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), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The PRN II survey objectives were to develop broad knowledge about social workers’ practices, along with more specific knowledge about social workers who provide substance abuse treatment services. The focus of this update, however, will be the PRN II survey data relevant to social workers who provide mental health 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 multiple reminders via mail; stamped, self-addressed return envelopes; and 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

PRN II survey results provide NASW with important demographic data about its regular members residing in the U.S. The median age of the Association’s regular members is 50 years; 73 percent were born before 1960. A vast majority (87 percent) of regular members are Caucasian/white, five percent are African-American/black; seventy-nine percent are female; and seventy-four percent are married or in domestic partner relationships.

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 jurisdiction.

Fifty percent of members are involved in providing mental health services, while 37 percent reported this as their primary practice area.

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Experience and Professional Development

NASW members were asked questions about years of experience since receiving their first degree, the types of degrees they held, licensure, and training. The average number of years in social work is 16. 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, and only 14 percent reported having no experience in this area.

Virtually all of the Association’s regular members (98 percent) have a master’s degree, typically an MSW, and six percent reported holding a doctorate. A vast majority of regular members (92 percent) are licensed, and one-third of them (33 percent) also belong to other professional associations. Overall, 93 percent of regular members reported that they participated in some form of professional development activity during the previous 12 months. Regular NASW members reported that continuing education programs (85 percent) and colleagues (74 percent) were the two most important sources of professional development. While 82 percent of social workers reported using the Internet as part of their work, only 29 percent reported that the Internet was an important professional development resource. Fifty-four percent of respondents reported that they did not participate in any professional development activities in which at least one-quarter of the focus was on substance abuse. However, 13 percent reported receiving 10 or more hours of training in this area.

Employment Type and Setting

Half (50 percent) of the respondents currently employed in social work reported that mental health was their primary practice area. More than one-third (37 percent) reported that mental health was their primary practice area. While 15 percent of regular members reported being involved in addictions work, only three percent reported that this was their primary practice area. Four percent of social workers reported some involvement in employee assistance program work, although only one percent stated that this was their primary practice area.

NASW members were also asked about their primary roles within their practice areas. More than half (57 percent) cited clinical practice, 15 percent reported administration/management, and 10 percent stated case management as their primary roles. Respondents were asked to select (from a list of 20 options) the one that best describes their primary and secondary social work employment settings. Solo private practice was selected by 28 percent of 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.

Respondents 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 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 an impact on the amount of income. The median income for social workers with 25 or more years of experience was $60,000 in 2001, while 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 practices had the highest median incomes, at $65,500 and $58,300 respectively. The lowest median income by organization type was outpatient mental health—$43,600 in 2001. Social workers employed under the auspice of the federal government/military had the highest median income of $57,200, while those in private, for-profit entities had a median income of $56,700.

Discussion
One of the objectives of the PRN survey was to develop a broad knowledge about the practices of social workers. This study 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. Because of the sampling techniques and high response rate, this data can be generalized to the U.S. population of NASW members holding regular memberships. However, the results cannot be generalized to all social workers within the U.S., since NASW membership in the U.S. accounts for approximately one-third of the total number of employed social workers in this country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2002).

Nearly nine out of ten (86 percent) social workers have some experience during their careers providing mental health services across a variety of settings. Regular NASW members reported mental health as a primary practice area at rates three times higher than any other practice area. In addition, half (50 percent) of the social workers reported being involved with mental health services on some level. However, a combined total of 55 percent of social workers reported they were involved with solo or group private practice or outpatient mental health organizations. Social workers also reported working in other organizational settings (e.g., inpatient mental health, managed care organizations) that also involve mental health services. This may indicate that social workers are providing mental health services at higher rates than actually reported in this survey.

Social workers who identified mental health as their primary practice area earned an average of $52,500 per year in 2001 (the second highest amount), surpassed only by professionals in the category of addictions. However, the sample size for those social workers working in addictions is much smaller than those working in mental health, thus most likely affecting the results. Solo and group private practitioners had the
highest median incomes of $65,500 and $58,300 respectively. On the other hand, social workers in outpatient and inpatient mental health had median incomes of $43,600 and $47,200 respectively. The findings relating to those in group practice and inpatient mental health may also be affected by a small sample size.

This PRN survey was the second of the many studies needed to develop a clear understanding of the social work profession, and of 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 across these practice settings (e.g., private practice, outpatient mental health, social service agencies) in order to make a more comprehensive assessment of the profession. In addition, further research should be conducted exploring the types of services being provided to clients by social workers. It is anticipated that some of this information will be collected in greater depth in the next PRN survey, which will be administered during the current fiscal year.

References

Resources

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