

NEW SOCIAL WORKERS

RESULTS OF THE
NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF 2017
SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES

THE NATIONAL SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE STUDY





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A Report to

The Council on Social Work Education
and
National Workforce Initiative Steering Committee

From

The George Washington University
Health Workforce Institute

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Preface

Social workers play a significant role in providing health and social services to populations in need. As one of the largest professions in the health and social services sectors, they also serve in various roles in administration, community organizing, evaluation, teaching, and policy. Yet despite the size of the profession and its contribution to society, our knowledge and understanding of the social work workforce are remarkably limited. Additional data are needed to understand social work roles and responsibilities and how these may be changing. Data are also needed to inform the social work education community about the need for continued expansion in capacity and whether the current curricula are appropriate for current and future roles.

In recognition of the need for and importance of better data, organizations representing the social work profession came together to form the National Workforce Initiative Steering Committee to initiate and guide a major study of the social work workforce. Following a competitive process, the George Washington University Health Workforce Institute was selected to conduct the study. The goals of the study included informing the social work community about the supply, demand, distribution, and use of

social workers and developing a plan for ongoing data collection and analysis.

A major component of the study was a survey of a sample of 2017 graduates of social work degree programs. This report presents key findings from the Survey of 2017 Social Work Graduates. A series of briefs delving into detail on graduates by specific demographic and educational backgrounds, such as by focus of practice, race/ethnicity, sexual preference, and institution sponsorship, will be available in 2018.

The organizational members of the National Workforce Initiative Steering Committee were as follows:

- American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare
- Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors
- Association of Social Work Boards
- Council on Social Work Education
- Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work
- National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work
- National Association of Social Workers
- Society for Social Work and Research

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Background and Rationale



The Survey of 2017 Social Work Graduates included questions about the demographic and educational background of the graduates, who are the future social work workforce. It also gathered information about the jobs the graduates planned to take and their experience in the job market. The survey, which captured information on graduates at all levels (BSW, MSW, DSW, and PhD), thus provides a picture of how the social work workforce moves through education and into practice by type of education, demographic, educational background, location, and so forth. It also captures information on social work graduates who may not practice in positions clearly identified as social work and who would otherwise be missed by existing sources of data on social workers.

This survey provides a snapshot of social workers in terms of

- where they come from;
- which jobs they find;
- marketplace demand;
- satisfaction; and
- future career, education, and licensing/certification plans.

The survey complements other parts of the George Washington University Health Workforce Institute (GW HWI) study including the Social Work Profile, which presents current supply, distribution, and work setting. Monitoring supply and demand for social workers through the survey of recent graduates provides valuable information that can help align education and practice.

Conducting the survey on an on-going basis will provide valuable insights on the trends in the profession and marketplace.

GW HWI has several years' experience conducting surveys of physicians completing their training and moving into their first jobs. It adapted a tested survey instrument to address the particular characteristics of the social work career and the key questions of interest to the Steering Committee. ■

Executive Summary

In the spring of 2017, GW HWI, working through a sample of social work programs, recruited graduating students to participate in a survey of their work plans and experience in the job market. The survey was designed to obtain information on the characteristics of new social workers, the jobs they were entering, and the marketplace demand for social workers. Nearly 2,000 social workers from 84 social work programs signed up for the online survey, which was launched at the end of August 2017 and closed 4 weeks later with more than 1,400 responses. Data cleaning reduced the final figure to 1,348 valid responses, for a response rate of 70% of those that signed up to participate. Table 1 lists the responses by degree and the estimated proportion of all U.S. social work graduates.

Several cross-checks were carried out to assess the extent to which the survey respondents and the schools from which they graduated might be considered representative of the national population of social work graduates based on Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) data on accredited social work education programs. MSW and BSW respondents were overrepresented from the Northeast and West census regions and underrepresented in the Midwest and South regions compared to the CSWE data. In terms of sponsorship, public schools were underrepresented and private schools overrepresented among MSW programs, but public and private schools were evenly distributed among BSW programs. Regarding race and ethnicity, there was underrepresentation of African Americans, whereas the Hispanic proportion in the sample more closely mirrored the

Table 1: Overall Responses and Response Rates

Degree Awarded	Number of Respondents	Number of Programs	Response Rate by Degree ^a (%)	Proportion of National Graduates With Each Degree ^b (%)
BSW	195	24	62.5	1
MSW	1,107	37	69.8	5
PhD	34	19	72.3	12
DSW	12	4	80.0	21
Total	1,348	84	70.0	N/A

^aResponse rate reflects the percentage of confirmed registrants who responded.

^bBased on data supplied by the Council on Social Work Education on 2016 social work graduation numbers.

national proportion among both MSW and BSW graduates.

Regarding BSW respondents, graduates of schools that had BSW and MSW programs were overrepresented compared to BSW graduates nationally (78% to 59%).

Hence, the survey results are not necessarily representative of all social work graduates. The more than 1,100 MSW respondents—5% of the total MSW graduates—allows for a more robust analysis of new MSWs; although there were 195 BSW respondents, they represent only 1% of graduating BSWs, giving reason for caution in interpreting the findings as representative. Although the responses for PhDs and DSWs represent 12% and 21% of all 2017 graduates, respectively, the low overall number of those

graduates prevents in-depth analysis of their experiences.

Although a high percentage of all graduates by degree type is not needed to draw statistically valid conclusions, analysis of subgroups is limited if the overall number of respondents is not of sufficient size. For this reason, this report provides a more in-depth analysis of MSW respondents than of the other types of degree awardees.

Key Findings

1. According to CSWE, in 2016 there were 27,659 MSW graduates. Based on the Survey of 2017 Graduates, the majority are entering social work jobs.

Seventy-one percent (71%) of new MSWs reported that they were going into positions that required an MSW or a social work license while 9% took positions as social workers that did not require a degree or license (see Figure 1). Another 14.3% took jobs they did not consider to be in the field of social work but felt that their social work education was relevant to their work. Only 5.7% of MSWs took jobs unrelated to their education. At the MSW level, there is very little attrition from the field at the point of graduation.

The figures do not include respondents who were still looking for a job or who were not looking for work at the time of the survey.

2. The majority of BSW graduates were either enrolled in an MSW program or expected to enroll in the next 2 years.

For most BSW graduates the bachelor's degree is the first step on their social work

Figure 1: Types of Principal Position After Graduation (MSWs)

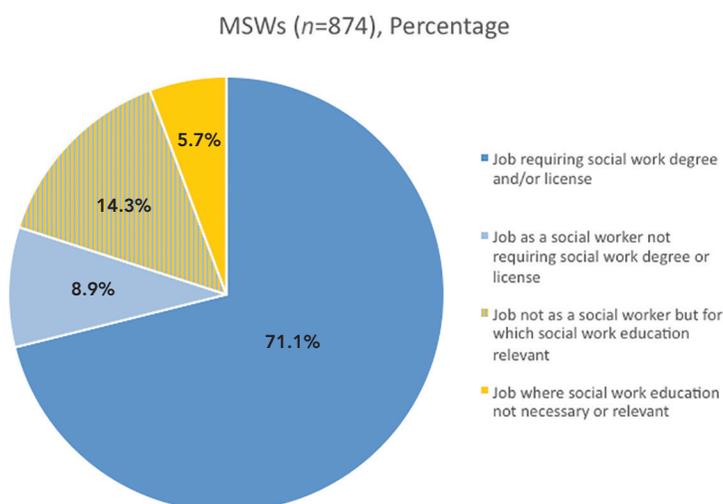


Table 2: BSWs Planning to Obtain an MSW

Do you plan to obtain an MSW in the future?	(n=194) %
Currently enrolled in an MSW program	49.5
Expect to enroll in an MSW program in the next 2 years	23.2
Hope to enroll in an MSW program in the future	19.1
No plans to enroll	8.2
Total	100

career pathway. As seen in Table 2, the majority were already enrolled in an MSW program or were planning to enroll in the next 2 years. It should be noted that respondents were more likely to have graduated from BSW programs that were in schools with MSW programs than shown in the CSWE data on all BSW programs: 78.3% vs. 58.1%. This may have contributed to the high percentage of BSW respondents going on to an MSW.

3. For those BSWs going on to work, most were going into positions that did not require a BSW or license.

Although the majority of BSW graduates entered or were planning to enter MSW programs, many were also taking jobs. As seen in Figure 2, of those entering jobs only 31.7% were going into positions requiring a social work degree or license. Another 16.8% were entering positions in which they considered themselves to be social workers although no degree or license was required; and 30.7% were entering positions not as social workers but for which they considered their social education to be a relevant preparation.

4. Many MSW and BSW graduates are entering positions using the skills and competencies gained through their social work education but are not formally identified as social work jobs. Unlike individuals with other degrees, such as nursing, who are clear about their identities regardless of setting or role, this is not the case for some individuals with a social work degree.

The survey included questions related to the jobs that graduates were entering, including setting, function, and job title. For MSWs

8.9% indicated they were in positions that did not require a degree or license but for which they felt they were working as social workers. Another 13.4% were in jobs that were not considered social work positions but for which their social work education provided relevant preparation. Examples of the job titles reported by this group include case manager, community outreach counselor, day shelter supervisor, human resource specialist, program manager, and volunteer coordinator.

Because social workers are well qualified for many diverse positions, some of which can also be filled by individuals with different educational pathways, the boundaries and definition of the profession are fuzzy. This creates issues of identity as well as difficulties counting and tracking the profession and documenting its contribution to society.

Figure 2: Types of Principal Position After Graduation (MSWs)

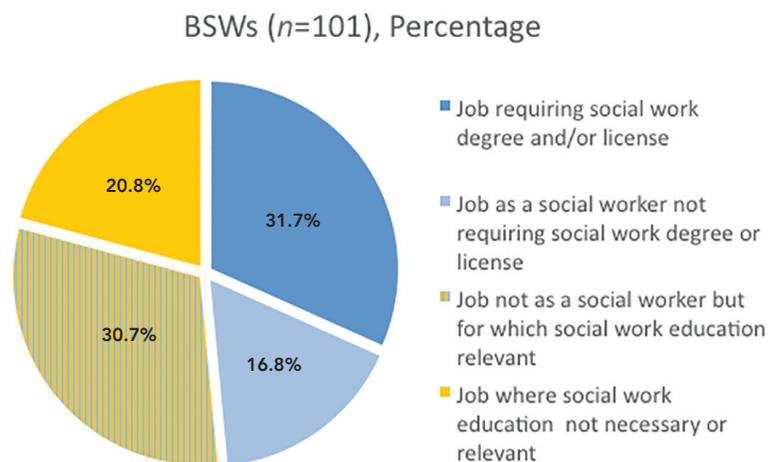


Table 3: Types of Jobs Taken by Those Working as Social Workers

In your principal position what best describes your role?	BSW (n=48) %	MSW (n=696) %
Direct work with individuals, families, or groups	77.1	92.0
Direct work with communities	12.5	2.6
Indirect social work ^a	8.3	3.7
Social work higher education	0.0	0.3
Other social work position	0.0	0.1
A position for which you believe a social work education provides relevant preparation	2.1	1.3
Total	100	100

Note. Percentages are of those who entered positions as a social worker, including positions not requiring a social work degree or license but described as a social work position by the respondent.

^aIndirect social work was defined as including public policy and advocacy; administration, management; planning; program evaluation; research (excluding teaching positions); or environmental health or public health work.

5. Based on the number of new graduates at the BSW and MSW level and on the results of the survey, we estimate that in 2016 between 26,500 and 30,200 new social workers entered the field with about four of five entering with an MSW. Because a majority of BSWs go on for their MSW, MSW programs play a central role in helping social work-educated individuals enter the workforce.¹

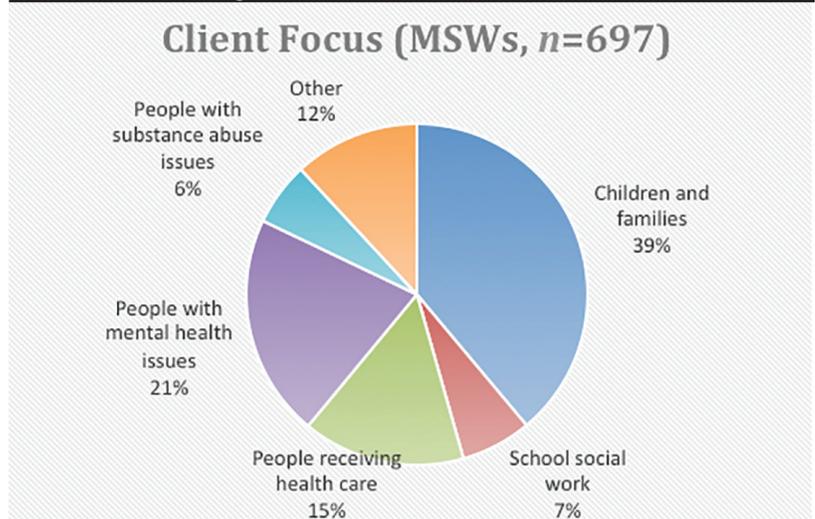
Based on the 2017 Survey of Social Work Graduates, we estimate that 95% of the MSW graduates go on to employment, of which 80% to 94% go into positions requiring an MSW and/or social work license or positions that they define as social work. (The 94% includes graduates going into positions not as social workers but in which they believed their social work education to be relevant preparation for the job.) The other 6% go into other non-social work jobs. According to CSWE, in 2016 there were 27,659 MSW graduates and 20,348 BSW graduates. We estimate that about 27% of new BSWs go directly into social work positions after their BSW graduation without a likelihood of going on to take an MSW and so

should be independently counted as new entrants into the profession alongside the MSW numbers.

6. New social workers are diverse in terms of age, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation; the field continues to be predominately female. The majority of social workers enter the field with work experience.

- Sex: All degree types were overwhelmingly female, with

Figure 3: Population Groups Served, Main Client Focus of MSWs Working as Social Workers



¹ This calculation of new social workers includes only those receiving a social work degree. According to the American Community Survey, approximately 24% of self-identified social workers do not have a bachelor's degree or above in social work. See "Profile of the Social Work Workforce"; GW Health Workforce Institute, October 2017.

Table 4: Practice Settings for Those Working as Social Workers (MSWs Only)

In your principal position who are you (or will you be) working for?	(n=696) %
Other private, not-for-profit, tax-exempt, or charitable organization	34.6
Outpatient health-care services	17.8
Other state, local, or federal government agency	13.6
Hospital inpatient facility	12.2
Educational establishment outside of higher education	6.0
Private social work practice	5.5
Other private, for-profit facility, or business	4.3
Higher education institution	2.0
Nursing or residential care facility	1.6
Rehabilitation facility	1.4
An organization that primarily does research and evaluation	0.6
Grant-making organization	0.3
Total	100

Note. Percentages are of those who were working in a position as a social worker, including jobs not requiring a social work degree or license.

nearly 90% of MSW respondents being female. DSWs were entirely female and PhDs a little less so than other degrees. This is generally consistent with data on all social work graduates.

- **Age:** The median ages of BSW, MSW, PhD, and DSW respondents were 23, 28, 39, and 41, respectively, a progression which is not surprising. It is worth noting that although the median age for MSWs was 28, nearly 13% were more than 40 years old and had significant work experience.
- **Race:** About two-thirds of respondents in any degree program were White (excluding DSWs, of which there were only 12 respondents). Nearly 11% of the BSW and MSW respondents were Black/African Americans. American Indian/Alaska Natives represented 2.6% of the BSW respondents and 0.8% of the MSW respondents. Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders represented 7.8% of the BSW and 6.6% of the MSW respondents.

- **Ethnicity:** Proportions of respondents who identified with Hispanic origin were similar between BSWs and MSWs at around 13% to 14%. Considerably lower proportions of Hispanics were graduating with a PhD or DSW.
- **Sexual Orientation:** Approximately 80% of respondents identified as straight or heterosexual in each degree categories. The proportion identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, homosexual, or transgender was higher among PhD and DSW respondents than among BSW and MSW respondents, whereas the proportion identifying as bisexual was lower.
- **Work History:** Among MSW graduates, 78.6% had work experience before entering MSW programs.

7. The majority of new social workers are providing direct or clinical services.

The majority of MSWs (92.0%) and BSWs (77.1%) were working in direct practice with individuals, families, or groups (see Table 3). Some BSWs were practicing with communities (12.5%) or indirect social work (8.3%).

8. New MSWs have many career options, including health care, mental health/behavioral health, education, and government.

Master's graduates with a practice focus on children and families (see Figure 3) represented the largest concentration of social workers. This was consistent with the focus of their MSW education. The second highest focus was treating individuals with mental health issues. Interestingly, there were differences based on sex: More men with MSWs were focused on mental health and substance abuse (34.8%) than children and families (31.8%); but women were more likely to focus on children and families (39.9%) than mental health/substance abuse (26.4%).

Almost a third of MSWs were working in health-care settings, with 17.8% serving in outpatient health services and 12.2% in inpatient facilities (see Table 4). Another third (34.6%) were serving in private and not-for-profit organizations not captured by the questionnaire precoding, and 13.6% were working in state, local, or federal agencies not captured by the questionnaire precoding.

Table 5: Practice Settings for Those Working as Social Workers, by Race (MSWs Only)

In your principal position who are you (or will you be) working for?	Black/African American (n=76) %	White (n=497) %	Total (n=689) %
Outpatient health-care services	11.8	18.9	17.9
Hospital inpatient facility	7.9	13.1	12.3
Educational establishment outside of higher education	5.3	6.2	6.0
Private social work practice	5.3	5.4	5.5
Higher education institution	1.3	1.6	2.0
Nursing or residential care facility	0	2.0	1.6
Rehabilitation facility	2.6	1.4	1.5
An organization that primarily does research and evaluation.	1.3	0.2	0.6
Grant-making organization	0	0.2	0.3
Other private, not-for-profit, tax-exempt or charitable organization	32.9	35.4	34.3
Other state, local or federal government agency	25.0	10.9	13.8
Other private, for-profit facility or business	6.6	4.6	4.4
Total	100	100	100

Note. Percentages are of those who were working in a position as a social worker, including jobs not requiring a social work degree or license.

Table 6: Job Educational or Licensing Requirement for Those Working as Social Workers

Minimum educational or licensing requirement for your current principal position	BSW (n=49) %	MSW (n=695) %
Social work license	16.3	36.0
MSW, but not license	2.0	44.5
BSW	42.9	7.6
Any bachelor's degree	28.6	8.2
High school diploma	6.1	0.6
Other	4.1	3.2
Total	100	100

Note. Percentages are of those who were working in a position as a social worker, including jobs not requiring a social work degree or license.

Table 7: Salary by Degree and Sex

Degree	Female			Male			Total		
	Mean Income	Median Income (in thousands)	n	Mean Income	Median Income (in thousands)	n	Mean Income	Median Income (in thousands)	n
BSW	\$30,064	\$30–\$34	39	\$37,188	\$35–\$39	8	\$31,327	\$30–\$34	49
MSW	\$44,309	\$40–\$44	622	\$45,524	\$45–\$49	62	\$44,418	\$40–\$44	687
PhD	\$71,500	\$70–\$74	20	\$64,375	\$65–\$69	8	\$69,464	\$70–\$74	28
DSW	\$66,500	\$65–\$69	10	NA	NA	NA	\$66,500	\$65–\$69	10

Note. Data for those working in positions as social workers, including jobs not requiring a social work degree or license. There were no males receiving a DSW among the respondents. NA=not applicable.

9. Social workers from historically underrepresented groups appear to have some different patterns than those not from historically underrepresented groups.

A quarter of African American MSWs were working for government agencies (see Table 5) compared to only one in 10 (10.9%) White MSWs ($p=.0014$). Conversely, fewer than one in five African American MSWs reported working in inpatient or outpatient facilities, compared to almost one third (32%) of White MSWs ($p=.0321$).

10. The majority of MSW graduates are entering social work positions that require an MSW or a social work license.

The plurality of new social workers are entering positions requiring a social work degree (44.5% of the MSWs); and many (36%) are going into positions requiring a social work license (see Table 6). This may reflect timing of the survey and the need for experience in some states to obtain a license.

11. Salaries for new social workers are relatively low, with the mean income for MSWs being \$44,418 and for BSWs \$31,327.

In terms of mean income for graduates going into social work positions, MSWs earned \$13,000 more than BSWs, with PhDs and DSWs earning some \$20,000 to \$25,000 more than MSWs (see Table 7). MSW males were earning around \$1,200 more than females, whereas among PhDs

the positions were reversed, with females earning around \$7,000 more than males (although there were only eight male PhDs reporting income data). Income for female BSW graduates was very low and \$7,000 less than males (although there were only eight male BSWs in the sample). All DSW respondents were female.

The same relationships exist when considering median income, that is, males make more than females at the MSW and BSW level but not at the PhD level, and PhDs/DSWs make more than MSWs, who make more than BSWs.

12. Jobs for new MSWs appear to be plentiful covering a wide range of activities and settings.

The overall job market appears a bit tighter for BSWs than MSWs: 15.3% of MSWs and 27% of BSWs who searched for jobs reported finding no, very few, or few jobs locally (see Table 8). Those who found some or many jobs in their

Table 8: Assessment of Local Job Market

What is your overall assessment of social work or social work-related jobs/opportunities locally (within 50 miles of where you graduated)?	BSW (n=115) %	MSW (n=941) %
No jobs	0.9	0.1
Very few jobs	12.2	4.6
Few jobs	13.9	10.6
Some jobs	47.8	41.7
Many jobs	21.7	39.1
Unknown	3.5	3.9
Total	100	100

Note. Percentages are of those who searched for a job.

local areas were 80.8% MSWs and 69.5% BSWs. MSWs who indicated they had a difficult time finding a satisfactory position most often cited inadequate salary/compensation or inadequate jobs in desired settings. For BSWs, the most cited reason was overall lack of jobs/opportunities.

The survey also included an open-ended question asking the respondents' impressions of jobs that were most available and unavailable. In some job categories the message was unambiguous: Case manager/case worker jobs were seen as plentiful, as were child welfare/child protective positions and positions requiring a license. Jobs not requiring a license and indirect social work jobs were seen as scarce. Given the diversity of needs across communities and the various backgrounds of graduates, it is not surprising that some job types, such as clinical and direct practice positions, appear on both lists; further analysis may reveal whether there are

patterns to the responses, such as high demand in some regions but low demand in others or differences by social work degree of the respondent.

13. New social workers were generally satisfied with their new jobs and their benefits; they were less satisfied with their income. The majority of new social workers would recommend the profession to others.

“As indicated in Tables 9 and 10, the majority of MSWs and BSWs were very satisfied or satisfied with their current position overall; with only 6% to 8% being dissatisfied. While a majority of both MSWs and BSWs were satisfied with their salary, less than 27% and 29% for MSWs and BSWs were “very” satisfied and 20% of the BSWs and 25% of the MSWs were dissatisfied.

Table 9: Satisfaction With Position

What is your overall level of satisfaction with your current position?	BSW (n=49) %	MSW (n=692) %
Very satisfied	46.9	50.3
Somewhat satisfied	46.9	41.6
Somewhat dissatisfied	0	6.1
Very dissatisfied	6.1	2.0
Total	100	100

Note. Percentages are of those who were working in a position as a social worker, including jobs not requiring a social work degree or license.

Table 10: Satisfaction With Salary

What is your level of satisfaction with your current (or expected) social work salary?	BSW (n=49) %	MSW (n=693) %
Very satisfied	28.6	26.6
Somewhat satisfied	51.0	48.1
Somewhat dissatisfied	14.3	17.2
Very dissatisfied	6.1	8.2
Total	100	100

Note. Percentages are of those who were working in a position as a social worker, including jobs not requiring a social work degree or license.

Table 11: Views of the Profession

Would you recommend a social work degree to others?	BSW (n=192) %	MSW (n=1,091) %
Yes	92.2	92.7
No	7.8	7.3
Total	100	100

Findings on the Methodology and Next Steps

The survey was distributed in late August 2017 and the majority of respondents had completed their social work education in May or June. At the time of the survey, 86.4% of MSWs had searched for a job, and most of the remainder had a job without searching or were not planning to search at the time of the survey. Although the percentage of BSWs who had searched was lower (63.5%), this reflects the high numbers going straight to an MSW program or returning to a prior job. Overall, the use of a survey of new graduates a few months after graduation appears to be a good approach to learning about the supply and demand for social workers. Most of the survey respondents (87.9% of MSWs and 83.2% of BSWs) expressed willingness to have their e-mail addresses retained by GW HWI and CSWE for future surveys (see Table 11). This opens the possibility of longitudinal study of their social work career paths.

The Survey of New Social Work Graduates appears to be an effective way to obtain valuable information on roles of social worker graduates as well as the future supply of and demand for social workers. Collecting this data consistently over time will provide even clearer insights into how the job market for social workers and supply and demand are evolving. In addition, follow-up surveys several years after graduation will provide valuable information on adequacy of preparation and career paths. This information will be valuable to social work programs, prospective students, and policy makers.



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