

PRACTICE RESEARCH NETWORK II RESULTS

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INTRODUCTION

This update describes the results of the second Practice Research Network (PRN II) survey conducted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), as a collaborative project funded by the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The objectives of the PRN II survey were to develop broad knowledge about the practices of social workers and more specific knowledge about social workers with substance abuse treatment services. In this update the focus will be the PRN II survey results relevant to social workers who provide substance abuse services.

METHODOLOGY

A representative sample of NASW members ($N=2,000$) was selected from the population of individuals holding regular memberships ($N=100,136$), excluding members who had foreign addresses. NASW subcontracted with Readex, Inc. to complete the administration, data collection, and data analysis of the PRN II survey. Data collection began September 30, 2002 and ended November 13, 2002. A number of activities were undertaken to encourage a high response rate, including sending multiple reminders via mail, providing stamped, self-addressed return envelopes, and offering a cash incentive. A total of 1,560 completed surveys were received, resulting in a 78 percent response rate. Subsets of the sample included social workers employed by organizations ($N=1,078$), social workers in private practice ($N=600$), and members not employed in social work ($N=133$). Each subset represents 1.6 percent of its respective total population. The high response rate and sampling techniques implemented help ensure that the results are representative of NASW members within the U.S. holding regular membership. Furthermore, these factors minimize potential selectivity and non-response

bias. The margin of error for the total sample is ± 2.5 percent at the 95th confidence interval. However, subsets of the sample (e.g., private practitioners) have slightly higher margins of error.

RESULTS

Demographic Information

The PRN II survey results provide NASW with important demographic data about its regular members residing in the U.S. On average NASW regular members are 50 years old (median age); 73 percent of the respondents were born before 1960. A vast majority (87 percent) of regular members are Caucasian/white, five percent are African American/black, and no other racial category was named by more than two percent of the respondents. More than three-fourths (79 percent) of the members are female, and 74 percent reported being married or in a domestic partner relationship.

Experience and Professional Development

Members were asked about years of experience since receiving their first degree, types of degrees, licensure, and training. They averaged 16 years experience in social work. Thirty-nine percent reported having 20 or more years of experience since receiving their first degree. Nearly one-half (46 percent) of social workers in private practice reported having 20 or more years of experience. Regular members have an average of 15 years experience providing behavioral or mental health services, while only 14 percent of the members reported having no experience in this area. Virtually all regular members (98 percent) have a master's degree, typically an MSW, and six percent of reported holding a doctorate. A vast majority of members (92 percent) are licensed in their respective jurisdictions, and seven percent hold one or more substance abuse certifications. While one-third (33 percent) belong to other

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professional associations, only two percent reported they belonged to the National Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors (NAADAC).

Overall, 93 percent of regular members reported participating in one or more hours of professional development activities during the previous 12 months. Regular NASW members reported that continuing education (85 percent), colleagues (74 percent), and professional publications (55 percent) were the three most important sources for professional development. Only 29 percent reported that the Internet was an important professional development resource, although 82 percent reported using the Internet as part of their work.

When asked specifically about substance abuse training and education, 82 percent of NASW regular members reported they received some type of such training or education in their lifetimes. Sixty-six percent reported that this training or education occurred through continuing education and 39 percent through formal coursework. Thirty-nine percent reported that some portion of their professional development activities in the previous 12 months were courses or trainings in which at least one-quarter of the focus was on substance abuse, and 13 percent reported receiving 10 or more hours of training in this area. However, 54 percent of the respondents reported participating in no hours of professional development activities in substance abuse in the previous 12 months.

Employment Type and Setting

While 15 percent of regular members reported being involved in addictions work, only three percent reported that this was their primary practice area. Half (50 percent) of social workers currently employed in social work reported that their primary, secondary, or tertiary practice area was in mental health. More than one-third (37 percent) reported that mental health was their primary practice area. Both of these rates are more than three times higher than any other practice area identified by social workers. Four percent of social workers reported some involvement in employee assistance program work, and only one percent stated that this was their primary practice area. In addition to practice area, NASW members were asked about their primary role in their practice area. More than half (57 percent) cited clinical practice, 15 percent reported administration/management, and 10 percent stated that case management as their primary roles.

Respondents were asked to select, from a list of 20 options, those that best describe their primary and secondary social work employment settings. Solo private practice was mentioned by 28 percent of the regular NASW members for both primary and secondary settings, while 20

percent reported this to be their primary setting. Social workers in outpatient mental health settings made up a total of 19 percent, and 15 percent reported this as their primary employment setting. Group private practice, as a primary setting, was reported by five percent, while the total for this category was eight percent. Social workers were also asked about the auspices of their primary employment setting. More than two-thirds (71 percent) reported being employed by private organizations including: private, for-profit (36 percent), non-profit (24 percent), and non-profit/sectarian (11 percent) agencies. Twenty-six percent work under public sector auspices (i.e., local, state, or federal/military). Furthermore, 53 percent of social workers work only in organizational settings, 22 percent are only in private practice, and 17 percent work in both settings.

Social Work Income

Social workers working both part-time and full-time in the social work field were asked about their income. The median income in 2001 for all social workers was \$44,400. However, social workers working full-time in social work had a median income of \$49,500. Among social workers working full-time, years of experience had a great impact on the amount of their income. The median income for social workers with 25 or more years of experience was \$60,000 in 2001, and social workers with only two to four years of experience had a median income of \$35,600.

Primary practice area, primary role, primary organization type, and organizational auspice had an impact on compensation as well. Social workers working in addictions had the highest median income of \$53,300 in 2001, and those in mental health had a median income of \$52,500. Those working in the practice areas of adolescents and developmental disabilities both had a median income of \$40,000. Social workers in administration/management roles had a median income of \$57,800 in 2001, nearly \$10,000 more than the median income for those whose roles were clinical/direct practice. Individuals working in solo and group private practice had the highest median incomes at \$65,500 and \$58,300 respectively. The lowest median income by organization type was outpatient mental health, averaging \$43,600 in 2001. Social workers employed under the auspice of the federal government/military had the highest median income of \$57,200, and those in private, for-profit entities averaged \$56,700.

Substance Abuse Activities

Social workers were asked about the types of actions they took in relation to diagnosing and treating clients with substance abuse disorders. More than three-fourths (77 percent) working in social work indicated taking one or more of several such actions. Overall, referrals to substance

abuse treatment (65 percent), screening for substance abuse disorders (65 percent), and treating secondary substance abuse diagnoses (53 percent) were the three most frequent actions taken by social workers. When comparing social workers employed in organizational settings versus private practice, key differences emerge. Social workers in private practice refer clients to self-help groups (48 percent) and substance abuse treatment while treating mental/emotional needs (43 percent) more often than their counterparts in organizational settings (37 percent and 32 percent respectively). Private practitioners treat both mental/emotional needs and substance abuse issues more often than social workers in organizational settings (44 percent and 29 percent respectively). In addition, social workers in private practice spend much more time providing individual counseling (54 percent) to clients with substance abuse disorders than professionals in organizational settings (25 percent). However, social workers in organizational settings spend more time doing assessments (21 percent) and case management (19 percent) than private practitioners perform these activities (14 percent and four percent respectively).

Twenty-five percent of social workers in organizational settings report that one-quarter or more of their client caseload have a primary substance abuse diagnosis, while only 15 percent of private practitioners have a client caseload with the same primary diagnosis. Practitioners in organizational settings see more clients with primary and secondary substance abuse disorder diagnoses (10 percent and 21 percent respectively) than do social workers in private practice (7 percent and 17 percent respectively). Private practitioners see clients with a substance abuse disorder of alcohol only than social workers in organizational settings (47 percent and 30 percent respectively). Practitioners in organizational settings see more individuals with a drug only substance abuse disorder than private practitioners (21 percent and 16 percent respectively). Clients receiving services for both alcohol and drug disorders are seen more in organizational settings (50 percent) than in private practice (36 percent). Furthermore, the median number of clients seen per week by social workers in organizational settings is higher than those seen by private practitioners (18 and 15 respectively). More practitioners in organizational settings (24 percent) see 30 or more clients per week than social workers in private practice (18 percent).

DISCUSSION

The objectives of the PRN survey were to develop a broad knowledge about the practices of social workers and more specific knowledge about social workers providing substance abuse treatment services. This survey was

designed to obtain a variety of characteristics of regular NASW members within the U.S. including: basic demographics, educational background and training, practice areas, practice settings, professional roles, organizational auspices, and some data on client characteristics. A representative sample of regular NASW members was included in this descriptive study, which can be generalized to the U.S. population of NASW members holding regular memberships because of the sampling techniques and high response rate. However, the results cannot be generalized to all social workers within the U.S., since the NASW membership makes up less than one-quarter of the total number of employed social workers in this country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2002).

Social workers who identified substance abuse as their primary practice area earned an average of \$53,300 per year in 2001, higher than any other practice area. However, the sample size for those social workers working in addictions is much smaller than other categories, which is most likely affecting these results.

It is clear that social workers in both organizational settings and private practice are providing services to clients with a primary or secondary substance abuse disorder diagnoses. As indicated by the results, practitioners in organizational settings see more clients with a primary or secondary substance abuse diagnoses (30.3 percent) than do social workers in private practice (23.6 percent), and on average, they also see more clients per week (18 versus 15 respectively). The types of services being provided in these settings may influence the fact that social workers in private practice see fewer clients on average. Private practitioners spend more than twice the amount of their time providing individual counseling (54 percent) than their counterparts in organizational settings (25 percent), and are treating mental/emotional needs at higher rates. On the other hand, social workers in organizational settings spend more of their time doing assessments and case management than private practitioners.

The results also indicate that a large majority of employed social workers (77 percent) took one or more action in relation to diagnosing and treating clients with substance abuse disorders. However, a majority of social workers (54 percent) reported participating in no substance abuse specific professional development activities in the previous 12 months. Furthermore, only seven percent of the regular NASW members have a substance abuse certification in their respective jurisdictions. The discrepancy between practice and training may have an impact on the services being provided by social workers. This may be an important area that needs further exploration, and result in developing additional training or professional development activities in the area of substance abuse for the profession.

This PRN survey was the second of multiple studies that are needed to develop a clear understanding of social work practice, and the types of services social workers provide to clients in a variety of employment settings. Additional research is necessary to determine key characteristics of social workers employed in various primary practice areas and across the practice settings in order to make a more comprehensive assessment of the profession's role in service delivery. Further research should be conducted exploring the types of services being provided to clients by social workers, particularly in the area of substance abuse. It is anticipated that some of this information will be collected in greater depth in the next PRN survey scheduled to be administered this fiscal year.

REFERENCES:

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2002). *Occupational outlook handbook, 2002-03 edition* [Online]. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/oco/pdf/ocos060.pdf> on June 11, 2003.

RESOURCES:

National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Practice Research Network (PRN) project. Available at: <http://www.socialworkers.org/naswprn/default.asp>

- Two thousand regular NASW members residing in the U.S. were randomly selected for this survey, with a 78 percent response rate.
- Basic demographic information for these members includes the following:
 - Fifty years is the average age;
 - Eighty-seven percent are Caucasian/white, five percent African American/black;
 - Seventy-nine percent are female; and
 - Seventy-four percent are married or in a domestic partner relationship.
- Ninety-eight percent of regular NASW members have a master's degree, six percent hold a doctorate, and 92 percent are licensed in their respective jurisdictions.
- Fifteen percent of the members are involved in providing substance abuse services, while only three percent reported this as their primary practice area.