

Fact Sheet 2010



SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS: A PORTRAIT

Basic Facts

- In 2009, there were nearly 2.34 million community and social service workers in the U.S. Of these, 697,000 were counselors; 725,000 were social workers; and 349,000 were other community and social service specialists.¹ By 2018, jobs in community and social service occupations are expected to grow by 16.5%, compared with a national rate of job growth of 10.1%.²
- “Counselors” includes educational, vocational, and school counselors, of which there were 665,500 in 2008; rehabilitation counselors (129,500); mental health counselors (113,300); substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors (86,100); and marriage and family therapists (27,300). Counselors work in schools, community centers, government agencies, and private practices, among other settings.³
- Social workers are broken down into three specializations: in 2008, there were 292,600 child, family, and school social workers; 138,700 medical and public health social workers; and 137,300 mental health and substance abuse social workers.⁴
- “Other community and social service specialists” include probation officers, health educators, and social and human services assistants.⁵ This last category includes a broad range of job titles, such as case management aide, social work assistant, community support worker, and life skills counselor. Unlike counselors and social workers, social service specialists typically do not hold advanced degrees, and have lower average earnings.⁶
- The workforce is aging. Licensed social workers are significantly older than the civilian labor force. Thirty-three percent of social workers are between the ages of 45 and 54, 24% are between 55 and 64, and 5% are 65 and older compared to the civilian labor force where 23% of workers are between 45 and 54, 11% are between 55 and 64, and 3% are 65 and older.⁷

Education & Salaries

- In 2008, median earnings for all counselors were \$40,082.⁸ Earnings ranged from \$30,930 for rehabilitation counselors, to \$51,050 for educational, vocational and school counselors.⁹ The top-paying employers were elementary and secondary schools and government positions, while residential care facilities and individual and family services typically pay the lowest.¹⁰
- The median annual earnings for social workers was \$42,402 in 2008, ranging from \$37,210 for mental health and substance abuse social workers, to \$46,650 for medical and public health social workers.¹¹ Government, school, and hospital positions are typically the best-paying jobs for all types of social workers, while individual and family services are the lowest-paying.¹²

- Social and human service assistants had a median annual salary in 2008 of \$27,280. Again, government positions typically had the highest salaries, with a median of \$35,510 for state government employees, while the lowest salaries were paid to those working in residential mental health and substance abuse facilities (median annual salary: \$23,580).¹³
- Salaries for social service workers tend to be significantly below those of similarly educated professionals. For instance, in 2008 the median annual salary for registered nurses was \$62,450, and for psychologists it was \$64,140. The typical special education teacher earns nearly 30% more than a school social worker.¹⁴
- All but one state requires counselors to be licensed, a process that typically requires a master's degree in counseling, extensive practical training and experience, and passage of a licensing exam, along with continuing education requirements.¹⁵
- Most states also require practicing social workers to be licensed, certified, or registered. This typically requires at minimum a bachelor's degree in social work; a master's is required to provide therapy and for more advanced clinical work. A Ph.D. or doctorate in social work (DSW) is useful for research and teaching positions. Currently, some 600,000 people in the U.S. hold social work degrees.¹⁶
- Among members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 91% hold an MSW as their highest degree. Six percent hold a Ph.D. or DSW, and 3% hold only a BSW.¹⁷
- Social and Human Service Assistants are not normally required to hold college degrees, although increasingly, employers are seeking individuals with advanced education or relevant work experience.¹⁸

Social Workers and Educational Debt

- Social workers are burdened with education debt due to the costs of their higher education and low salaries. An NASW survey found nearly 70% of social workers had incurred debt to finance their education. Of those in debt, 66% had one social work degree, 34% had more than one social work degree, and 7% did not yet have a social work degree.¹⁹ Almost half of survey participants (48%) described their debt load as unreasonable, while nearly a quarter (21%) described it as unmanageable.²⁰
- For social workers, education debt burdens ranged from less than \$5,000 to more than \$100,000. Fifty-two percent of respondents owed between \$10,000 and \$39,999, 31% owed between \$20,000 and \$39,999, 7% owed less than \$5,000, and 4% owed more than \$80,000 in education debt. Eighty-two percent of those without social work degrees had incurred some education debt and 41% owed between \$20,000 and \$39,000.²¹
- More than half of respondents (53%) who earned less than \$19,999 per year had educational debt that was greater than their annual salaries and 25% of them had debt more than twice their annual salaries. Thirty-three percent of respondents earning between \$20,000 and \$49,999 per year had educational debt more than their annual salaries and 11% had more than \$60,000 in debt. Of those earning between \$50,000 and \$79,999 per year, 27% had more than \$39,000 in debt and 11% had more than \$60,000 in debt.²²

Rapid Growth

- Between 2008 and 2018, mental health counselors, and medical and public health social workers, are expected to grow 24% and 22.4%, respectively. That amounts to increases of more than double the rate of national job growth.²³
- Jobs for social workers are expected to increase by 16.1% (103,400) by 2018. The overall growth rate for counselors is predicted to be 17.5% (116,800 jobs).²⁴
- For social service assistants, job growth is expected to be especially rapid: by 2018, the number of positions should increase by 22.6%, translating to an additional 79,400 jobs. This is more than twice the national rate of job growth.²⁵

Social Workers and Health Care Services

- The most commonly reported practice areas of licensed social workers are mental health (37%), child welfare/family (13%), health (13%), and aging (9%).²⁶
- Mental health social workers are most likely to be found in private practice (38%) or behavioral health clinics (20%); health social workers are most likely to be found in hospitals (56%); child welfare/family social workers are most likely to be found in social service agencies (60%); and social workers in aging are most likely to be found in nursing homes (29%).²⁷
- Today, clinically trained social workers provide most of our country's mental health services, administering 60% of care compared to 10% for psychiatrists, 23% for psychologists, and 5% for psychiatric nurses.²⁸
- As the baby-boom generation ages, gerontological social workers are increasingly important in helping families and seniors cope with problems, maintain well-being, and achieve greater quality of life.²⁹

Women, Minorities, and Social Service

- Women dominate the field of social services, constituting more than 80% of social workers, 70% of counselors, and 65% of miscellaneous community and social service specialists.³⁰ In contrast, women account for about 47.3% of the total labor force.³¹
- Despite their disproportionate representation, women social workers still earn less than men. One study found male social workers in Pennsylvania earning an estimated \$3,665 more per year than their female counterparts, even when controlling for variables such as experience and job role. Various other studies have also found an unexplained salary gap between male and female social workers of around 15%.³²
- The wage gap varies across social service occupations. For instance, in 2009 male counselors' median weekly earnings were nearly 6% more than female counselors; male social workers earned 10.4% more than female social workers; and among miscellaneous social service workers, men earned 17.7% more than women.³³
- The social service workforce is very diverse. In 2009, 34.3% of counselors and 34.6% of social workers were non-white, and among miscellaneous social service specialists, this figure was 39.6%.³⁴

Union Benefits

- A significant proportion of social service workers are union members. Among social workers, 24.5% were union members in 2009; 18.7% of counselors and 18.6% of other social service workers were union members.³⁵
- In 2009, social workers represented by unions earned 20.5% more than those without union representation. For counselors, this earnings differential was as high as 32%.³⁶ The 2009 median weekly earnings of all other community and social service workers was a whopping 22% higher for those represented by a union than for those who were not.³⁷
- Unions are also important in acting on social service workers' behalf, in cases where understaffing or insufficient safety and security precautions lead to an unsafe work environment.³⁸
- Unions, like American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are working nationally on social workers' behalf. AFT advocates strengthening Occupational Safety and Health protections (OSHA) to ensure social workers and other public employees have safe and healthful working environments, to reverse the trend of privatizing and contracting out public services and advocates for increased federal funding for public services.³⁹
- At the local level, unions are fighting to win workplace protections and case load reductions. For example, AFSCME Local 3547, Council 8 in **Ohio** has negotiated health and safety language in a contract covering child welfare workers which places a duty on the employer to maintain a safe working environment and subjects them to grievance procedures when hazards are not addressed. Also, AFSCME Council 81 in Delaware advocated on behalf of a successful piece of legislation which limits case loads for child welfare workers.⁴⁰

Burnout and Workplace Safety

- Social services occupations can be emotionally draining. This is due in part to the nature of the work (i.e., consistently dealing with very difficult situations), and relatively low wages combined with understaffing can add to the pressure and lead to high turnover.⁴¹
- The tension between responsibilities to clients, professional code of ethics and administrative requirements in many health care settings can negatively impact a social worker's mental and physical well being.⁴²
- Because social service workers often work with mentally and emotionally unstable people, dwindling services and reduced benefits, and working conditions such as understaffing, working alone, working late hours, social service workers are at risk for workplace violence. Like any other workplace hazard, it is the responsibility of the employer to take reasonable measures to minimize the likelihood of workplace violence. Social service workers need safety precautions, including proper levels of staffing, careful recording of incidents, and training in self-defense, along with technological precautions such as panic alarms, bullet-proof glass and camera monitors.⁴³
- According to an NASW survey, licensed social workers indicated that over the last two years they had experienced: increases in paperwork, increases in the severity of client problems, larger caseload sizes, longer waiting lists for services, assignment of non-social work tasks, increases in oversight, increased coordination with community agencies, and increased availability of professional training. Except for the latter two (which had the smallest gains), these increases can be characterized as barriers to effective practice.⁴⁴

- Forty-four percent of social workers reported facing personal safety issues on the job; yet only 70% reported that these safety issues were adequately addressed by their employer.⁴⁵
- NASW found that the most common work-related stressors for social workers were: inadequate time to complete their jobs (31%); heavy workloads (25%); salary not comparable to peers in other jobs (19%); overall inadequate compensation (16%); and challenging clients (16%).⁴⁶
- Work-related stress has profound effects on social worker’s physical and emotional health. An NASW survey found social workers in mental health, health, and child welfare/family fields reported feeling fatigue (65%, 70%, 65% respectively); psychological problems (38%, 36%, 37%); and sleep disorders (22%, 23%, 25%).⁴⁷
- Nearly five percent of licensed social workers in the NASW survey indicated that they planned to leave social work but continue to work, indicating some level of dissatisfaction with social work as a career. These social workers were disproportionately younger social workers with bachelor’s degrees in their first four years of practice who cited personal safety issues, low pay, work below their skill level, understaffing, and lack of support at their workplace as challenges to doing their job properly.⁴⁸

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 11, “Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity”, 2009 Averages.

² Lacey, T. Alan and Benjamin Wright. “Occupational Employment Projections to 2018”, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2009.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*.

⁶ *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, op. cit.

⁷ Whitaker, T., T. Weismiller, and E. Clark. *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce: A national study of licensed social workers, Executive summary*, Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers, 2006.

⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 39, op. cit.

⁹ *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, op. cit.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 39, op. cit. *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, op. cit.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, op. cit.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Practice Research Network, “Demographics”, PRN 2:2, 2003.

<https://www.socialworkers.org/naswprn/surveyTwo/Datagram2.pdf>

¹⁸ *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, op. cit.

¹⁹ Whitaker, T. *In the red: Social workers and educational debt*, NASW Membership, Workforce Study, Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers, 2008.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Lacey, T. Alan and Benjamin Wright. “Occupational Employment Projections to 2018”, op.cit.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

- ²⁶ Whitaker, T., T. Weismiller, and E. Clark. *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce*, op. cit.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ National Association of Social Workers, “Issue Fact Sheet: Mental Health”.
- ²⁹ National Association of Social Workers, “Issue Fact Sheet: Aging”.
- ³⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 11, op. cit.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Koeske, G. and W. Krowinski. “Gender-Based Salary Inequity in Social Work: Mediators of Gender’s Effect on Salary”, *Social Work*, Volume 49, Issue 2, pg. 309, April 2004.
- ³³ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 39, op. cit.
- ³⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 11, op. cit.
- ³⁵ BNA Plus, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book: Compilations from the Current Population Survey*, 2009 Edition, Table 8a.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Union Members Summary, 2010*, Table 4, January 22, 2010.
- ³⁸ “Workplace Violence Against Social Service Workers,” AFSCME.
- ³⁹ “Members, AFT looking forward to new leadership in the White House”, Public Employee Advocate, AFT, June/July 2008.
- ⁴⁰ “Double Jeopardy: Caseworkers at Risk helping At-Risk Kids”, AFSCME.
- ⁴¹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008–09 Edition*, April 2007.
- ⁴² Gregorian, Camille, MSW, LICSW. “A career in hospital social work: Do you have what it takes?”, *Social Work in Health Care*, Volume, 40, No. 3, 2005.
- ⁴³ “Workplace Violence Against Social Service Workers”, op. cit.
- ⁴⁴ Whitaker, T., T. Weismiller, and E. Clark. *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce*, op. cit.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Arrington, P. *Stress at work: How do social workers cope?*, NASW Membership, Workforce Study, Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers, 2008.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ Whitaker, T. T. Weismiller, and E. Clark. *Assuring the sufficiency of a frontline workforce*, op. cit.

For further information on professional workers, check out DPE’s Web site: www.dpeaflcio.org.

The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 23 AFL-CIO unions representing over four million people working in professional, technical and administrative support occupations. DPE-affiliated unions represent: teachers, college professors and school administrators; library workers; nurses, doctors and other health care professionals; engineers, scientists and IT workers; journalists and writers, broadcast technicians and communications specialists; performing and visual artists; professional athletes; professional firefighters; psychologists, social workers and many others. DPE was chartered by the AFL-CIO in 1977 in recognition of the rapidly-growing professional and technical occupations.

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