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## Social Workers

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### Significant Points

- Employment is projected to grow much faster than average.
- About 5 out of 10 jobs were in health care and social assistance industries and 3 in 10 work for State and local government agencies.
- While a bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement, a master's degree in social work or a related field has become the standard for many positions.
- Competition for jobs is expected in cities, but opportunities should be good in rural areas.

### Nature of the Work

Social work is a profession for those with a strong desire to help improve people's lives. Social workers assist people by helping them cope with issues in their everyday lives, deal with their relationships, and solve personal and family problems. Some social workers help clients who face a disability or a life-threatening disease or a social problem, such as inadequate housing, unemployment, or substance abuse. Social workers also assist families that have serious domestic conflicts, sometimes involving child or spousal abuse. Some social workers conduct research, advocate for improved services, engage in systems design or are involved in planning or policy development. Many social workers specialize in serving a particular population or working in a specific setting.

*Child, family, and school social workers* provide social services and assistance to improve the social and psychological functioning of children and their families and to maximize the well-being of families and the academic functioning of children. They may assist single parents, arrange adoptions, or help find foster homes for neglected, abandoned, or abused children. Some specialize in services for senior citizens. These social workers may run support groups for the children of aging parents; advise elderly people or family members about housing, transportation, long-term care, and other services; and coordinate and monitor these services. Through employee assistance programs, social workers may help people cope with job-related pressures or with personal problems that affect the quality of their work.

In schools, social workers often serve as the link between students' families and the school, working with parents, guardians, teachers, and other school officials to ensure students reach their academic and personal potential. In addition, they address problems such as misbehavior, truancy, and teenage pregnancy and advise teachers on how to cope with difficult students. Increasingly, school social workers teach workshops to entire classes.

Child, family, and school social workers may also be known as child welfare social workers, family services social workers, child protective services social workers, occupational social workers, or gerontology social workers. They often work for

individual and family services agencies, schools, or State or local governments.

*Medical and public health social workers* provide psychosocial support to people, families, or vulnerable populations so they can cope with chronic, acute, or terminal illnesses, such as Alzheimer's disease, cancer, or AIDS. They also advise family caregivers, counsel patients, and help plan for patients' needs after discharge from hospitals. They may arrange for at-home services, such as meals-on-wheels or home care. Some work on interdisciplinary teams that evaluate certain kinds of patients—geriatric or organ transplant patients, for example. Medical and public health social workers may work for hospitals, nursing and personal care facilities, individual and family services agencies, or local governments.

*Mental health and substance abuse social workers* assess and treat individuals with mental illness or substance abuse problems, including abuse of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Such services include individual and group therapy, outreach, crisis intervention, social rehabilitation, and teaching skills needed for everyday living. They also may help plan for supportive services to ease clients' return to the community. Mental health and substance abuse social workers are likely to work in hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers, individual and family services agencies, or local governments. These social workers may be known as clinical social workers. (Counselors and psychologists, who may provide similar services, are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Other types of social workers include social work administrators, planners and policymakers, who develop and implement programs to address issues such as child abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty, and violence. These workers research and analyze policies, programs, and regulations. They identify social problems and suggest legislative and other solutions. They may help raise funds or write grants to support these programs.

**Work environment.** Social workers usually spend most of their time in an office or residential facility, but they also may travel locally to visit clients, meet with service providers, or attend meetings. Some may meet with clients in one of several offices within a local area. Social work, while satisfying, can be challenging. Understaffing and large caseloads add to the pressure in some agencies. To tend to patient care or client needs, many hospitals and long-term care facilities employ



*Social workers help clients with problems such as unemployment, life-threatening illnesses, or substance abuse.*

social workers on teams with a broad mix of occupations, including clinical specialists, registered nurses, and health aides. Full-time social workers usually work a standard 40-hour week, but some occasionally work evenings and weekends to meet with clients, attend community meetings, and handle emergencies. Some work part time, particularly in voluntary nonprofit agencies.

**Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

A bachelor’s degree is the minimum requirement for entry into the occupation, but many positions require an advanced degree. All States and the District of Columbia have some licensure, certification, or registration requirement, but the regulations vary.

**Education and training.** A bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) is the most common minimum requirement to qualify for a job as a social worker; however, majors in psychology, sociology, and related fields may qualify for some entry-level jobs, especially in small community agencies. Although a bachelor’s degree is sufficient for entry into the field, an advanced degree has become the standard for many positions. A master’s degree in social work (MSW) is typically required for positions in health settings and is required for clinical work as well. Some jobs in public and private agencies also may require an advanced degree, such as a master’s degree in social services policy or administration. Supervisory, administrative, and staff training positions usually require an advanced degree. College and university teaching positions and most research appointments normally require a doctorate in social work (DSW or Ph.D.).

As of 2006, the Council on Social Work Education accredited 458 bachelor’s programs and 181 master’s programs. The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education listed 74 doctoral programs in social work (DSW or Ph.D.) in the United States. Bachelor’s degree programs prepare graduates for direct service positions, such as caseworker, and include courses in social work values and ethics, dealing with a culturally diverse clientele and at-risk populations, promotion of social and economic justice, human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, social work practice, social research methods, and field education. Accredited programs require a minimum of 400 hours of supervised field experience.

Master’s degree programs prepare graduates for work in their chosen field of concentration and continue to develop the skills required to perform clinical assessments, manage large caseloads, take on supervisory roles, and explore new ways of drawing upon social services to meet the needs of clients. Master’s programs last 2 years and include a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field instruction or internship. A part-time program may take 4 years. Entry into a master’s program does not require a bachelor’s degree in social work, but courses in psychology, biology, sociology, economics, political science, and social work are recommended. In addition, a second language can be very helpful. Most master’s programs offer advanced standing for those with a bachelor’s degree from an accredited social work program.

**Licensure.** All States and the District of Columbia have licensing, certification, or registration requirements regarding so-

cial work practice and the use of professional titles. Although standards for licensing vary by State, a growing number of States are placing greater emphasis on communications skills, professional ethics, and sensitivity to cultural diversity issues. Most States require 2 years (3,000 hours) of supervised clinical experience for licensure of clinical social workers.

**Other qualifications.** Social workers should be emotionally mature, objective, and sensitive to people and their problems. They must be able to handle responsibility, work independently, and maintain good working relationships with clients and co-workers. Volunteer or paid jobs as a social work aide can help people test their interest in this field.

**Certification and advancement.** The National Association of Social Workers offers voluntary credentials. Social workers with a master’s degree in social work may be eligible for the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW), the Qualified Clinical Social Worker (QCSW), or the Diplomate in Clinical Social Work (DCSW) credential, based on their professional experience. Credentials are particularly important for those in private practice; some health insurance providers require social workers to have them in order to be reimbursed for services.

Advancement to supervisor, program manager, assistant director, or executive director of a social service agency or department usually requires an advanced degree and related work experience. Other career options for social workers include teaching, research, and consulting. Some of these workers also help formulate government policies by analyzing and advocating policy positions in government agencies, in research institutions, and on legislators’ staffs.

Some social workers go into private practice. Most private practitioners are clinical social workers who provide psychotherapy, usually paid for through health insurance or by the client themselves. Private practitioners must have at least a master’s degree and a period of supervised work experience. A network of contacts for referrals also is essential. Many private practitioners split their time between working for an agency or hospital and working in their private practice. They may continue to hold a position at a hospital or agency in order to receive health and life insurance.

**Employment**

Social workers held about 595,000 jobs in 2006. About 5 out of 10 jobs were in health care and social assistance industries and 3 out of 10 are employed by State and local government agencies. Although most social workers are employed in cities or suburbs, some work in rural areas. Employment by type of social worker in 2006, follows:

|                                                       |         |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Child, family, and school social workers .....        | 282,000 |
| Medical and public health social workers.....         | 124,000 |
| Mental health and substance abuse social workers..... | 122,000 |
| Social workers, all other.....                        | 66,000  |

**Job Outlook**

Employment for social workers is expected grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2016. Job prospects are expected to be favorable, particularly for social work-

### Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

| Occupational Title                                    | SOC Code | Employment, 2006 | Projected employment, 2016 | Change, 2006-2016 |         |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|---------|
|                                                       |          |                  |                            | Number            | Percent |
| Social workers.....                                   | 21-1020  | 595,000          | 727,000                    | 132,000           | 22      |
| Child, family, and school social workers .....        | 21-1021  | 282,000          | 336,000                    | 54,000            | 19      |
| Medical and public health social workers.....         | 21-1022  | 124,000          | 154,000                    | 30,000            | 24      |
| Mental health and substance abuse social workers..... | 21-1023  | 122,000          | 159,000                    | 37,000            | 30      |
| Social workers, all other.....                        | 21-1029  | 66,000           | 78,000                     | 12,000            | 18      |

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

ers who specialize in the aging population or work in rural areas.

**Employment change.** Employment of social workers is expected to increase by 22 percent during the 2006-16 decade, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. The growing elderly population and the aging baby boom generation will create greater demand for health and social services, resulting in rapid job growth among gerontology social workers. Employment of social workers in private social service agencies also will increase. However, agencies increasingly will restructure services and hire more social and human service assistants, who are paid less, instead of social workers. Employment in State and local government agencies may grow somewhat in response to growing needs for public welfare, family services, and child protective services, but many of these services will be contracted out to private agencies. Employment levels in public and private social services agencies may fluctuate, depending on need and government funding levels.

Opportunities for social workers in private practice will expand, but growth may be somewhat hindered by restrictions that managed care organizations put on mental health services. The growing popularity of employee assistance programs is expected to spur demand for private practitioners, some of whom provide social work services to corporations on a contractual basis. However, the popularity of employee assistance programs will fluctuate with the business cycle because businesses are not likely to offer these services during recessions.

Employment of child, family and school social workers is expected to grow by 19 percent, which is faster than the average for all occupations. One of the major contributing factors is the rise in the elderly population. Social workers, particularly family social workers, will be needed to assist in finding the best care for the aging and to support their families. Furthermore, demand for school social workers will increase and lead to more jobs as efforts are expanded to respond to rising student enrollments as well as the continued emphasis on integrating disabled children into the general school population. There could be competition for school social work jobs in some areas because of the limited number of openings. The availability of Federal, State, and local funding will be a major factor in determining the actual job growth in schools. The demand for child and family social workers may also be tied to the availability of government funding.

Mental health and substance abuse social workers will grow by 29 percent, which is much faster than the average, over the 2006-16 decade. In particular, social workers specializing in substance abuse will experience strong demand. Substance

abusers are increasingly being placed into treatment programs instead of being sentenced to prison. Also, growing numbers of the substance abusers sentenced to prison or probation are, increasingly being required by correctional systems to have substance abuse treatment added as a condition to their sentence or probation. As this trend grows, demand will strengthen for treatment programs and social workers to assist abusers on the road to recovery.

Growth of medical and public health social workers is expected to be 24 percent, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. Hospitals continue to limit the length of patient stays, so the demand for social workers in hospitals will grow more slowly than in other areas. But hospitals are releasing patients earlier than in the past, so social worker employment in home health care services is growing. However, the expanding senior population is an even larger factor. Employment opportunities for social workers with backgrounds in gerontology should be good in the growing numbers of assisted-living and senior-living communities. The expanding senior population also will spur demand for social workers in nursing homes, long-term care facilities, and hospices. However, in these settings other types of workers are often being given tasks that were previously done by social workers.

**Job prospects.** Job prospects are generally expected to be favorable. Many job openings will stem from growth and the need to replace social workers who leave the occupation. However, competition for social worker jobs is expected in cities, where training programs for social workers are prevalent. Opportunities should be good in rural areas, which often find it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. By specialty, job prospects may be best for those social workers with a background in gerontology and substance abuse treatment.

### Earnings

Median annual earnings of child, family, and school social workers were \$37,480 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$29,590 and \$49,060. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$24,480, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$62,530. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of child, family, and school social workers in May 2006 were:

|                                         |          |
|-----------------------------------------|----------|
| Elementary and secondary schools .....  | \$48,360 |
| Local government .....                  | 43,500   |
| State government.....                   | 39,000   |
| Individual and family services .....    | 32,680   |
| Other residential care facilities ..... | 32,590   |

Median annual earnings of medical and public health social workers were \$43,040 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$34,110 and \$53,740. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$27,280, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$64,070. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of medical and public health social workers in May 2006 were:

|                                             |          |
|---------------------------------------------|----------|
| General medical and surgical hospitals..... | \$48,420 |
| Home health care services .....             | 44,470   |
| Local government .....                      | 41,590   |
| Nursing care facilities .....               | 38,550   |
| Individual and family services .....        | 35,510   |

Median annual earnings of mental health and substance abuse social workers were \$35,410 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$27,940 and \$45,720. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$22,490, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$57,630. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of mental health and substance abuse social workers in May 2006 were:

|                                                                                      |          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Local government .....                                                               | \$39,550 |
| Psychiatric and substance abuse hospitals .....                                      | 39,240   |
| Individual and family services .....                                                 | 34,920   |
| Residential mental retardation,<br>mental health and substance abuse facilities..... | 30,590   |
| Outpatient mental health and substance abuse centers .....                           | 34,290   |

Median annual earnings of social workers, all other were \$43,580 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$32,530 and \$56,420. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$25,540, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$68,500.

Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of social workers, all other in May 2006 were:

|                                      |          |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Local government .....               | \$46,330 |
| State government.....                | 45,070   |
| Individual and family services ..... | 35,150   |

About 20 percent of social workers are members of a union. Many belong to the union that represents workers in other occupations at their place of employment.

**Related Occupations**

Through direct counseling or referral to other services, social workers help people solve a range of personal problems. Workers in occupations with similar duties include the clergy, counselors, probation officers and correctional treatment specialists, psychologists, and social and human services assistants.

**Sources of Additional Information**

For information about career opportunities in social work and voluntary credentials for social workers, contact:

- National Association of Social Workers, 750 First St.N.E., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241.

Internet: <http://www.socialworkers.org>

For a listing of accredited social work programs, contact:

- Council on Social Work Education, 1725 Duke St., Suite 500, Alexandria, VA 22314-3457. Internet: <http://www.cswe.org>

Information on licensing requirements and testing procedures for each State may be obtained from State licensing authorities, or from:

- Association of Social Work Boards, 400 South Ridge Pkwy., Suite B, Culpeper, VA 22701. Internet: <http://www.aswb.org>