2024 SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE STUDY SERIES

FIRST REPORT

THE SELF-IDENTIFIED SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE

ANALYSES OF THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU'S HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS

Submitted to
THE ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORK BOARDS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the first part of the 2024 Social Work Workforce Study series, this study was intended to fulfill the following four goals. First, it aimed to identify critical gaps in our knowledge of the social work workforce to highlight some of the major topics that this workforce study should explore. Second, it presents findings from **the analysis of data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau's household surveys — the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS)** — and social work regulatory boards. This analysis shows that the existing data sources cannot provide accurate profiles of professional social workers (i.e., those with a social work degree and licenses), thereby justifying a national workforce survey. Third, this study aimed to generate basic national estimates about the social work workforce, defined as **self-identified social workers who may or may not hold social work credentials such as a degree or a license.** The estimation was to validate data from the recent 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey and to assess the overall size and composition of the licensed and nonlicensed workforce analyzed in the second and third reports of this series. Finally, in the absence of any literature and national estimates on the nonlicensed social work workforce, this study aimed to produce findings that contextualize a sample of nonlicensed social workers. The sample was drawn from the 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey, which was part of the 2024 Social Work Census conducted by the Association of Social Work Boards with the leading social work organizations that formed the Social Work Workforce Coalition, as examined in the third report in the series. To do that, it used **occupational license data from CPS** to estimate the self-identified social workers' license status. Below are the key takeaways from this report.

1. What was the estimated size of the self-identified social work workforce? How was it composed in terms of education level and license status?

- The estimated number of self-identified social workers varied by data source and year: 731,405 according to the 2018–2022 American Community Survey (ACS) and 790,080 according to the 2023–2024 Current Population Survey–Basic Monthly Survey (CPS–BMS).
- The self-identified social work workforce consisted of 6–8% without a college degree, 45–47% with a bachelor's degree, and 45-49% with a master's degree. Nearly 80% of bachelor's-level social workers did not hold a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree.
- Approximately 41% of all self-identified social workers were estimated to be licensed, including

21% of bachelor's-level and 63% of master's-level social workers.

- Nearly 70% of self-identified licensed social workers were master's-level social workers. The majority (63%) of self-identified nonlicensed social workers were bachelor's-level social workers.

2. What was the composition of the self-identified licensed workforce in terms of education level and license categories?

- The educational composition of the licensed social work workforce differed depending on the data source. According to the regulatory boards' data, the licensed workforce roughly consisted of 0.8% social workers without a social work degree, 7.47% holding a BSW, and almost 92% holding an MSW. Approximately 67% of MSW holders were clinical social workers.
- In contrast, the estimates from the CPS data indicated that the self-identified licensed workforce was comprised of about 70% master's-level social workers, 24.46% bachelor's-level social workers, and 5.63% social workers without a bachelor's degree. This discrepancy suggested that estimates based on the U.S. Census Bureau's data may be inaccurate in describing the social work workforce that holds social work credentials.

3. What were the demographic and employment characteristics of the self-identified social work workforce? How did the characteristics differ by education level and license status?

- Self-identified social workers were in their early 40s, predominantly female, and mostly White (58%), while about 35% identified as Black and Hispanic/Latino. Only 10% reported being immigrants, and about 17% spoke languages other than English at home. Slightly more than 6% of them reported having any health conditions.
- The largest fields of practice for self-identified social workers included individual and family services (33%) and outpatient and residential care facilities (15%). More than 55% were employed by nonprofit and for-profit agencies.
- For bachelor's-level social workers, self-identified licensed social workers were older, more likely to be female, White, and U.S.-born. They were more likely to work in outpatient, residential care, or nursing facilities than their nonlicensed counterparts.
- For master's-level social workers, self-identified licensed social workers were more likely to be in education and health care settings, where licensure is often required. In contrast, nonlicensed social workers were more concentrated in individual and family services. A higher percentage of licensed social workers were self-employed and worked for federal agencies, whereas

nonlicensed social workers were more prevalent in state government positions. Licensed social workers held multiple jobs at a higher rate than the nonlicensed.

4. How much did social workers earn? How did their earnings differ by education level and license status?

- Findings suggested that master's degrees and licensure — along with being older and having more work experience — were related to higher annual earnings for self-identified social workers.
- Master's-level social workers earned substantially more than bachelor's-level social workers.
- In 2024, the estimated median earnings for master's-level self-identified social workers were $69,179, while the 75th percentile earnings were $89,216. In contrast, the median and 75th percentile earnings for bachelor's-level social workers were $51,947 and $69,589, respectively.
- Self-identified licensed social workers had considerably higher weekly earnings than nonlicensed social workers across all earnings percentiles. Specifically, licensed master's-level social workers earned 13.41% more ($1,488 versus $1,312 in median), and licensed bachelor's-level social workers earned 7.14% more ($1,186 versus $1,107 in median) than their nonlicensed counterparts.

5. How were self-identified social workers distributed across the country? Were there any states with low densities of social workers?

- On average, there were 2.21 self-identified social workers per 1,000 people nationwide, with higher concentrations in the Northeast and varying numbers across states.
- The three states with the lowest number of self-identified social workers per 1,000 people were South Dakota (1.15), Texas (1.38), and Alaska (1.39).

6. What important questions about the social work workforce remain unanswered by the publicly available data? What should a national workforce survey aim to address?

- The U.S. Census Bureau's household survey data offered some basic insights into the workforce characteristics. However, they could not differentiate between social workers with a social work degree or license and those without. As a result, it was challenging to accurately assess how well these findings represent the professional workforce as identified by the profession.
- The existing data also lacked information on social workers' practice categories, primary

functions and roles, and client groups. There is much to learn about how social workers with social work degrees or licenses perform various functions and roles in their jobs and how they are compensated compared to those without such professional credentials.

- The social work profession calls for a national workforce survey to fill these critical gaps in our knowledge. Gaining this knowledge could strengthen social workers' professional identities and improve public recognition of the profession.

INTRODUCTION

Social work is known to have a relatively loose professional boundary, in part due to a diverse range of specializations, practice settings, and variations in licensure across state jurisdictions (Association of Social Work Boards, 2025; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). Many individuals without social work credentials hold social work positions and may call themselves social workers, especially at the baccalaureate level. On the other hand, some individuals with social work credentials may not identify themselves as social workers (Barth, 2003; Lightfoot et al., 2016). This ambiguity in drawing a clear boundary in defining the social work workforce may stem from the profession's commitment to inclusion and diversity as well as its effort to denounce elitism. However, this lack of clarity presents challenges in examining the size and characteristics of the workforce, which is critical to understanding its labor market conditions and public access to social work services.

To properly address the boundary issue of the social work workforce, it would be helpful to define what a profession is. A profession is an occupation characterized by specific core attributes, including a distinct body of knowledge and skills, recognized training or education, a code of ethics aimed at serving others, regulated entry to practice, and an organization with the authority to assess professional competence (Hugman, 1996, 1998). Additionally, a profession exercises self-regulation through state legislation that grants regulatory authority. It typically enjoys a degree of autonomy and social prestige (Randall & Kindiak, 2008). Licensure is the most effective means of professionalizing an occupation since it establishes all necessary mechanisms, such as educational and training requirements, assessments of professional competence, restrictions on entry to practice, and self-regulation concerning violations of the code of ethics (Weeden, 2002). Professionalization also involves cultivating a public image, trust, and recognition for occupations that perform complex, nonroutinized, specialized tasks that require continued discretion and judgment, which are essential to public well-being (Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985). Social work, like medicine, nursing, and law, is a regulated profession, particularly for master's-level practice, with defined educational, training, and licensure requirements that create barriers to practice for individuals who do not meet these professional standards.

Social work began its journey toward professionalization nearly a hundred years ago, with the expansion of social work education programs throughout the country during the 1910s and 1920s. In 1930, the U.S. Census Bureau classified social work as a profession for the first time,

reporting over 30,000 social workers in the nation (Stuart, 2019). The 1930s saw the introduction of new methods of social work practice focusing on individuals, groups, and communities, along with the emergence of distinctions between bachelor's- and master's-level practitioners. In 1951, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was established to create standardized curricula and educational guidelines for the profession. Four years later, in 1955, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) was formed to develop a code of ethics for social work and to represent its members (Cooper-Bolinskey, 2022; Stuart, 2019). By 1969, CSWE began accrediting baccalaureate social work programs. The movement to professionalize social work gained momentum throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as many states implemented licensure and regulations aimed at ensuring high-quality social services. The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) was established in 1978 to support state boards in regulatory issues and to administer licensing exams (Cooper-Bolinskey, 2022; Stuart, 2013). The need for health insurance reimbursement for mental health services helped to create clinical licensure. By 1992, all states had established clinical licensure to regulate clinical practice, marking a significant milestone in the professionalization of social work (Cooper-Bolinskey, 2022; Stuart, 2019). Recently, with the enactment of the Social Work Licensure Compact, social work has solidified its professional status in the behavioral health care market by preparing to allow interstate practice among member states and to ensure public access to social work services (The Council of State Governments, 2024).

Despite the professionalization efforts, social workers are often perceived as having more porous professional boundaries than other professional occupations. For example, the availability and standards of social work licensure are not consistent across the country. While clinical practice requires licensure in all jurisdictions, 11 states do not license bachelor's-level practice. Nine states do not license master's-level practice. Moreover, states generally do not provide licensure for master's advanced generalist macro-level practice (Association of Social Work Boards, 2025; Donaldson et al., 2014). Relatedly and importantly, social workers are considered to be one of the lowest-paid professions required to have a graduate degree (Salsberg et al., 2017). Although this perception can hinder the profession's self-advocacy and efforts to recruit and retain workers, little research has been conducted to understand how this boundary issue affects the national profile of the workforce, including its demographic, employment, and earnings characteristics.

Against this backdrop, this study examines self-identified social workers by their education level and estimated license status. Not all individuals who self-identify as social workers have a formal social work background, such as a social work degree (training) or license. Conversely, not all

licensed or nonlicensed individuals with social work education are employed as social workers or identify themselves as social workers. The **social work workforce** is defined as including individuals who (1) have a formal social work background — degree, training, or licensure — and (2) are employed as social workers. Using this definition of the social work workforce, this study estimates the size of the workforce, describes its demographic and employment characteristics, observes its geographic distribution across states, and estimates the state-by-state workforce density using microdata from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

Additionally, this study compared the estimated size of the licensed workforce to the aggregate number of licenses issued by state regulatory boards. This comparison aimed to evaluate whether the estimates based on household survey data aligned with the regulatory boards' data and to provide insights into the size and composition of the social work workforce. Although microdata from the ACS and CPS do not accurately identify the professional social work workforce, the analyses offer foundational and contextual information about the workforce that could be useful in assessing the validity of the data collected by the 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey. The findings from these analyses also help identify critical gaps in the publicly available data, underscoring the need for a national workforce survey. Findings and insights from this study justify why the social work profession should conduct a national workforce survey and what the survey data should explore to fill the gaps in our understanding of the workforce.

The "Official" Profile of the Social Work Workforce and Its Limitations

Before diving into the analyses, it is worthwhile to look at how the social work workforce is officially described. According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* by the U.S. Department of Labor's BLS, which describes each occupation and projects its 10-year employment growth, there were more than 751,900 social workers in the country in 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024b). According to Table 1, the three groups of social workers, including child, family, and school social workers, health care social workers, and mental health and substance abuse social workers, made up about 90% of the workforce. About half of the social workers were child, family, and school social workers who offer social services and support to enhance the social and psychological well-being of children and their families, aiming to maximize the family well-being and academic performance of children. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024b), most (70% or more) of the jobs require a bachelor's degree and have the lowest median salary of about $54,000. About 26% of social workers worked as *health care social workers*, earning a median salary of $63,000. Nearly 70% of the jobs require a master's degree. Health care social workers provide individuals, families, and groups with the psychosocial support needed to cope with chronic, acute, or terminal illnesses. They provide patients with information and counseling and make referrals for other services (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024b).

Another 16% of the social workers were mental health and substance abuse social workers, earning about $56,000 annually. Despite the modest earnings, at least 77% of the jobs required a master's degree. Mental health and substance abuse social workers assess and treat individuals with mental, emotional, or substance abuse problems, including providing therapy, crisis intervention, case management, client advocacy, prevention, and education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024b). A little over 9% of social workers were outside the three large behavioral health groups and had a median wage of about $64,000. The BLS projected that social workers' overall employment will grow by 7% from 2023 to 2033, faster than the average growth rate for all occupations. It also projected that employment in mental health and substance abuse social workers will grow by as much as 12%. However, it projected only a 5% increase in employment for child, family, and school social workers, indicating that the profession may not need to produce a large number of bachelor's-level social workers as they may experience slower employment growth than other groups.

Table 1

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Outlook for Social Workers in 2023

	Employment 2023	Percentage of Employment	Projected Employment 2033	Percentage Increase	Median Wages 2023
All social workers	751,900	100.00%	806,600	7%	$58,380
Child, family, school	365,900	48.66%	383,800	5%	$53,940
Health care	193,200	25.69%	211,900	10%	$62,940
Mental health/substance abuse	123,700	16.45%	138,100	12%	$55,960
All other	69,000	9.18%	72,800	5%	$63,770

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024b, 2024c).

In the absence of regular national workforce studies, this occupational profile and employment outlook taken together serve as the profession's national profile, and social work scholars, major stakeholders, and policymakers rely on them to understand the profession and engage in professional advocacy. However, it is important to note the two most crucial caveats in these statistics (Weismiller & Whitaker, 2013). The first is that they are based on employers' reports on job titles, not on reports by individual social workers with social work education, training, and license credentials. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* program uses the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) survey, which draws its sample from state unemployment insurance (UI) files to measure employment and wage rates for wage and salary workers in nonfarm establishments in the country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024a). The second caveat is that, as the OEWS survey's sampling frame comes from the state UI system, it excludes self-employed workers or those outside the state unemployment insurance system (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Many self-employed social workers are likely to be licensed in the master's and clinical practice categories, and some of them may have higher earnings than others in the profession. Therefore, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* statistics are likely to overlook a significant portion of licensed self-employed social workers, leading to an underestimation of their numbers and earnings. As a result, the statistics may not accurately profile whom the profession considers to be social workers. This limitation clearly explains why a national workforce survey is essential for understanding labor market information related to the social work workforce.

Previous Workforce Studies

While the BLS *Occupational Outlook Handbook* data may not be accurate, the profession has conducted numerous workforce studies, primarily led by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, n.d.). There were five waves of workforce studies using various samples of social workers, including (1) licensed social workers, (2) NASW members, (3) members of professional social work organizations, (4) self-identified social workers, and (5) recent graduates of social work programs. Each of the reports provides valuable pieces of information and insights into the demographics, practice settings, roles and compensation, and career paths of social workers. However, inconsistent definitions of the social work workforce used across the studies left some lingering questions unanswered. The discussions below provide a brief overview of each wave of the studies to highlight their major findings and the limitations that stem from unclear and inconsistent boundaries for the social work workforce.

The NASW (2004)'s Licensed Workforce Study

This study was conducted about 20 years ago and remains critically important. It presents findings from a national survey of ***4,489 licensed social workers*** who participated in the survey based on a stratified random sample of 10,000 licensed social workers. It was estimated that approximately 310,000 social workers — around 37% of all self-identified social workers in 2000 — were licensed in 2004 (Center for Health Workforce Studies & NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). The study revealed that 84.5% of licensed social workers were White, with 6.8% Black, 4.3% Hispanic/Latino, and 1.4% Asian. The average annual salary was estimated to be $37,650 (which was equivalent to $64,138 in 2024 after adjusting for inflation). The average annual salary for full-time working social workers was $51,912 (equivalent to $88,433 in 2024 value).

The study reported a substantial gender difference in annual salary among full-time working social workers. Full-time working male social workers' salary (n=389) was reported to be $61,040 ($103,983 in 2024 value), much higher than the $48,995 ($83,464 in 2024 value) for female social workers (N=1,744) (Center for Health Workforce Studies & NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006, p. 4). The study also found that about 17.5% of licensed social workers were in private practice, but most were employed either at public agencies (38.4%) or health care organizations (31.8%). Nearly 39% of licensed social workers answered that providing mental health and addiction

services was the primary function of their agencies, followed by 13% of those in children and families and 13% in health care practice areas.

Close to 40% of licensed social workers identified behavioral health as their practice focus, making behavioral health care social workers the largest group of licensed social workers. Private practice was the most common employment sector reported by MSWs in behavioral health (35%), followed by the nonprofit sector (33%), public sector (20%), and for-profit sector (12%). MSWs in mental health were nearly four times more likely to report private practice as their employment sector compared to MSWs in non-behavioral health practice areas (37% versus 8%) (Whitaker et al., 2006). Consistent with the BLS *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, almost four-fifths of all social workers served children and adolescents in their caseloads. However, they earned less than other social workers regardless of degree. MSWs earned the highest median salaries in private practice ($96,850 in 2024 value) and the lowest in private nonprofit organizations ($43,548, $74,185 in 2024 value) (Center for Health Workforce Studies & NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). Unfortunately, these studies did not report licensed social workers' characteristics by their practice categories.

The 2007 NASW Membership Workforce Survey

This 2007 study was conducted to fill the gap in the 2004 workforce survey of licensed social workers by addressing topics such as social workers' educational debts and work-related stress that could challenge the recruitment and retention of professional social workers. Interestingly, however, the study was based on ***3,653 NASW members*** who were social workers with a degree from a CSWE-accredited program. The average age of respondents was 45 years old; 83% were female, 86% were White, and 7% were Black (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008). Whitaker (2008) reported that because 69% of respondents had student loan debts to finance their social work education, the debts and low salaries were the two main financial challenges that the survey respondents faced. The respondents also reported that high workload and poor compensation were two major stressors at work, which resulted in burnout, impaired performance, mental health/health concerns, and high turnover among social workers (Arrington, 2008). Although the study effectively addressed the two most important areas of concern for social workers, relying on a sample of NASW members excluded nonmember social workers who also had social work credentials.

The 2010 NASW Compensation and Benefits Study: Members of Professional Organizations

The survey intended to provide detailed salary information for social workers and used a sampling frame developed by the ***membership list of six social work membership organizations***, including (1) NASW, (2) Association of Oncology Social Work, (3) National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, (4) National Network for Social Worker Managers, (5) the Rural Social Work Caucus, and (6) Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care. A group of 73,777 social workers with a valid email address was invited to an online survey, and a sample of 5,000 without an email address was invited to the survey via regular mail between October 1 and November 24, 2009. Of the 17,911 respondents with valid responses, the median annual salary was $55,000 ($80,300 in 2024 dollars), and the mean salary was $59,800 ($87,308 in 2024 dollars). The report revealed a substantial gender pay difference, with a median of $53,000 for women and $64,000 for men. Social workers with a bachelor's degree earned $15,000 less in median salary than those with an MSW. Those with a DSW/PhD earned $17,000 more than those with an MSW.

Those employed by the federal government had the highest median salary of $68,000, and those working for private for-profit employers had the lowest salary of $51,400. Social workers in a private group practice were reported to have the lowest annual salary of $45,000, which seems somewhat contradictory to the findings reported in the 2004 study of licensed social workers. About 67% of social workers were offered health insurance, and 59% were offered dental insurance. About half of social workers had life and disability insurance. Although this study addressed one of the most pressing concerns of the social work workforce — earnings and compensation — members of professional organizations tend to differ from nonmembers in terms of their career goals and access to resources (Young & Berlan, 2021). Using the membership list as the survey sampling frame excluded nonmember social workers from the workforce study and thus might have skewed the findings one way or another. For example, if the professional members had more senior careers or were networked better than nonmember social workers, the median and mean earnings from the survey would have been higher than those of the more representative social workers.

2017 Profile of the Social Work Workforce: Self-Identified Social Workers

Unlike any other study, this study is unique in that it uses the publicly available microdata

from a national household survey, the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS), which was collected by the U.S. Census**.** The study estimated ***the number of self-identified social workers*** in the country and described their demographic and educational backgrounds, employment characteristics, and incomes (not earnings, which would have been more appropriate). It reported that the median income of master's-level social workers was $48,000 in 2015 ($64,798 in 2024 dollars), less than that of teachers and nurses. It also examined the geographical distribution of self-identified social workers and reported a great disparity across the country in the number of social workers per 100,000 people. For example, in Arkansas, there were 80 social workers per 100,000, but in the District of Columbia, there were as many as 572 per 100,000. Northeast states tend to have more social workers per capita compared to Southern states (Salsberg et al., 2017).

It is important to note that since the ACS data is based on respondents' self-identification of their occupation, it is not possible to determine what proportion of self-identified social workers possess social work education, training, or licensure credentials. Suppose the size of nonprofessional self-identified social workers is greater than that of social workers who have a social work degree, training, or license. In that case, the ACS-based profile may not accurately describe the social work workforce that the profession considers to be social workers.

The 2017–2019 National Study of Recent Graduates

This report presents the findings from a more recent series of studies based on national surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019. The surveys included approximately 1,000 new Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates each year from 35 to 53 MSW programs across the country, totaling around 3,500 new graduates. The study aimed to examine the different career pathways of recent social work graduates (Salsberg et al., 2020). It examined job search processes, income levels, job market, job satisfaction, and career plans for the graduates. It reported that nearly 90% of MSW graduates were a racially and ethnically diverse group of women, with more than 22% Black and 14% Hispanic/Latino. More than 46% of the 2019 MSW graduates were the first ones in their families to graduate from college; this was particularly true for Black (57%) and Hispanic/Latino (73%) social workers. It also reported that an almost equal share of new graduates (26–27%) were traditional graduates at age 26 and nontraditional graduates at age 40.

The mean educational debt amount was $66,000 for all 2019 graduates, but it was particularly higher at $92,000 for Black graduates and $79,000 for Hispanic/Latino graduates

(Salsberg et al., 2020). According to the report, one of the main concerns of the new graduates was their salaries and compensation, which hovered around a median salary of $47,000 ($58,989 in 2024 value). It also revealed that more than 76% of available jobs were in licensed positions and that nearly 80% of new MSW graduates intended to become licensed clinical social workers in the next five years. About 43% of graduates who worked as social workers had a job that required licensure either at the appointment or within a fixed time, but about 35% required an MSW but not licensure. While only about 20% reported working in health care settings, nearly 66% provided mental health services to their clients (Salsberg et al., 2020). Findings from this study provide important knowledge and insights about the demographic profile of increasingly diverse social work graduates, their financial situations, and job market entries and plans. To be considered a national workforce study, however, it should have been part of a more comprehensive workforce study that included the entire current workforce beyond recent graduates of social work programs.

Knowledge Gaps and Key Research Questions

Despite the previous national workforce studies discussed above, many questions critical to the profession remain unanswered. First of all, the profession's knowledge about the **size and composition of the social work workforce** — those with social work credentials in social work positions or employed as social workers — is still limited (e.g., Lombardi et al., 2024). As stated earlier, while the BLS *Occupational Outlook Handbook* estimate may be inaccurate, previous social work workforce studies failed to present comprehensive statistics based on consistent definitions or boundaries for the workforce. As a result, we do not know what share of bachelor's-level social workers have a social work degree or licensure or both. Social work jobs and positions are known to be open to non-social work graduates, and as many as 11 states do not provide licensure for bachelor's-level practice. Given this lack of occupational closure measures, the profession needs to assess its extent and implications for the workforce. Likewise, we do not know what share of master's-level social workers have a social work degree or license (Kim, 2022), nor the share of clinical social workers within master's-level social workers. As the educational, training, and licensure requirements for clinical practice are most prevalent and consistent in the country, the occupational boundary is clearest for clinical social workers. Nevertheless, there is limited knowledge in the literature about the size and share of the clinical workforce.

Second, it is also unknown how the **demographic and employment characteristics** of the workforce differ by the workers' degrees and license status. Although it is important to know the racial and ethnic composition, prevalence of disabilities, and language backgrounds of the workforce and how those characteristics differ by social workers' degree and licensure credentials, such national statistics have not been readily available due to the absence of regular national workforce studies. Additionally, the literature does not document the extent to which the demographics of social workers mirror the changing profiles of the U.S. population that the profession is supposed to serve. Furthermore, it remains unclear how **employment characteristics, working conditions, and compensation** of social workers differ by education level, license status, and practice categories. Although these differences are important, given the diverse employment settings and specialties within the profession, efforts for systematic data collection and comprehensive examination have been limited and inadequate (e.g., Kang & Krysik, 2010; Williams & Vieyra, 2018). As a result, there is a gap in our understanding of how social work degrees and licensure affect the workforce and the profession. Such knowledge is important in promoting social workers' professional identity and

public awareness of the profession.

Last, there is currently limited understanding of how occupational closure in social work impacts public access to social work practitioners across different states. The **geographic distribution or density** of social workers, especially clinical social workers, is a significant public health concern (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). Existing literature fails to provide information on the nationwide distribution of the social work workforce, including the numbers of self-identified social workers, licensed social workers, and clinical social workers across the country. This information is crucial for identifying geographic areas that are underserved by the social work profession and assessing whether there is an adequate supply of social workers nationwide. Additionally, understanding the distribution of licensed clinical social workers would enhance our comprehension of the issues related to public access to social work practitioners. This knowledge would enable stakeholders to better understand the current state of the social work labor market and to strategically plan for the future supply and development of the workforce.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to describe the self-identified social work workforce by examining its demographic and employment characteristics, earnings, and geographic density using publicly available microdata from the U.S. Census and the BLS and an aggregate number of licenses issued by social work regulatory boards. Some of the specific research questions that this study attempts to explore are as follows:

1) What is the estimated size of the social work workforce? How is it composed in terms of education level and license status?
2) What percentage of bachelor's-level social workers do not have a BSW? What percentage of master's-level social workers are licensed?
3) What are the demographic and employment characteristics of the social work workforce? How do the characteristics differ by education level and license status?
4) How much do social workers earn? How do their earnings differ by education level and license status?
5) How are social workers distributed across the country? Are there any states with notable shortages?
6) What important questions about the social work workforce remain unanswered by the publicly available survey data? What should a national workforce survey aim to explore?

METHODS

DATA AND SAMPLE

This study analyzed the following five data files to explore the proposed research questions: (1) 2018–2022 American Community Survey (ACS), (2) 2023–2024 Current Population Survey–Basic Monthly Survey (CPS–BMS), (3) 2018–2024 Current Population Survey–Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS–ASEC), (4) 2018–2024 Current Population Survey–Outgoing Rotation Group data (CPS–ORG), and (5) the number of social work licensees issued by state regulatory boards reported to the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). The samples included college-educated social workers who were working either as employees or were self-employed. Occupation codes in the survey data were used to identify social workers. The selected social workers were classified into bachelor's-level and master's-level social workers and licensed and nonlicensed social workers. Below, each data source is discussed in more detail to highlight why it was chosen for this study.

The ***American Community Survey (ACS)*** is an ongoing national survey by the U.S. Census Bureau; it collects information about demographic (e.g., age, gender, race, and ethnicity), social (e.g., citizenship, education, language, etc.), economic (e.g., employment, occupation, income), and housing from a sample of people in roughly 3.5 million addresses annually. The survey was designed to produce estimates on a wide range of geographies, including states. The five-year (60-month) ACS microdata allows estimations of small geographic areas with a population of less than 20,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This study used the most recent five-year data file of 2018–2022 to maximize the sample size for analyses. The ACS data file was chosen because it provides a large number of social workers, allowing state-by-state estimates. It also contains information about undergraduate majors for adults with a college degree. A sample of **33,613 self-identified currently working social workers** was selected from the 2018–2022 ACS data using the occupation classification code.

The ***Current Population Survey (CPS)*** is a monthly national survey of adults (16 years or older) from about 60,000 households, jointly conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the BLS, to collect demographic and labor force information on the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). The CPS uses a rotating panel design, in which households are interviewed for four consecutive months, leave the survey for eight months, and then return to the survey for four more consecutive months. There are three types of data files available from the CPS for research purposes: the Basic

Monthly Survey (BMS), the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), and the Outgoing Rotation Group (ORG).

First, the ***Basic Monthly Survey (BMS)*** serves as the primary source of statistics on the labor force, referring to labor market activities during the prior week for those employed and the prior four weeks for those unemployed. This data file was chosen because it includes information about survey respondents' occupational licensure and certification, in addition to their demographic and employment information, such as the number of jobs. While the BMS data indicate whether respondents hold a license or certification, a noteworthy limitation is that these data do not clarify whether these credentials are relevant to the respondents' current jobs, nor do the data specify the titles of the licenses or certifications. Therefore, while the CPS–BMS data are valuable for approximating licensed social workers, they do not confirm whether the sample social workers really possess a social work license. Nevertheless, CPS–BMS serves as the only publicly available data that allow us to examine the nonlicensed social work workforce. Second, the CPS **Annual Social and Economic (ASEC) Supplement** survey is conducted annually and collects a broad range of demographic and income data. The ASEC microdata were chosen to examine the annual earnings of social workers. Last, the CPS **Outgoing Rotation Group (ORG)** data, which were collected during the fourth and eighth months of the surveys, were chosen for this study because they provide extra information about weekly hours worked and earnings, which were not available in CPS–BMS. CPS–ORG microdata allow for the examination of earnings differences by license status.

This study used all three CPS surveys to maximize their utility in understanding the social work workforce. To use the most up-to-date data in describing social workers' demographic and employment characteristics, this study used the 2023–2024 BMS data and selected a sample of **5,621 self-identified social workers** who worked during the prior week. As stated earlier, the CPS–BMS does not collect respondents' wages/salaries or earnings, but CPS-ORG does. To use the weekly earnings data available in the CPS–ORG data while maximizing the sample size, this study pooled ORG data from 2018 through 2024 to draw a sample of **4,732 self-identified social workers**. As the annual earnings data are available only in the CPS–ASEC datafile, this study pooled ASEC data from 2018 through 2024 and selected a sample of **2,579 self-identified social workers**. It is important to note that both the ACS and CPS collected occupation information based on the self-reports of survey respondents regarding their primary jobs, regardless of their educational or licensure backgrounds in social work.

The last data file used for this study was the number of licenses issued by regulatory boards. Each regulatory board collects data on the number of licenses it issues, and ASWB compiled the aggregate count data and provided it to the author. The data contained **the number of licenses by license categories** across 50 state jurisdictions and the District of Columbia. Provisional licenses, which were for individuals whose supervision or training was pending, were not included in the total number of licenses. There are a couple of important limitations worth mentioning about this data source. The aggregate numbers may also include licenses held by nonworking social workers, those not in a social work position, or social workers who hold duplicate licenses across multiple jurisdictions. As a result, the aggregate count of the licenses issued may substantially overestimate the actual size of the licensed social work workforce. Unfortunately, however, there is currently no national system in place to examine the extent of this overestimation or to generate an accurate list of unduplicated licensees nationwide. Readers should keep these limitations in mind when interpreting the findings presented below.

Variables and Measures

Demographic variables included social workers' age (measured in years), gender (male versus female), race and ethnicity (Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, other, White), education (bachelor's degree or at least master's degree), immigration status (native-born citizen, naturalized citizen, and noncitizen), region of residence (Northeast, Midwest, South, West), the language used at home (English, Spanish, or other languages), and health conditions (yes or no). The ACS asked if respondents had cognitive difficulty, ambulatory difficulty, independent living difficulty, self-care difficulty, and vision or hearing difficulty. For this study, social workers who responded "yes" to any of these questions were classified as having health conditions. Similarly, the CPS asked respondents if they had any of the following health conditions: hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, difficulty remembering, physical difficulty, disability that limits mobility, or personal care limitation. Respondents who answered "yes" to any of those questions were also measured as having a health condition.

Employment characteristics included social workers' field of practice, type of employer, full-time and year-round work (only in ACS), full-time weekly work (only in CPS–BMS), and the number of jobs (only in CPS–BMS). Both ACS and CPS data files included industry codes, which were used to measure social workers' fields of practice. The following categories were created to

capture fields of practice with the largest shares of social workers: (1) K–12 school or higher education; (2) outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities; (3) hospitals, (4) individual and family agencies; (5) justice, public order, and safety service agencies; (6) administration of human resource agencies; and (7) other (e.g., civil, social, advocacy agencies; community food and housing services agencies; home health care agencies). For both the ACS and CPS data, the type of employers measured if the sample social workers were self-employed or worked for (1) private for-profit agencies, (2) private nonprofit agencies, (3) federal government, (4) state government, or (5) local government. The ACS data provided the full-time year-round work variable to identify respondents who usually worked at least 35 hours per week and 50 weeks per year in the years prior to the survey years. The CPS–BMS asked the respondents for the number of jobs they held last week. Using the variable, the sample social workers with more than one job were identified as multiple job holders.

Two variables from CPS–BMS were used to measure the **license status** of self-identified social workers. The CPS–BMS asked respondents (1) if they currently have an active professional certification or license and (2) if the certification or license was issued by the federal, state, or local government. Following the approach taken by previous studies (e.g., Kim, 2022), social workers who answered "yes" to both questions were categorized as licensed social workers, as state governments typically issue occupational licenses.

This study used **wages and earnings** variables from both ACS and CPS microdata to gain insights into the earnings of social workers based on their education level and license status. One of the **earnings variables** included in the analyses was the weekly earnings reported in the CPS–ORG data file, which measured the amount respondents usually earned per week before deductions at their "current" job. As stated earlier, because it has variables related to licensure, CPS–ORG enabled an analysis of the earnings differences between licensed and nonlicensed social workers. This study also used the ACS data file to examine the annual wages or salaries of self-identified social workers. The ACS data file was particularly valuable due to its large sample size, which allowed for the generation of reliable national statistics for social workers. However, the most recent five-year data from 2018–2022 appeared somewhat outdated. To address this, the study incorporated annual wages and salary data from the 2018–2024 CPS–ASEC data files for social work employees. Despite its smaller sample size, the ASEC file provided more current information than the ACS file. It should be noted that the annual wages and salaries analyzed in this study refer to the sample self-identified social workers' total pretax wages and salaries received as employees during the previous year (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2020, 2024). The annual earnings also refer to earnings from wages or salaries or a self-employed individual's own businesses during the previous year. All amounts in this study were adjusted for inflation and expressed in 2024 values.

Data Analyses

This study first estimated the **size and composition** of self-identified social workers based on their education level and license status. Utilizing the ACS and CPS–BMS data files, the weighted total number of self-identified social workers was determined for all social workers, as well as categorized by education level (bachelor's or master's) and license status (licensed or nonlicensed). Additionally, the study calculated the number of licensees in each category by using data compiled by social work regulatory boards to estimate the size of the licensed social work workforce by license category.

Second, a series of descriptive analyses of the ACS and CPS–BMS data were conducted to present self-identified social workers' **demographic and employment characteristics** based on their education level and license status. The analyses were done for all self-identified social workers and separately for bachelor's-level and master's-level social workers to present differences by license status within each education level.

Third, descriptive analyses examined **the earnings profiles** of self-identified social workers by education level and license status. The descriptive analysis of weekly earnings was based on CPS–ORG data to compare the earnings of self-identified social workers by education level and license status. The mean and percentile values of the weekly earnings were estimated using the appropriate weight variables provided by the U.S. Census. Similar descriptive analyses of annual earnings were performed using the ACS and CPS–ASEC to examine the mean and percentile values of self-identified social workers' annual gross earnings and variations by education.

Last, this study examined **state-by-state geographic distributions** of self-identified social workers and their density, measured in their numbers per 1,000 people in each state. As the large sample size of the five-year ACS data could generate reliable statistics for each state, the density analyses relied on the 2018–2022 ACS (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) for both the U.S. population and self-identified social workers. It should be noted that all findings presented in this study were obtained using appropriate weight variables, making them nationally representative.

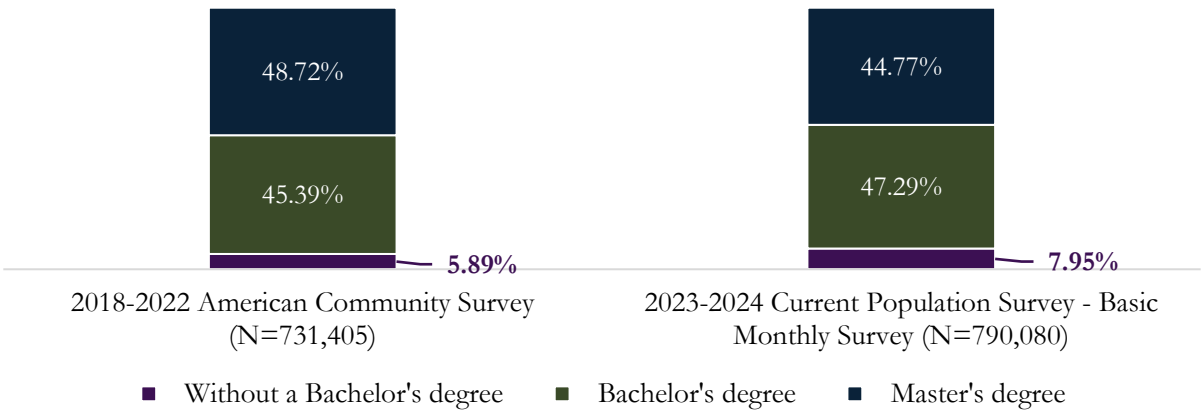
FINDINGS

SIZE OF THE SELF-IDENTIFIED AND LICENSED WORKFORCE

Table A1 in the Appendix presents the number of self-identified social workers by education level and license status using the most recent 2018–2022 ACS and 2023–2024 CPS–BMS microdata. Chart 1 summarizes the size of the self-identified workforce. According to the ACS, there were an average of 731,405 self-identified social workers in the 2018–2022 period. About 6% of them were social workers without a bachelor's degree (N=43,085), 45.39% were those with a bachelor's degree (N=332,009), and the remaining 48.72% held a master's degree (N=356,311). As Chart 2 shows, of the 332,009 bachelor's-level social workers, only about 20.5% had a BSW (N=68,038), and the remaining 263,971 social workers did not have social work education.

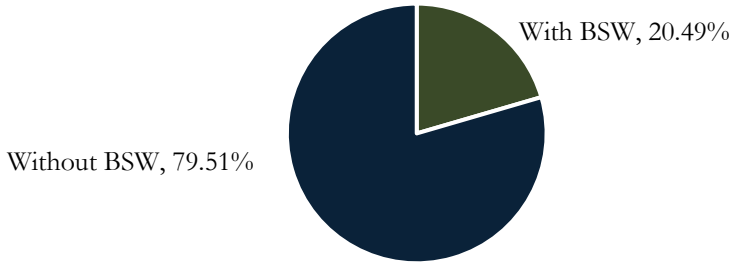
Based on the CPS–BMS, there were an average of 790,080 self-identified social workers in 2023 and 2024. Of them, 7.95% did not have a bachelor's degree (N=62,776), 47.29% had a bachelor's degree (N=373,610), and 44.77% had a master's degree (N=353,694). The number of master's-level social workers was similar across ACS and CPS–BMS estimates. However, the CPS–BMS estimates were higher for social workers at the bachelor's level and sub-baccalaureate level.

Chart 1
Size and Proportion of Self-Identified Social Workers



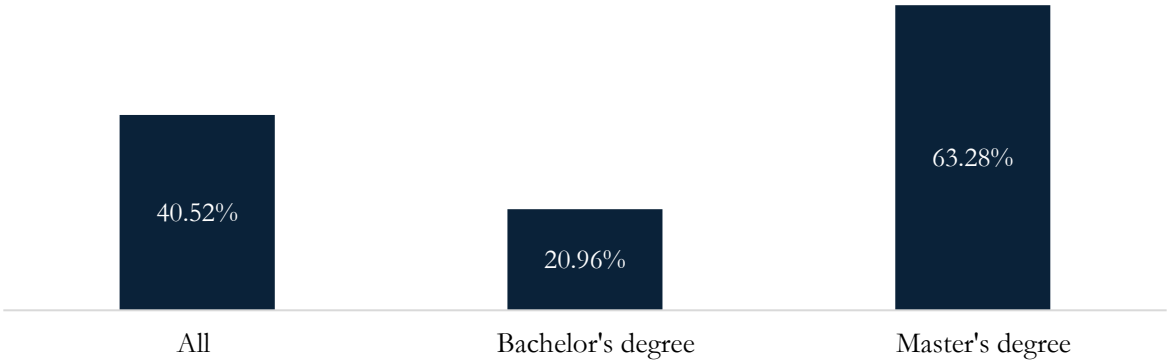
As Chart 2 shows, of the 332,009 bachelor's-level social workers, only about 20.5% had a BSW (N=68,038), and the remaining 263,971 social workers did not have a social work degree.

Chart 2
Percentage Without a BSW Among Self-Identified Bachelor's-Level Social Workers (N=332,009)



According to Table A1 in the Appendix and Chart 3 below, of the 790,080 self-identified social workers, 40.52% (N=469,938) were licensed based on the 2023–2024 CPS–BMS. About 21% of bachelor's-level social workers (N=78,307) and about 63% of master's-level social workers (N=223,800) were licensed.

Chart 3
Percentage Licensed Among Self-Identified Social Workers by Education Level



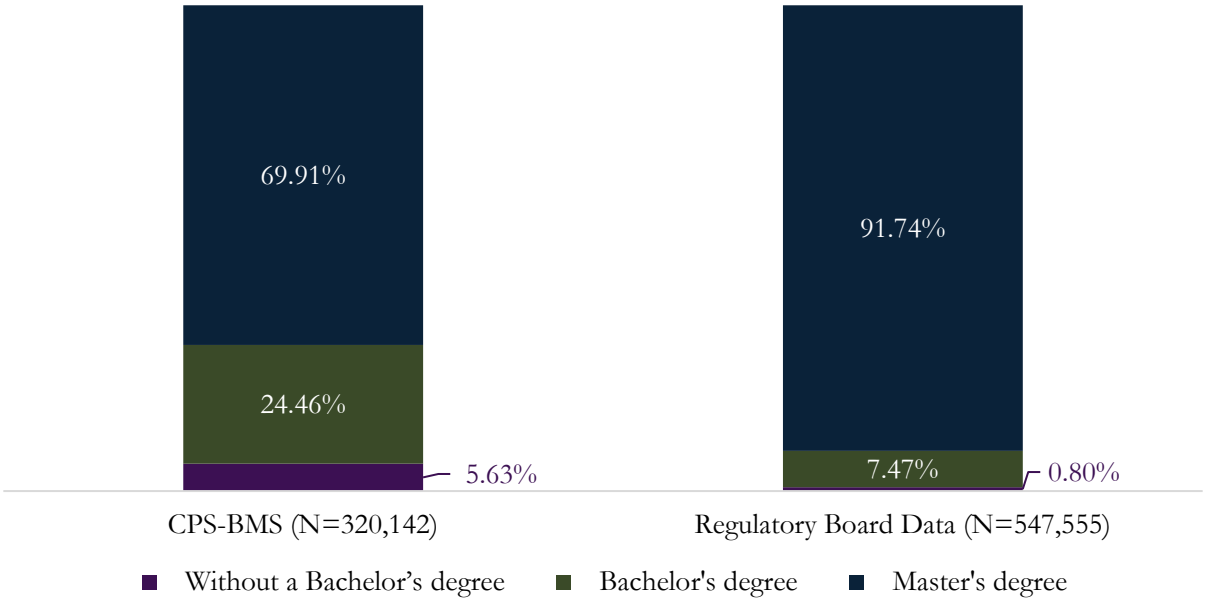
The bottom rows of Table A1 in the Appendix indicate that master's degree holders dominated among licensed self-identified social workers. Nearly 70% of licensed social workers held a master's degree, and only 24.46% of the licensed were bachelor's degree holders. On the other hand, the majority (63%) of nonlicensed self-identified social workers were bachelor's degree holders. Only about 28% of nonlicensed self-identified social workers held a master's degree.

Table A2 in the Appendix shows the 2023 compilation of the total number of licenses reported by regulatory boards in 50 states and the District of Columbia by education and license

category. As Chart 4 shows, of the 545,552 licenses issued, only 0.8% (N=4,354) were held by social workers without a social work degree, while BSW holders accounted for only 7.47% of all licenses (N=40,896) and MSW holders were nearly 92% (N=502,305). Of the licenses held by MSW social workers, 67.36% were Clinical licenses (N=338,348), and 32.64% were Masters licenses (N=163,957). These percentage breakdowns suggest that the estimates derived from the CPS–BMS data do not align with either the number or the educational composition of social work licenses reported by regulatory boards. According to the regulatory boards' data, there were far more social work licenses in the country, and a far greater percentage of these licenses were held by individuals with master's degrees (i.e., MSW degree holders). Furthermore, more than 67% of master's-level licenses belonged to Clinical licensees. This discrepancy may arise from two potential issues: either (1) because regulatory boards' data contain many duplicates or inactive licenses or (2) because some licensees do not identify themselves as social workers in national household surveys like the CPS–BMS. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the CPS–BMS cannot accurately identify social workers who hold a social work license. Since each data source has its own caveat, determining the educational composition of the licensed workforce was challenging.

Chart 4

Percentage Breakdown of Licensed Social Workers by Education Level



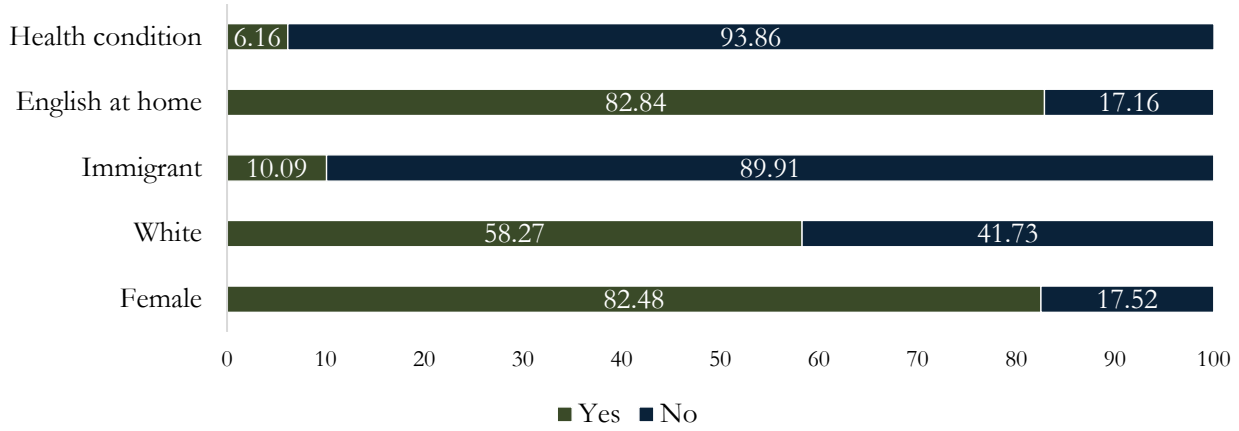
Characteristics of the Self-Identified Workforce: By License and Education

Tables A3, A4, and A5 in the Appendix present detailed demographic and employment characteristics of self-identified and licensed social workers based on the 2018–2022 ACS and 2023–2024 CPS–BMS. Table A4 focuses on all social workers, while Tables A5 and A6 show the results on bachelor's- and master's-level social workers, respectively. The estimated demographic characteristics of all self-identified social workers derived from the ACS and CPS microdata were generally similar. However, their employment characteristics differed slightly depending on the data used in part because the two surveys used different reference periods (annual versus monthly) to ask for employment activities, as discussed earlier.

All Self-Identified Social Workers: Table A3 in the Appendix suggests that self-identified social workers were in their early 40s, overwhelmingly female (82.48%), and predominantly White (58.27%). About 35% of them were Black or Hispanic/Latino, and only 3.43% were Asian. Nearly 90% of them were native-born citizens, and they were distributed across regions with a slightly higher percentage (30%) in the South than in the West (21%) region. Slightly more than 6% of them reported having any physical or mental health conditions. While nearly 83% spoke English at home, 10.94% spoke Spanish, and 6.22% spoke a language other than English or Spanish at home. Chart 5 summarizes these demographic characteristics.

Chart 5

Percentage Breakdown of Demographic Characteristics



As Charts 6 and 7 show, self-identified social workers worked in individual and family services (33.09%), outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities (14.67%), administration of human resources programs (14.03%), hospitals (10.79%), K–12 schools or institutions of higher education (7.36%), and justice, public order, and safety (2.7%) services. More than 17% of them were employed in various industries other than those listed, such as civic, social, and advocacy organizations; community food, housing, and emergency services; or offices of health practitioners. In terms of the type of employers, social workers were employed by private nonprofit organizations (33.16%), private for-profit agencies (22.14%), and local (19.89%), state (17.26%), and federal government (4.04%) agencies. A small percentage (3.52%) were self-employed.

Chart 6

Percentage Breakdown of Field of Practice (%)

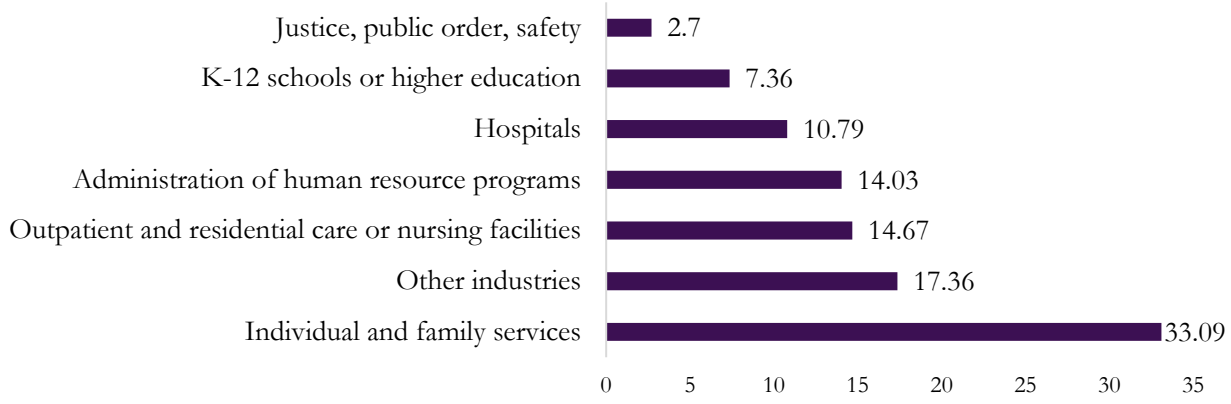


Chart 7

Percentage Breakdown of Employer Types (%)

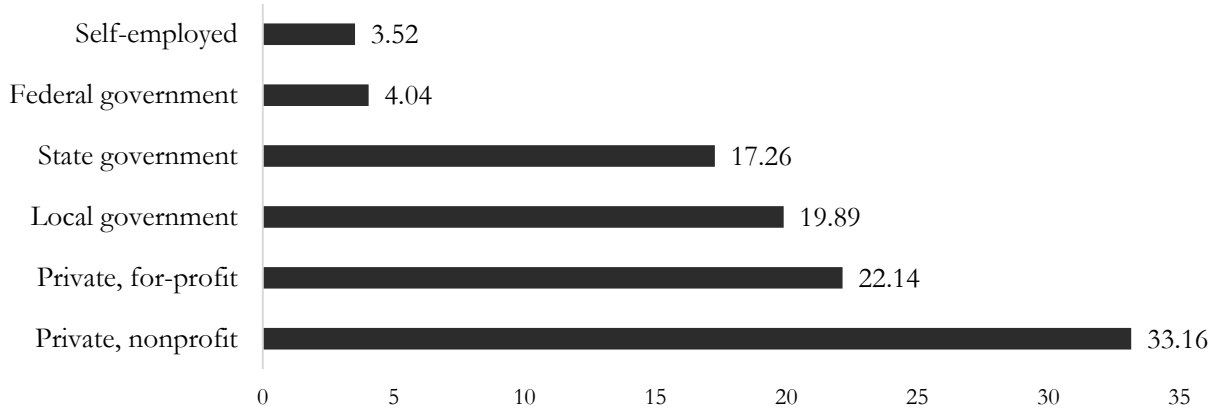


Table A3 in the Appendix revealed interesting findings when self-identified social workers were compared by their license status, approximated with questions in the CPS–BMS microdata. Licensed social workers (44 years old) were older than nonlicensed (41 years old) in their median age. A higher percentage of licensed social workers (87.65%) than nonlicensed (81.93%) were female. Similarly, a higher share of licensed social workers (66.65%) than nonlicensed (48.94%) were White. For example, only 9.75% of licensed social workers were Hispanic/Latino, compared to 19.33% of nonlicensed social workers. While fewer than 9% of licensed social workers were immigrants, about 14% of the nonlicensed were immigrants. A higher percentage of licensed social workers (27.50%) were in the Midwest region than the nonlicensed (19.98%), but a lower percentage of the licensed (15.19%) were in the West region than the nonlicensed (24.98%).

Large shares of licensed social workers, compared to the nonlicensed, were employed in K–12 schools or institutions of higher education (12.94% compared to 4.61% of the nonlicensed), hospitals (15.31% compared to 5.98% of the nonlicensed), outpatients, and residential care facilities (14.15% compared to 9.43% of the nonlicensed), probably because licensure is required in those fields. In contrast, nonlicensed social workers were heavily concentrated in individual and family services (37.75% compared to 24.34% of the licensed) and not represented in hospitals and schools. Higher percentages of licensed than nonlicensed social workers were self-employed (5.60% versus 1.30%) and worked for the federal government (7.73% vs. 2.82%). A higher percentage of nonlicensed social workers (23.18%) than the licensed (15.98%) worked for state government. Compared to nonlicensed social workers, a lower percentage of licensed social workers worked full-time year-round, but a higher percentage had multiple jobs. Nearly 11% of licensed social workers had multiple jobs, but only 6.27% of nonlicensed social workers did so.

Bachelor's-Level Social Workers: Difference by BSW Degree and License Status

Table A4 in the Appendix compares the demographic and employment characteristics of bachelor's-level social workers who held a BSW with those who did not. Bachelor's-level social workers were not different in their median ages by BSW degree holding, as both groups were 39 years old. However, BSW degree holders were more likely to be female, White, immigrant, and English-speaking at home. More specifically, a higher percentage of BSW degree holders (90.11%) were female than those without a BSW (77.90%). While more than 63% of BSW degree holders were White, 54% of those without were White. More than 87% of BSW holders spoke English at home, compared to 80% among those without a BSW. Interestingly, nearly 70% of

bachelor's-level social workers were concentrated in the Midwest and South, but non-BSW holders were spread across all regions. Despite these demographic differences, few differences by BSW-degree-holding social workers were observed in the field of practice or the type of practice among bachelor's-level social workers. Those with a BSW degree were slightly more concentrated in outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities, while non-BSW workers were slightly more engaged in administering human resources programs. However, the differences were not large.

Chart 8

Percentage Breakdown of Demographic Characteristics: Bachelor's-Level Social Workers by BSW Degree-Holding

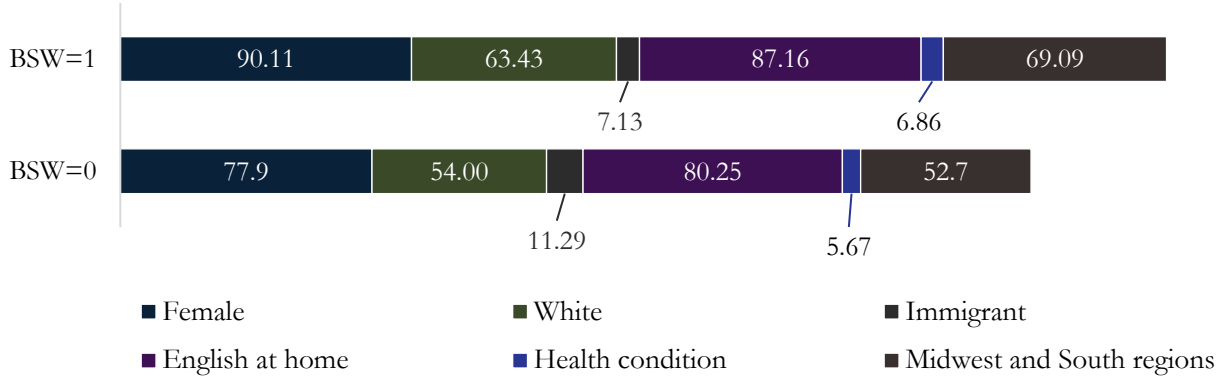
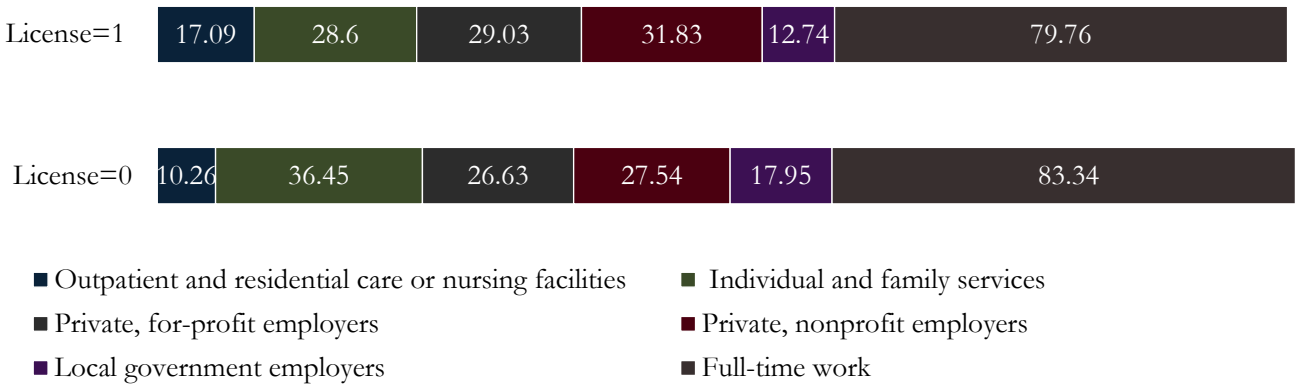


Table A4 in the Appendix also compares licensed and nonlicensed bachelor's-level social workers. Licensed bachelor's-level social workers were older and more likely to be female, White, and U.S.-born citizens than their nonlicensed counterparts. Regional differences indicated that licensed bachelor's-level social workers were more common in the Midwest, while nonlicensed social workers were more prevalent in the West and Northeast. Chart 9 presents those differences by license status in detailed percentages.

Chart 9
Percentage Breakdown of Demographic Characteristics: Bachelor's-Level Social Workers by License Status

As Chart 10 shows, a higher percentage of licensed bachelor's-level social workers were employed in outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities than their nonlicensed counterparts (17.09% versus 10.26%). In contrast, a lower percentage of them than their nonlicensed counterparts worked in individual and family services (28.6% versus 36.45%). Slightly greater percentages of licensed bachelor's-level social workers, compared to the nonlicensed, worked for private employers, either for-profit (29.3% versus 26.63%) or nonprofit employers (31.83% versus 27.54%). A lower share of the licensed than the nonlicensed (12.74% versus 17.95%) worked for local government. Interestingly, a slightly smaller share of the licensed (79.76%) worked full time (35 hours per week or longer) than the nonlicensed (83.34%).

Chart 10
Percentage Breakdown of Practice Settings: Bachelor's-Level Social Workers by License Status



MASTER'S-LEVEL SOCIAL WORKERS: DIFFERENCE BY LICENSE STATUS: Table A5 in the Appendix and Charts 11 and 12 compare the characteristics of master's-level social workers by their license status. Licensed social workers were slightly older than their nonlicensed counterparts in their median ages (44 years versus 43 years). The licensed group had a higher proportion of women than the nonlicensed (87.44% versus 81.60%). As with the findings of bachelor's-level social workers, the licensed group was predominately White (69.2%), with 18.11% Black, 9.15% Hispanic/Latino, and 2.47% Asian or Pacific Islander. On the other hand, only 49.8% of the nonlicensed master's social workers were White, with 28.36% Black, 15.47% Hispanic/ Latino, and 4.80% Asian and Pacific Islander. Immigrants comprised less than 10% of licensed master's-level social workers and about 14% of nonlicensed social workers. While master's-level social workers were evenly distributed across the Northeast, Midwest, and South regions at around 27–29%, only 14.60% of them were in the West region. Similarly, the nonlicensed group was relatively equally spread around the regions, at around 24% in the West and 32% in the South but only 16.03% in the Midwest region.

Chart 11
Percentage Breakdown of Demographic Characteristics: Master's-Level Social Workers by License Status

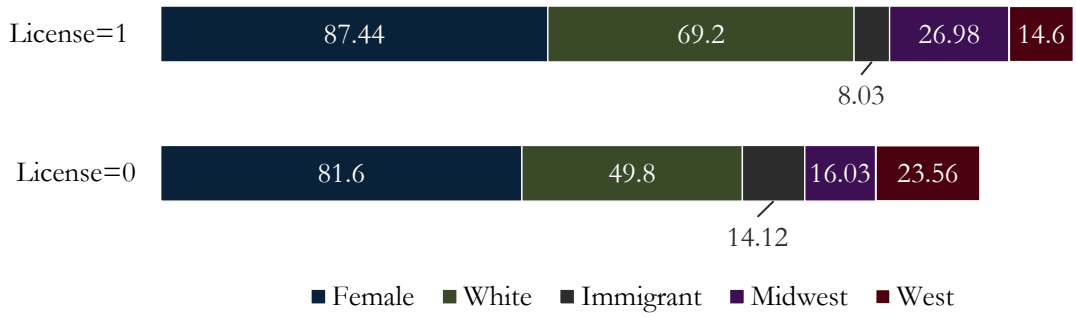
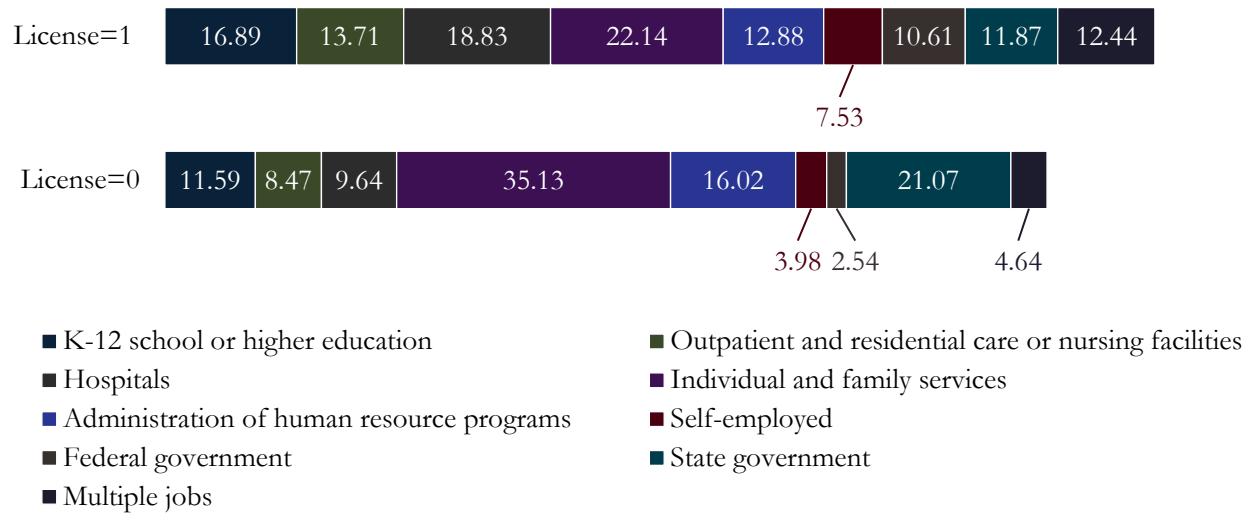


Chart 12 shows how the employment characteristics of licensed and nonlicensed social workers differed. Higher percentages of licensed master's-level social workers than their nonlicensed counterparts were employed in K–12 or institutions of higher education (16.89% versus 11.59%), outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities (13.71% versus 8.47%), and hospitals (18.83% versus 9.64%) where licensure is important or required.

Chart 12
Percentage Breakdown of Employment Characteristics: Master's-Level Social Workers by License Status



On the other hand, nonlicensed master's-level social workers were more prevalent in individual and family services (35.13% versus 22.14%) and administration of human resources programs (16.02% versus 12.88%). Licensed master's-level social workers were more likely to be self-employed than their nonlicensed counterparts (7.35% versus 3.98%) and employed by the federal government (10.61% versus 2.54%). In contrast, nonlicensed master's-level social workers, rather than their licensed counterparts, were more prevalently employed by the state government (21.07% versus 11.87%). Interestingly, more than 12.44% of licensed master's-level social workers had multiple jobs, compared to 4.64% of their nonlicensed counterparts. This finding, together with the percentage of the self-employed, indicates the prevalence of private clinical practice among clinical licenses. Nevertheless, the CPS data do not offer a way to investigate this, as the survey does not offer any details on license type or practice category.

The Earnings Profile: Difference by Education and License Status

Table A6 in the Appendix highlights annual earnings by education level, using the ACS and CPS–ASEC microdata. Table A7 in the Appendix also presents findings that focus on how the weekly earnings of self-identified social workers are compared by education level and license status,

using the CPS–ORG microdata. Both tables show not only the mean values but also the values of different percentiles for a comprehensive comparison. The detailed findings are discussed below.

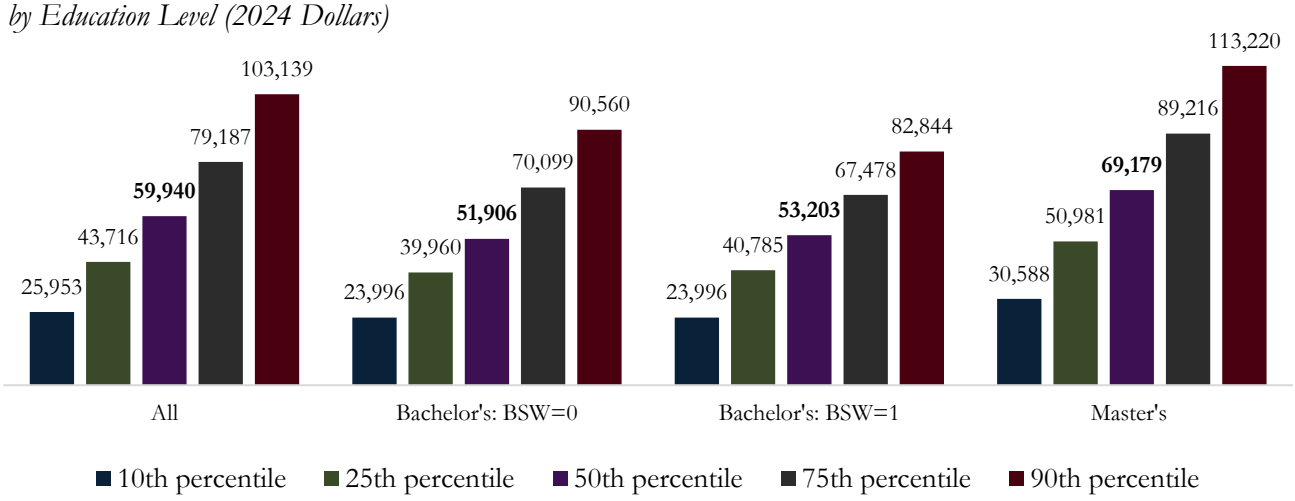
ANNUAL GROSS EARNINGS BY EDUCATION: According to Table A6, the median annual earnings of all self-identified social workers were about $58,628 in 2024, based on the analyses of the ACS data file**.** However, there was a clear difference in annual earnings by education level, as the average annual median earnings of master's-level social workers were more than $17,000 (33%) higher than the median earnings of bachelor's-level social workers ($69,179 for master's-level social workers versus $51,947 for bachelor's-level social workers) based on the analyses of the ACS data file. The estimated median annual wages or salaries based on the CPS–ASEC generated a smaller difference ($9,900 or 17.5%) by education level ($66,600 for master's-level social workers versus $56,700 for bachelor's-level social workers), probably because of differences in sample sizes and reference periods between ACS and CPS–ASEC. Regardless of the data sources, master's-level social workers consistently earned more than bachelor's-level social workers, reflecting the combined value of graduate degrees, age, and a higher license rate. This is true at each percentile of annual earnings, as depicted in Chart 13.

The findings presented in Chart 13 are particularly interesting because they separate the annual earnings of bachelor's-level self-identified social workers by their BSW-degree-holding status. Since nearly 80% of bachelor's-level social workers do not have a BSW, the earnings of those with a BSW degree are important to reflect the value of a BSW degree in the social work labor market. While the 50th percentile annual earnings of BSW holders were higher than those without the degree ($53,203 versus $51,906), their earnings at the 10th and 25th percentiles were similar to those without the degree. Interestingly, at the 75th and 90th percentiles, the earnings of bachelor's-level social workers without a BSW degree were higher than those of BSW degree holders.

As Chart 13 shows, the 50th percentile (median) and 75th percentile earnings of master's-level social workers were $69,179 and $89,216, respectively. The 90th percentile earning was $113,220. These findings suggest that the earnings profile of social workers based on the BLS *Occupational Outlook Handbook* discussed earlier, which combines bachelor's- and master's-level social workers, does not accurately represent social workers with social work credentials, who are mostly master's-level social workers and are likely to be licensed.

Chart 13

Annual Gross Earnings of Self-Identified Social Workers by Education Level (2024 Dollars)



WEEKLY EARNINGS BY EDUCATION AND LICENSE STATUS: Table A7 in the Appendix provides detailed estimates of weekly earnings of bachelor's- and master's-level social workers by license status and at various percentiles. Across all education groups and regardless of license status, the mean and median **weekly earnings** of all social workers were $1,786 and $1,228, respectively, based on the 2018–2024 CPS–ORG microdata. Overall, licensed social workers had higher weekly earnings than their nonlicensed counterparts across all percentile distributions. For the median earnings, licensed social workers earned $242 (21%) more than their nonlicensed counterparts, $1,395 versus $1,153. The weekly earnings differences by license status grew at a higher percentile. At the 90th percentile, there was a difference of $665 (28%) between $3,074 for the licensed and $2,409 for the nonlicensed.

Chart 14 highlights differences in weekly earnings by license status among bachelor's- and master's-level social workers. Chart 14 suggests that although it remains true that licensed social workers had higher weekly earnings than their nonlicensed peers at each percentile, the gap between the licensed and nonlicensed appears to differ by education. Overall, bachelor's-level social workers had only slightly greater weekly earnings than their nonlicensed peers, but master's-level social workers had considerably higher earnings than their nonlicensed counterparts. For example, the 50th percentile weekly earnings of licensed bachelor's-level social workers were $79 higher than their nonlicensed counterparts (7.14%, $1,186 versus $1,107). However, for master's-level social workers,

the difference in weekly earnings between licensed and nonlicensed social workers was $176 (13.41%, $1,488 versus $1,312).

Chart 14

Weekly Earnings ($) of Self-Identified Social Workers by License Status (2024 Dollars)

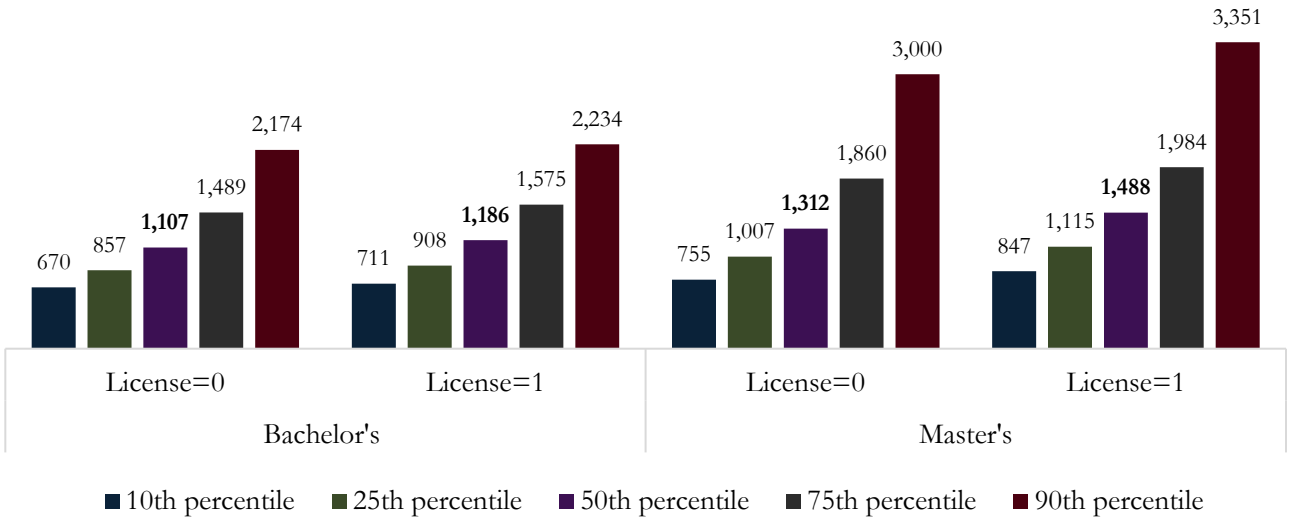
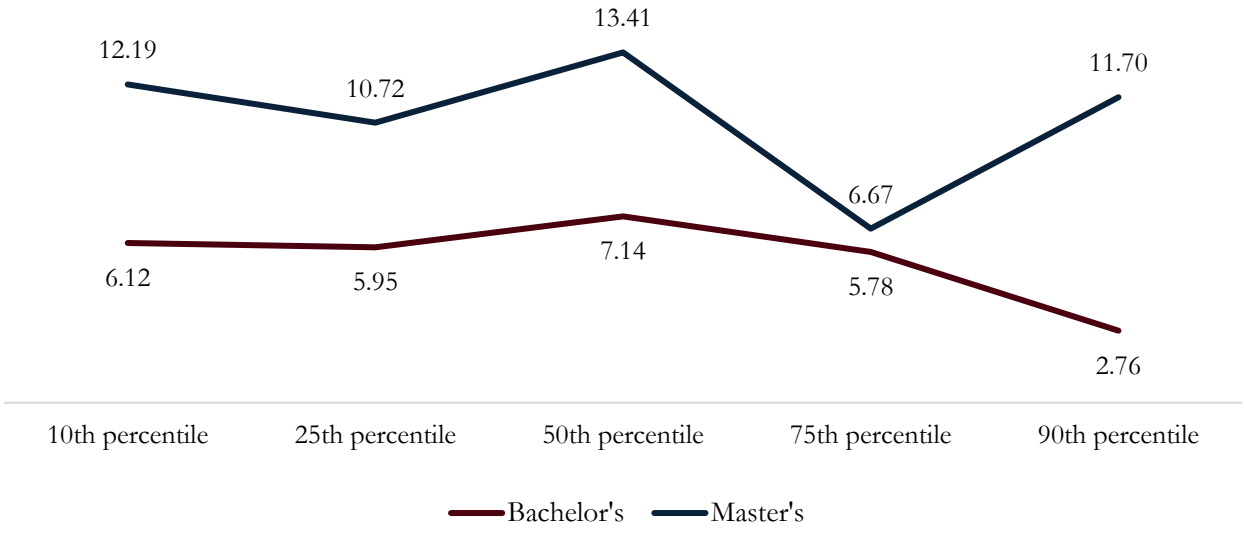


Chart 15 presents the percentage differences in weekly earnings between nonlicensed and licensed social workers at various percentiles. For master's-level social workers, licensed social workers earned between 6.67% and 13.41% more per week than their nonlicensed peers across the earnings distribution. However, for bachelor's-level social workers, a license was associated with between 2.76% to 7.14% higher weekly earnings across the earning percentiles. These findings may indicate that licensure at the master's level has greater value in the labor market than licensure at the bachelor's level.

Chart 15

Percentage Differences in Weekly Earnings Between Nonlicensed and Licensed Social Workers by Education Level



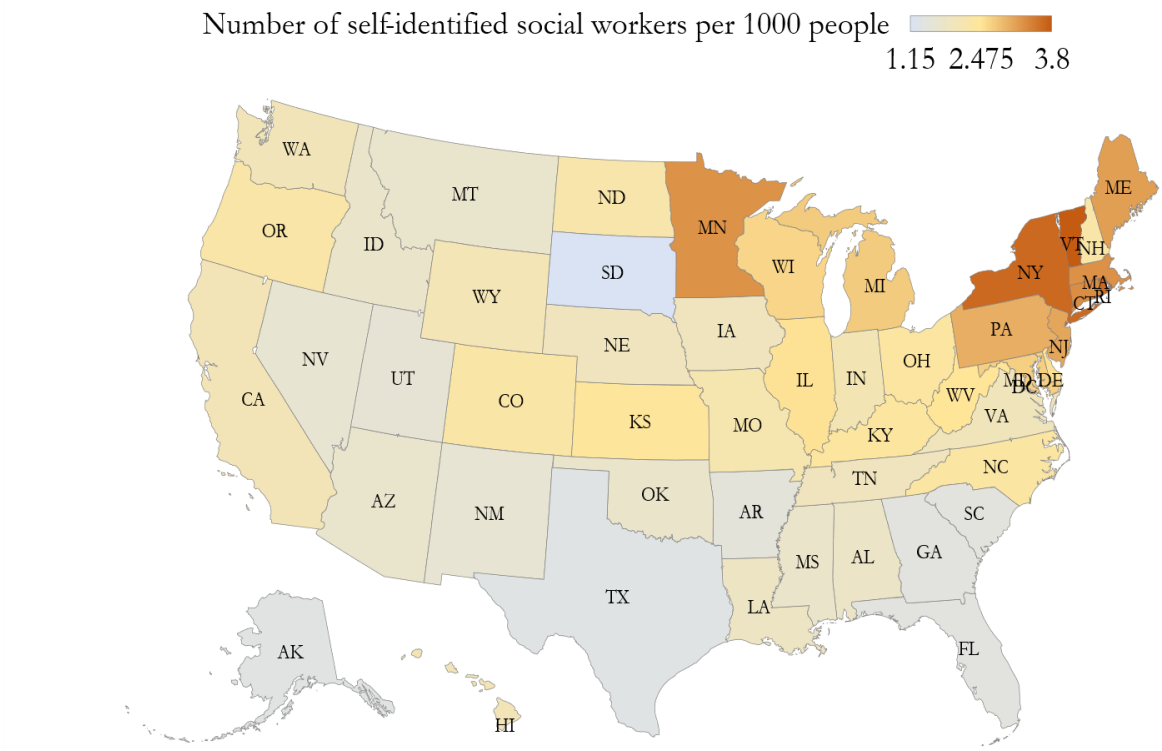
GEOGRAPHIC DENSITY OF SELF-IDENTIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS

Table A8 in the Appendix shows the number of self-identified social workers per 1,000 people in each state, based on estimates from the ACS microdata. It also ranked all 50 states and the District of Columbia by the number from the highest (ranked 1) to the lowest (ranked 51st). On average, there were 2.21 social workers for every 1,000 people across the country.

Chart 16 maps the number of self-identified social workers per 1,000 people to show the workforce density at a glance. Overall, states in the Northeast region had higher densities than those in the West and South regions. The three states with the lowest number of social workers per 1,000 people, highlighted in light blue, were South Dakota (1.15), Texas (1.38), and Alaska (1.39). Conversely, the three states with the highest concentrations of self-identified social workers, marked in orange, were Vermont (3.80), New York (3.65), and Rhode Island (3.65). Due to the uncertainty about what population-to-provider ratios should be considered a threshold for policy interventions, it is challenging to assess whether these low-density states require policy attention (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the level of variation in the density of social workers across the country.

Chart 16

Estimated Density of Self-Identified Social Workers by State, 2023



Discussion

Although social work established its professional standards decades ago, it has used inconsistent boundaries and definitions of the workforce in conducting its national workforce studies. In fact, many individuals without formal social work credentials hold positions as social workers, particularly at the baccalaureate level. In contrast, some credentialed social workers may not identify as social workers in a national household survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, further complicating accurate assessments of the workforce size. This study explored the definition of the professional workforce and conducted descriptive analyses of the existing national data to understand the characteristics, earnings, and geographic density of the self-identified social work workforce. It sought to address critical gaps in our understanding of the social work workforce and demonstrate the need for a national workforce survey. Furthermore, the findings of this study were meant to be used to validate the data from the recent 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey and help evaluate the reasonableness of the findings from the survey data. In particular, in the absence of any literature and national estimates on the nonlicensed social work workforce, some findings of this study were also meant to serve as a sampling frame for a sample of nonlicensed social workers drawn from the 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey.

As discussed above, many important questions about the social work workforce remain unanswered by the publicly available data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau's household surveys. For example, existing surveys do not distinguish between social workers who hold a social work degree or licensure and those who identify as social workers without such a credential. There is also limited information on social workers' practice categories, roles, and client groups, which are crucial to understanding social workers' jobs, employment, and compensation. Although social workers with social work degrees and licenses may perform different functions and roles and earn more than those without such credentials, few previous studies have explored how social work degrees, training, and licensure relate to different functions and roles in the labor market, let alone the economic benefits of such credentials for the workforce. This creates significant gaps in our understanding of how social work degrees and licensure affect the workforce, the profession, and the public. Accurate knowledge about the workforce could strengthen the professional identity of social workers and increase public recognition of the profession. It could help the accrediting body, social work programs, and professional organizations in updating their standards for social work education, training, licensure, and regulation. It would also help the profession advocate for the

professional titles, roles, and compensation for the workforce. Furthermore, such knowledge could provide practical resources to guide aspiring social workers as they navigate their employment and career choices. All of these call for a national workforce survey to collect the necessary information about the workforce to fill the knowledge gaps.

Another important rationale for a national workforce study is the need to monitor the changing workforce. This study revealed that White and U.S.-born women predominantly represent the profession of social work. It is important to monitor how the workforce has diversified to reflect the changing demographics of the U.S. population. The aforementioned national survey of licensed social workers conducted 20 years ago in 2004 reported that nearly 85% of licensed social workers were White and that Black and Hispanic/Latino social workers were only 6.8% and 4.3% of licensed social workers. These figures were in sharp contrast to the self-identified social work workforce, which included both licensed and nonlicensed social workers as well as those without any social work credentials: 65% White, 23.2% Black, 8.3% Hispanic/Latino, and 2.6% Asian (Center for Health Workforce Studies & NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). These demographic comparisons have not been updated in 20 years, limiting the profession's ability to assess how well its workforce has changed to reflect the growing diversity of the population it serves. Now is the time to make such an update with the data collected by the 2024 Social Work Workforce Survey.

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Appendix Tables

Table A1

Number of Self-Identified Social Workers in the United States

	2018–2022 American Community Survey	2023–2024 Current Population Survey–Basic Monthly Survey			
		All	License Status		
			Nonlicensed	Licensed	% Licensed
Number					
All social workers	731,405	790,080	469,938	320,142	40.52
Below bachelor's	43,085	62,776	44,740	18,036	28.73
Bachelor's level	332,009	373,610	295,303	78,307	20.96
BSW=1	68,038	--	--	--	--
BSW=0	263,971	--	--	--	--
Master's level	356,311	353,694	129,894	223,800	63.28
Percentage					
All social workers	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	--
Below bachelor's	5.89	7.95	9.52	5.63	--
Bachelor's level	45.39	47.29	62.84	24.46	--
Master's level	48.72	44.77	27.64	69.91	--

Note: -- indicates that data are unavailable.

Table A2

Number of Licenses Issued by Regulatory Boards Compiled in 2023, by Education and License Category

	Number	Percentage
All	547,555[1]	100.00
Without a social work degree	4,354	0.80
Bachelor's degree in social work	40,896	7.47
Master's degree in social work or higher	502,305	91.74
(Master's)	(163,957)	(32.64)
(Clinical)	(338,348)	(67.36)

[1] This number did not include provisional licenses.

Table A3

Demographic and Employment Characteristics of the Self-Identified and Licensed Social Work Workforce: All

	2018–2022 American Community Survey	2023–2024 Current Population Survey–Basic Monthly Survey		
		All	Nonlicensed	Licensed
Weighted N	731,405	790,080	469,938	320,142
Age (mean)	42.43	43.12	42.06	44.68
(median)	41.00	42.00	41.00	44.00
Male	17.52	16.35	19.07	12.35
Female	82.48	83.65	80.93	87.65
Race				
Asian	3.43	3.92	4.52	3.03
Black	20.26	22.09	24.44	18.65
Hispanic/Latino	14.21	15.45	19.33	9.75
Other	3.84	2.43	2.77	1.93
White	58.27	56.12	48.94	66.65
Immigration status				
Native-born citizen	89.91	88.39	86.23	91.56
Naturalized citizen	8.01	9.91	11.18	8.05
Noncitizen	2.07	1.70	2.59	0.40
Region of residence				
Northeast	25.87	25.51	25.79	27.57
Midwest	23.05	23.03	19.98	27.50
South	30.06	29.45	29.24	29.74
West	21.03	21.01	24.98	15.19
Health condition	6.16	4.43	4.47	4.38
Language at home				
English	82.84	--	--	--
Spanish	10.94	--	--	--
Other language	6.22	--	--	--
Field of practice				
K–12 school or higher education	7.36	7.98	4.61	12.94
Outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities	14.67	11.34	9.43	14.15
Hospital	10.79	9.76	5.98	15.31
Individual and family	33.09	31.13	35.75	24.34
Justice, public order, safety	2.70	2.73	3.29	1.91

Administration of human resource programs	14.03	17.07	19.04	14.19
Other	17.36	19.98	21.9	17.16
Type of employer				
Self-employed	3.52	3.04	1.30	5.60
Private, for-profit	22.14	26.79	27.41	25.88
Private, nonprofit	33.16	27.04	26.90	27.24
Federal government	4.04	4.81	2.82	7.73
State government	17.26	20.26	23.18	15.98
Local government	19.89	18.06	18.38	17.58
Full-time year-round work	80.84	--	--	--
Full-time work (35+ hours per week)	--	79.79	82.03	76.49
Multiple job-holding	--	8.14	6.27	10.89

Note: -- indicates that data are unavailable.

Table A4

Demographic and Employment Characteristics of the Self-Identified and Licensed Social Work Workforce: Bachelor's-Level Social Workers

	2018–2022 American Community Survey			2023–2024 Current Population Survey–Basic Monthly Survey		
	All	No BSW	BSW	All	Nonlicensed	Licensed
Weighted N	332,009	263,971	68,038	373,610	295,303	78,307
Age (mean)	40.47	40.51	40.35	41.19	40.76	42.82
(median)	39.00	39.00	39.00	40.00	39.00	42.00
Male	19.60	22.10	9.89	18.73	19.90	14.33
Female	80.40	77.90	90.11	81.27	80.10	85.67
Race						
Asian	3.29	3.63	1.96	4.60	4.40	5.32
Black	21.34	21.57	20.46	20.01	21.39	14.78
Hispanic/Latino	15.70	16.85	11.27	19.05	21.13	11.23
Other	3.73	3.95	2.89	3.61	3.30	4.81
White	55.94	54.00	63.43	52.73	49.78	63.86
Immigration status						
Native-born citizen	89.56	88.71	92.87	86.60	85.94	89.09
Naturalized citizen	8.05	8.61	5.87	11.52	11.93	9.98
Noncitizen	2.39	2.67	1.27	1.88	2.13	0.93
Region of residence						
Northeast	23.89	25.62	17.15	25.82	26.27	24.14
Midwest	24.21	21.82	33.47	22.35	20.01	31.19
South	31.86	30.88	35.62	28.49	28.85	27.16
West	20.05	21.67	13.76	22.33	24.88	17.52
Health condition[1]	5.91	5.67	6.86	3.55	3.40	4.14
Language at home						
English	81.65	80.25	87.16	--	--	--
Spanish	12.48	13.46	8.70	--	--	--
Other language	5.87	6.29	4.14	--	--	--
Field of practice						
K–12 school or higher education	3.37	3.10	4.43	2.6	2.24	3.95
Outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities	13.43	12.87	15.64	11.69	10.26	17.09
Hospital	5.48	5.16	6.75	5.05	4.57	6.85
Individual and family	39.31	39.02	40.42	34.8	36.45	28.6

Justice, public order, safety	3.20	3.50	2.07	4.07	3.96	4.49
Administration of human resource programs	18.02	18.70	15.36	19.47	19.97	17.56
Other[2]	17.18	17.66	15.33	22.31	22.54	21.45
Type of employer						
Self-employed	1.21	1.35	0.64	0.53	0.31	1.37
Private, for-profit	0.43	0.49	0.16	27.13	26.63	29.03
Private, nonprofit	21.91	21.43	23.80	28.44	27.54	31.83
Federal government	32.77	32.43	34.11	2.60	3.03	0.97
State government	2.55	2.82	1.50	24.45	24.55	24.05
Local government	21.62	21.92	20.44	16.86	17.95	12.74
Full-time year-round work	82.69	82.48	83.52	--	--	--
Full-time work (35+ hours per week)	--	--	--	82.59	83.34	79.76
Multiple job-holding	--	--	--	7.38	7.54	6.76

Note: -- indicates that data are unavailable.

[1] Having a health condition means experiencing difficulties in at least one of the following functions: cognitive, physical, ambulatory, independent living, personal care, vision, or hearing.

[2] Other fields include many industries, including community food, housing, and emergency services, doctors' offices, civic, social, and advocacy organizations, executive offices, etc.

Table A5

Demographic and Employment Characteristics of the Self-Identified and Licensed Social Work Workforce: Master's-Level Social Workers

	2018–2022 American Community Survey	2023–2024 Current Population Survey–Basic Monthly Survey		
	All	All	Nonlicensed	Licensed
Age (mean)	44.03	44.88	44.20	45.27
(median)	42.00	44.00	43.00	44.00
Male	15.61	14.70	18.40	12.56
Female	84.39	85.30	81.60	87.44
Race				
Asian	3.57	3.32	4.80	2.47
Black	19.04	21.87	28.36	18.11
Hispanic/Latino	11.74	11.47	15.47	9.15
Other	3.84	1.26	1.57	1.07
White	61.81	62.07	49.8	69.2
Immigration status				
Native-born	90.63	89.73	85.88	91.97
Naturalized citizen	7.68	9.03	11.16	7.79
Noncitizen	1.69	1.24	2.96	0.24
Region of residence				
Northeast	28.11	29.02	28.65	29.23
Midwest	22.17	22.96	16.03	26.98
South	28.27	30.13	31.76	29.18
West	21.46	17.78	23.56	14.60
Health condition[1]	6.09	5.39	6.92	4.51
Language at home				
English	84.80	--	--	--
Spanish	8.60	--	--	--
Other language	6.60	--	--	--
Field of practice				
K–12 school or higher education	11.59	14.95	11.59	16.89
Outpatient and residential care or nursing facilities	15.82	11.79	8.47	13.71
Hospital	16.62	15.45	9.64	18.83
Individual and family	27.12	26.91	35.13	22.14
Justice, public order, safety	1.89	1.26	2.08	0.78

Administration of human resource programs	10.36	14.04	16.02	12.88
Other[2]	16.6	15.61	17.05	14.76
Type of employer				
Self-employed	6.01	6.22	3.98	7.53
Private, for-profit	22.00	24.71	25.14	24.47
Private, nonprofit	33.86	26.54	27.39	26.05
Federal government	5.44	7.65	2.54	10.61
State government	13.12	15.25	21.07	11.87
Local government	19.50	19.62	19.88	19.48
Full-time year-round work	78.82	--	--	--
Full-time work (35+ hours per week)	--	77.10	78.89	76.06
Multiple job-holding	--	9.58	4.64	12.44

Note: -- indicates that data are unavailable.

[1] Having a health condition means experiencing difficulties in at least one of the following functions: cognitive, physical, ambulatory, independent living, personal care, vision, or hearing.

[2] Other fields include many industries, including community food, housing, and emergency services, doctors' offices, civic, social, and advocacy organizations, executive offices, etc.

Table A6

Annual Earnings (Adjusted to 2024 Dollar Value) of the Social Work Workforce by Education Level

	2018–2022 American Community Survey		2018–2024 Current Population Survey–Annual Social and Economic Supplement
	Wage/Salary[1]	Earning[2]	Wage/Salary[1]
All			
Mean	62,204	63,997	64,092
10th percentile	22,941	25,953	25,412
25th percentile	42,180	43,716	42,000
50th percentile	58,628	59,940	56,700
75th percentile	77,983	79,187	78,000
90th percentile	101,961	103,139	99,900
Bachelor's level (all)			
Mean	55,933	56,506	60,095
10th percentile	23,358	23,996	24,960
25th percentile	39,765	40,228	39,960
50th percentile	51,906	51,947	53,320
75th percentile	69,179	69,589	70,180
90th percentile	88,800	89,216	89,250
BSW=No			
Mean	56,189	56,849	--
10th percentile	23,358	23,996	--
25th percentile	39,510	39,960	--
50th percentile	51,906	51,906	--
75th percentile	69,930	70,099	--
90th percentile	89,538	90,560	--
BSW=Yes			--
Mean	54,939	55,175	--
10th percentile	23,197	23,996	--
25th percentile	40,785	40,785	--
50th percentile	52,827	53,203	--
75th percentile	67,478	67,478	--
90th percentile	82,844	82,844	--
Master's-level social workers			
Mean	69,620	72,724	70,345
10th percentile	23,310	30,588	27,720
25th percentile	49,311	50,981	46,800
50th percentile	67,478	69,179	66,600
75th percentile	88,786	89,216	88,200
90th percentile	111,000	113,220	109,200

[1] The annual wages and salaries refer to total pretax wages and salaries received as employees for the previous year. [2] The annual earnings refer to earnings from wages or salaries or a person's own businesses for the previous year. -- indicates that data are unavailable.

Table A7

Weekly Earnings[1] (Adjusted to 2024 Dollar Value) of the Self-Identified Social Work Workforce by Education Level and License Status

	2018–2024 Current Population Survey–Outgoing Rotation Group		
	All	Nonlicensed	Licensed
All			
Mean	1,786	1,598	2,088
10th percentile	714	697	756
25th percentile	930	888	1,028
50th percentile	1,228	1,153	1,395
75th percentile	1,708	1,601	1,865
90th percentile	2,560	2,409	3,074
Bachelor's-level social workers			
Mean	1,507	1,486	1,575
10th percentile	678	670	711
25th percentile	871	857	908
50th percentile	1,116	1,107	1,186
75th percentile	1,523	1,489	1,575
90th percentile	2,178	2,174	2,234
Master's-level social workers			
Mean	2,150	1,876	2,363
10th percentile	774	755	847
25th percentile	1,054	1007	1,115
50th percentile	1,404	1312	1,488
75th percentile	1,938	1860	1,984
90th percentile	3,202	3000	3,351

[1] The weekly earnings measured the amounts self-identified social workers usually earned per week at their current job before deductions.

Table A8

Estimated Number of Self-Identified Social Workers in the Labor Force

	Total U.S. Population[1]	Number of Self-Identified Social Workers[1]		
	N	N	Number per 1,000	Rank
US	331,097,594	731,405	2.21	--
AL	5,028,092	9,123	1.81	36
AK	734,822	1,022	1.39	49
AZ	7,172,282	12,273	1.71	41
AR	3,018,669	4,571	1.51	45
CA	39,356,104	79,633	2.02	28
CO	5,770,790	13,082	2.27	21
CT	3,611,317	11,967	3.31	4
DE	993,635	2,510	2.53	14
DC	670,587	1,917	2.86	10
FL	21,634,529	31,158	1.44	48
GA	10,722,325	15,599	1.45	47
HI	1,450,589	2,935	2.02	29
ID	1,854,109	3,203	1.73	39
IL	12,757,634	32,181	2.52	15
IN	6,784,343	14,086	2.08	26
IA	3,188,836	6,149	1.93	32
KS	2,935,922	7,135	2.43	17
KY	4,502,935	10,732	2.38	18
LA	4,640,546	8,539	1.84	35
ME	1,366,949	4,296	3.14	7
MD	6,161,707	16,599	2.69	12
MA	6,984,211	22,864	3.27	5
MI	10,057,981	27,431	2.73	11
MN	5,695,286	18,541	3.26	6
MS	2,958,846	5,127	1.73	38
MO	6,154,422	13,251	2.15	25
MT	1,091,840	1,881	1.72	40
NE	1,958,939	3,756	1.92	34
NV	3,104,817	5,106	1.64	42
NH	1,379,604	3,117	2.26	23
NJ	9,249,063	28,522	3.08	8
NM	2,112,463	3,420	1.62	43
NY	19,994,379	73,064	3.65	2
NC	10,470,203	24,449	2.34	20
ND	776,874	1,712	2.20	24
OH	11,774,683	27,841	2.36	19
OK	3,970,497	6,922	1.74	37
OR	4,229,374	9,568	2.26	22
PA	12,989,208	38,918	3.00	9
RI	1,094,250	3,998	3.65	3

SC	5,142,761	7,569	1.47	46
SD	890,348	1,028	1.15	51
TN	6,923,772	13,332	1.93	33
TX	29,243,342	40,286	1.38	50
UT	3,283,809	5,184	1.58	44
VT	643,816	2,447	3.80	1
VA	8,624,511	16,952	1.97	31
WA	7,688,549	15,312	1.99	30
WV	1,792,967	4,453	2.48	16
WI	5,882,128	15,454	2.63	13
WY	577,929	1,190	2.06	27

[1] Author's estimation using the 2018–2022 American Community Survey microdata. The unweighted N was 15,721,123 for the total population and 33,613 for self-identified social workers.

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