



Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce:

**A National Study of
Licensed Social Workers**

PRELIMINARY REPORT

National Association of Social Workers
Center for Workforce Studies
March 2005

© 2005 National Association of Social Workers.
All Rights Reserved.

Acknowledgements

National Association of Social Workers

Gary Bailey, MSW
President

Elizabeth J. Clark, PhD, ACSW, MPH
Executive Director
President, NASW Foundation

NASW Center for Workforce Studies

Toby Weismiller, ACSW, Director
Tracy Whitaker, ACSW, Associate Director
Sharon Tyson, Grants Administrator
Gwendolyn Nkabyo, Sr. Administrative
Assistant

NASW Workforce Study Expert Panel

Barbara A. Conniff, ACSW
Diana DiNitto, PhD, ACSW
Margaret Gibelman, DSW
Kathleen A. Rounds, PhD, MPH, MSW
Brad Sheafor, PhD, ACSW
Nelly Rojas Schwan, LCSW, ACSW
Cynthia Stuen, DSW/PhD
Patricia Volland, MBA, ACSW
Darrell P. Wheeler, PhD, MPH, ACSW

Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany

Jean Moore, BSN, MSN, Director
Paul Wing, D.Engin., Deputy Director
Bonnie Cohen, Associate Director
Sandra McGinnis, PhD, Research Associate

NASW gratefully acknowledges the Atlantic Philanthropies, the John A. Hartford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their funding support of this project. We thank them for their support, but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundations.

NASW also gratefully acknowledges the members of the NASW Workforce Study Expert Panel for their thoughtful assistance in designing the survey instrument, and the Center for Health Workforce Studies, University at Albany, for their collaboration in the design, administration and analysis of the study.



Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce:

**A National Study of
Licensed Social Workers**

PRELIMINARY REPORT



Executive Summary

Social work is a diverse profession,

unique among the social 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 order to better predict the adequacy and sufficiency of the social work labor force to meet the changing needs of society, NASW 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.

A random sample of 10,000 social workers was drawn from social work licensure lists of 48 states and the District of Columbia. 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 non-respondents. The response rate to the survey was 49.4%. Of the respondents, 81.1% report that they are currently active as social workers.

This report is based on the responses to that survey. It presents preliminary findings that illuminate a number of issues related to social workers and their professional practices. A full report, which will include special analyses of social work practice in the areas of Aging, Children and Families, Behavioral Health and Health, will be available later this year.

Key Findings

The following ten key findings from the survey responses have important implications for the future of the social work profession.

- 1 *The social work labor force is older than most professions and occupations.*
- 2 *The current social work labor force is expected to decrease significantly over the next two years.*
- 3 *The social work labor force is experiencing more transition than originally envisioned.*
- 4 *Social workers have experienced increased demands in their work, but decreased resources and supports in recent years.*
- 5 *The profession is not keeping pace with population trends in terms of its ability to attract social workers of color.*
- 6 *A significant number of social workers provides services to older adults and children, both vulnerable populations requiring specialized knowledge and skill.*
- 7 *Social work practice areas exhibit considerable variability in terms of social worker characteristics, compensation levels and sources, and types of organizational settings.*
- 8 *Most social workers are satisfied with their educational preparation and post-degree continuing education or training.*
- 9 *Most social workers are satisfied with their compensation packages.*
- 10 *MSWs and BSWs report different levels of satisfaction with their experiences in the labor market.*

Background

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.¹ 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.² 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 labor force information. Consequently, there are not data resources to reliably gauge the sufficiency of the current workforce or to project future needs for the profession. 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. A sense of urgency to plan for future needs for the profession and for viable service delivery systems led the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to conduct a benchmark national study of licensed social workers. The results of this study will be used to define and describe the current professional social work labor force, and to plan for future needs.

A random sample of 10,000 social workers was drawn from social work licensure lists of 48 states³ and the District of Columbia. 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 response rate to the survey was 49.4%. Of the respondents, 81.1% report that they are currently active as social workers.⁴

The majority of licensed social workers in the U.S. 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 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.⁵ The number of social workers graduating with bachelor's degrees increased by about 50% between 1995 and 2000, while the number of social workers graduating with master's degrees rose by about 25% during the same period.⁶

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 work.

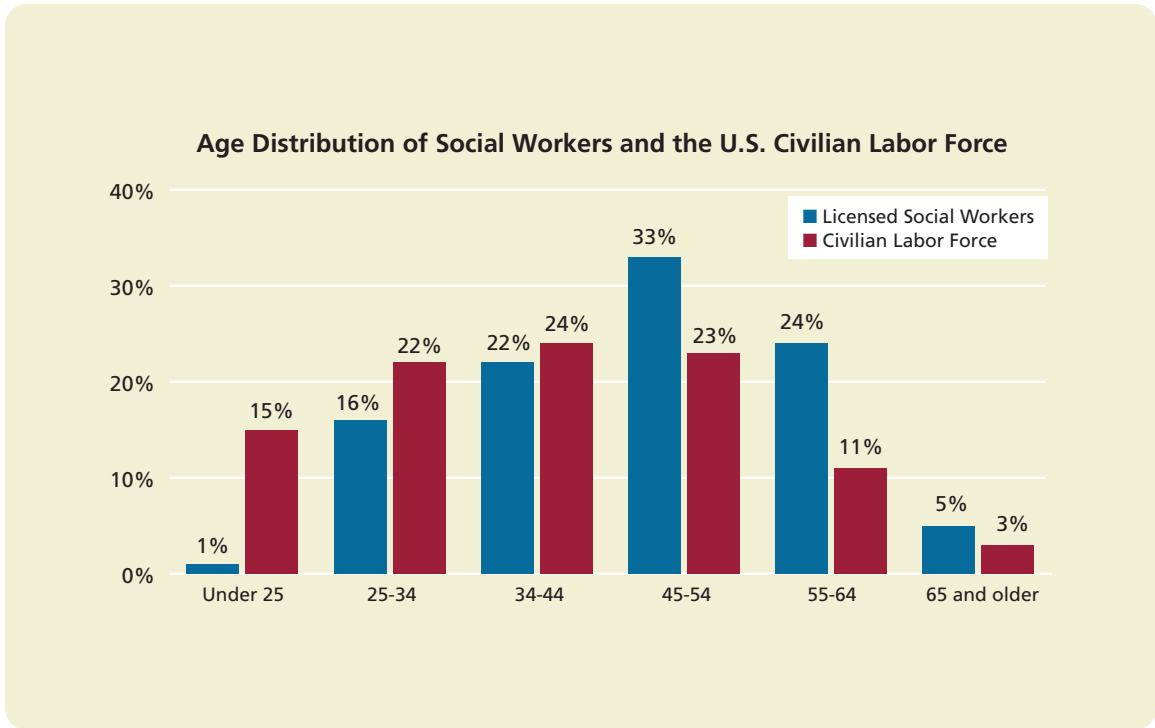
Survey Findings

1 The social work labor force is older than most professions and occupations.

Nearly 30% of social workers are over 55 years of age, compared with 14% of the U.S. civilian labor force.⁷ Overall, there are more licensed social workers in the older age cohorts than in the U.S. civilian labor force, meaning that a disproportionate share of social workers will retire in the next several years. The aging of the social work workforce is a critical issue in terms of workforce planning. It is important to ensure that there will be sufficient new social workers to replace those who will retire. Replacement of these experienced professionals as they retire will place significant burdens on social work education programs in coming years.

- Social workers are significantly older than cohorts within the U.S. civilian workforce: 62% of social workers are over 45 years of age as compared with 37% of the civilian labor force, and 29% of social workers are 55 years and older as compared with 14% of the civilian labor force.
- As compared to 37% of the civilian labor force, relatively few social workers (17%) are under the age of 35.
- Respondents received their first social work degree at an estimated median age of 30. Those holding the BSW as their highest degree received that degree at younger ages (median age of 26) than those holding the MSW as their highest degree (median age of 31).

CHART 1



- Social workers under 35 are more likely to have the BSW as their highest social work degree and less likely to have MSWs. No respondents under the age of 35 held a PhD/DSW, compared to four percent of those 55 and older.

② The current social work labor force is expected to decrease significantly over the next two years.

Thirteen percent of current social workers plan to leave their current positions in the next two years:

- Five percent plan to leave the field but continue working;
- Six percent plan to retire; and
- Two percent plan to stop working.
- Of the 70% of social workers who intend to remain in their current positions, eight percent plan to increase their hours working as a social worker, while 10% plan to decrease their hours.

③ The social work labor force is experiencing more transition than originally envisioned.

One way to understand who is leaving the social work profession and why is to examine data on social workers who are no longer active in social work. Many of these individuals have retained their licenses despite leaving the field, while others do not plan to renew their current license once it expires. Although we believe that a significant number of currently inactive social workers did not respond to the current survey, a large number did – 19% of respondents reported that they were not currently active as social workers.

- Social workers not in the active workforce are older than social workers overall, with only 11% under the age of 35 (compared to 17% for active social workers), and 45% over the age of 55 (compared to 29% of active social workers).
- Inactive social workers did not differ significantly from social workers overall in gender and race/ethnicity.
- Median years of experience for inactive social workers is slightly lower than that for social workers overall (12 years compared to 13 years).
- The most common reason given for leaving social work was retirement (24%), followed by personal reasons and level of pay (both 21%). Almost 18% of social workers indicated that they left the field because they preferred other work; 11% indicated that there were too few social work jobs.

④ Social workers have experienced increased demands in their work, but decreased resources and supports in recent years.

Survey respondents were asked several questions about their workplace. Several seem relevant to planners and policy makers concerned about the social work profession.

- Social workers reported changes in the practice of social work in the past two years, as well as in the service delivery system.
- Social workers report the most significant changes in the practice of social work are increases in paperwork, the severity of client problems, caseload size and waiting lists for services, as well as reduced levels of reimbursement, and the availability of social work supervision and staffing.
- Respondents also report that the service delivery system has changed in the past two years in ways that may hinder clients' access to services.

- Social workers report that the number of client services that are eligible to receive funding has decreased.
- Social workers report that the range and number of client services available have also declined.

CHART 2

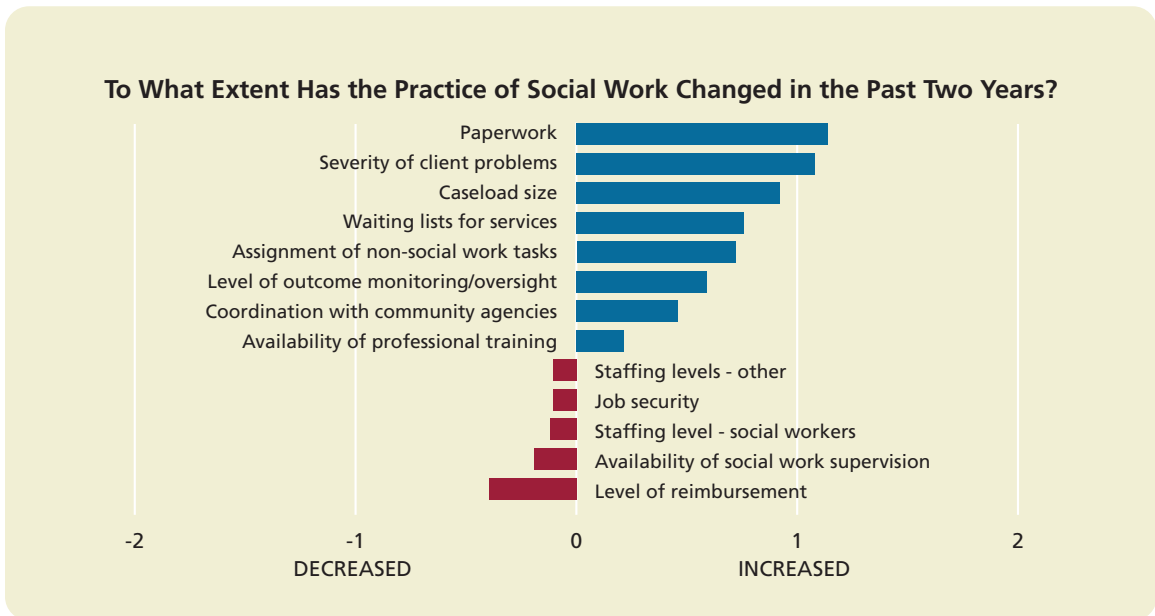
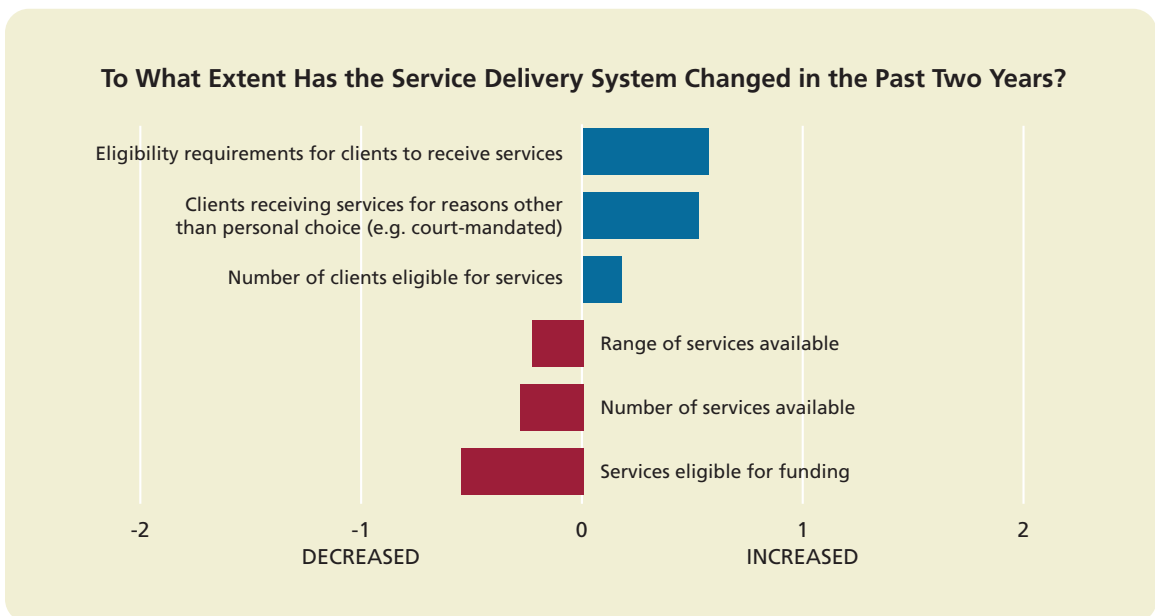


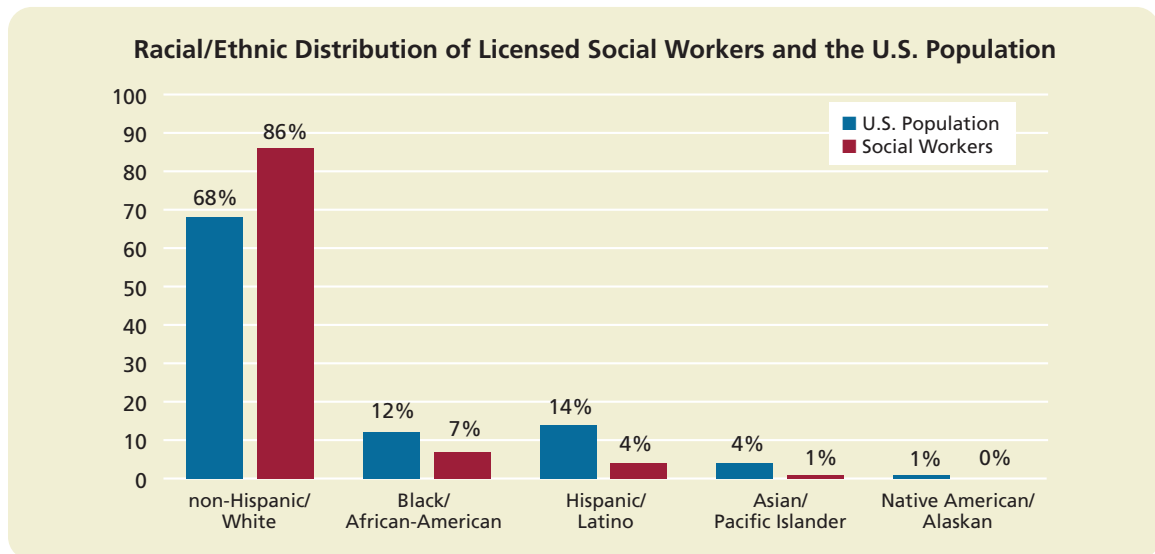
CHART 3



5 The profession is not keeping pace with population trends in terms of its ability to attract social workers of color.

Racial and ethnic diversity in the health professions has become a critical issue as the racial/ethnic diversity of the U.S. population increases. Concerns about the cultural competence of the frontline workforce and issues of quality of care and access to services highlight the need to recruit more diverse workers and to educate existing workers about important cultural differences.⁸

CHART 4



- Licensed social workers are predominantly non-Hispanic white (86%).
- While Blacks/African-Americans are the largest minority group within social work, they are under-represented when compared with the general population (seven percent in social work compared to 12% of the U.S. population).
- Hispanics/Latinos and Asians/Pacific Islanders also are under-represented relative to their presence in the U.S. population (four percent in social work compared to almost 14% of the U.S. population for Hispanics/Latinos and one percent in social work compared to four percent of the population for Asians/Pacific Islanders).
- Ninety-six percent of social workers report having non-Hispanic/Latino white clients in their caseloads.
- Eighty-three percent of social workers report having Black/African-American clients in their caseloads.
- Seventy-five percent of social workers report having Hispanic/Latino clients in their caseloads.
- Forty-nine percent of social workers report having Asian/Pacific Islander clients in their caseloads.

⑥ A significant number of social workers provides services to older adults and children, both vulnerable populations requiring specialized knowledge and skill.

Social work services to older adults and children are not narrowly confined to particular practice settings. The mix of age groups that social workers routinely serve has implications for workforce training and development beyond particular practice areas:

- Sixty-one percent of social workers report that they have children (zero to 12 years old) in their caseloads;
- Seventy-six percent of social workers report that they have adolescents (13 to 21 years old) in their caseloads;
- Seventy-five percent of social workers report that they have older adults (55 years and over) in their caseloads; and
- Twenty-four percent of social workers report that older adults comprise at least 50% of their caseloads.

⑦ Social work practice areas exhibit considerable variability in terms of social worker characteristics, compensation levels and sources, and types of organizational settings.

Social workers work in a wide variety of settings and practice areas. Few other health professions serve such a diverse client population in such diverse settings as do social workers. An understanding of the varied roles played by social workers in the health and behavioral health care systems is invaluable to recruitment, training, and promotion of the profession.

- Mental health (37%), medical health (13%), child welfare/family (13%), and aging (nine percent) are the four most common practice areas cited as the foci of social workers' primary employment.⁹

CHART 5

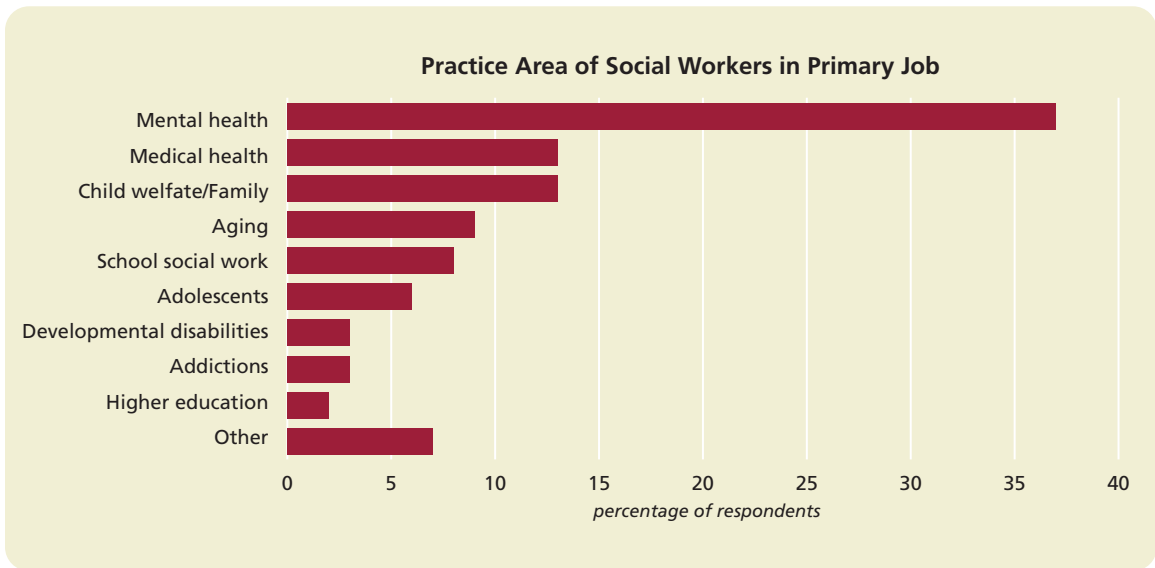


CHART 6

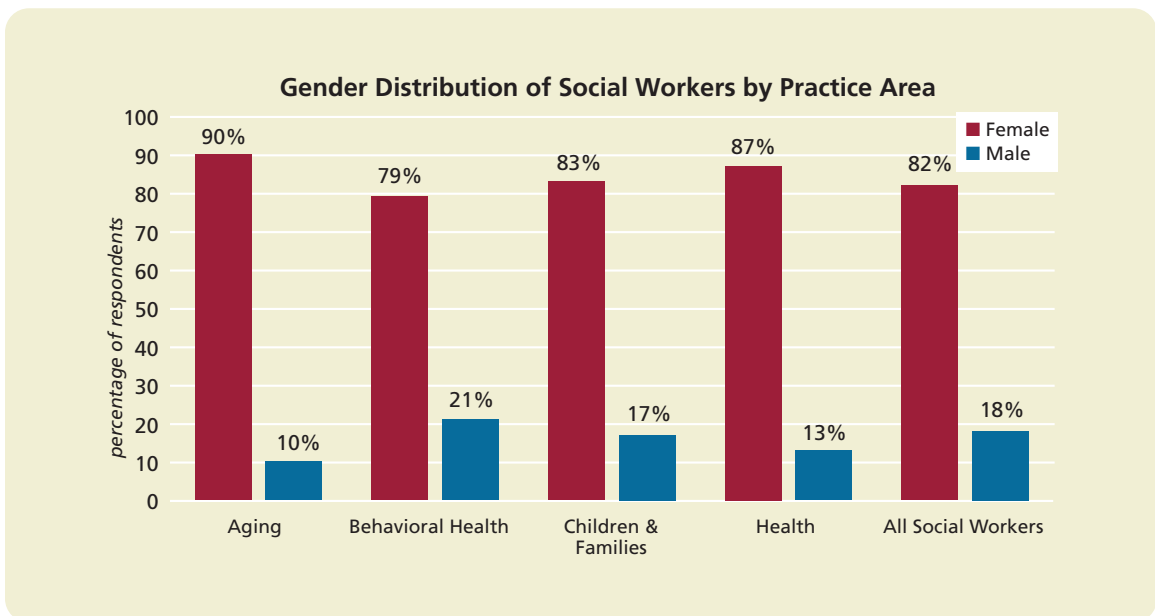


CHART 7

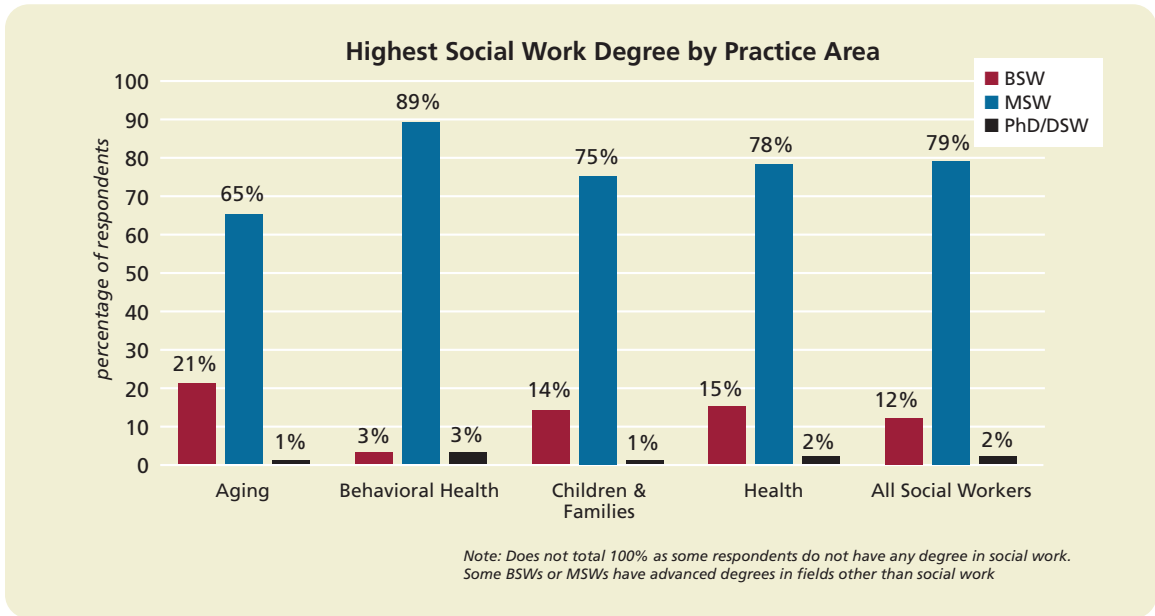
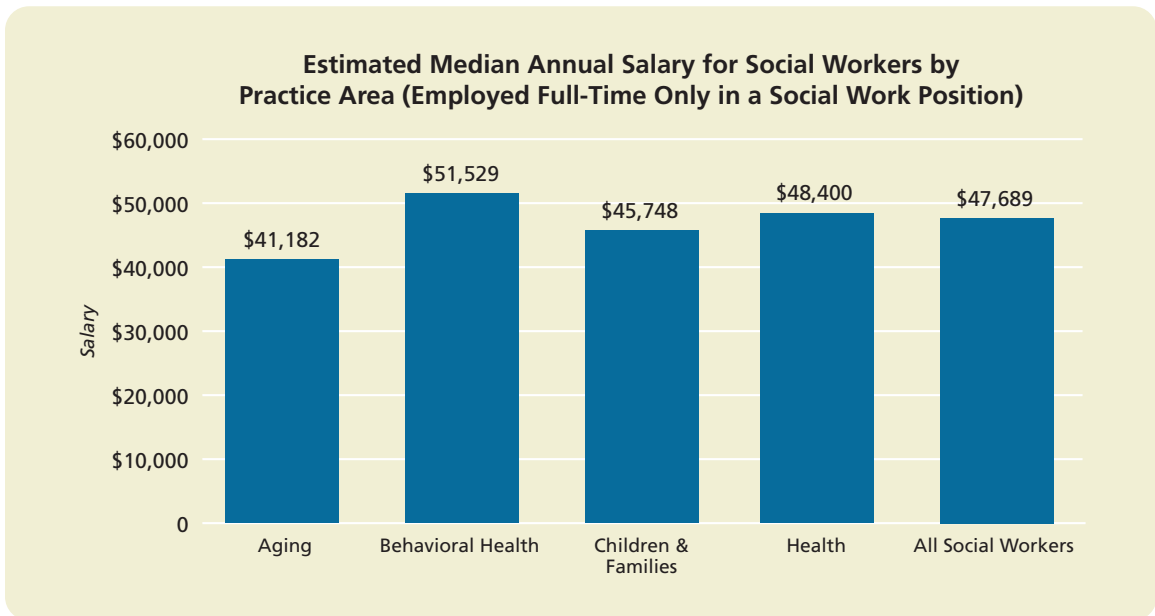
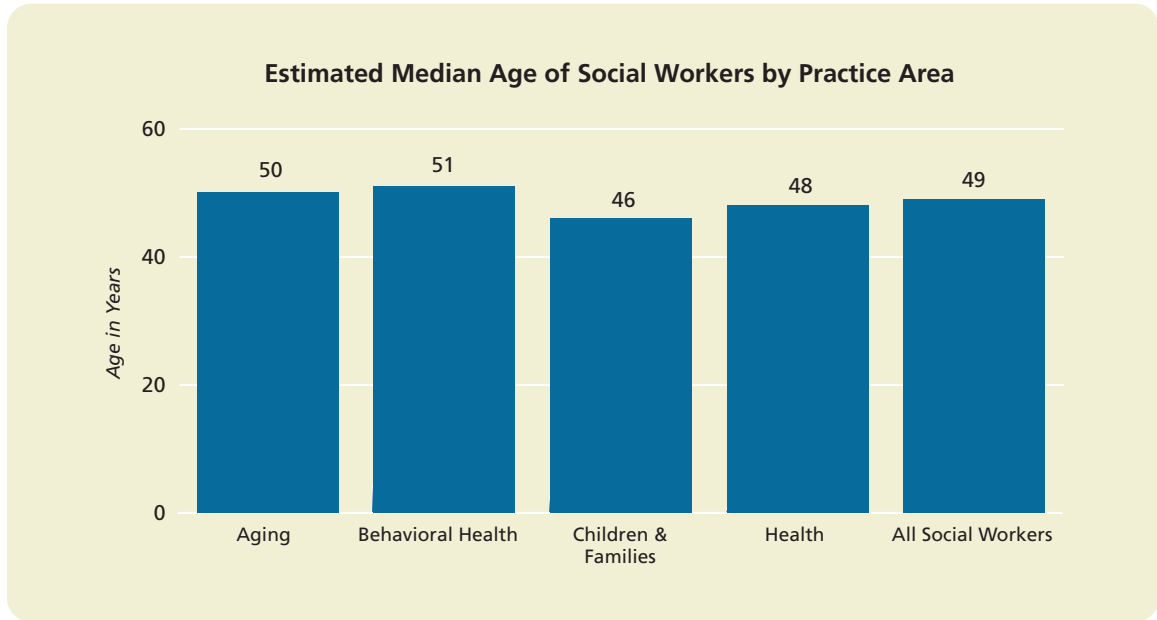


CHART 8



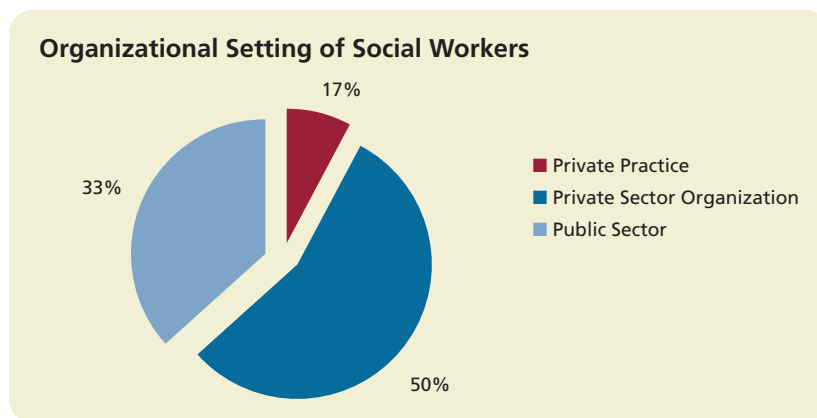
- The median age for social workers varies by practice area with consequent implications for workforce planning. Respondents with practice areas in behavioral health and aging are slightly older than social workers overall, while respondents in health care and children and families practice areas are younger.

CHART 9



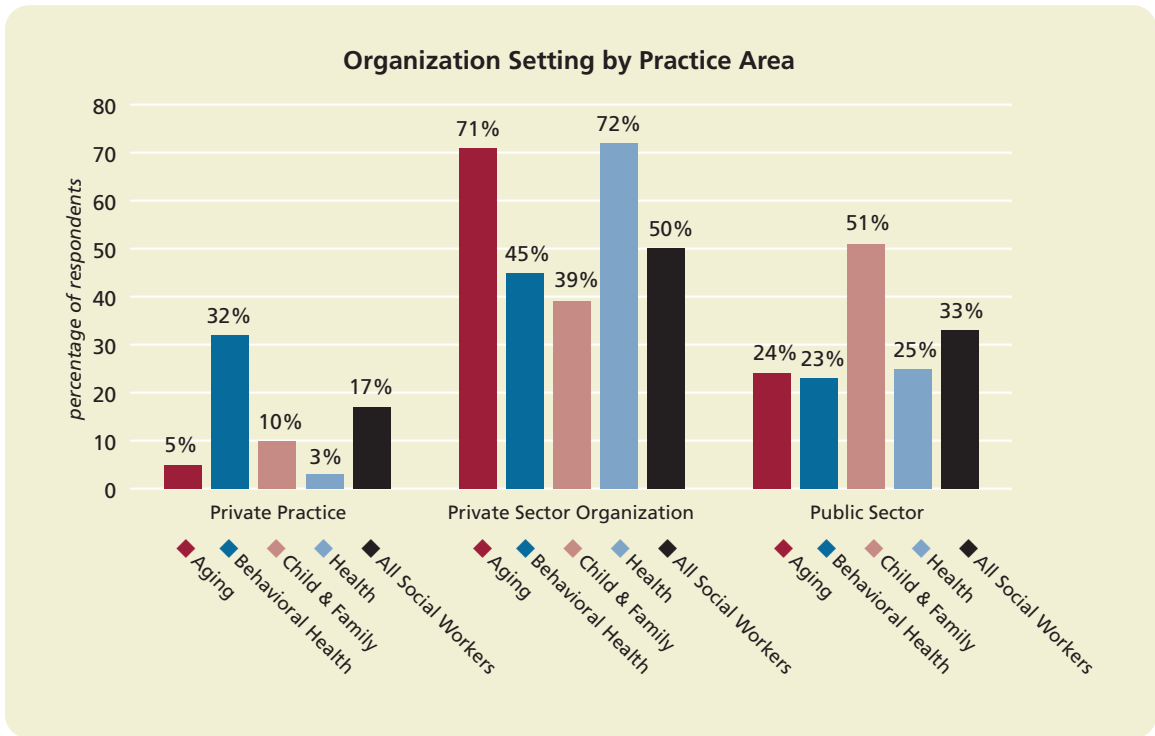
- Over two-thirds of all social workers are employed in the private sector in private organizations (50%) or in private practice (17%). Older social workers are more likely to be in private practice.

CHART 10



- One-third (33%) of social workers work in public sector agencies.
- Compared to social workers overall, respondents with a practice area in behavioral health are more likely to be in private practice (32%); respondents with practice areas of health (72%) or aging (71%) are more likely to work in private sector organizations; and respondents with a practice area in children and families (51%) are more likely to work in public sector agencies.

CHART 11



➤ The most common sources of health coverage for clients reported by respondents are Medicaid (41%), private insurance (24%), and Medicare (16%), although there is significant variation across practice areas.

CHART 12

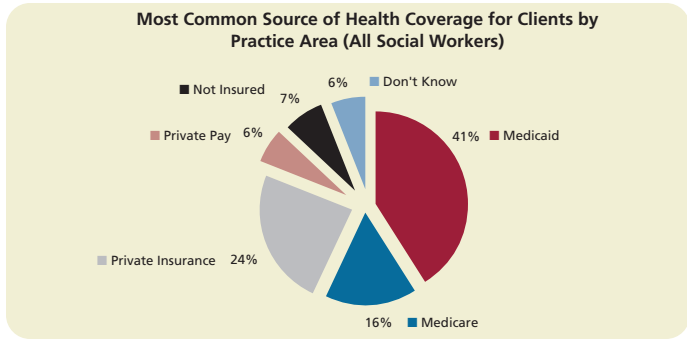


CHART 13

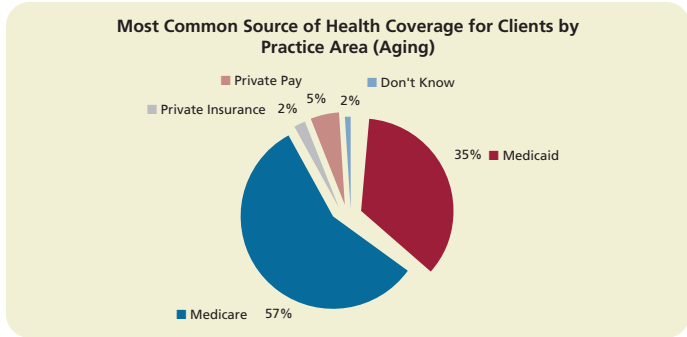


CHART 14

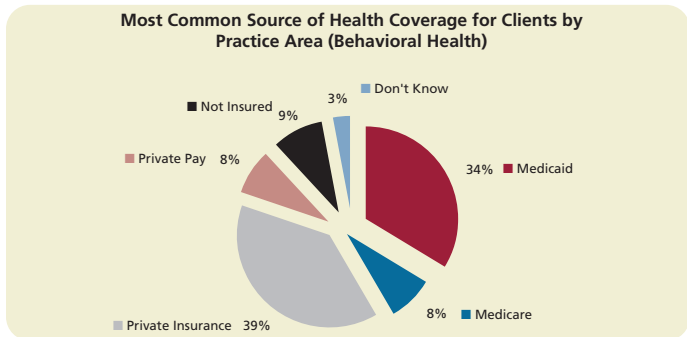


CHART 15

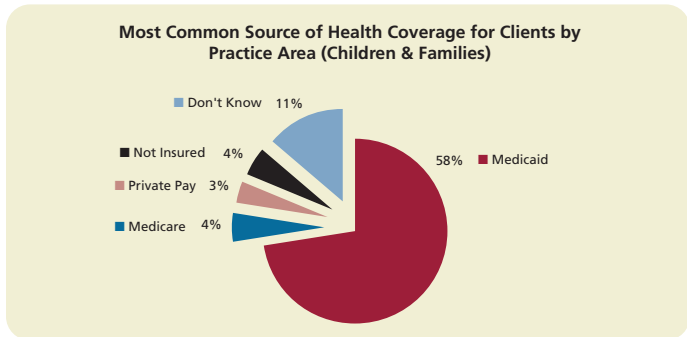
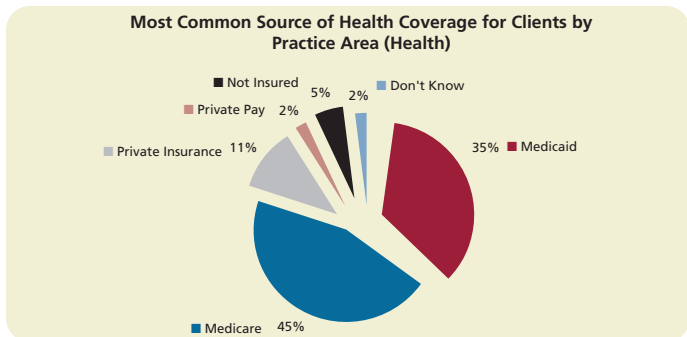


CHART 16



8 Most social workers are satisfied with their educational preparation and post-degree continuing education or training.

The adequate preparation of social work practitioners, both during and following their degree programs, is critically important in ensuring not only competent practice but also a satisfied workforce that plans to remain in the profession.

- The majority of social workers report that degree programs (60%) and post-degree continuing training or education (71%) prepared them either well or very well for roles they currently perform as social workers.
- Few respondents reported that degree programs (10%) or continuing training/education (five percent) did not prepare them adequately.

9 Most social workers are satisfied with their compensation packages.

An understanding of supply and demand dynamics for social workers is critical for effective workforce planning. One of the chief indicators of supply and demand is wages, in that when supply is insufficient to meet demand, wages will rise.¹⁰ Supply is also forecast in part by projected attrition, which can be partially determined by the reported plans of workers to leave the profession.

- Of social workers working one full-time social work job only, 69% earn \$40,000 per year or more, and 25% earn \$60,000 or more per year.
- Sixty-seven percent of social workers report their salary as either adequate or very adequate.
- Social workers report similar levels of satisfaction with their benefits, with 65% describing their benefits as either adequate or very adequate.

10 MSWs and BSWs report different levels of satisfaction with their experiences in the labor market.

Full-time salaries differed by degree as did the perceptions of the adequacy of salary and benefits.

- Eighty-eight percent of MSWs earn \$40,000 a year or more, while 30% earn \$60,000 a year or more.
- Twenty-four percent of BSWs earn \$40,000 a year or more, while one percent earn \$60,000 a year or more.
- Compared to 69% of MSWs who reported that their salary was either adequate or very adequate, only 57% of BSWs reported that their salary was either adequate or very adequate.

Footnotes

- 1 Estimates of the number of social workers in the U.S. range from 840,000 self-reported social workers in the 2000 Current Population Survey (only 600,000 of whom have at least a bachelor's degree), to 450,000 employer-classified social work jobs reported to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, to the 300,000 social workers licensed by the 50 states and the District of Columbia, to the estimated 190,000 clinical social workers described by West et al. in *Mental Health, United States, 2000*.
- 2 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), <http://www.cswe.org>
- 3 Licensure lists were not available from Delaware and Hawaii.
- 4 Unless otherwise indicated, when referring to the survey respondents, the term "social workers" will be used to indicate active, licensed social workers.
- 5 NCES, 2000.
- 6 NCES, 2000.
- 7 *Civilian labor force*: All persons in the civilian noninstitutional population classified as either employed or unemployed. (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics).
- 8 Sullivan Commission, 2004
- 9 "Practice area" should be understood as social workers' self-reported primary or secondary practice areas. Responses of social workers indicating mental health or addictions as practice areas are included in the category Behavioral Health. Responses from social workers reporting child welfare/families, adolescents or school social work are included in the category Children and Families. Responses of social workers indicating health care or developmental disabilities are included in the category Health.
- 10 Barth, 2003.

A Note About the 2004 Licensed Social Worker Survey

This report contains preliminary data from this survey. As the survey was targeted to licensed social workers, it is only appropriate to generalize results from this study to licensed social workers, not all social workers. The final editing of the data to account for errors and corrections made by respondents in filling out the electronically scannable survey form is not yet completed. Subsequent reports displaying the same data may include slight variation in the exact numbers once the data editing process has been completed in the spring of 2005. Any significant variation in these numbers is not anticipated, however, and conclusions drawn from the data reflected in this report will not change.

References

- Barth, M. (2003). Social work labor market: A first look. *Social Work* , 48 (1), 9–19.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2000). Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS).
- Sullivan Commission (2004). Missing Persons: Minorities in the Health Professions. Sullivan Commission.