



Find Your Way in Social Work:

*A Job Market to
Match Growing Need*

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UNDERSTANDING THE FIELD

An Evolving Definition

Since before it had a name, social work has been a practice, touching the lives of individuals in need and helping at-risk communities attain health, stability, and justice. But how do we define a field active in so many locations and contexts and across such a wide range of issues and vulnerabilities?

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) have long determined the global definitions of social work. An evolving understanding of the daily challenges individuals and communities face has led to the most recent definition, established in 2014.

How has the definition changed since 1957, when the IFSW and IASSW first sat down to delineate the field's scope? Rather than using "specialized knowledge" to impose answers on those struggling (as social workers had been said to do in the past),² today's social workers guide people to their own answers, using "indigenous knowledges" and working theories to empower clients to change their lives and environments.

In short, no longer is there a stark duality between the expert social worker and non-expert client. Today they work together with mutual respect toward sustainable solutions grounded in human rights and social justice. At its core, social work incorporates an enduring commitment to helping people.

What is social work?

It "promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people" with principles of "social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities." Social work "engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing."¹

¹["Global Definition of Social Work," IFSW, July 2014](#)

²["What Is Social Work?", Rory Truell, The Guardian, July 7, 2014](#)

Who Becomes a Social Worker?

The field attracts a variety of dedicated people from different backgrounds. However, many of them share an experience: They've suffered hardship or trauma themselves and want to help others in similar situations.

Some drawn to the field want to work with a specific population—whether their own, one they've become familiar with in their community, or one whose plight they can't ignore. Others yearn simply to help people and make a difference in the world.

As they fight some of the gravest injustices society faces—including poverty, substance abuse, climate emergencies, hunger, PTSD, and unfair working conditions—misconceptions about the nature of their work continue to circulate.

Contrary to popular belief, social work is not synonymous with Child Protective Services. It's not all low-paying, either. With the right education and credentials, social workers can climb career ladders with the same fervor as corporate workers, going on to command high salaries and influential jobs directing organizations. As understanding of and respect for the field grow, so too do social workers' earning power and career opportunities.



Source: [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

A Field Perpetually in Demand

As long as there is suffering, there will be a demand for social workers. But while no place in the world is without populations in need, each region has its own unique vulnerabilities. Educated professionals trained in all the nuances of treating distress—aware of what works, what doesn't, and how communities respond to different methodologies—can have the greatest impact.

And the field is growing. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment of social workers to grow 15 percent from 2016 to 2026—faster than the average of all professions.³

Employment projections data for social workers, 2016–2026

| Occupational Title | Employment 2016 | Projected Employment 2026 | Change, 2016–26 | |
|--|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| | | | Percent | Numeric |
| Social workers | 682,100 | 784,200 | 15 | 102,100 |
| Child, family, and school social workers | 317,600 | 359,700 | 13 | 42,100 |
| Health care social workers | 176,500 | 209,300 | 19 | 32,700 |
| Mental health and substance abuse social workers | 123,900 | 146,100 | 18 | 22,200 |
| Social workers, all other | 64,000 | 69,000 | 8 | 5,000 |

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections

During a time of growing awareness and anxiety about political, social, and environmental matters—and increased visibility of mental health issues—the need for social workers is at an all-time high. Individuals, particularly in the U.S., are now more than ever seeking help to cope with their own stresses and the mounting injustices of the world around them.

But of course, there is more to social work than therapy. A social worker's job title typically falls under clinical or community work—and sometimes, a combination of the two.

³ ["Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2016–2017 Edition: Social Workers," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, October 24, 2017](#)

TYPES OF SOCIAL WORK

Having a Personal Impact: Clinical Social Workers

Constituting the largest group of mental health providers, clinical social workers keep it personal. Whether their client is an individual, couple, family, or small group, it's their job to help prevent and treat mental health issues.

Although all clinical social workers share a foundational knowledge of biology, psychology, and social development, many specialize in certain behavioral issues and disorders. These include excessive anger, addiction, and learning disabilities, just to name a few.

Clinical social workers enjoy careers in:

- ◆ Clinics
- ◆ Hospitals
- ◆ Rehabilitation centers
- ◆ Hospice care
- ◆ Social service agencies

Extending Their Influence: Community Social Workers

Community social workers' scope extends beyond helping individuals to having an impact at the community level. They assess situations within certain areas—particularly those affecting marginalized populations—and recommend improvements that increase stability within the community's means.

Because access to education, housing, and health care facilities translates to healthier mentalities and overall wellness, these social workers play an important role in shaping communities where people can thrive.

They succeed in such settings as:

- ◆ Research facilities
- ◆ Nonprofits
- ◆ Public policy
- ◆ Public health

Combining Approaches: Integrated Social Workers

What do you get when you combine aspects of both clinical and community training?

An integrated social worker.

Integrated social workers address someone's needs by taking both personal and social situations into account, bringing a well-rounded perspective to careers that require both micro and macro approaches. For example, a child with a criminal offense presents a situation where a social worker may have to investigate the child's personal living situation, as well as the opportunities—or lack thereof—within the community.

Integrated social workers are employed in:

- ◆ Schools
- ◆ Community organizations
- ◆ Social and community service centers
- ◆ Health education facilities
- ◆ Public policy

15%

How much employment of social workers is projected to grow between 2016 and 2026—much faster than the average of all professions. Employment of health care social workers is projected to grow **19 percent** in the same time span.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

WHAT SOCIAL WORKERS DO

Leaving Their Mark

Simply put, social workers help people. Whether a patient is a veteran, or a community consists of victims of abuse, social workers help them take steps toward meaningful outcomes.

Because they witness firsthand the struggles of individuals and communities, social workers also bear the responsibility of advocating on behalf of underserved populations. Many municipal leaders don't have a background in social work, so they don't often consider the health implications—particularly mental health implications—of the mandates they propose. That's where social workers come in; they can advise local leaders on the nuances of the issues and the necessary care.

Putting a Range of Skills to Use

Depending on their situations, patients have an array of needs—which allows social workers to tap into a variety of skills. Whether a professional works best in administrative roles, one-on-one counseling, or even forensic social work, there are plenty of ways to contribute to people’s wellbeing. Students pursuing social work can choose a specialization that further prepares them for a career in which they channel their skills for the greater good.

Evolving Roles

Because external factors like legislation and the economy affect how people lead their lives, the roles that social workers play are always changing as well. For example, an influx of refugees in certain communities may mean those communities need more social workers. Or if a devastating storm hits part of the country, social workers may need to assist families who suffer significant losses. Responding to these shifting needs means that social workers will always have opportunities to learn and grow.

Regardless of job title, all social workers share a goal: Make the world a better place.

LICENSING

The Basics

What gives social workers a leg up in this dynamic landscape? Credentials. Debate remains over whether obtaining licensure is necessary for a rewarding and successful career, but it’s a powerful step in proving commitment to ethical practice and the profession overall.

Licensing was established for a reason: so states can protect residents. They do this by requiring social workers follow a code of ethics and ensuring competence and proper training. But every state has a different notion of ethics and therefore different licensing requirements. It’s easy to find the requirements for each state, but because they vary so widely, transferring licenses from one to state to another can be difficult.⁴

⁴[Social Work License Map](#)

To License or Not?

The decision to get licensed should be based on each social worker's career path. Clinical social workers, for example, are required to obtain an LCSW. And some employers—like government agencies and nonprofits—may require a license even if the position requires no clinical application. Meanwhile, those pursuing community social work often learn everything they need in their MSW program.

Many choose to get licensed regardless. While some may say it creates a false sense of security—arguing that credentials don't necessarily hold professionals to standards of care without program evaluations, transparency, and accountability—colleagues and clients alike see it as a mark of trustworthiness.

Licensing keeps social workers ahead of profession-wide developments through required continuing education. It helps them access opportunities to present research, author articles, mentor others, and increase their earning potential.

The most common levels of licensure:

- ◆ LBSW: Licensed Bachelor Social Worker
- ◆ LCSW: Licensed Clinical Social Worker
- ◆ LMSW: Licensed Master Social Worker
- ◆ LMSW-AG: Licensed Master Social Worker-Advanced Generalist

CAREERS AND SALARY

Earning Potential

Most don't enter social work for the compensation alone. However, they don't need to expect low wages either.

Like licensing, social work salaries vary from state to state and by specialization. Studies show that acquiring an MSW can increase one's earning potential by an average of \$15,000 per year versus holding just an undergraduate degree.⁵

And as with most other careers, salary potential depends on a few consistent factors: level of education, level of licensure, years of experience, region of the country, and gender.⁶ Yes, the gender wage gap exists in social work, too, even though 82 percent of social workers are women.⁷

⁵ ["Is It Worth It to Get a Masters in Social Work?"](#), Social Work Degree Guide

⁶ ["Social Work Salaries and Hiring Outlook,"](#) Social Work Guide

⁷ ["Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,"](#) Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 8, 2017

Looking Ahead: A Field of Possibilities

As social work transforms with the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, the field continues to grow—both in terms of the number of potential career paths and types of opportunities it offers. Today’s social workers seeking advanced degrees and meaningful careers have an array of options that allows them to improve the lives of individuals, families, underserved populations, and entire communities in a variety of ways. And given the swelling job prospects, the future continues to be promising for those who dedicate their lives to this dynamic, rewarding field.

A Smart Investment: What Social Workers Earn

As of May 2016...

The median annual wage for social workers is **\$46,890** (up **\$4,410** since 2010)

The **TOP 10%** of social workers earn **\$78,510** or more

Median annual wage by role:

- ◆ Health care: **\$53,760**
- ◆ Child, family, and school: **\$43,250**
- ◆ Mental health and substance abuse: **\$42,700**
- ◆ All others: **\$60,230**

Median annual wage by setting:

- ◆ Hospitals (state, local, and private): **\$57,650**
- ◆ State and local government (excluding education and hospitals): **\$48,100**
- ◆ Ambulatory health care services: **\$47,130**
- ◆ Nursing and residential care facilities: **\$41,080**
- ◆ Individual and family services: **\$39,260**

Sources: [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), [Social Work License Map](#)