

NASW Center for Workforce Studies
& Social Work Practice

Social Workers in Government Agencies

occupational profile



Overview

Social workers are key employees in federal, state, and local government agencies. Social workers may work on-site at a government agency; at a non-governmental agency whose client base is generated from their relationship with a government agency; or in a contracting relationship as independent consultants. The range of government settings in which social workers practice include:

- Agencies serving children and families, such as foster care agencies;
- Health care settings, including community-based clinics and hospitals;
- Schools;
- Federal, state or local correctional facilities;
- Settings that serve older adults, such as nursing homes; and
- Agencies serving military veterans and active duty military personnel.

The Federal Government

Social workers are an important part of the federal government's workforce. At a single point in time, there are over 8,000 social work positions in the federal government. For social work positions (GS-0185), a bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement, but a master's degree in social work or a related field has become the standard for many positions. For social service assistants, (GS-0187) and (GS-0186), a bachelor's degree is usually recommended.

Social workers work in a number of cabinet level agencies within the government including:

Social Security Administration (SSA)

Social workers in the Social Security Administration have varied roles. SSA, by far, employs the largest number of social workers (more than 26,000). Social workers serve as program analysts, eligibility workers, community-outreach workers, and program administrators.

Veterans Administration (VA)

The over 9,000 social workers employed by the Department of Veterans Affairs are assigned to the 57 VA facilities located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and six territories. VA social workers work as case managers, clinicians, and administrators in hospitals and community-based outreach programs throughout the United States.

The Department of Defense (DOD)

Social workers in the Department of Defense include civilian social workers assigned to military components (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines) as well as to other DOD facilities. In addition, there are over 500 active military personnel who are practicing social workers.

Department of Justice (DOJ)

DOJ employs over 5,000 social workers as direct service workers in areas such as community-based offender reentry programs and federal parole and probation agencies. They also serve as policy analysts for DOJ.

Health and Human Services (HHS)

HHS is a vast department that has many services areas including community health, HIV/AIDS, mental health, and substance abuse. The work of HHS is conducted by the Office of the Secretary and 11 agencies, including the National Institutes of Health, the Administration for Children and Families, the Administration on Aging, the Health Research Services Administration (HRSA), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These agencies hire social workers as project officers, policy analysts, researchers, and administrators.

Overview of Functions of Social Workers in Government Agencies

Social workers perform a variety of professional tasks and functions for the government agencies, ranging from clinical practice to program management/administration. Functions vary from agency to agency but essentially include:

- Case management;
- Individual and group therapy;
- Psychosocial assessments;
- Treatment and discharge planning;
- Substance use counseling and treatment; and
- Administration

Social workers are also integrated into federal programs that address health care, behavioral health, criminal justice, social services, and child welfare issues. Additionally, social workers play a significant role in formulating policies, and developing program standards and guidance for federal programs. Social workers who practice in a government agency are usually integrated into a broader continuum of services along with other disciplines such as physicians, nurses, and substance abuse counselors.

Benefits/Challenges of Practicing in a Government Agency

There are benefits and challenges related to practicing in a governmental setting. One commonly perceived benefit is that government work offers greater job security and long-term job stability than private sector employment. Conversely, a challenge to working in such settings is the inflexibility of large bureaucracies which often limits applying creative solutions to complex problems.

Data referenced in this profile are based upon results from the *2009 NASW Salary & Compensation Study* (see Notes).

Salary Analysis of Social Workers in Government Agencies (n=539)

ANNUAL SALARY BY AGE¹



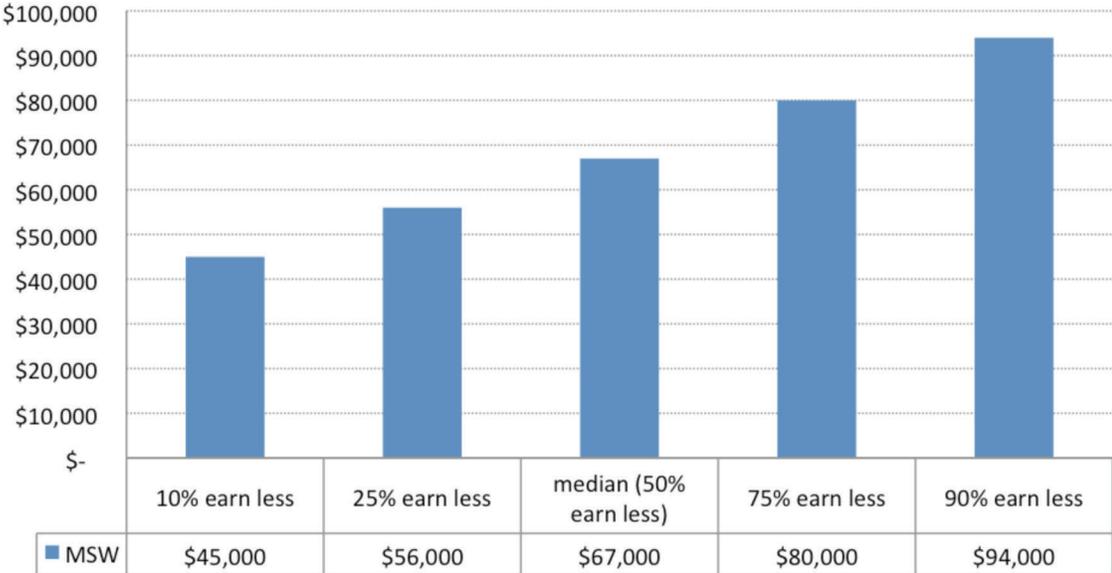
ANNUAL SALARY BY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE²



¹ Your age? (under 25; 25-29; 30-34; 35-39; 40-44; 45-49; 50-54; 55-59; 60-64; 65 and older)

² In what year did you first begin working in the social work field?

ANNUAL SALARY BY DEGREE³



ANNUAL SALARY BY CERTIFICATION⁴



³ Which of the following academic degrees do you hold (if any?)
⁴ In which of these areas (if any) do you hold current certifications? Please check all that apply.

ANNUAL SALARY BY CERTIFICATION (CONTINUED)



ANNUAL SALARY BY SECTOR⁵



⁵ On October 1, 2009, what was the sector of your primary social work position?

ANNUAL SALARY BY PRACTICE AREA⁶



ANNUAL SALARY BY REGION⁷



⁶ Which one option best matches the primary practice area of your primary position? (Please check the one best option.)

⁷ On October 1, 2009, what was the city, state, and ZIP code of your primary work location?

ANNUAL SALARY BY CENSUS REGION



ANNUAL SALARY BY CENSUS REGION (CONTINUED)



Survey Methodology

This survey was sponsored and developed by NASW. Data were collected and tabulated by Readex Research, an independent research company. To broaden representation of the profession, NASW partnered with a number of other social work membership organizations to create an expanded list of U.S. professional social workers for sampling purposes. These partner organizations were:

- Association for Oncology Social Work (AOSW)
- National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO)
- National Network for Social Worker Managers (NNSWM)
- The Rural Social Work Caucus
- Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care (SSWLHC)

The total number of unduplicated individuals among these five lists and the NASW domestic membership was 101,995. The overall sample size of 78,777 consisted of the 73,777 with a valid email address on file and a systematic sample of 5,000 (from the 28,218 who could not be reached via email).

Data collection utilized a mixed mode approach. For those with a valid email address, invitations were sent via email to access a Web-based survey. Those without an email address were sent invitations via regular mail, with the option to fill out a provided paper survey or to access the survey online via a provided Web site address.

Data were collected between October 1 and November 24, 2009. A total of 23,889 unduplicated usable responses were received, for a 30% response rate. Among these, 22,000 responses were randomly chosen for inclusion in the final tabulation. The data have been weighted to account for disproportional response between the email and regular mail samples. Percentages based on all 22,000 responses are subject to a margin of error of $\pm 0.6\%$.

RESPONDENT STATUS

The compensation analysis focuses on the subset of “valid answering practitioners”—that is, U.S.-based respondents confirming paid employment or self-employment on October 1, 2009 in a social work-related position (defined as any position that requires or makes use of one’s education, training, or experience in social work), and reporting regular salary or wages. Percentages based on these 17,851 “valid answering practitioners” are subject to a margin of error of $\pm 0.6\%$. *Results are not shown in this profile if there were fewer than 30 valid values in a category.*

Removed are those who did not answer at all, those who provided a report considered to be an outlier (top 1% and bottom 1% of all responses), and those who did not answer in a coherent manner. The tabulated base of the “answering practitioners” is 17,911.



National Association of Social Workers
750 First Street NE, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241

