



The Crucial Role of Social Workers in Supporting Individuals and Families

For more than a century, social workers have been pivotal in supporting individuals and families in the United States. Their understanding of the impact of social determinants of health dates back to 1889 when Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr opened Hull House to address the challenges posed by modern living conditions (Trattner, 1984).

Today, we recognize that social determinants, alongside physical and behavioral factors, contribute to up to 80% of health outcomes (Ross and de Saxe Zerden, 2020). The broad perspectives inherent in social work can help achieve both cost containment and population health (Steketee et al., 2017).

Modern social workers bring these perspectives, along with unique assessment and intervention skills and an

advanced understanding of the interplay between individual, family, community, and environmental factors, to various settings. These include hospitals, behavioral health care clinics, nursing homes, Veterans Affairs hospitals, schools, child welfare agencies, law enforcement agencies, government offices, correctional institutions, and private practice settings.

Social workers use their skills to:

- › Rebuild lives after disasters
- › Treat individuals with substance use and mental health disorders
- › Support veterans with PTSD
- › Protect children from abuse and neglect
- › Comfort individuals and families coping with end-of-life care
- › Promote resilience and empowerment of older adults and individuals with disabilities
- › Support caregivers
- › Advocate for policies that enhance health and well-being
- › Foster excellence and innovation in the field

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers were on the frontlines, helping individuals and families cope with loss and continue to support those hardest hit by the pandemic. Their role is more critical than ever as the nation faces multiple crises.

The public also recognizes the value of social workers. A nationwide survey done by Ipsos in 2023 found that 81 percent of Americans who interacted with social workers said members improved their situation or that of a spouse, child, sibling or parent.

Consider the following statistics:

- › About 59 million adults experienced mental illness in the past year (NIMH).
- › More than 107,000 drug overdose deaths occurred in the United States in 2023 (CDC).
- › In 2021, more than 48,800 Americans died from gun-related injuries (CDC).
- › More than 100,000 children attended a school where a shooting occurred in 2018 and 2019 (Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research).

- › An average of 24 people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States – more than 12 million women and men annually (National Domestic Violence Hotline).

Despite these pressing needs, there are only about 700,000 social workers in the United States, leading to a significant shortage. In 2016, Lin et al. estimated a shortage of more than 195,000 social workers by 2022, a figure exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, up to 160 million Americans live in areas with mental health professional shortages (Counts, 2023).

Social workers often receive lower salaries than other professionals with Master's degrees, are reimbursed at lower rates than medical providers, and face significant student debt, which can drive them out of the profession. They also experience high rates of trauma and burnout – the PTSD rate among social workers was reported to be over three times higher than that of combat-exposed military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq (Holmes et al., 2021). These factors contribute to dangerous shortages in the field at a time when social work services are needed the most.

The public agrees that social workers should get more support. More than half of respondents to the Ipsos public opinion survey said social workers deserve higher pay and 84 percent said Congress should pass legislation to improve workplace safety for social workers.

Addressing these challenges is imperative to ensure that social workers can continue their vital work in supporting and improving the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities across the nation.



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About NASW

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world. NASW works to enhance the professional growth and development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards for social workers, and to advance sound social policies.