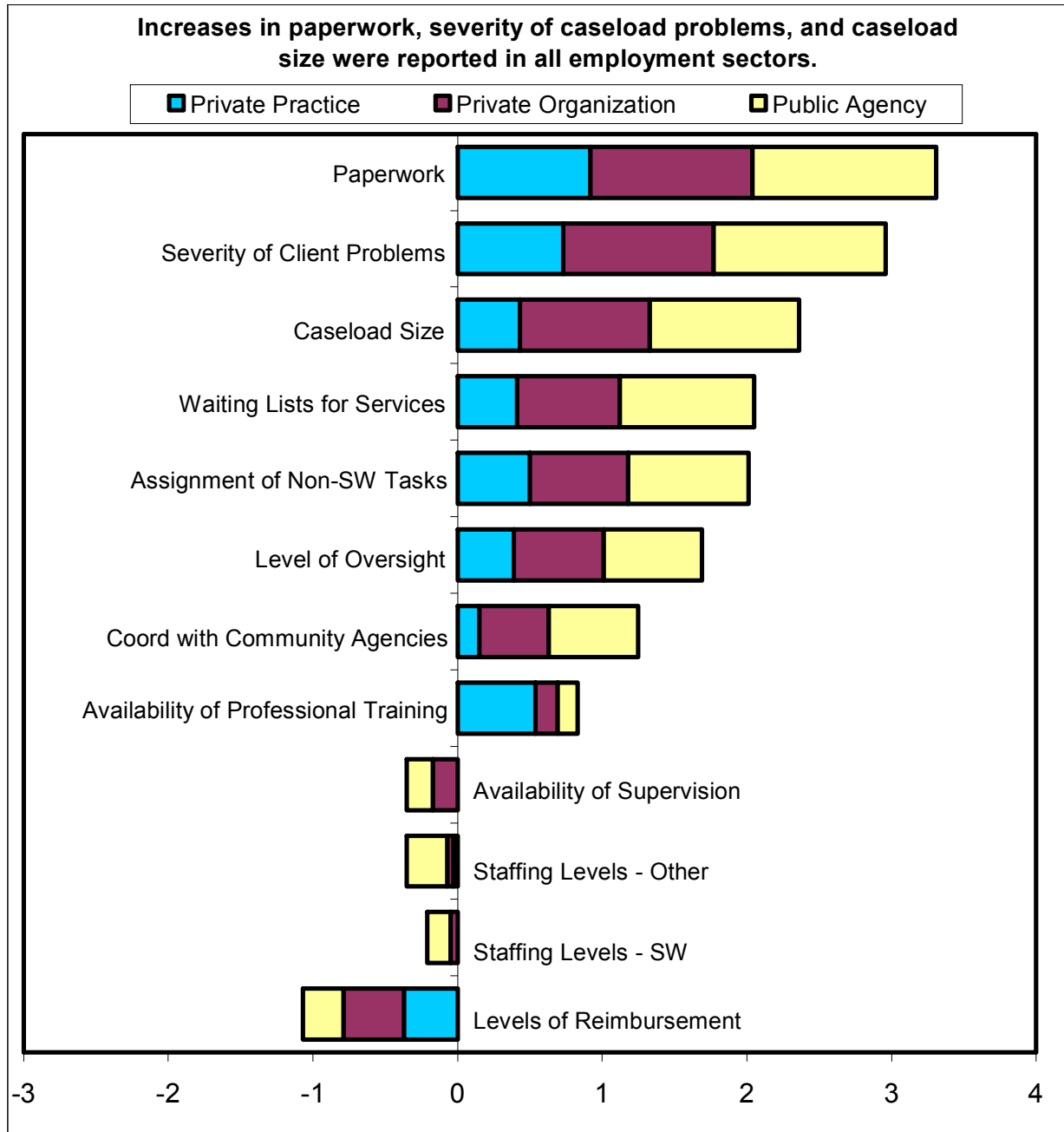


Figure 2 shows that social workers in the three major employment sectors reported increase in demands placed on them. Those in private practice reported the most moderate changes. Social workers in public agencies generally rated the magnitude of changes as greater than social

workers in private-sector/non-profit organizations. This was particularly pronounced with regard to staffing levels.

**Figure 2. Changes in Selected Aspects of Social Work Practice, by Employment Sector**

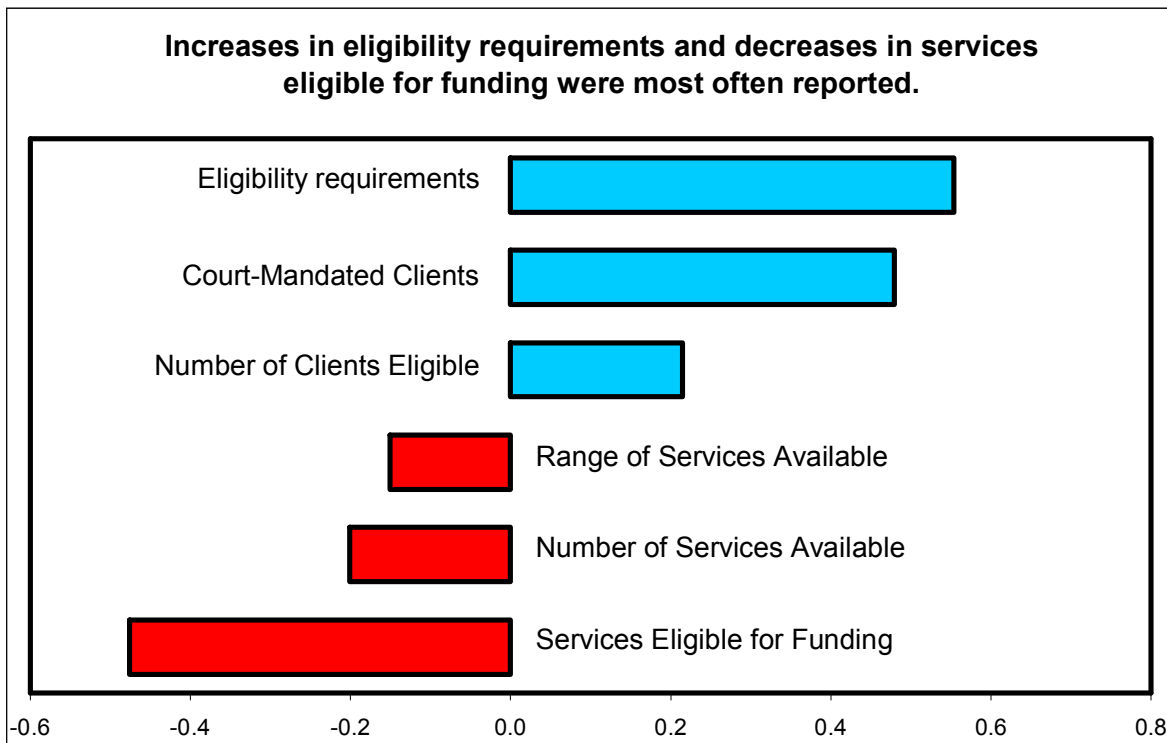
[Scale: -2 = Decreased to +2 = Increased]



### Changes in the Service Delivery System

The changes in the service delivery system reported by social workers were generally more moderate than those reported for social work practice. Figure 3 shows that, on average, responses indicated that eligibility requirements had increased, the percentage of clients receiving services mandated by the court or a condition of some program increased, and the number of clients eligible for services increased. At the same time, respondents reported that the range and number of services available and especially the number of services eligible for funding had decreased.

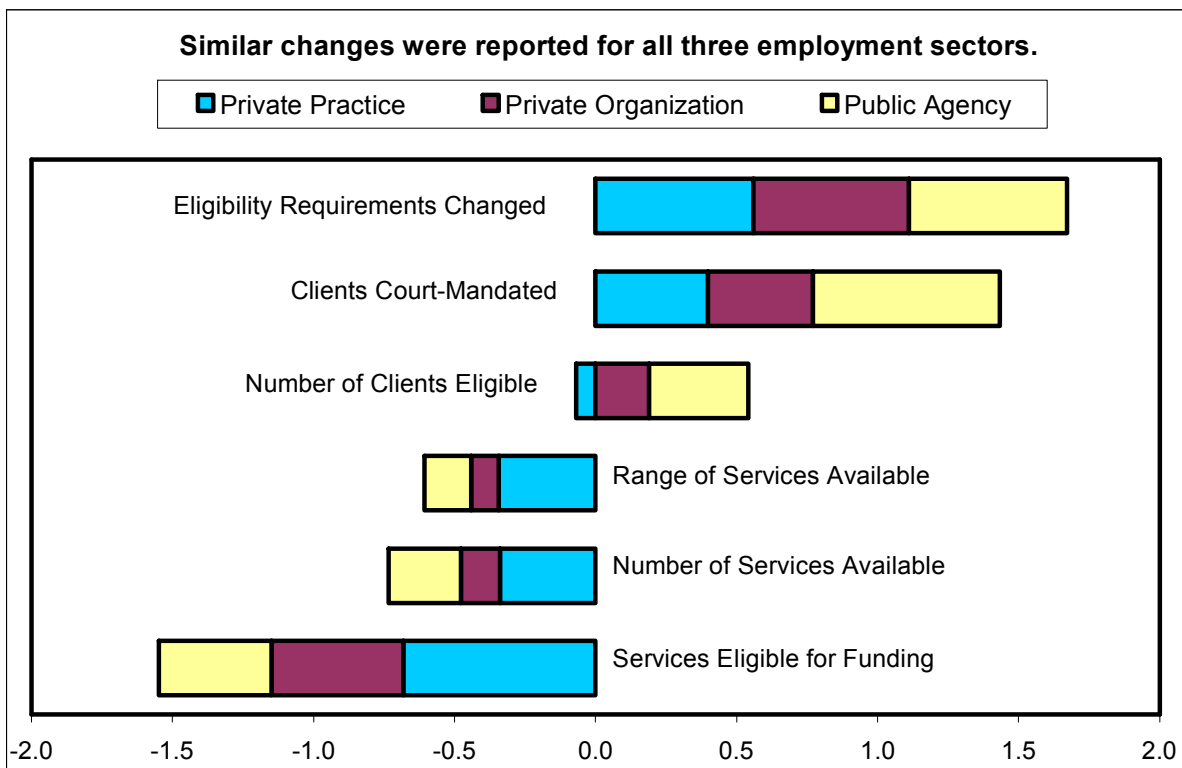
**Figure 3. Average Reported Changes in Selected Aspects of the Social Work Service Delivery System**  
[Scale: -2 = Decreased to +2 = Increased]



There was noticeable variation in responses by sector of employment, with social workers in private practice reporting the greatest decreases in the range and number of services available and the number of services eligible for funding, and with social workers in public-sector agencies reporting the greatest increases in the number of clients eligible for services and the proportion of court-mandated clients. Figure 4 shows the patterns graphically.



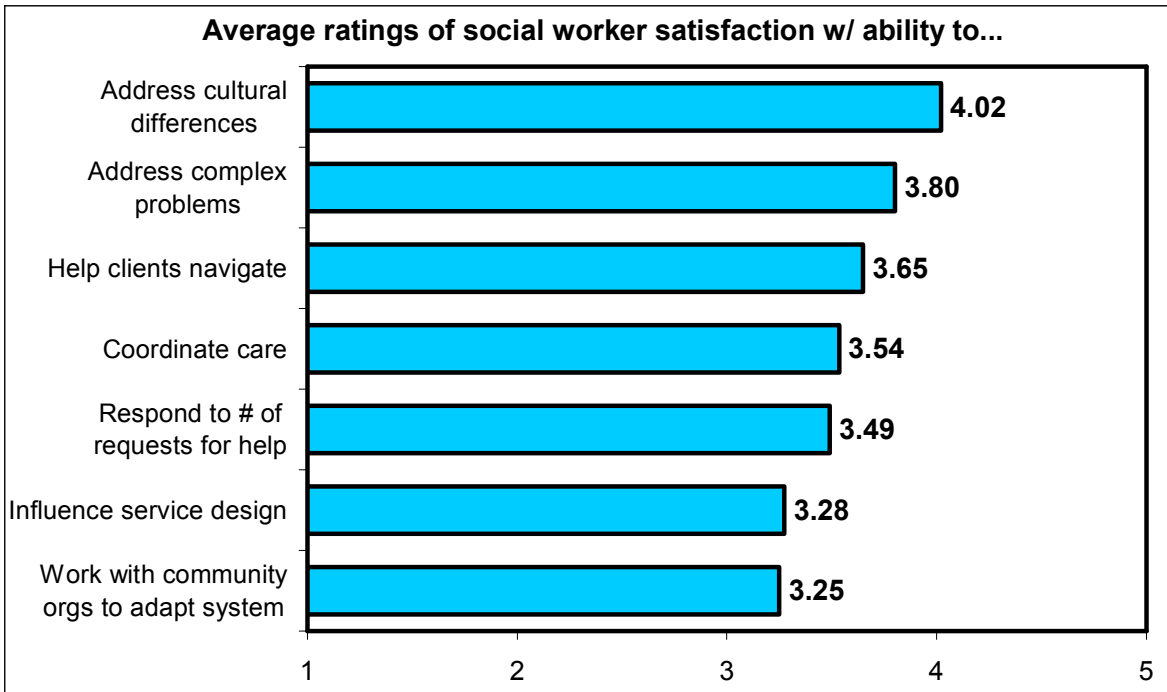
**Figure 4. Average Reported Changes in Selected Aspects of the Social Work Service Delivery System, by Employment Sector**  
 [Scale: -2 = Decreased to +2 = Increased]



### Licensed Social Worker Perspectives on Skills and Efficacy

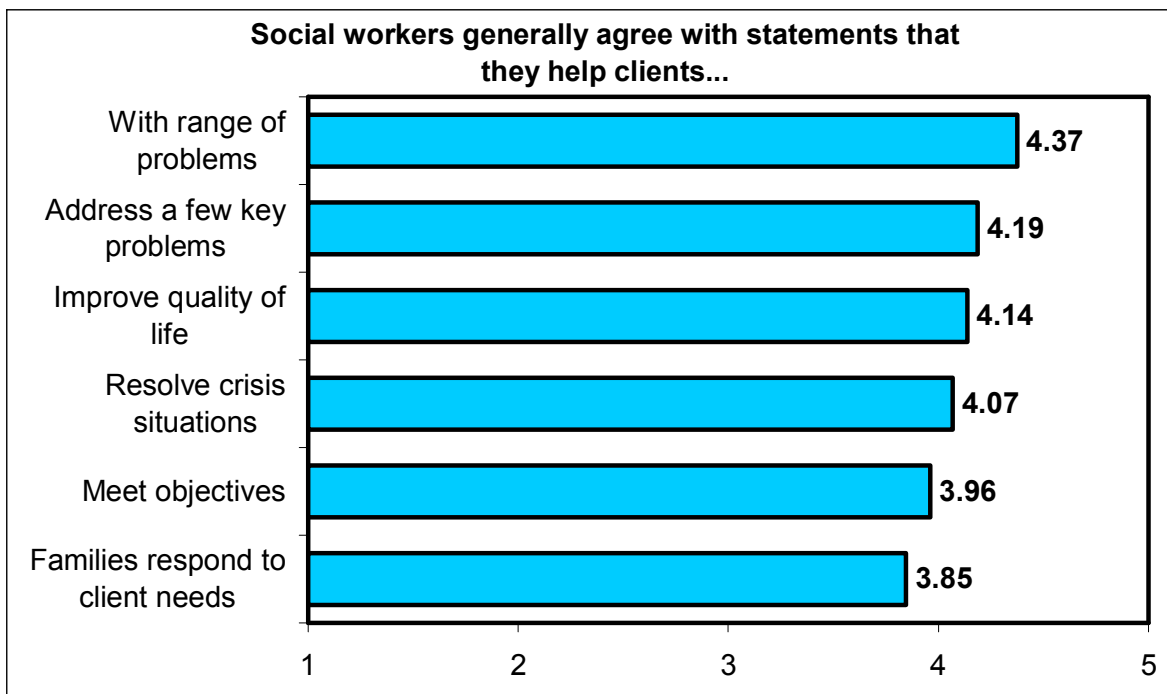
On average, social workers reported that they were satisfied with their abilities and skills on a number of different dimensions of social work practice. Figure 5 shows that they were most satisfied with their ability to address cultural differences and address complex problems, and least satisfied with their ability to influence service design and to work with community organizations to adapt the service delivery system.

**Figure 5. Average Ratings of Agreement by Licensed Social Workers with Selected Statements About Social Work**  
 [Scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Always]



Social workers were also, on average, positive in their assessments of what they accomplished for their clients. As can be seen in Figure 6, they were most likely to agree that they helped clients with a range of problems and that they helped clients to address a few key problems, and least likely to agree that they helped client families respond to client needs. Even the lowest average score, however, was close to the equivalent of 4 on a 5-point scale, indicating that social workers were generally satisfied with what their efforts were able to accomplish.

**Figure 6. Average Ratings of Agreement by Licensed Social Workers with Selected Statements About Helping Clients**  
 [Scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Always]



*Satisfaction by gender.* Social workers did not differ greatly by gender in their feelings about their skills and efficacy. Women indicated significantly higher agreement than men with the statement that they helped clients with a range of problems, while men agreed significantly more than women that they were able to effectively respond to the number of requests for help and that they were able to influence service design.

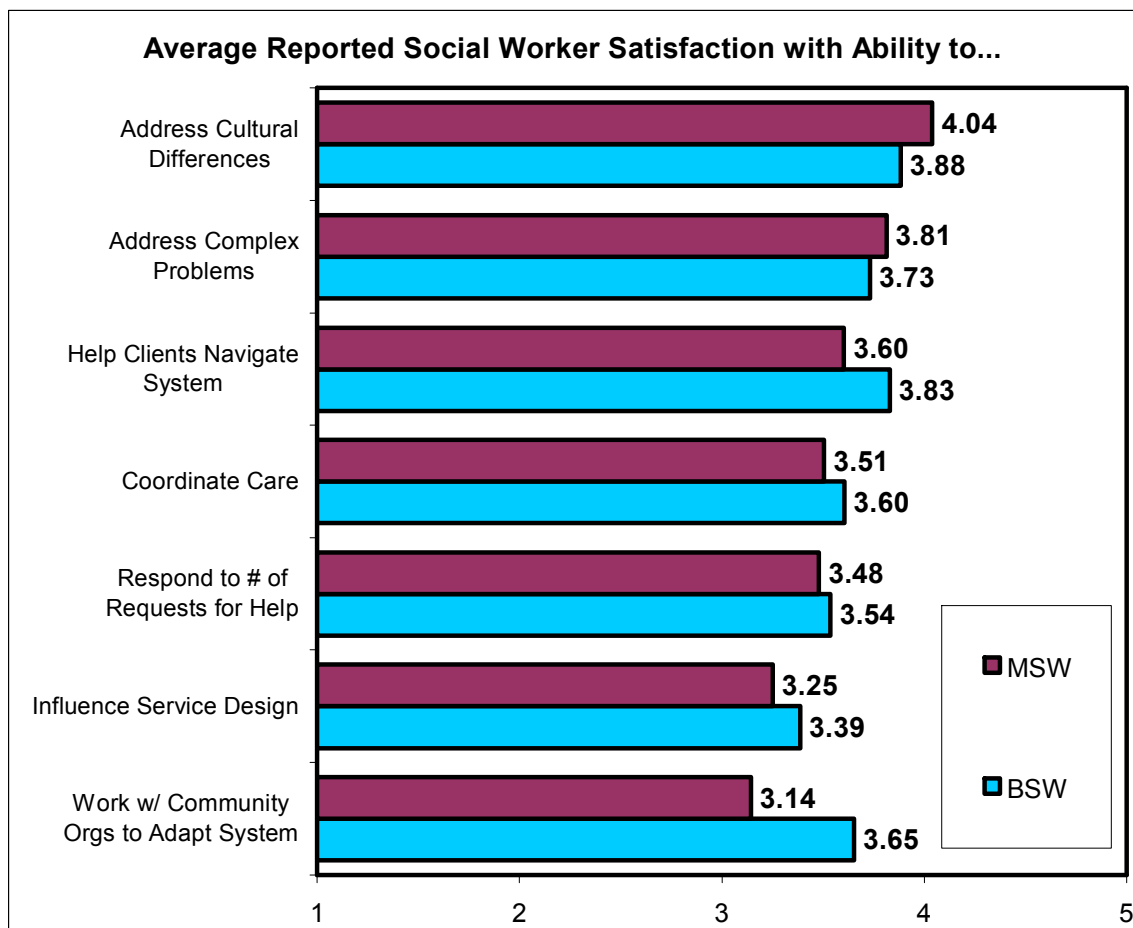
*Satisfaction by age.* Social worker age was positively related to the perception that they improved quality of life for clients, helped clients meet objectives, helped clients with a range of problems, helped clients address a few key problems, and responded effectively to the number of requests for help. Older social workers were also more satisfied with their ability to address complex problems, the amount of time they spent with clients, and their ability in cultural differences. Younger social workers, however, were significantly more likely to feel that they helped families respond to client needs.

*Satisfaction by race/ethnicity.* Generally, non-Hispanic White social workers seemed least satisfied with their abilities and their effect on clients. They indicated significantly less agreement than Black, Hispanic, or Asian social workers that they helped improve the quality of life of their clients, that they were satisfied with their ability to respond to cultural differences, and that they were satisfied with their ability to coordinate care between the medical and mental health community. They also indicated less agreement than Black and Hispanic social workers that they are satisfied with their ability to help clients navigate through the social services system and less agreement than Black social workers that they worked with community organizations to

adapt the service delivery system. Non-Hispanic White respondents were also less satisfied with their ability to influence service design and less satisfied than Asian social workers that they helped clients address one or two key problems and that they helped families respond to client needs.

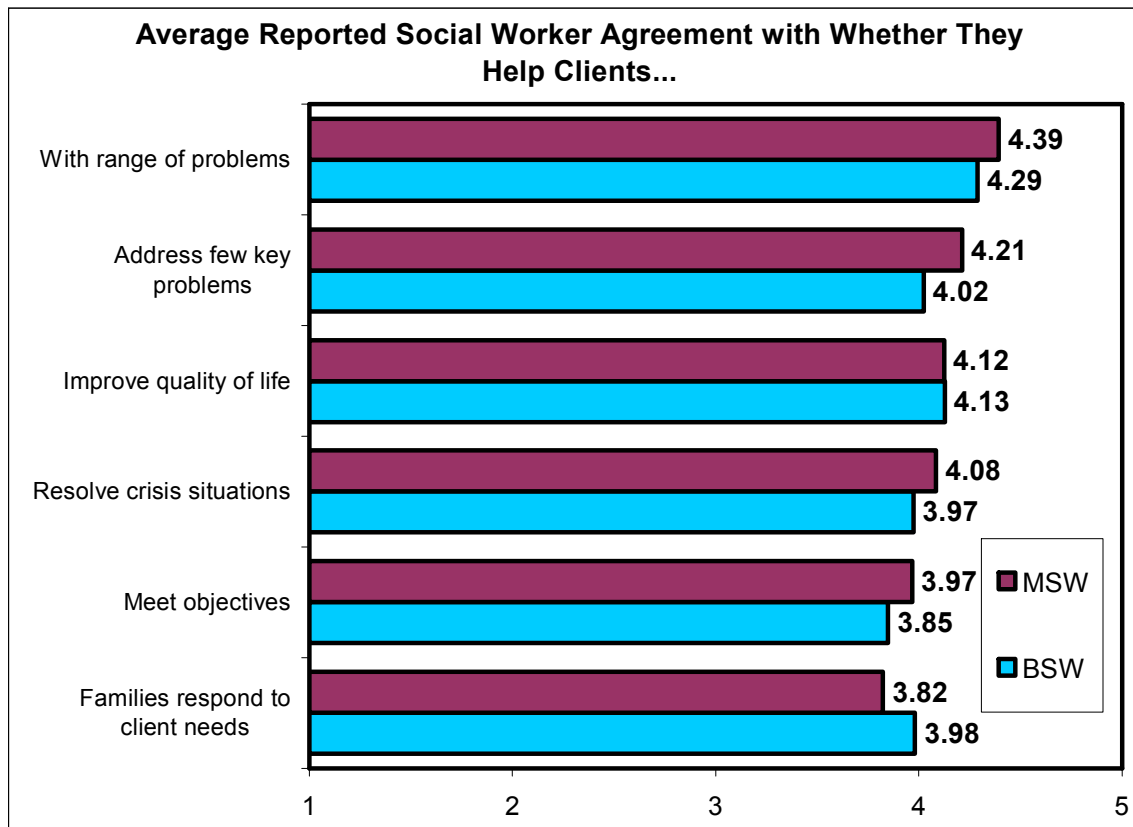
*Satisfaction by degree.* There were apparent relationships between the reported satisfaction with abilities in various tasks and highest social work degree, but they were not always in the direction one would expect (Figure 7). BSWs were more satisfied than MSWs with their abilities in almost every competency described, except for addressing cultural differences and addressing complex problems. Differences were strongest for factors related to relationships between agencies (e.g., helping clients navigate the system, influencing service design, working with community organizations to adapt the system, and coordinating care).

**Figure 7. Average Ratings of Agreement by Licensed Social Workers with Selected Statements About Helping Clients, by MSW and BSW**  
[Scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Always]



A somewhat different pattern emerged when examining social worker attitudes about their own performance. Figure 8 shows that MSWs tended to have more positive opinions about whether they helped clients in a variety of ways. The single exception to this pattern was that BSWs were more positive about whether they were able to help client families respond to client needs.

**Figure 8. Average Ratings of Agreement by Licensed Social Workers with Selected Statements About Helping Clients, by MSW and BSW**  
[Scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Always]



*Satisfaction by experience.* Although it seemed probable that attitudes would vary by years in practice, with more experienced social workers rating their skills and efficacy more positively, there were not significant differences on many of the variables. More experienced social workers expressed agreement with the statements that they helped clients meet objectives, that they addressed a few key problems, that they addressed complex problems, and that they were satisfied with the amount of time they have to spend with clients. On the other hand, they expressed significantly less agreement with the statements that they helped families respond to client needs and that they were satisfied with their ability to coordinate care.

*Satisfaction by employment sector.* Satisfaction with abilities in various aspects of social work varied significantly by sector, with social workers in private practice tending towards greater agreement, except in matters of working with community agencies and helping clients navigate the service delivery system, in which social workers in public-sector agencies reported the greatest satisfaction.

Attitudes about efficacy in social work practice also varied by employment sector, with social workers in private practice consistently expressing more satisfaction than other social workers with their ability to help clients. The exceptions were that they were not significantly more or less likely to agree that they help clients resolve crisis situations, and were in fact less likely than social workers in other sectors to agree that they helped client families respond to client needs. There was less variation between social workers in private-sector organizations and those in public-sector agencies, but generally private-sector social workers expressed more satisfaction with their efficacy than public-sector social workers.

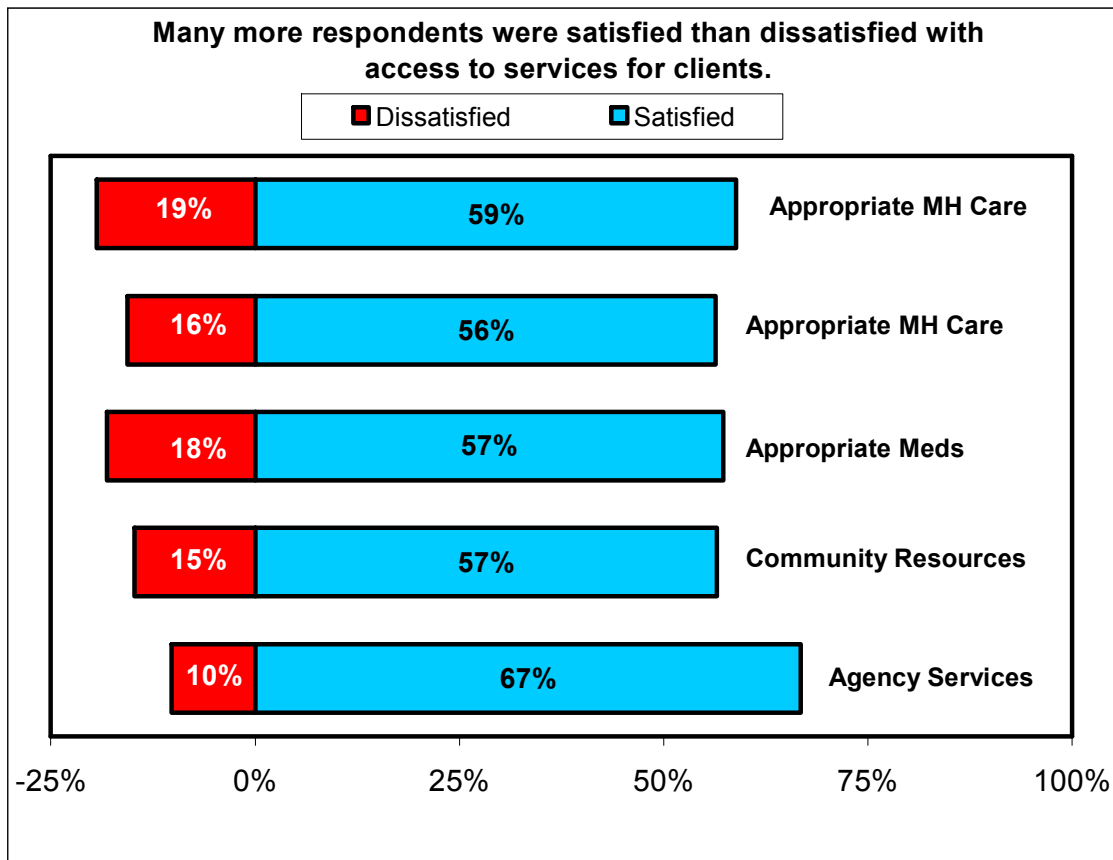
*Appropriateness of tasks.* Most social workers (54%) felt that their tasks were well-matched to their training, but 13% reported that they were asked to do tasks below their training, and 34% reported that they were asked to do tasks above their training. This varied somewhat by practice area, with social workers in the areas of aging and developmental disabilities reporting the best match between tasks and training. Social workers in the practice area of criminal justice were most likely to report their tasks being above their training, followed by social workers in mental health, higher education, and adolescents. There was no practice area in which the average response indicated that tasks were notably below one's training.

The appropriateness of education to tasks also varied significantly by sector, with social workers in private practice most likely to report tasks were above their level of training, and social workers in public-sector agencies reporting being closest to their level of training. Respondents in most settings reported that their tasks were on average close in appropriateness to their training, with the exception of social workers in hospices, 39% of whom felt that their tasks were above their level of training. There were not significant differences in how well tasks matched to training by highest social work degree or by years experience.

### **Satisfaction with Access to Resources and Time Available**

*Satisfaction with access to resources.* Figure 9 shows that between 67% and 57% of social workers reported being satisfied with their ability to access various services for clients. Social workers were most satisfied with their access to agency services for their clients, with 67% reporting satisfaction overall. This was followed by access to appropriate mental health care, with 59% satisfied, and access to appropriate medication, medical care, and community resources, all with 57% satisfied. Reported dissatisfaction ranged from 19% in access to appropriate mental health care to 10% in access to agency services.

**Figure 9. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers Reporting Satisfaction or Dissatisfaction with Ability to Access Services for Clients**



Satisfaction with access to resources for one’s clients varied significantly by employment sector. Social workers in public agencies were significantly less satisfied than social workers in private /nonprofit-sector organizations with their access to appropriate medication and medical care.

Social workers in private practice were significantly more satisfied with their access to medications and mental health care than other social workers, and more satisfied with their access to medical care than social workers in public-sector agencies, but were significantly less satisfied than both other groups with their access to agency services.

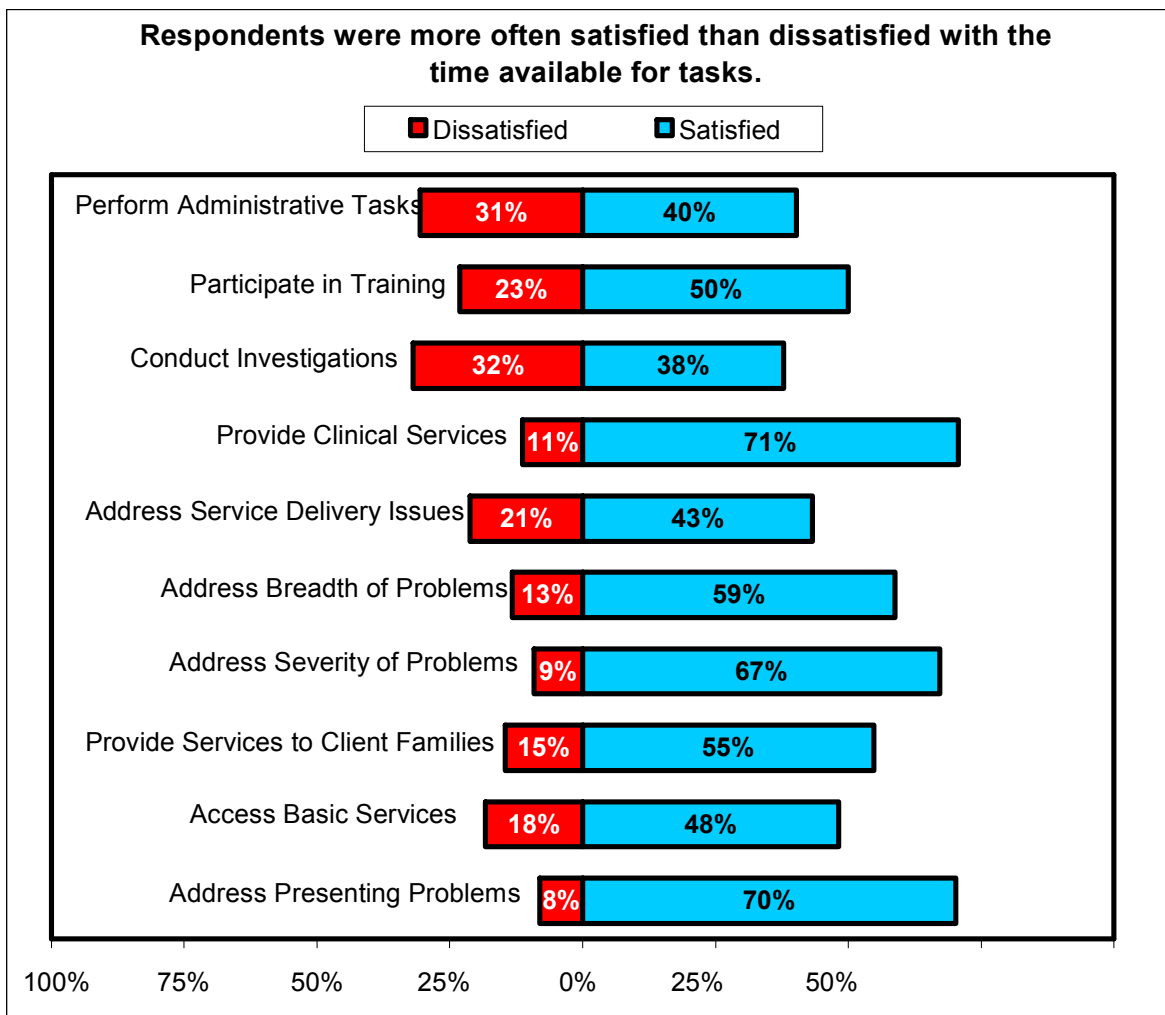
Satisfaction with access to resources also varied by setting. Social workers in hospices were most satisfied with their access to both agency services and community resources, while social workers in psychiatric hospitals were least satisfied. Social workers in schools were least satisfied with their access to appropriate medications and medical care, while social workers in hospices were again the most satisfied. Hospital social workers were least satisfied with their access to appropriate mental health care, while those in behavioral health clinics were most satisfied.

There were no significant differences between BSWs and MSWs in terms of their satisfaction with access to medication and medical care, although years experience was positively correlated with both. BSWs were significantly more satisfied with their access to agency services and

community resources for their clients, however, while MSWs were significantly more satisfied with their access to appropriate mental health care. Years experience was not significantly correlated to access to agency services, community resources, or mental health care.

*Satisfaction with time available.* Figure 10 shows that between 38% and 71% of social workers reported satisfaction with the time available to them for various tasks, with the most satisfaction reported for time to provide clinical services and the least satisfaction reported for time to conduct investigations. Reported dissatisfaction ranged from 8% (time to address presenting problems) to 32% (time to conduct investigations).

**Figure 10. Percent of Social Workers Satisfied or Dissatisfied with Time Available for Selected Tasks**



*Time available, education, and experience.* Education and experience were significantly correlated with satisfaction with time available. MSWs were significantly more satisfied than BSWs with their time to address presenting problems, severity of problems, and breadth of problems, and to provide clinical services. BSWs, on the other hand, were more satisfied with their time to provide basic services and to conduct investigations. More experienced social



workers expressed more satisfaction with time to address presenting problems, severity of problems, and breadth of problems; to provide clinical services; to provide services to client families; and to participate in training and perform administrative tasks.

*Time available and practice area.* Satisfaction with the time available for selected tasks varied by practice area. Highlights are presented below.

- Higher education social workers were the most satisfied with the time available to them for every one of the ten tasks listed on the survey questionnaire.
- Child welfare/family social workers were the least satisfied with time to address presenting problems, to address breadth of problems, and to address service delivery issues.
- Criminal justice social workers were the least satisfied with time to access basic services and time to provide services to client families.
- School social workers were least satisfied with their time to address severity of problems and to perform administrative tasks.
- Social workers in developmental disabilities were least satisfied with their time to provide clinical services and participate in training.
- Social workers in addictions and mental health were least satisfied with their time to conduct investigations.

*Time available and employment sector.* Satisfaction with the time available for selected tasks also varied by employment sector. Some highlights are presented below.

- Generally, social workers in private/nonprofit-sector organizations reported significantly more satisfaction with their time than those in public-sector agencies, although there were no significant differences in their time to conduct investigations, participate in training, or perform administrative tasks.
- Social workers in private practice were significantly more satisfied with other social workers in their time for all tasks except for time to access basic services (which was significantly lower for those in private practice), and time to conduct investigations, which was not significantly different.

*Time available and employment setting.* Satisfaction with the time available for selected tasks also varied by employment setting. Some highlights are presented below.

- Social workers in hospice settings reported the highest average satisfaction with their time to perform all tasks except for conducting investigations, in which nursing home social workers were most satisfied.
- Social service agency social workers were least satisfied with their time to address presenting problems, severity of problems, and breadth of problems.
- Social workers in behavioral health clinics were least satisfied with their time to access basic services and conduct investigations.
- Social workers in schools were least satisfied with the time available to provide services to client families and perform administrative tasks.

- Hospital social workers were least satisfied with their time to address service delivery issues. Nursing home social workers were least satisfied with their time to provide clinical services. Social workers in psychiatric hospitals were least satisfied with their time to participate in training.

## Agency Environment

Survey responses reveal that there were noteworthy differences in the work environments offered by different types of agencies. Tabulations of a variety of different aspects of the agency environment are provided below to suggest some of the important factors.

*Supervision.* Of the active, licensed social workers who reported that they were supervised, 51% reported that they were not supervised by a social worker. There were no significant differences in the likelihood of being supervised by a social worker by highest degree, although there were significant differences by setting. Social workers were most likely to be supervised by other social workers in social service agencies (68%), and least likely in schools (21%). Social workers in the practice area of child welfare/families were most likely to be supervised by a social worker (69%), and school social workers were least likely (22%), consistent with the finding for practice settings.

*Social work colleagues.* Although a large number of social workers (27%) worked in settings where there are more than 10 other social workers, nearly as many (23%) work in settings with no other social workers. The most common number of other social workers reported by respondents was between one and five social workers (35%). The number of other social workers in one's practice setting was related to whether or not one is supervised by a social worker. Twenty-three percent of those who reported being supervised by a non-social worker were the only social worker in their setting, compared to only 5% of those supervised by a social worker. Similarly, 45% of those supervised by a social worker reported that they worked with more than ten other social workers, compared to only 20% of those supervised by a non-social workers.

Nursing home social workers and school social workers reported working with the fewest other social workers, with 30% in both settings being the only social worker at their job site. Social workers in social service agencies and psychiatric hospitals reported working with the most other social workers, with 50% of each group working with more than ten other social workers.

*Agency participation in professional development programs.*<sup>1</sup> The most common type of professional development program in which social workers' agencies participated in was professional development (72%), followed by student internships (70%) and best practices training (36%). Thirty-one percent of social workers reported that their agency participated in evaluation research, and 19% say that their agency participated in clinical research. Only 17% reported that their agency participates in demonstration programs.

Public agencies were more likely to participate in student internships and best practices training, whereas private-sector organizations were more likely to participate in clinical research. Demonstration programs were most common in hospice programs (75%), while student internships were most common in psychiatric hospitals (86%). Clinical research was most common in hospitals and psychiatric hospitals (38% and 36%, respectively), while best practices training was most likely in social service agencies (51%). Program evaluation research was most

<sup>1</sup> These figures only include social workers who work in an agency/organizational setting, and excludes those in private practice.

common in behavioral health clinics (35%) and psychiatric hospitals (34%), and professional development programs were most common in schools (78%) and social service agencies (77%).

*Job safety.* Forty-four percent of social workers reported that they faced personal safety issues on the job, and of these, 70% 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%).

Psychiatric hospitals were rated the least safe place to work, with 81% of social workers in this setting reporting personal safety issues, followed by hospices (58%). Nursing homes, in contrast, appeared to be the safest places, with 27% of social workers reporting safety issues. Of those social workers reporting safety issues, hospice social workers were the most likely to report that their issues were addressed (89%), followed by those in nursing homes (84%). Social workers in social service agencies were least likely to report that these issues had been addressed (58%), followed by social workers in schools (64%).

*Vacancies.* A majority of social workers reported that vacancies were not common in their agency, with 19% indicating that vacancies were common and 29% indicating that they were “somewhat common”. A slight majority (53%) reported that vacancies were either difficult (21%) or “somewhat difficult” (32%) to fill.

*Use of non-social workers.* Of those social workers who were able to report<sup>2</sup> whether or not their employers recruited non-social workers for social work vacancies or outsourced social work functions, 27% reported the recruitment of non-social workers, and 20% reported outsourcing of social work functions. Both of these practices were somewhat more common in the public sector. Social workers in state and local government agencies were most likely to report that non-social workers were recruited for social work jobs (32% and 31%, respectively), while this practice was least common in the military (10%) and federal government agencies (12%). Outsourcing of social work functions, in contrast, was most common in the military (41%), followed by local government (34%). Private Not-for-Profit and Private For-Profit agencies were least likely to outsource social work functions (14% each).

Across settings with at least 15 responses, Criminal Justice Agencies and Case Management Agencies – Other were most likely to recruit non-social workers (both at 51%). Criminal Justice Agencies and Social Service Agencies were most likely to outsource social work functions (40% and 34%, respectively). Hospices and hospitals were least likely to recruit non-social workers (10% and 16%, respectively). Nursing Homes and Hospices were least likely to outsource social work functions (7% and 6%, respectively).

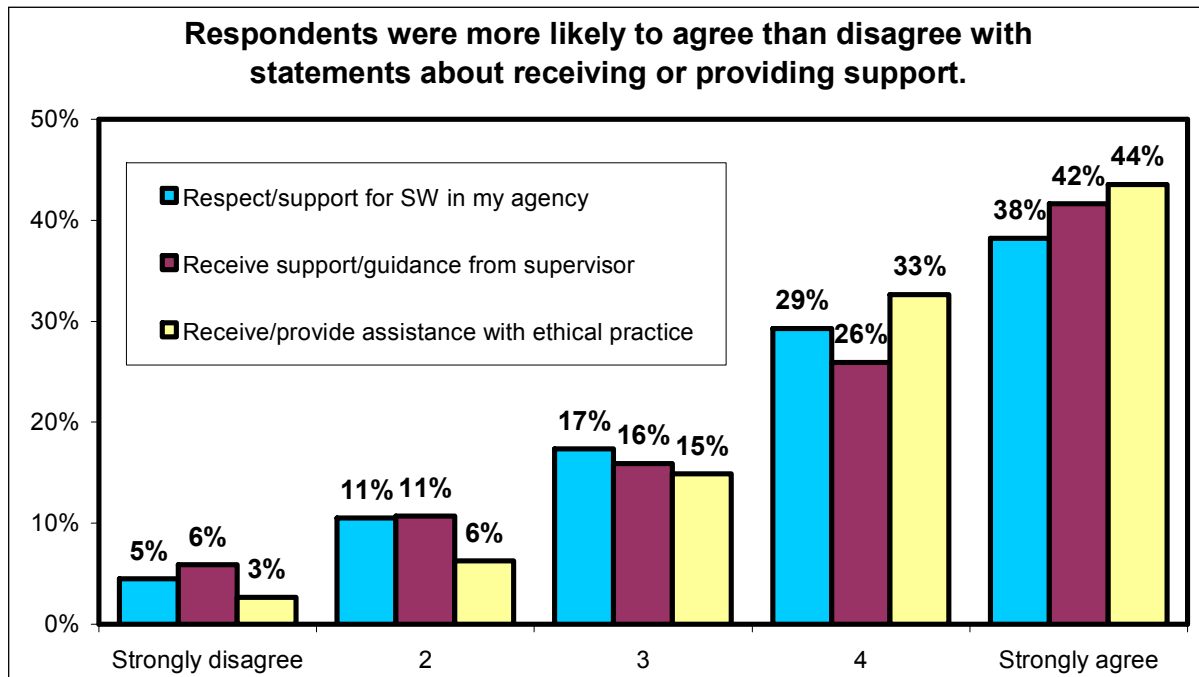
*Support and guidance.* Social workers were generally positive about the supportiveness of their work environment (Figure 11). Thirty-eight percent strongly agreed that there was respect and support for social work services in their agency, 42% strongly agreed that they received support and guidance from their supervisor, and 44% strongly agreed that they received and/or provided

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<sup>2</sup> Percentages are calculated excluding social workers who reported “don’t know” and respondents in private practice.

assistance on issues of ethical practice in the workplace. Only 16% indicated any disagreement about social work services being supported in their agency, and only 17% indicated any level of disagreement about receiving support and guidance from their supervisor. Only 9% indicated any disagreement about receiving or providing assistance with issues of ethical practice.

**Figure 11. Percentages of Respondents Agreeing with Selected Statements About Receiving and Providing Support**



There was, however, significant variation in these ratings by employment setting. Social workers in psychiatric hospitals and hospices reported the least support for social work services and the least support from their supervisor, while those in behavioral health clinics reported the most. Social workers in behavioral health clinics also reported the most guidance on ethical issues, while those in schools and psychiatric hospitals reported the least support.

There was also variation in support by practice area. Social workers in mental health reported the most support for social work and the most support from their supervisor. Those in criminal justice reported the least support for social work, and those in higher education and school social work felt the least supported by their supervisor. Those in higher education did, however, give or receive the most assistance with ethical practice, while those in criminal justice experienced the least.

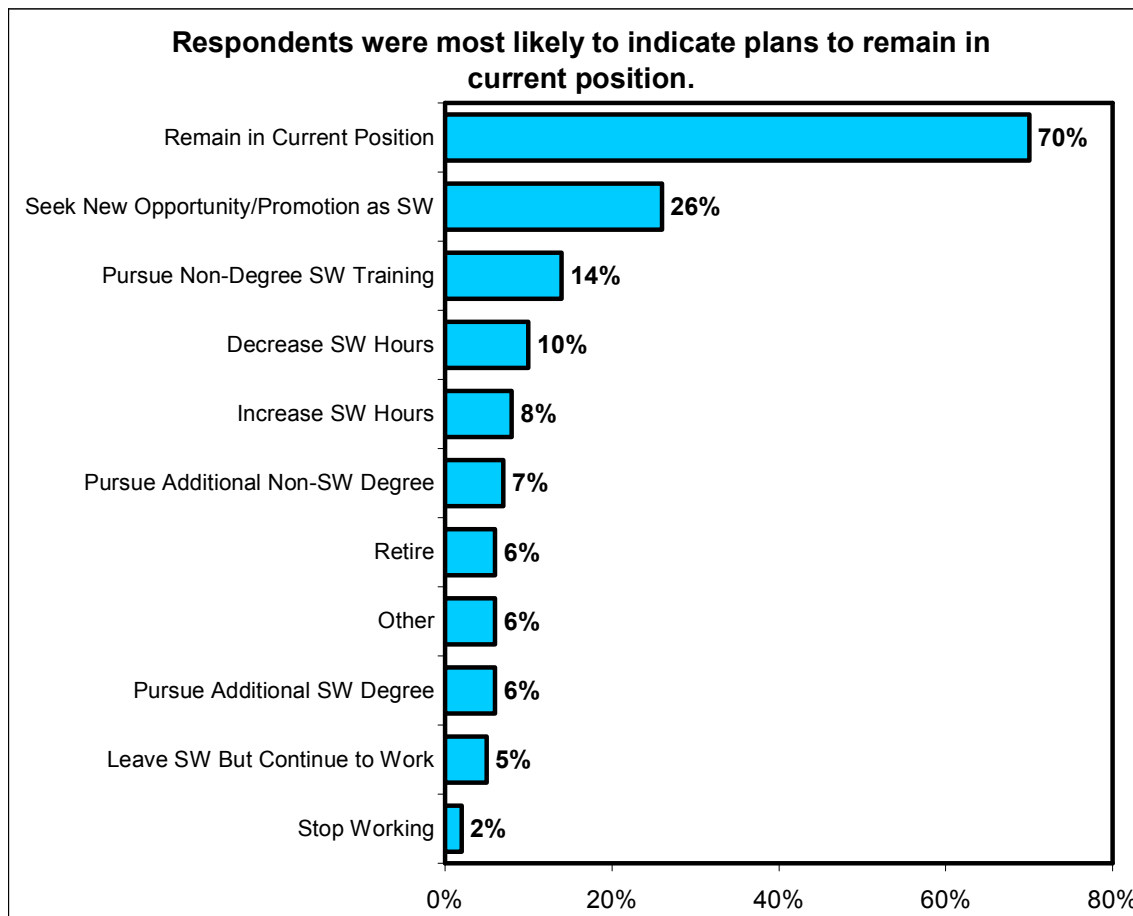
### Career Plans of Licensed Social Workers

Career plans provide insights about the reasons that licensed social workers are thinking about leaving the social work profession. Question 47 asked respondents to mark all that apply, so that the response categories summarized below are not mutually exclusive.

*Career plans.* When asked about career plans in the next two years, the most frequent response from social workers (70%) was to remain in their current position (Figure 12). Twenty-six percent reported they would seek a new opportunity or a promotion as a social worker, and 14% planned to pursue additional non-degree training. Although 5% wanted to leave the field of

social work to do other work and 6% planned to retire, relatively few wanted to leave the workforce by means other than retirement (2%).

**Figure 12. Career Plans of Respondents in the Next Two Years**



*Career plans by gender.* Although the career plans of men and women over the next two years looked very similar, women were 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, were more likely to plan to retire (8% of men versus 5% of women), which is consistent with the fact that the proportion of respondents who were men was larger in older age groups.

*Career plans by race/ethnicity.* There were some striking differences in career plans between non-Hispanic Whites and minority social workers, particularly Black/African Americans. African Americans were less likely than Whites to say that they planned to remain in their current position (54% compared to 72%), and more likely to say that they planned to seek a new opportunity/promotion (40% compared to 24%) or to leave the field of social work but continue to work (10% compared to 4%). Both African American and Hispanic/Latino social workers were more likely than Whites to report plans to pursue an additional social work degree or non-social work degree.

*Career plans by degree.* There were few significant differences in career plans between BSWs and MSWs. BSWs were more likely than MSWs to report that they planned to seek a new opportunity or promotion in the next two years (27% compared to 14%).

*Career plans by age.* Career plans varied based on social worker age. The reported desire to remain in one's current position increased steadily from 54% among those ages 25 and under to 76% among those ages 55-64, but then dropped to 65% among those ages 65 and up. Plans to retire in the next two years were first reported among those ages 35-44 (1%), and increased steadily to 34% of those ages 65 and up. Plans to increase social work hours peaked for the 35-44 age group at 10%, while plans to decrease hours fluctuated more (peaking at 26-34, when some social workers may be planning families, and again at age 55-64 when they may be planning retirement). There was no steady pattern for those who planned to leave social work but continue to work, or for those who planned to leave the workforce other than by retirement.

Plans for career development tended to decrease with age. Thirty-one percent of social workers age 25 and under planned to pursue an additional social work degree, but this dropped to 14% among those ages 26-34, and then to 7% among those ages 35-44. Only 2% of those over the age of 55 planned to pursue an additional social work degree. A similar pattern was observed for plans to pursue a non-social work degree, to pursue non-degree social work training, or to seek a new opportunity or promotion as a social worker.

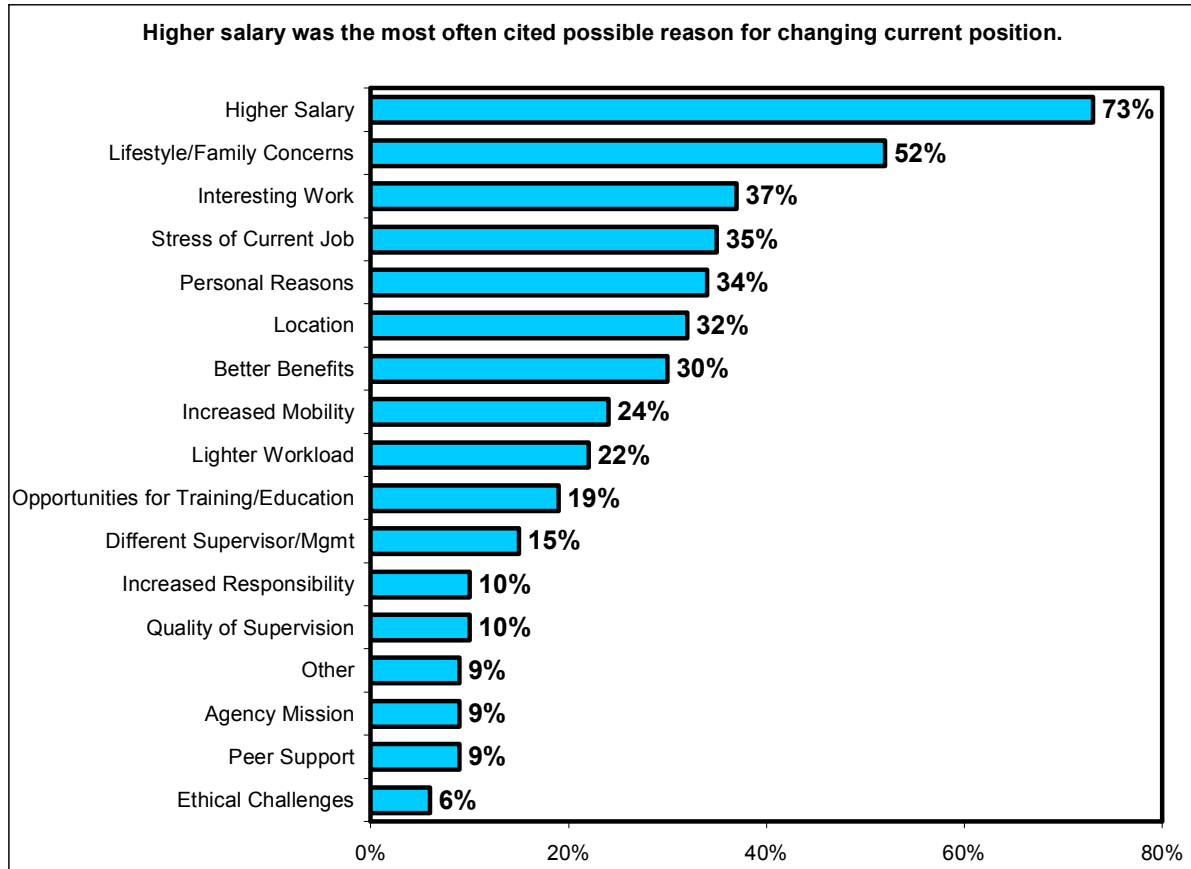
*Career plans by practice area.* There was also wide variation in career plans by practice area. Plans to remain in one's current position ranged from 79% among school social workers to 54% among addictions social workers. Plans to increase hours were most common among social workers serving adolescents (12%) and least common among school social workers, aging social workers, and medical health social workers (all 5%). Plans to decrease hours were most common among addictions social workers (17%) and least common among criminal justice social workers (4%). Seven percent of criminal justice social workers planned to leave the field of social work to do other work, compared to only 2% of higher education social workers, and 10% of higher education social workers planned to retire, followed by 9% of aging social workers, compared to only 3% of adolescents social workers.

Plans to seek a new opportunity or promotion ranged from 41% among addictions social workers to 12% among higher education social workers. Plans to pursue an additional social work degree were highest among child welfare/family social workers (11%) and lowest among mental health social workers (3%). Plans to pursue an additional degree in an area other than social work were highest in criminal justice and lowest in higher education. Variation was moderate in plans to pursue social work non-degree training, ranging from 18% for social workers serving adolescents to 11% for social workers in medical health.

*Career plans by sector.* In terms of variation by sector, social workers in private practice showed a profile of overall satisfaction. They were most likely to plan to remain in their current position (82%), pursue additional non-degree social work training (16%), and/or increase their hours (16%). Social workers in private-sector organizations and public-sector agencies were less likely to plan to remain in their current position (both 68%), and were more likely to plan to seek a new opportunity or promotion (29%), and were less likely to plan to increase their hours (8% of private-sector social workers and 4% of public-sector social workers). Eight percent of public agency social workers plan to retire in the next two years, compared to 6% of those in private practice and 4% of those in private-sector jobs.

*Factors in career plans.* Figure 13 shows that the factors most frequently cited as an important influence on decisions to change current positions were higher salary (73%), lifestyle/family concerns (52%), more interesting work (37%), and stress of the current job (35%).

**Figure 13. Percentage of Respondents Indicating That Selected Factors Would Influence a Decision to Change Their Current Position**



*Career plan factors by gender.* Although there were few gender differences in career plans, there were several significant differences in the factors that would motivate male or female social workers to change positions. Men were more likely to say that they would change positions for more interesting work, increased mobility, location, or agency mission. Women were more likely to say that they would change positions due to lifestyle/family concerns, quality of supervision, or stress of current job.

*Career plan factors by race/ethnicity.* Black/African American social workers were more likely than Whites to cite several factors that would influence a decision to change position: higher salary (81% compared to 72%), opportunities for education or training (26% compared to 18%), ethical challenges (11% compared to 6%), and increased mobility (26% compared to 18%). Hispanic/Latino and Asian social workers were also significantly more likely than Whites to cite mobility as a potential reasons for changing (26% and 22%, respectively).

*Career plan factors by age.* There were also clear patterns of factors being more or less important to various age groups. The importance of increased mobility steadily declined with age. Similarly, the importance of a different supervisor or management declined with age, from 23% among the youngest social workers to 6% among the oldest. Opportunities for training and

education also became less important with age, as did lifestyle/family concerns, peer support, quality of supervision, and stress of current job. Salary concerns peaked among the 26-34 age group, and declined steadily from there.

A few factors appeared to become greater concerns as social workers aged. Personal reasons were cited by 27% of social workers under the age of 35, but increased steadily to 55% of those ages 65 and older. Similarly, ethical challenges became more important, and were mentioned by 7% of social workers 45-64, compared to 4% of social workers age 25 and under. Concern with benefits and agency mission peaked among those ages 35-44 before falling in importance for older social workers.

*Career plan factors by degree.* BSWs and MSWs did not significantly differ in most of the factors that would influence a decision to change careers. There were striking differences, however, in a few key factors. BSWs were much more likely than MSWs to report that they would be influenced to change positions by higher salary (72% compared to 47%), lifestyle/family concerns (53% compared to 34%), stress of current job (34% compared to 16%), or opportunities for training or education (19% compared to 8%).

*Career plan factors by practice area, sector, and setting.* Social workers did not appear to differ substantially by practice area or setting in the factors they felt would influence them to change positions. Although there was variation between employment sectors in the reasons that social workers indicated would influence them to change jobs, the top two reasons given in all three major sectors were higher salary and lifestyle/family concerns (the latter reason being first for social workers in private practice and second for other social workers). The third reason given by social workers was personal reasons in private practice, more interesting work in private-sector organizations, and stress of current job in public-sector agencies.

Most reasons given were similar for social workers in the public sector and the private sector, but increased mobility was cited by 30% of social workers in public agencies compared to only 24% of social workers in private-sector organizations, and better benefits were cited by 35% of social workers in private-sector organizations compared to only 24% of social workers in public-sector agencies.

### **Who Plans to Leave Social Work?**

Of those social workers who planned to remain in the labor force in the next two years, 4% reported that they planned to leave social work but continue to work. This is an important group to examine because presumably they plan to leave due to dissatisfaction of some sort with social work as a career.

*Demographics.* Social workers who reported plans to leave social work but continue working differed somewhat from those who planned to continue working in social work<sup>3</sup> in their age distribution. They were more likely to be ages 26-34 (21% of those who planned to leave compared to 17% of those who did not), and were less likely to be ages 55-64 (13% of those who planned to leave compared to 22% of those who did not). In fact, those ages 55-64 were less likely than any other age group to report plans to leave the field of social work but continue to work (2% compared to 4% for social workers overall).

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<sup>3</sup> Comparisons exclude those who report planning to leave the labor force completely (e.g. retire or stop working).

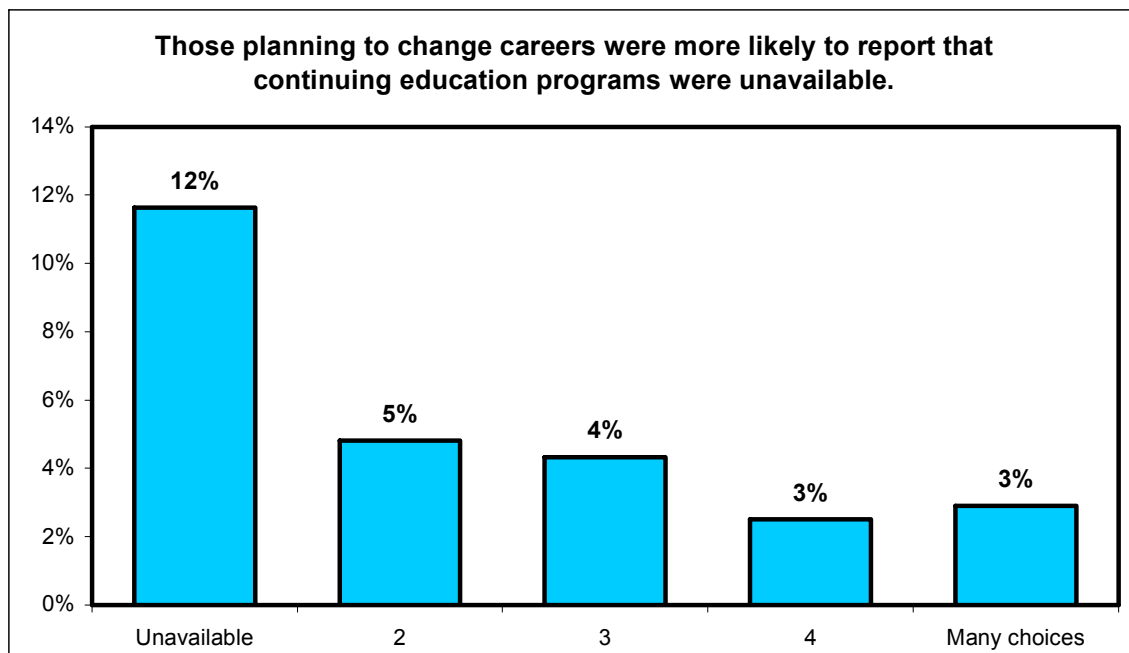


Social workers who planned to leave social work but continue to work were also different from other social workers in their racial/ethnic distribution, with those who reported plans to leave social work being 14% African American compared to 7% of those who planned to continue in social work, and 6% being an “other” race/ethnicity compared to 1% those who plan to continue in social work. Overall, 7% of African American social workers and 13% from “other” race/ethnicity plan to leave social work, compared to only 3% of non-Hispanic White social workers, 4% of Hispanic social workers and 2% of Asian social workers.

*Education and background.* The greater the level of formal education in social work respondents had, the less likely they were to report plans to leave for another field. Fully 7% of non-degreed licensed social workers planned to leave social work for another line of work within two years, compared to 4% of BSWs, 3% of MSWs, and none of the DSW/PhDs in the study.

Satisfaction with one’s degree and post-degree training was not significantly associated with plans to leave the profession, but the reported availability of continuing education (CE) programs was. Thirteen percent of those who reported that CE was unavailable planned to leave the field for other work, compared to only 3% of those who reported many choices for continuing education (Figure 14).

**Figure 14. Percentages of Respondents Planning to Change Career in Next Two Years, by Reported Availability of Continuing Education Programs**



Licensed social workers who plan to leave appear to be lost to the profession early. Those who plan to leave social work for other work were disproportionately in their first four years of practice, compared to those who did not plan to change careers (27% versus 17%).

*Employment setting and sector.* Plans to change career were most common among those working in a nursing home (8%), social service agency (6%) or hospital (5%). Four percent of social workers in behavioral health clinics and hospices, and 3% of social workers in psychiatric hospitals and clinics reported plans to leave social work. School social workers appeared the

most satisfied, with only 1% reporting plans to leave social work for other work. There were not significant differences by sector (e.g., private practice, private organization, or public agency) or by practice area in terms of desire to change careers.

Social workers working only a single, full-time social work job were more likely to report plans to change careers than other social workers (4%), followed by those who work only a single, part-time social work job (3%). Those combining a full-time social work job with a part-time job (either social work or non-social work) were less likely to report plans to leave the field (2%). Social workers working other combinations of jobs (e.g., a combination of part-time jobs or a full-time non-social work job with a part-time social work job) were likely to report plans to leave (4%). Those who plan to leave the field report working significantly more hours per week in their primary job (an average of 37.8 hours) than those who do not (an average of 35.1 hours).

Working in a job where social work licensure was required, being supervised by a social worker, and the number of other social workers at one’s primary job were not associated with the likelihood of planning to leave social work for another field. There does not appear to be a significant difference between those who planned to leave and those who did not in terms of caseload size.

*Salary and benefits.* Social workers who planned to leave the field rated the adequacy of their salary significantly lower than other social workers, although there were not significant differences between the two groups in their assessment of their benefits. Nearly 10% of social workers who described their salary as “very limited” planned to leave the field, compared to 5% of those who describe their salary as “limited”, 3% of those who describe their salary as “adequate”, and 1% of those who describe their salary as “very adequate”.

Table 1 shows that those who were planning to leave earned a smaller salary (full-time social work only) than those who planned to stay. This was true for almost every level of education and experience.

**Table 1. Estimated Average Annual Wages/Salaries of Respondents Planning to Leave or Not Leave Social Work, by BSW and MSW and Years of Experience**

SW Degree	Years of Experience	Planning Not to Leave	Planning to Leave
BSW	1 to 4	\$27,760	\$27,000
	5 to 9	\$33,380	\$26,686
	10 to 14	\$35,181	\$33,918
	15 to 19	\$42,419	\$35,169
	20 to 24	\$36,174	\$37,647
	25+	\$38,992	\$32,837
MSW	1 to 4	\$38,280	\$39,183
	5 to 9	\$44,749	\$44,536
	10 to 14	\$45,727	\$39,238
	15 to 19	\$48,540	\$44,186

	20 to 24	\$52,406	\$45,744
	25+	\$51,394	\$49,036

Red estimates are the largest in the respective rows.

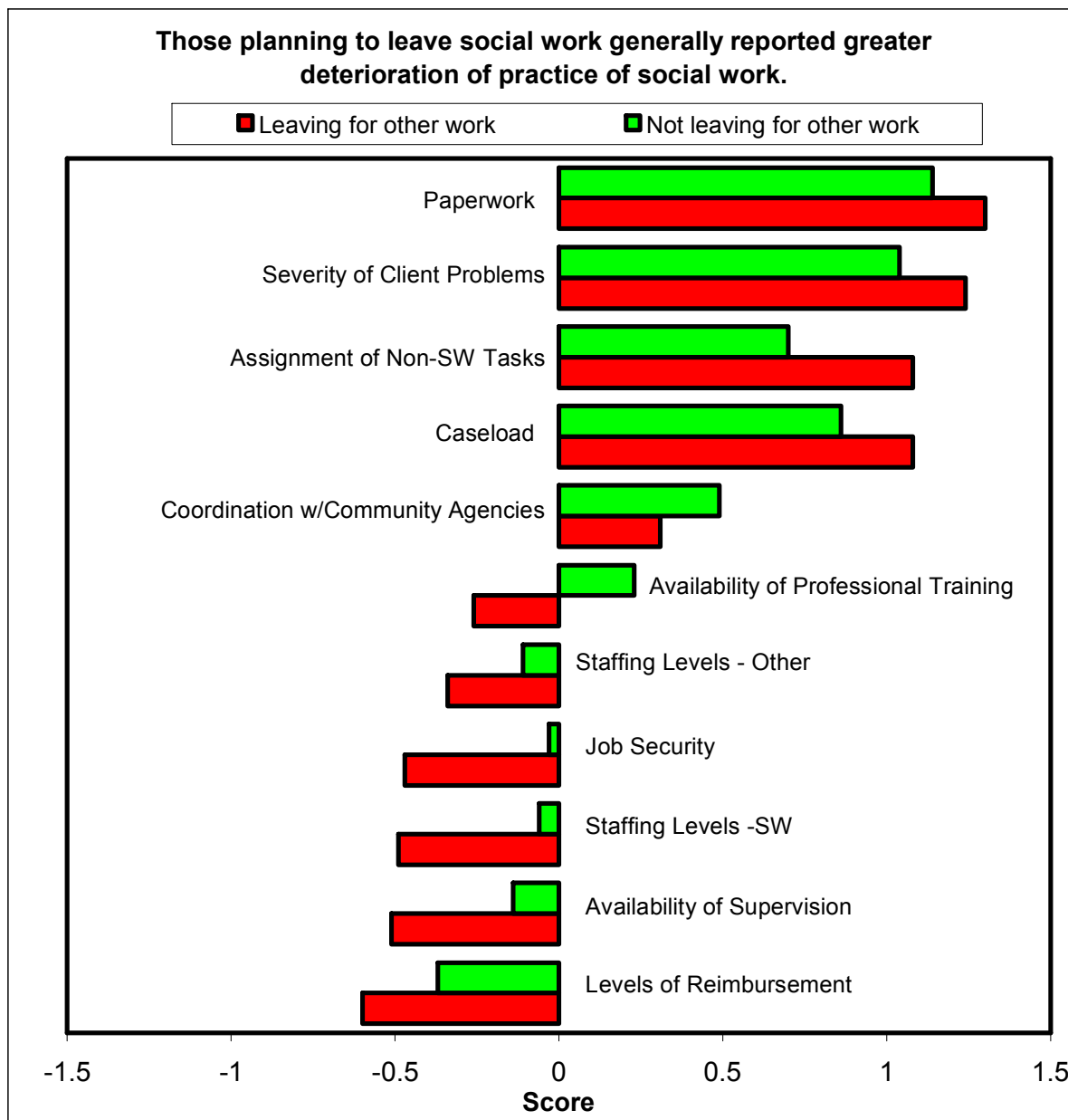
*Client populations.* Client populations were associated with plans to change careers. Social workers who plan to leave the field were more likely than others to report that most of their clients were not insured (13% versus 7%), and were less likely than others to report that their most common insurance coverage for their clients was private insurance (13% compared to 25%). Six percent of social workers serving a predominantly uninsured population planned to leave in the next two years, compared to less than 2% of social workers serving a predominantly privately-insured population. There were not significant differences in the likelihood that a social worker planned to change careers based upon presenting problems of clients.

*Perspectives on social work practice.* Figure 15 shows that social workers who planned to leave the field in the next two years were significantly more likely than those who did 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 (social workers who planned to stay in their jobs actually reported an increase in the latter).

Additionally, social workers who planned to leave reported a smaller increase in coordination with community agencies than those who planned to stay.

**Figure 15. Ratings of Changes in Selected Aspects of Social Work Practice, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Social Work Field [Scale: -2 = Decreased to +2 = Increased]**



Social workers who planned to leave the social work field also reported a greater increase in the number of court-mandated clients and greater decreases in the range of services available, the number of services available, and services eligible for funding, compared to social workers who planned to remain in their current positions.

**Figure 16. Ratings of Changes in Selected Aspects of Social Work Delivery System, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Profession**  
 [Scale: -2 = Decreased to +2 = Increased]

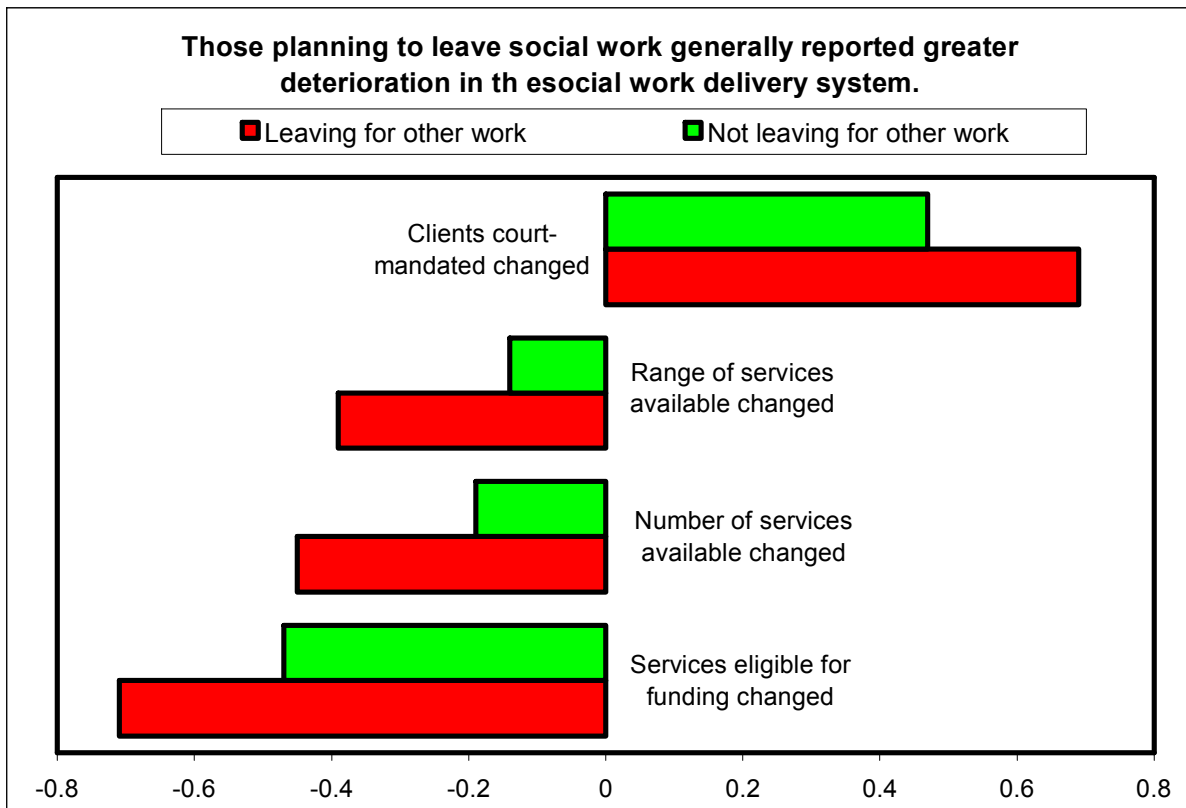


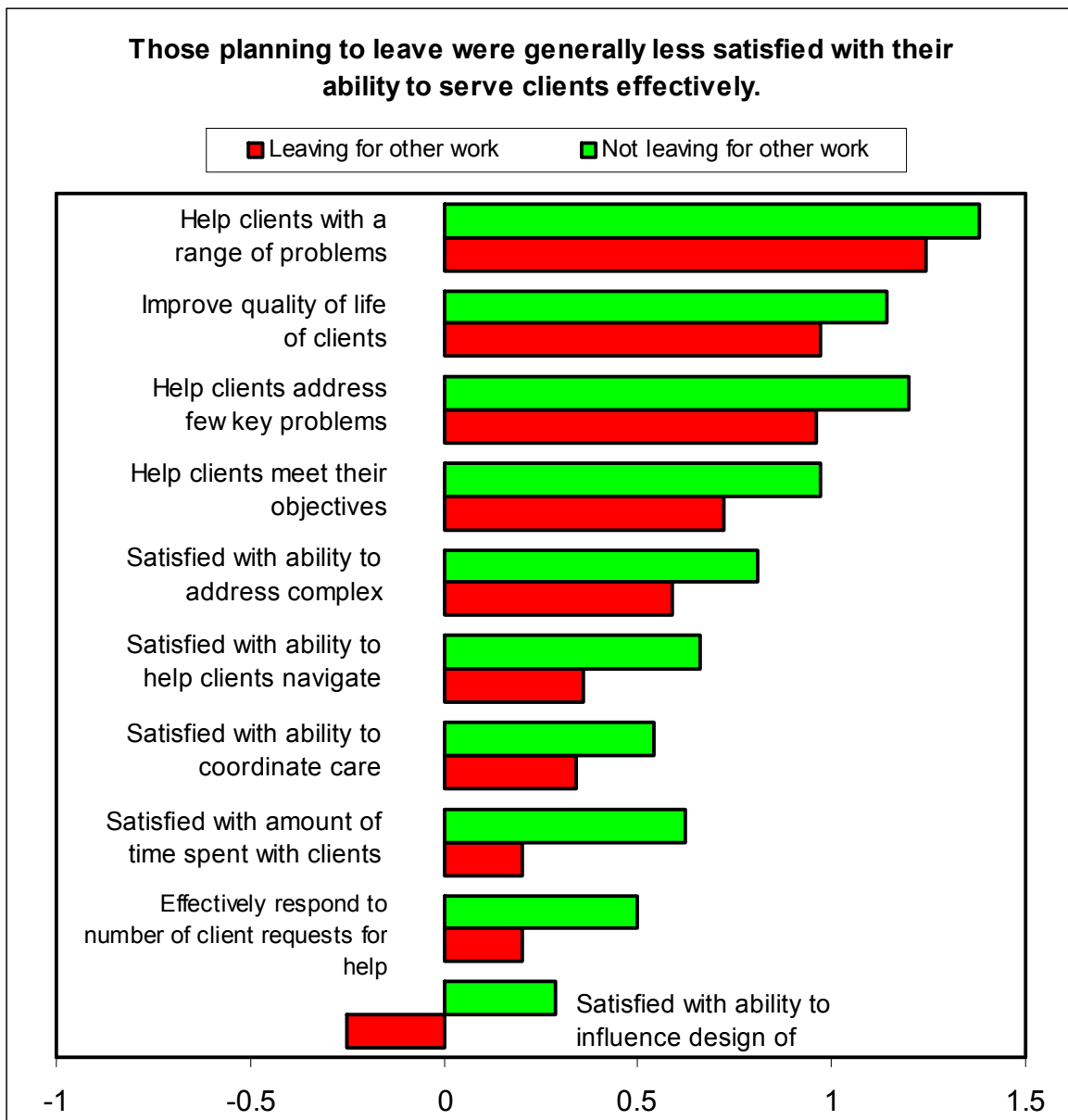
Figure 17 shows that social workers who planned to leave were less likely to agree that they:

- improved quality of life for clients,
- help clients meet objectives,
- help clients with a range of problems,
- help clients address key problems, and
- help client resolve crisis situations.

Figure 17 also shows that they were less likely to agree that they:

- were satisfied with their ability to help clients navigate the service delivery system,
- could effectively respond to the number of requests for help,
- were satisfied with their ability to address complex problems,
- were satisfied with the amount of time they could spent with clients, and
- were satisfied with their ability to influence service design.

**Figure 17. Ratings of Agreement with Selected Statements about Social Work Practice, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Profession**  
 [Scale: -2 = Decreased to +2 = Increased]



Social workers who planned to leave for another field were much more likely than other social workers to report that they were assigned tasks below their training (29% compared to 9% of those who planned to stay in their jobs), while those who planned to stay in their jobs were much more likely to report that they were assigned tasks above their training (36% compared to 26% of those who planned to leave social work). Figure 18 shows that social workers who planned to leave the field were also less satisfied with their access to three types of resources (agency resources, medical care, and mental health care) than those planning to remain in their jobs.

**Figure 18. Satisfaction with Access to Selected Social Work Services for Clients, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Profession**  
 [Scale: 1 = Not at All to 5 = Very]

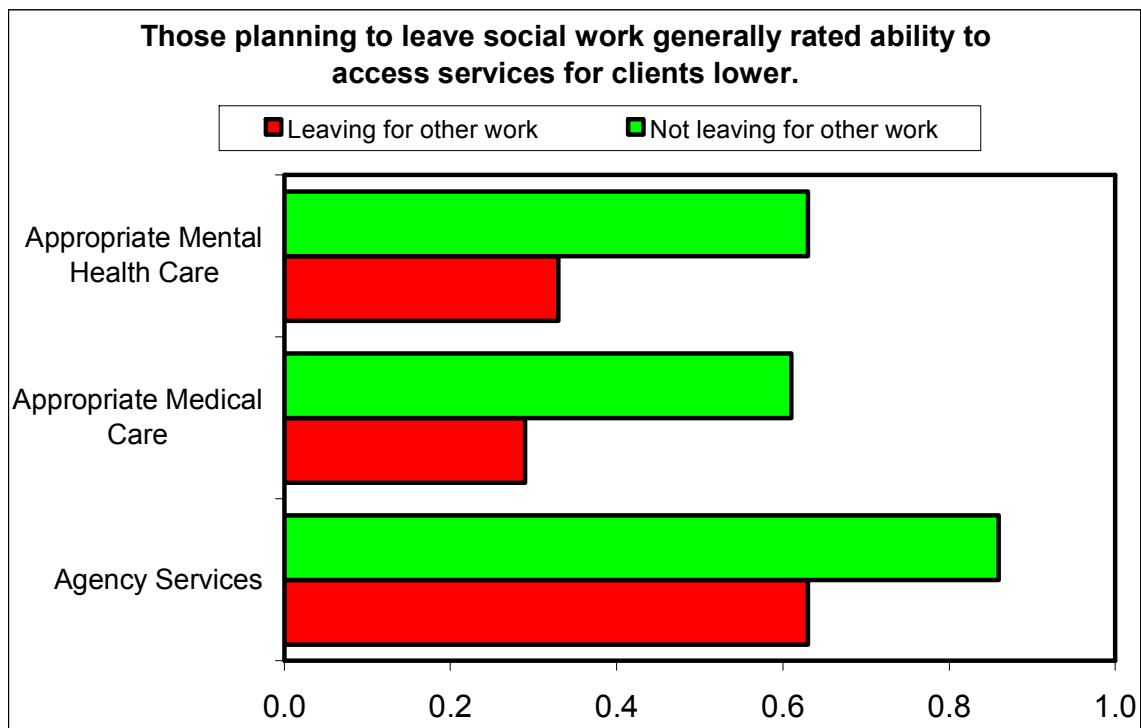
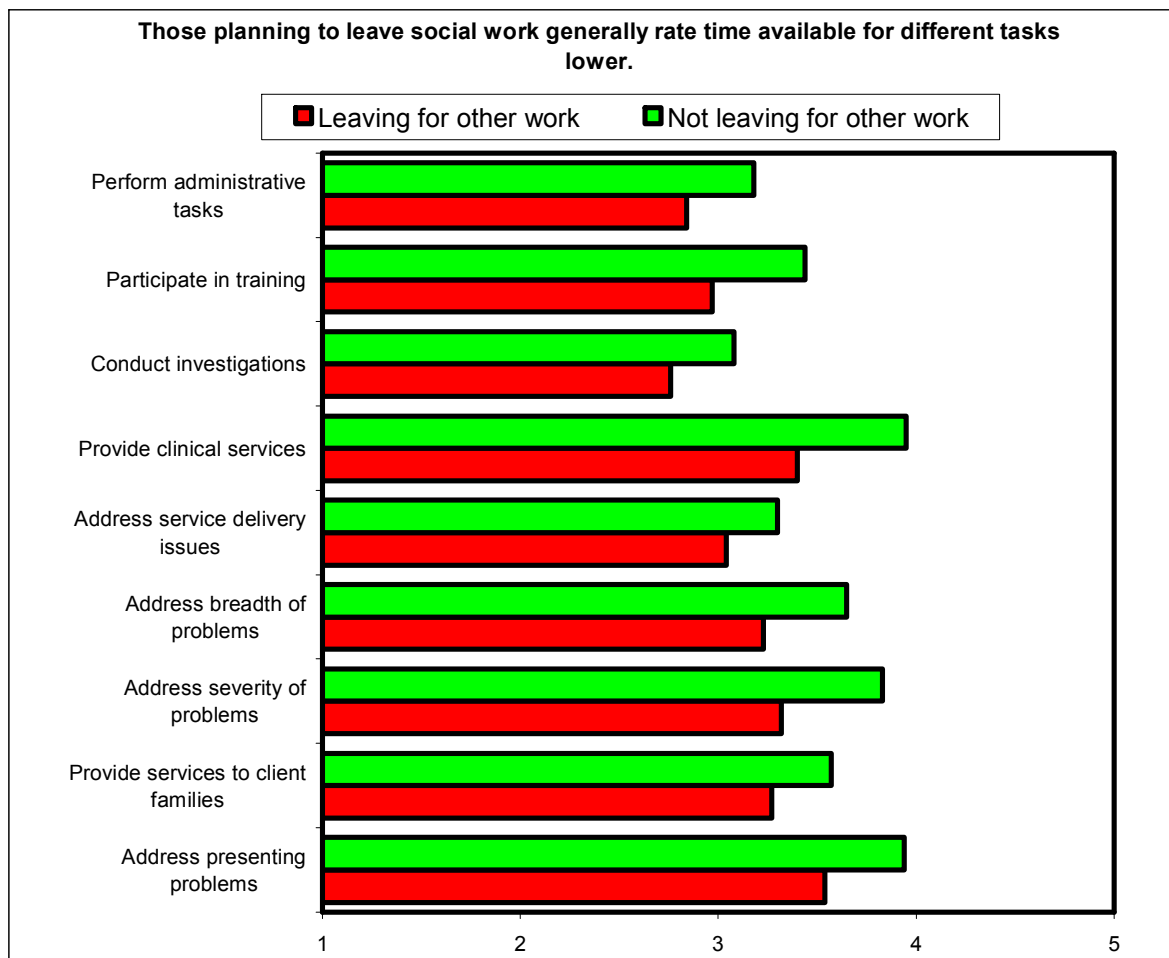


Figure 19 shows that social workers planning to leave were less satisfied than social workers not planning to leave with their time available to:

- 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.

**Figure 19. Ratings of Satisfaction With Time Available for Selected Social Work Tasks, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Profession [Scale: 1 = Not at All to 5 = Very]**

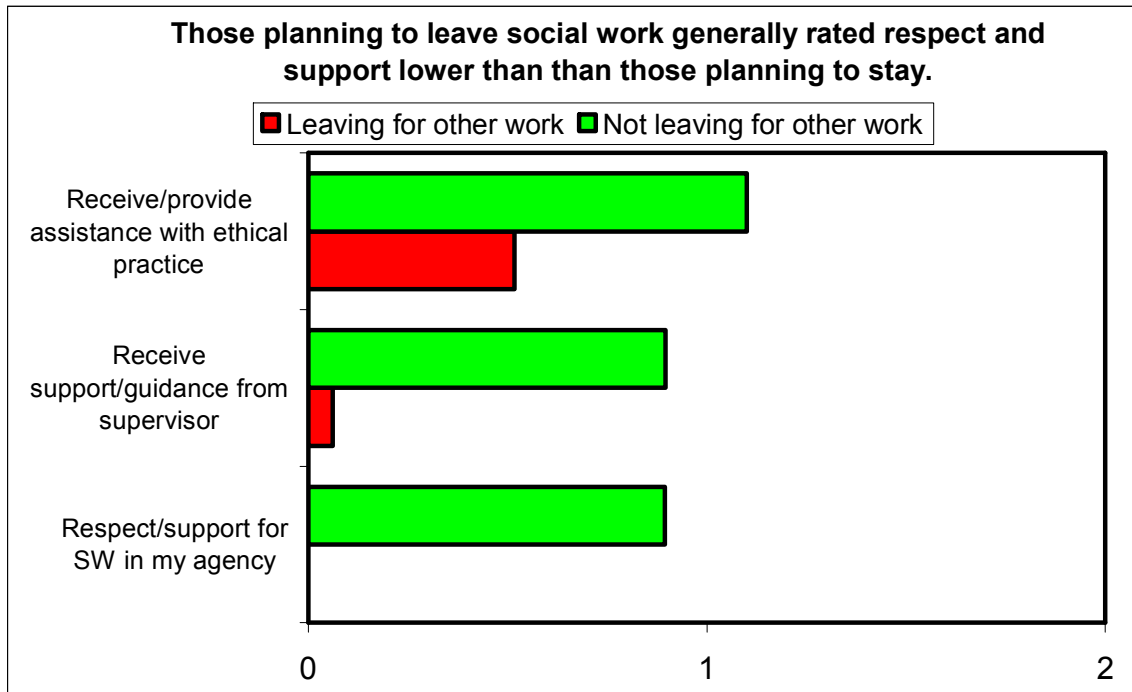


*Agency environment.* Reported agency environment is associated with the plans of social workers to leave the field for other work. Social workers who planned to leave were significantly less likely than others to report that their agencies engage in demonstration programs (9% versus 16%) and best practices training (23% versus 31%). They were also significantly more likely to report that vacancies in their agency are common (33% compared to 19%), that their employer recruits non-social workers to fill social work positions (34% versus 25%), and that their employer outsourced social work functions (27% compared to 19%). Plans to leave were not significantly associated with whether vacancies in one's agency were difficult to fill.

Social workers who planned to leave were significantly more likely than other social workers to report that they face personal safety issues (58% compared to 44%), and significantly less likely to report that these issues are adequately addressed (51% compared to 71%). Figure 20 shows that they were also significantly more likely to report that there was respect/support for social work services within their agency, that they received support and guidance from their supervisor, and that they received or provided support on issues of ethical practice in the workplace.

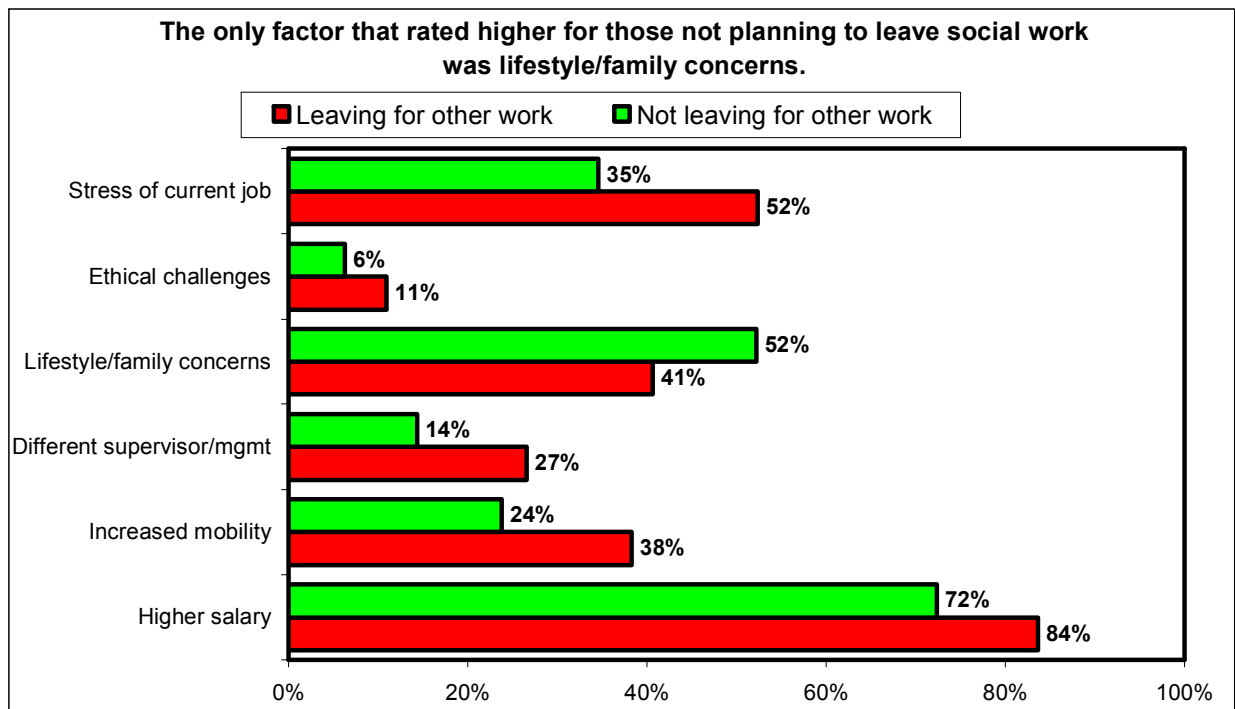


**Figure 20. Ratings of Agreement with Selected Statements About Respect and Support, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Profession [Scale: -2 = Strongly Disagree to +2 = Strongly Agree]**



*Motivating factors in changing positions.* Social workers who planned to leave were significantly more likely than other social workers to say that they would change position due to higher salary, increased mobility, different supervision or management, ethical challenges, and stress. They were significantly less likely to report that they would be influenced to change jobs by lifestyle or family concerns.

**Figure 21. Percentages of Respondents Selecting Different Factors as a Top Five Influence on Changing Current Position, by Whether or Not Planning to Leave the Profession**



### Changing Jobs Within Social Work

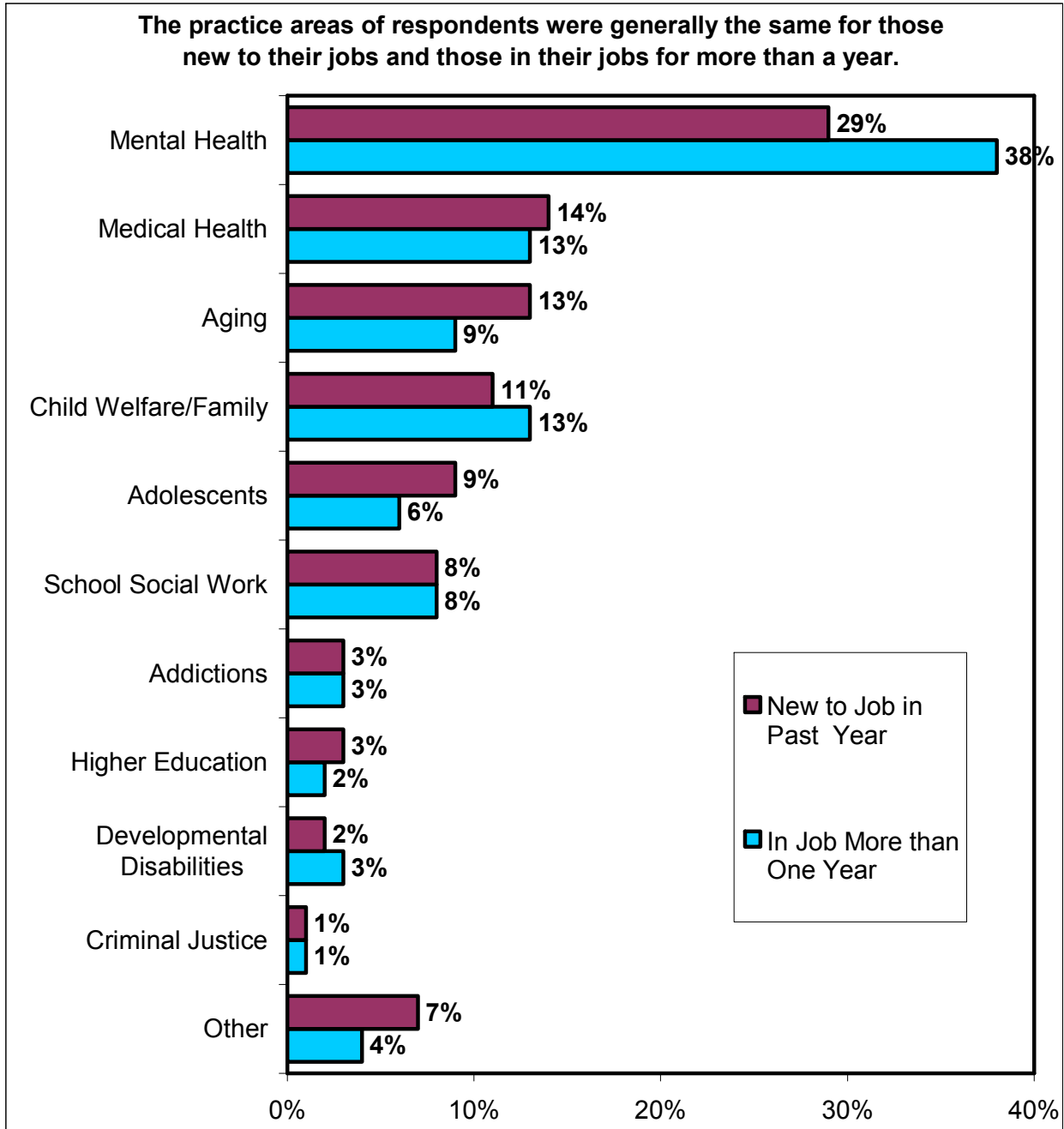
Seven percent of the active social workers in the study had changed primary jobs within the past year<sup>4</sup>. The characteristics of these social workers may tell us who tends to be dissatisfied with their jobs and in what areas of social work turnover is more common.

Social workers who changed jobs within the past year were more likely than other social workers to work in psychiatric hospitals (7% versus 4%), nursing homes (7% versus 3%), adult and child/adolescent group homes (2% compared to 0% and 4% compared to 2%, respectively), and criminal justice agencies (4% versus 2%). They were less likely than other social workers to work in behavioral health clinics (9% compared to 12%), social service agencies (12% compared to 17%), and schools (9% compared to 12%).

Figure 22 shows that social workers who changed jobs within the past year were more likely than other social workers to be working in the practice area of aging (13% versus 9%) or adolescents (9% versus 6%). They were less likely to be working in the area of mental health (29% compared to 38%).

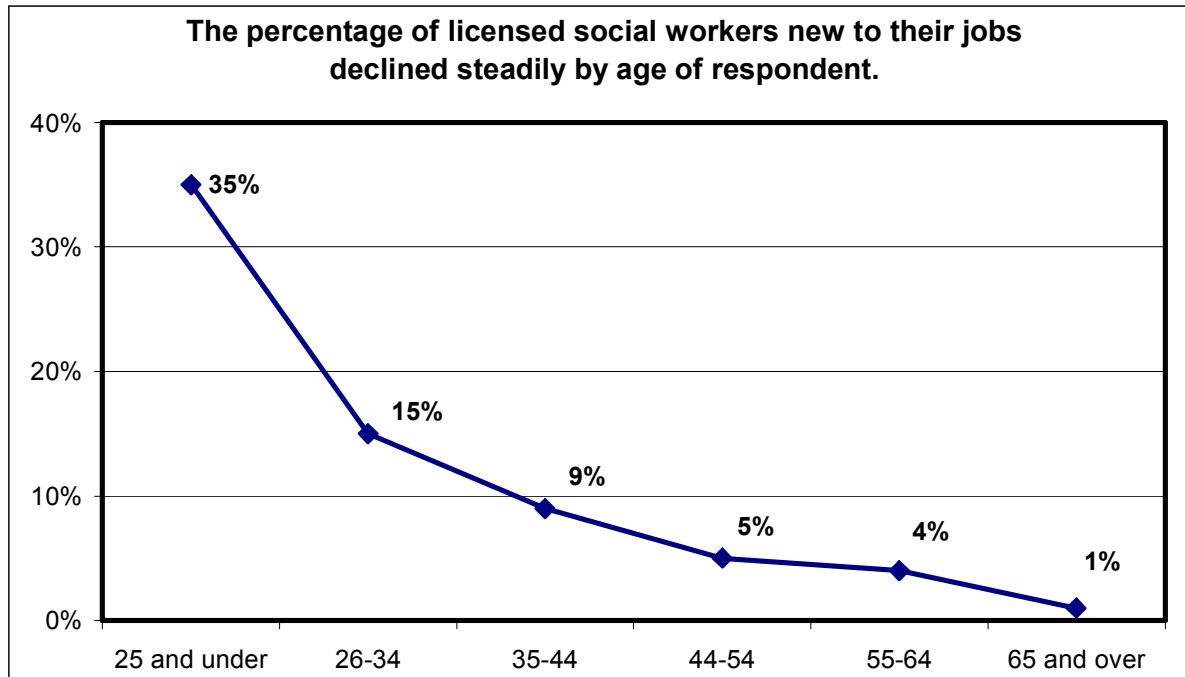
<sup>4</sup> Analyses exclude social workers with less than one year experience in social work, to distinguish between job-changers and new entrants.

**Figure 22. Practice Area of Licensed Social Workers,  
by Time on the Job**



MSWs were more likely to report having changed jobs in the past year (8%) than either DSW/PhDs (7%) or BSWs (5%). The likelihood that a social worker had changed jobs in the past year decreased with age, from 35% among social workers 25 and under to 1% among those 65 and over.

**Figure 23. Percentages of Licensed Social Workers New to Their Job in Past Year, by Age Category**



### Who Has Left Social Work?

Nineteen percent of the social workers who responded to the 2004 survey were not currently active in a social work job. Although many of these inactive social workers responding to the survey were older (with 45% age 55 and older, and 17% age 65 and older), the majority of the inactive licensed social workers (55%) were under the age of 55.

Consistent with their older age on average, inactive social workers were more likely not to have a social work degree than active social workers (19% compared to 8%), and less likely to hold MSWs (65% compared to 79%). Inactive social workers did not differ significantly from active social workers in their gender or racial/ethnic distribution.

*Years before leaving.* The median years experience as a degreed social workers among those who have left the field is 13 years. Ten percent reported less than a year's experience, and another 11% reported one to four years experience, so that one out of every five inactive social workers left the field in their first five years. Still, nearly one in five inactive social workers had 25 or more years experience in the field.

Women left the field after many fewer years than men (a median of 11 years compared to 25 years for men). Race/ethnicity had little effect upon when social workers left the field, although Asians left sooner (a median of 7 years) than Blacks, Hispanics, or Whites (all 13 years). Older social workers left after more experience than younger ones. Years experience before leaving the field also varied substantially by degree. BSWs left after a median of 7 years, while MSWs left after a median of 14 years and DSWs after a median of 27 years.

*Reasons for leaving.* The most common reason for being no longer active as a social worker was retirement (24%), but the majority of social workers reported other reasons, especially personal reasons and level of pay (both 21%). Eighteen percent simply preferred other work.

Table 2 shows that older, inactive social workers were much more likely than younger active ones to report that their reason for leaving the field was retirement (37% among those ages 55-64 and 69% among those ages 65 and older). Younger social workers were more likely to report that they left due to almost any reason other than retirement. The youngest inactive social workers (ages 26-34) were most likely to report leaving due to personal reasons (43%), level of pay (28%) or few social work jobs (21%). Forty percent of young inactive social workers indicated they left for an “other reason”.

**Table 2. Reasons that Respondents Reported They Were Not Currently Working as a Social Worker**

Reason for Leaving Social Work	Age Group					
	Under 35	35-44	44-54	55-64	65 and Over	Total
Other Reason	40.9%	42.4%	27.4%	20.3%	9.8%	26.4%
Retired	0.0%	0.0%	7.8%	37.5%	69.2%	24.6%
Personal Reasons	42.0%	30.6%	22.4%	13.8%	9.8%	21.3%
Level of Pay	26.1%	31.3%	23.7%	18.5%	7.7%	21.1%
Convenience of Hours	13.6%	14.6%	8.2%	5.6%	4.2%	8.5%
Prefer Other Work	14.8%	18.8%	26.9%	18.1%	4.9%	17.9%
Few Jobs	22.7%	9.7%	12.3%	9.9%	4.2%	10.9%
Convenience of Location	9.1%	6.9%	7.3%	5.2%	4.2%	6.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>826</b>

Women were significantly more likely to report having left social work due to few available jobs (13% compared to 6%), convenience of hours (10% compared to 1%), convenience of location (8% compared to none), personal reasons (24% compared to 12%), and other reasons (30% compared to 16%). Men were significantly more likely to report having left social work due to retirement (44% compared to 20%).

Black/African Americans were significantly more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to report having left social work because few social work jobs were available (24% compared to 11%), and Hispanic/Latinos were significantly more likely to report having left due to level of pay (41% compared to 21%).

BSWs were more likely than MSWs to cite almost every reason for leaving except for retirement (only 8% of inactive BSWs report that they are retired). The most common reason given for leaving the field by inactive BSWs was level of pay (29%), followed closely by personal reasons (25%) and few social work jobs (24%). MSWs, in contrast, were most likely to report leaving due to retirement (27%), personal reasons (22%), or level of pay (20%).

*Plans to re-enter social work.* Sixteen percent of inactive social workers reported that they planned to re-enter social work within the next two years. Plans to re-enter decreased with age, from 40% of those ages 25 and under to 8% of those ages 65 and older. Hispanics were significantly less likely than non-Hispanic Whites to report plans to re-enter social work (3% compared to 19%), and women were significantly more likely to report plans to re-enter than men (41% compared to 19%). BSWs were more likely than MSWs (26% compared to 16%) to report plans to re-enter the field.

Several reasons for leaving were associated with an increased likelihood of planning to return. Those who left due to too few jobs were more than twice as likely to plan to re-enter than those who left for other reasons (36% compared to 15%). The same is true for those who left due to convenience of hours (34% compared to 16%) or location (36% compared to 16%), or for personal reasons (42% compared to 11%).

Other reasons were associated with a decreased likelihood of planning to return. Social workers who left due to a preference for other work were less likely to plan to return than those leaving for other reasons (11% compared to 19%). Social workers who are retired were relatively unlikely to plan to return, although nearly one in ten plan to do so (9% compared to 20%).