SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS: AN OCCUPATIONAL OVERVIEW

Social service workers provide front line support and social assistance for individuals, families, and communities in need. They work in a variety of settings, including mental health clinics, schools, community centers, hospitals, in private practice, and in domestic settings.

This fact sheet will outline general employment facts about social service workers including projected occupational growth, typical education requirements, salaries in social service occupations, union benefits for social service workers, diversity in social service work, and occupational challenges facing social service professionals.

Basic Employment Data

Community and social service work is a broad occupational category that includes health educators, mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists, probation officers and correctional treatment specialists, rehabilitation counselors, school and career counselors, social and human service assistants, social workers, and substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors. In May 2015, there were 1,972,140 community and social service workers in the U.S., up from 2013 when there were 1,902,000 workers in the field.¹

- Counseling is an essential social service for many individuals and families. Counselors work in schools, community centers, government agencies, and in private practice, among other settings.² In May 2015, there were 253,000 educational, guidance, school, and vocational counselors; 101,630 rehabilitation counselors; 128,200 mental health counselors; and 87,090 substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors employed in the U.S.³
- In May 2015, there were 294,080 child, family, and school social workers; 155,590 health care social workers, and 110,000 mental health and substance abuse social workers.⁴ Social workers may work in private practice, behavioral health clinics, hospitals, social service agencies, or nursing homes.
- Social service workers also work in administrative and program assistance, offender rehabilitation, and in personal and family therapy. In May 2015, there were 386,000 social and human service assistants; 91,700 probation officers and correctional treatment specialists; and 33,700 marriage and family therapists.⁵
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has predicted a 12 percent growth rate overall for social worker employment from 2014-2024, a higher than average rate in comparison to other occupations. They suggest that this will result from an increased demand for health care and health related services.⁶ However, estimates are unreliable and other studies suggest that unforeseeable economic events could curb job growth in this sector. Additionally, in the
event of economic hard times, social services are often amongst the first to see their budgets cut, even as demand increases.  

- Projections indicate that between 2014 and 2024, employment of healthcare social workers will grow by 19 percent, adding just fewer than 31,000 new positions. The BLS predicts that the aging baby boomer generation will drive demand for healthcare and associated services. Likewise, with more states sending drug offenders to treatment programs instead of jail, the BLS estimates that employment of mental health and substance abuse social workers will also grow by 19 percent between 2014 and 2024, adding 22,000 new positions.

**Education & Salaries**

Social service workers are generally well educated, but modestly compensated professionals. In most states, social service workers like counselors, social workers, and therapists must earn additional licenses through examinations and field experience.

- In the 2013-2014 school year, 33,483 students received a bachelor’s degree in public administration and social services, an increase of just fewer than 3,800 from the previous academic year. During the same academic year, 45,537 students received a master’s or doctoral degree in public administration and social services, an increase of over 16,000 from a decade earlier.
- Social workers are required to undergo extensive training and education to work in the field. Professional social workers must have a post-secondary degree in social work and complete supervised fieldwork before entering the workforce. More advanced clinical work, therapy, research, or teaching, all require a master’s or doctoral degree.
- States require that counselors be licensed, a process that typically requires a master’s degree in counseling, extensive practical training and experience, and passing a licensing exam. Counselors are also often required to take additional courses or professional development trainings once working in the field.
- Social and human service assistant occupations do not always require post-secondary degrees, although employers are increasingly seeking individuals with advanced education or relevant work experience.
- Salaries for social service workers tend to fall significantly below those of similarly educated professionals. For instance, in May 2015, the median annual salary for registered nurses was $67,490 and the median annual salary for physician assistants was $98,180, while professionals in community and social service occupations earned a median income of $42,010.
- For counselors, median earnings ranged from $34,390 for rehabilitation counselors to $53,660 for educational, guidance, school, and vocational counselors.
- In 2015, the median annual earnings for social workers ranged from $42,170 for mental health and substance abuse social workers to $50,380 for health care social workers. Government, school, and hospital positions are typically the best-paying jobs for all types of social workers, while individual and family services often have lower wages.
Social and human service assistants had a median annual salary of $30,830 in 2015. Government positions typically paid the highest salaries, with an estimated annual mean income of $40,510 for federal government employees, while those working in residential intellectual and developmental disability, mental health, and substance abuse facilities received one the lowest estimated annual mean salaries of $27,470.  

**Union Benefits**

Unions are important advocates for social workers where understaffing or insufficient safety and security precautions lead to unsafe work environments. For example, social workers for the City of Baltimore worked with their union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 800, to require the employer to meet with the union twice a year to discuss the workload of social workers. At the state level, unions fight abusive and anti-worker legislation that affects social workers. From Wisconsin to Ohio to Florida, unions work to defeat budget cuts, privatization schemes, and anti-collective bargaining measures.

- Social service workers have above average union membership. In 2015, 21 percent of social workers, 19.8 percent of counselors, and 17.5 percent of other community and social service specialists were union members.
- In 2015, counselors represented by unions reported mean weekly earnings that were 46 percent higher than those reported by non-union counselors. Social workers represented by unions made roughly 30 percent more than their non-union counterparts. The 2015 mean weekly earnings for other community and social service specialists averaged 30 percent higher for those represented by a union than for those who were not.
- Unions, like the AFT, work nationally on social workers’ behalf. The AFT advocates for strengthening occupational safety and health protections to ensure social workers and other public employees have safe working conditions; reversing privatization and contracting out of public services; and increasing federal, state, and local funding for public services.
Women, Minorities, and Social Service Work

- Most professionals in social service occupations are women, accounting for 83.8 percent of social workers, 71.4 percent of counselors, and 82.6 percent of social and human service assistants, even while women account for only 46.8 percent of the overall labor force.24
- Despite the disproportionate representation of women in the social service workforce, the median earnings of men are still higher in specific occupations. For example, in 2005, men working as counselors reported median weekly earnings that were 16.6 percent more than women’s earnings in the same field. By 2011, the median weekly earnings of men working as counselors dropped to 13 percent more than their female counterparts. In 2015, the gap diminished even more with male counselors’ median weekly earnings only .6 percent more than women’s earnings. The gender wage gap has also decreased in other social service occupations. In 2005, male social workers earned over 14 percent more than female social workers, however this dropped to 8.5 percent more in 2015.25 The cause of these changes is difficult to determine, and aggregate numbers do not suggest parity within a given organization.
- Additionally, the social service workforce is racially diverse. In 2015, 18.4 percent of counselors, 22 percent of social workers, and 21.2 percent of social and human service assistants were Black or African-American. That same year, 9.5 percent of counselors, 12.5 percent of social workers, and 16 percent of social and human service assistants were Hispanic or Latino.26
- In comparison, Black professionals represent 9.2 percent of the professional workforce and Hispanic professionals only 9.1 percent. Hispanic workers represented 16.4 percent of the total labor force in 2015, and Black workers represented 11.7 percent.27

Challenges for Professionals in the Social Service Occupations

Social service workers face numerous challenges related to their chosen occupations. High student debt coupled with the relatively low salaries of social service workers creates a long-term burden on many professionals. Additionally, social service workers must frequently work in high-stress environments and often struggle with workplace safety. The recent recession made working conditions for social service workers even more precarious as federal, state, and local government budget cuts threaten job security even as public need for social services continued to rise.

- The high cost of post-secondary education paired with the relatively low salaries for social work in general, means many of these professionals have large education debts. In 2011, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) reported the average debt for students with bachelor’s degrees in social work was $27,334. Unsurprisingly, the burden was even larger for advanced degrees, with master’s graduates in social work reporting an average of $40,161 in education debt and those with a doctorate of social work averaging $40,000.28
- Social services occupations can be emotionally draining. The high-pressure nature of the work, and relatively low wages combined with understaffing can lead to high turnover among social service professionals.29
Because social service workers often work with mentally and emotionally unstable people, they risk higher incidents of workplace violence. Dwindling services and reduced benefits, and working conditions such as understaffing, working alone, and working late hours, exacerbate this risk.  

A 2007 survey of social workers’ personal safety concerns while in the field found that the most common incidences were violence from adult clients (41 percent), followed by vandalism of their vehicles (35 percent) and car accidents during work-related travel (34 percent).

In another survey NASW found that the most common work-related stressors for social workers were: inadequate time to complete their jobs (31 percent); heavy workloads (25 percent); salary not comparable to peers in other jobs (19 percent); overall inadequate compensation (16 percent); and challenging clients (16 percent).

The Administration for Children and Families reports that some jurisdictions face turnover of frontline workers, i.e. those providing direct support services, as high as 90 percent a year. This high rate means those jurisdictions suffer a consistent loss of institutional knowledge, possibly at the expense of high quality service.

For more information on professional and technical workers, check DPE’s website: www.dpeaflcio.org.

The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 24 national unions representing over four million people working in professional and technical occupations. DPE’s affiliates represent teachers, physicians, engineers, computer scientists, psychologists, nurses, university professors, actors, technicians, and others in more than 200 professional occupations.

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http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes210000.htm

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.


22 Ibid.

23 “AFT Public Employees.” American Federation of Teachers, 2012. Retrieved from


Ibid.


