The Provision of Behavioral Health Services by Recent Master of Social Work (MSW) Graduates

March 2021

Findings From the 2019 Survey of Social Work Graduates

George Washington University's Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity (Mullan Institute)

Background

Information on the real-world experiences of recent social work graduates sheds light on the range of services provided by social workers. The Survey of Social Work Graduates was developed by the George Washington University's Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity (Mullan Institute) in collaboration with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). In 2019 the Mullan Institute surveyed recent graduates from more than 50 master of social work (MSW) programs across the country. The purpose of this survey was to gain information on the employment outcomes of new social workers, including services provided, populations served, and experiences in the job market. This report focuses on the provision of behavioral health services by recent MSW graduates across different job settings. For a more comprehensive report of findings and detailed description of the 2019 survey, see *The Social Work Profession: Findings From Three Years of Surveys of New Social Workers.*

Key Findings

MSWs serve a wide range of vulnerable and underserved populations across different settings. Among MSWs working in direct social work (most MSWs), more than one third enter jobs focused primarily on behavioral health (BH), which includes jobs focused on the provision of services related to mental health disorders or substance use disorders (SUDs). According to the 2019 Survey of Social Work Graduates, more than one third of MSWs concentrated on mental health disorders or SUDs in their degree program (34% and 2%, respectively). Upon receiving their degree, nearly a quarter (24.6%) of all MSW graduates entered positions with a main focus on people with mental health disorders, and 9% entered jobs focused on people with SUDs. Jobs

focused on mental health were the second most common focus for recent social work graduates, second only to child and family social work.

In addition to the population of MSWs explicitly focused on BH in their jobs, almost half of all social workers in other areas of direct social work (e.g., child and family or school social work) said they provide BH services to a majority of their clients.[1]. In all, more than 60% of social workers in direct social work provide BH services to a majority of their clients. According to the 2018 American Community Survey, there are an estimated 368,618 social workers with a master's degree or higher in the United States. Hence, if new MSWs are representative of all social workers, we estimate that there were approximately 221,000 social workers with MSWs providing BH services in the United States in 2018.

1. This information was derived from the following survey question: "For what percentage of your clients do you provide mental health/substance use disorder services (or expect to provide in your new position)?"

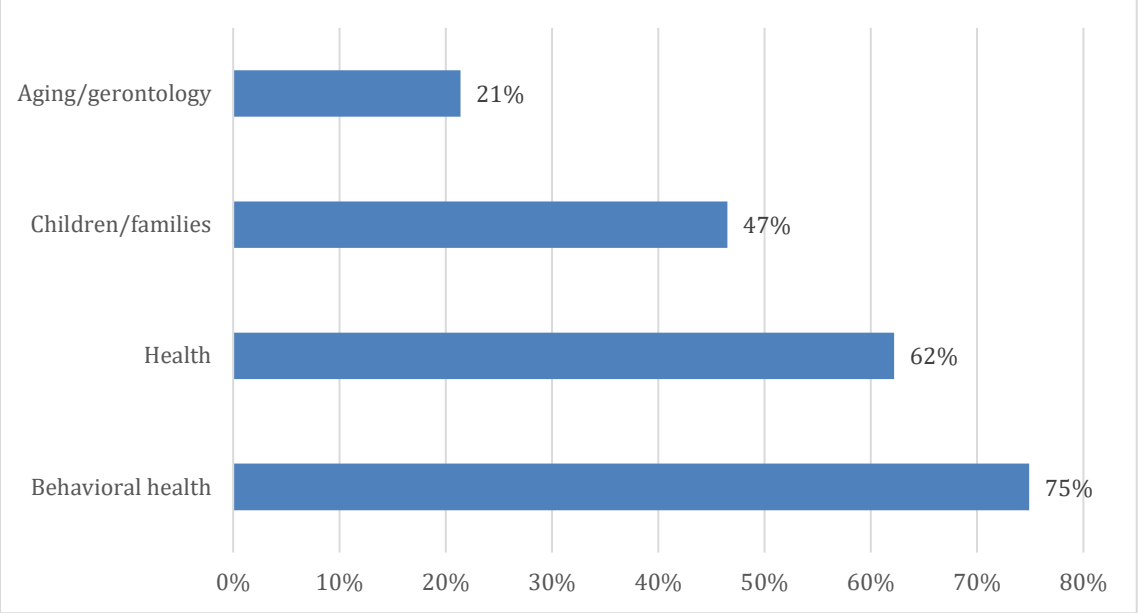
This report presents findings related to the provision of BH services by new MSWs from the 2019 Survey of Social Work Graduates. Section A describes the 60% of the new MSWs who are providing BH services to a majority (more than 50%) of their clients. Section B describes the characteristics of new MSWs who entered jobs specifically focused on the provision of BH services.

A. Behavioral Health Service Provision

The population of social workers providing BH services to a majority of clients comes from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of MSWs

who provide BH services to a majority of their clients within each program concentration. For instance, among social workers with an educational concentration in behavioral health (including mental health and substance use) in their MSW program, 75% provide behavioral health services to a majority of clients in their current social work job (Figure 1). Many graduates with other educational concentrations—such as health care or children and families—also provided BH services to a majority of their clients. On the other hand, only 21% of social workers with an educational concentration in aging/gerontology said they provide BH services to a majority of their clients.

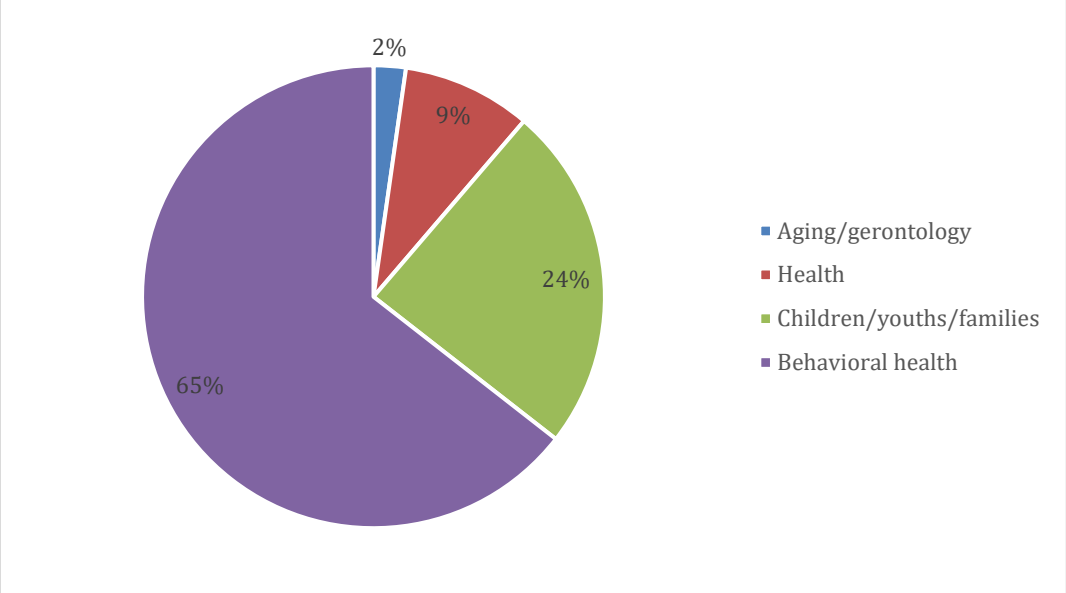
Figure 1: Percentage of MSW Graduates by Educational Program Concentration Who Provide BH Services to a Majority of Their Clients



Note: The denominator for each area of concentration is the total number in that concentration. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates who provide BH services to a majority of their clients within each program concentration.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of all MSWs who provide BH services to a majority of their clients by their educational focus. Across all social workers with high BH service provision (i.e., those who provide BH services to at least 50% of clients), 49% had a program concentration in BH and 18% had a program concentration in children, youth, or families. Less than 10% had a program concentration in health or aging/gerontology (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of MSWs Providing BH Services to a Majority of Their Clients by Their Program Concentration

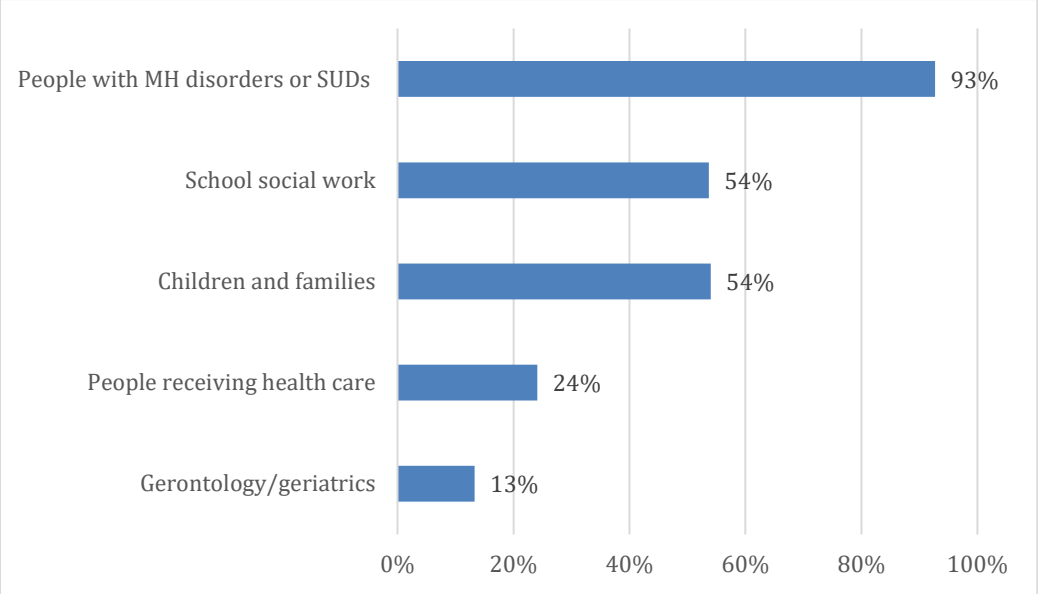


Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs providing BH services to a majority of their clients. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates in each program concentration among those who provide BH services to a majority of their clients.

As expected, most social workers with a job focus in BH (i.e., services for people with mental health disorders or SUDs) (93%) provide BH services to a majority of their clients. Interestingly, 54% of school social workers and child and family social workers also provide BH services to a majority of their clients, respectively (Figure 3). In terms of the overall distribution of these

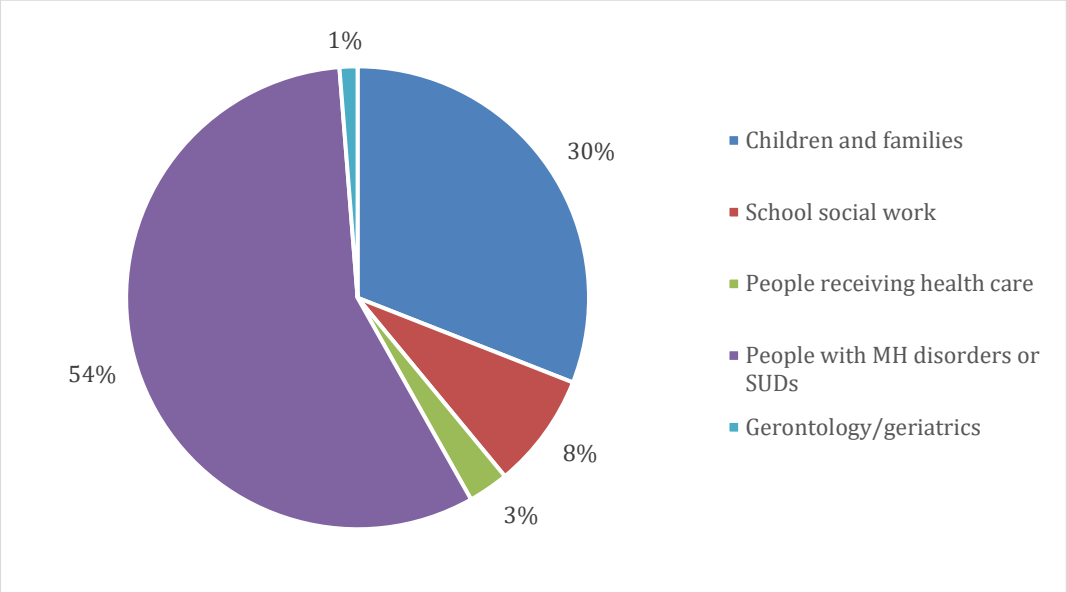
social workers, 54% with high BH service provision work primarily with people with mental health disorders or SUDs and 30% work primarily with children and families (Figure 4).

Figure 3: High BH Service Provision (>50%) by Primary Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of graduates with each job focus. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates who provide BH services to a majority of their clients within each focus area.

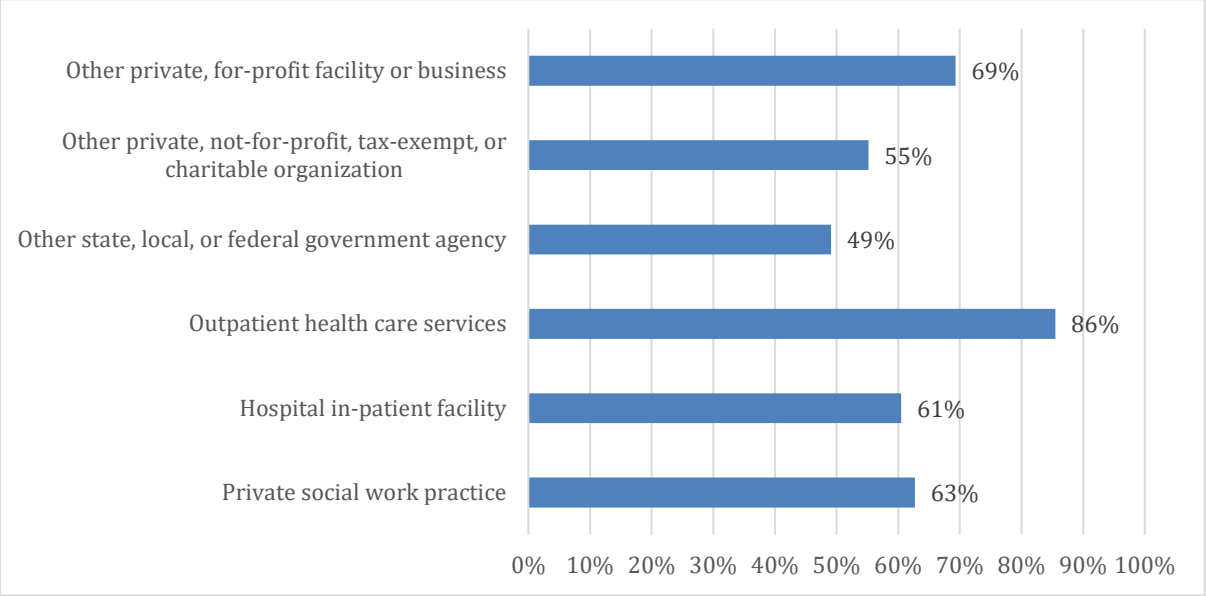
Figure 4: Primary Job Focus by MSWs With High BH Service Provision (>50%)



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs providing BH services to a majority of their clients. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates with each primary job focus among those who provide BH services to a majority of their clients.

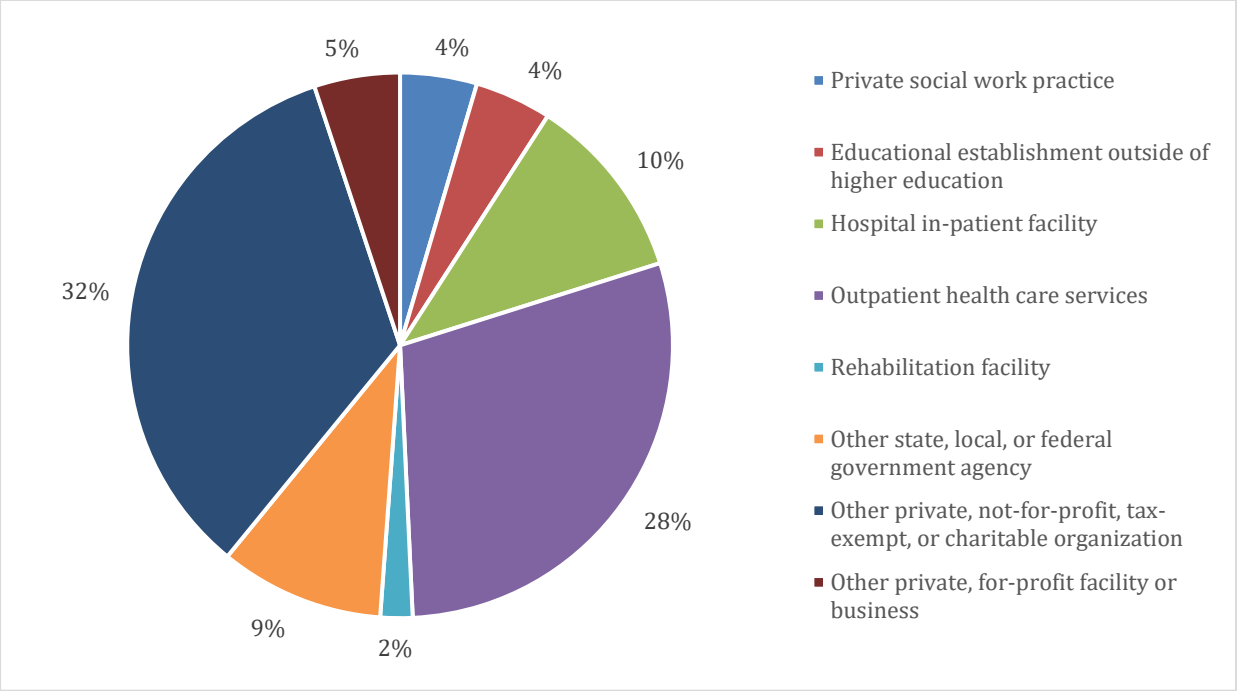
Among social workers working in outpatient settings, 86% provide BH services to a majority of their clients, compared with less than half (49%) of social workers working in state, local, or federal government agencies (Figure 5). Overall, approximately one third of social workers with high BH service provision work for private nonprofit organizations (32%), 28% work in outpatient health care services, and 10% work in hospital in-patient facilities. Less than 5% work in educational establishments or other private or for-profit businesses (Figure 6).

Figure 5: High BH Service Provision (>50%) by Job Setting



Note: The denominator is the total number of graduates in each job setting. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates who provide BH services to a majority of their clients within each job setting.

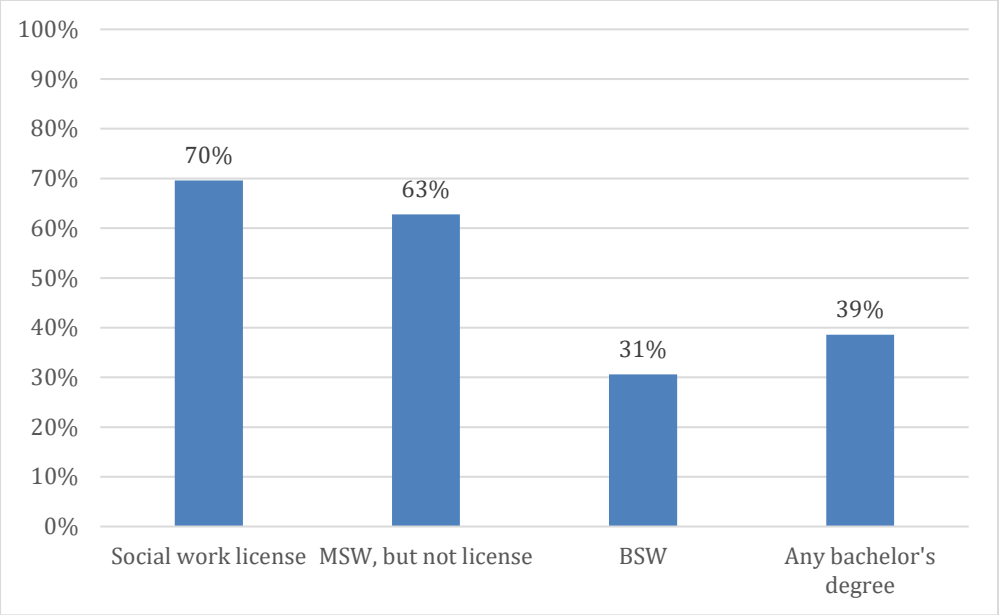
Figure 6: Job Setting of MSWs With High BH Service Provision (>50%)



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs providing BH services to a majority of their clients. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates working in each job setting among those who provide BH services to a majority of their clients.

Figure 7 illustrates the percentage of graduates who provide BH services to a majority of their clients in each job requirement category. For instance, among social workers in jobs requiring a social work license, 70% provide BH services to a majority of clients. In contrast, only 31% and 39% of social workers in jobs requiring a BSW or bachelor's degree, respectively, provide BH services to a majority of clients (Figure 7).

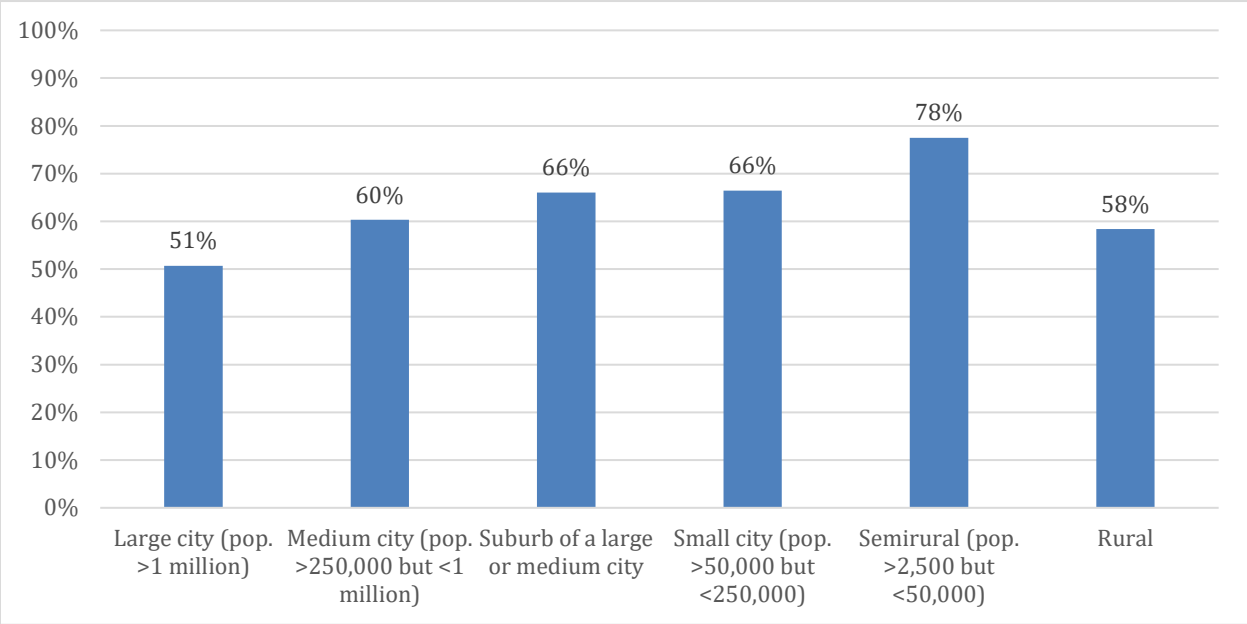
Figure 7: High BH Service Provision (>50%) by Licensing or Educational Requirement



Note: The denominator is the total number of graduates with each licensing or educational requirement for their social work job. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates who provide BH services to a majority of their clients within each job requirement category.

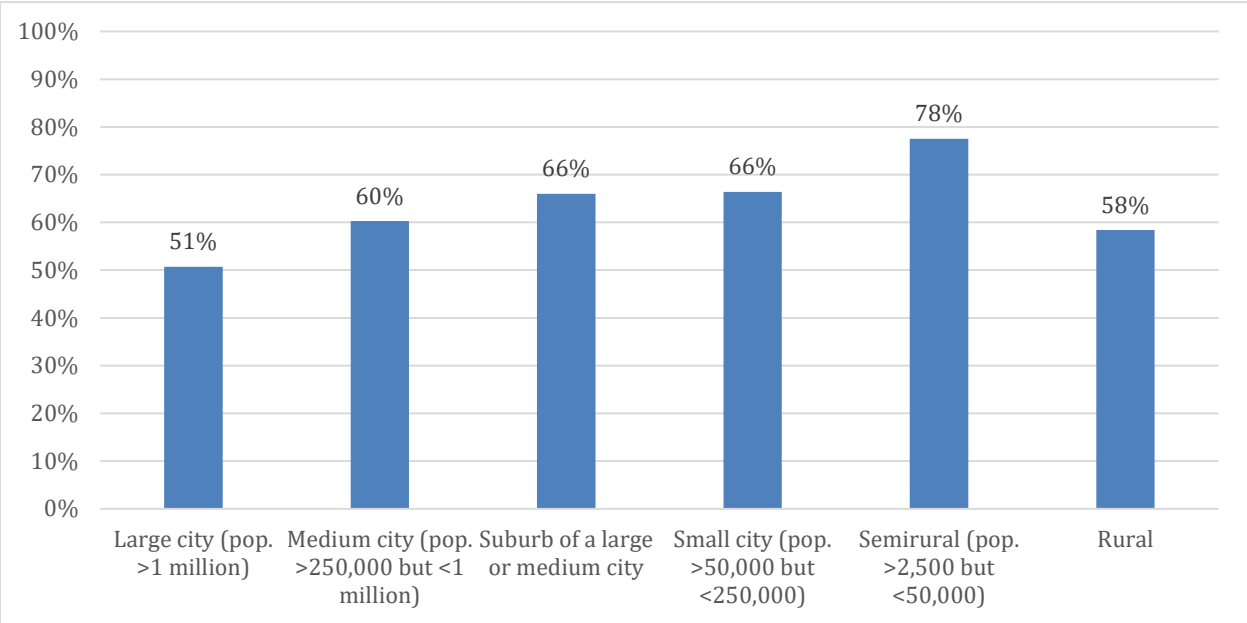
Most social workers working in semirural areas (78%) provide BH services to a majority of their clients, whereas 51% of social workers working in large cities provide BH services to a majority of their clients (Figure 8). Nearly a quarter of all social workers with high BH service provision work in small or medium cities (23% and 25%, respectively), whereas 16% work in rural or semirural areas (Figure 9).

Figure 8: High BH Service Provision (>50%) by Practice Area Demographics



Note: The denominator is the total number of graduates practicing in each demographic area. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates who provide BH services to a majority of their clients within each demographic area.

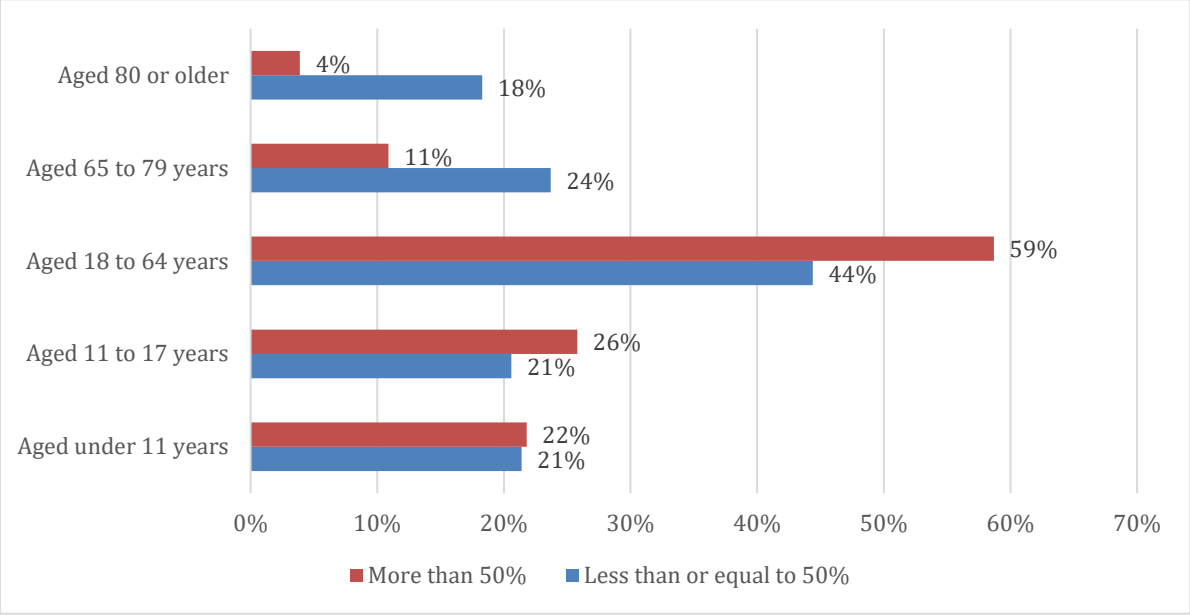
Figure 9: Practice Area Demographics of MSWs With High BH Service Provision (>50%)



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs providing BH services to a majority of their clients. This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates practicing in each demographic area among those who provide BH services to a majority of their clients.

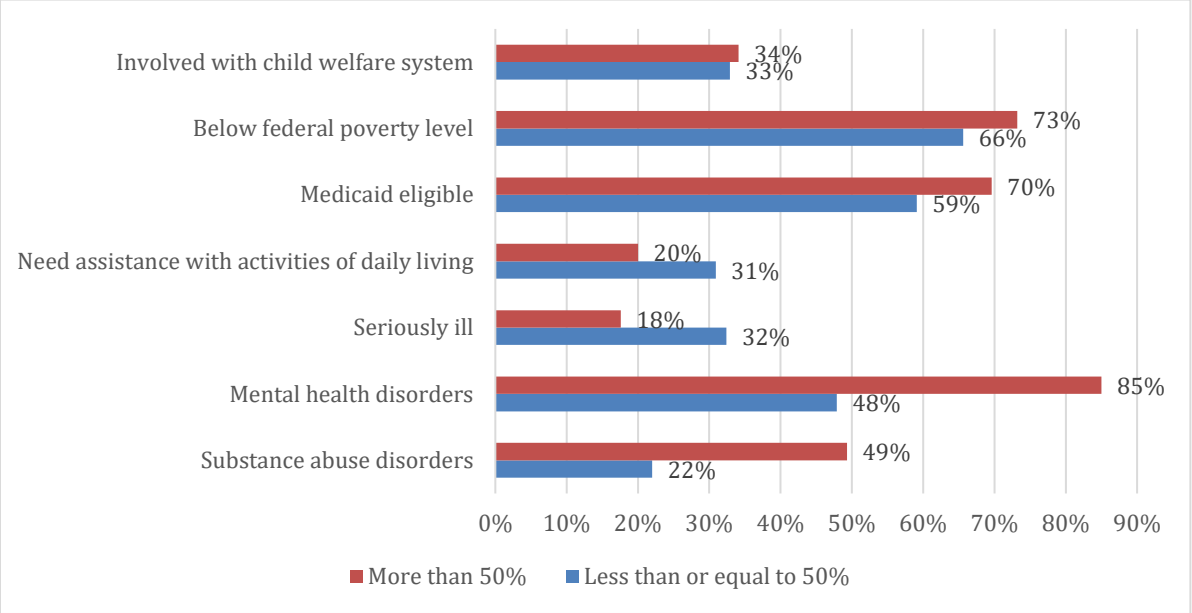
Among social workers with high BH service provision (>50%), 59% serve primarily adult clients aged 18 to 64, whereas among social workers with low BH service provision (<50%), only 44% serve primarily adult clients aged 18 to 64 (Figure 10). Among social workers with high BH service provision, 85% serve primarily adult clients with mental health disorders and 49% serve primarily clients with SUDs. Among social workers with low BH service provision, only 22% serve primarily clients with SUDs (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Age of Clientele by BH Service Provision (High vs. Low)



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs providing BH services to more than 50% of their clients (high BH service provision) or less than or equal to 50% of their clients (low BH service provision). This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates serving clientele in each age group among those with high versus low BH service provision. Some respondents indicated more than one age group as their primary focus.

Figure 11: Characteristics of Clientele by BH Service Provision (High vs. Low)



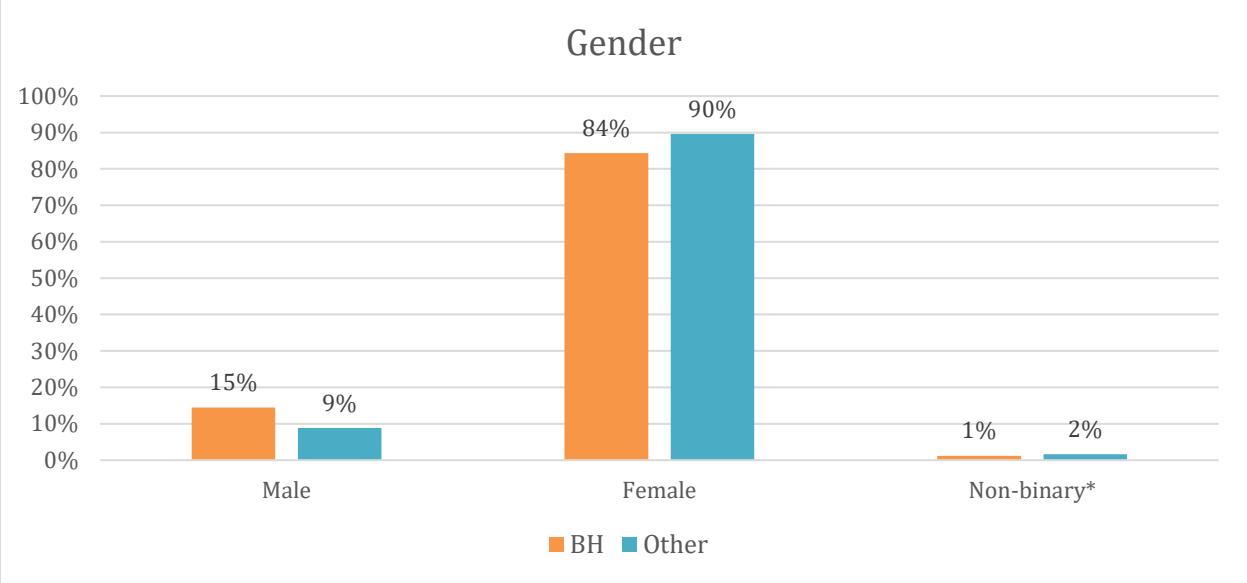
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs providing BH services to more than 50% of their clients (high BH service provision) or less than or equal to 50% of their clients (low BH service provision). This figure illustrates the percentage of graduates serving clientele in each category among those with high versus low BH service provision. Each characteristic is an independent question. For example, a respondent could indicate that a majority of their patients were on Medicaid, had mental health disorders, had substance abuse disorders, etc.

B. Behavioral Health (BH) Jobs

This section of the report presents demographic information, MSW program characteristics, and employment outcomes for social workers working in jobs specifically focused on BH (including mental health disorders and SUDs) compared with MSWs working in other focus area (e.g., child and family social work, school social work). Similar to the overall population of recent MSW graduates, social workers working in BH jobs were predominantly female (90%), white (69%), and under the age of 30 (74%) (Figures 12, 13, and 14). Compared with recent graduates in other focus areas, MSWs in BH jobs had slightly more work experience. Approximately 41%

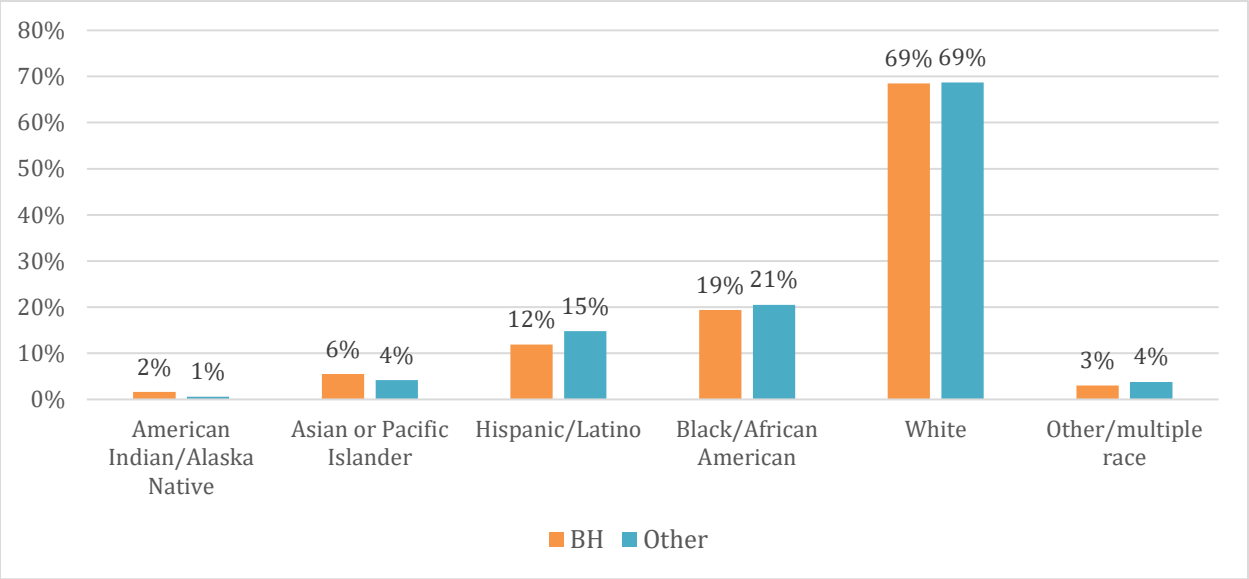
of MSWs in BH jobs worked for 3 to 10 years before their MSW degree, and 16% had more than 10 years of work experience (compared with 35% and 15% of MSWs in other focus areas, respectively) (Figure 15).

Figure 12: Gender of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



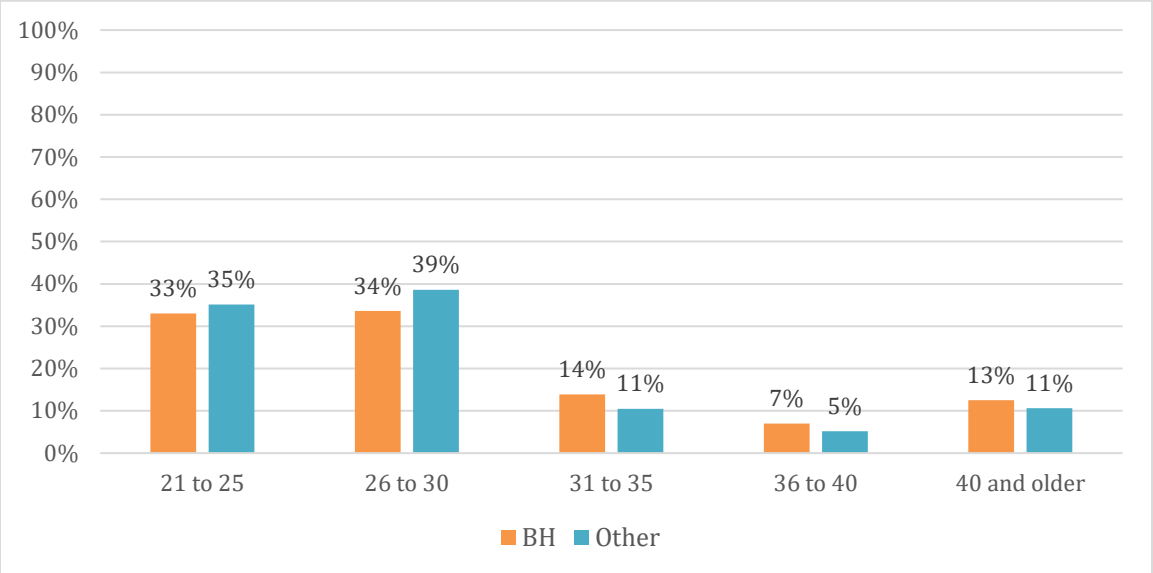
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Nonbinary = Nonbinary/genderqueer/not exclusively male or female. "Decline to answer" responses were excluded.

Figure 13: Race and Ethnicity of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



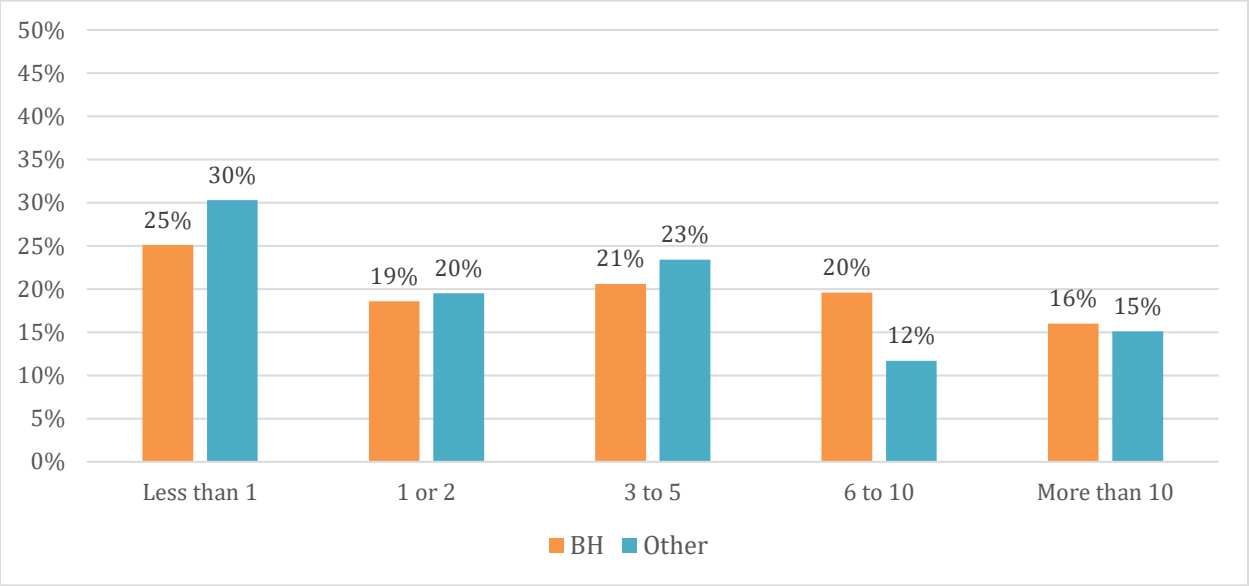
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. "Decline to answer" responses were excluded.

Figure 14: Age Group of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus.

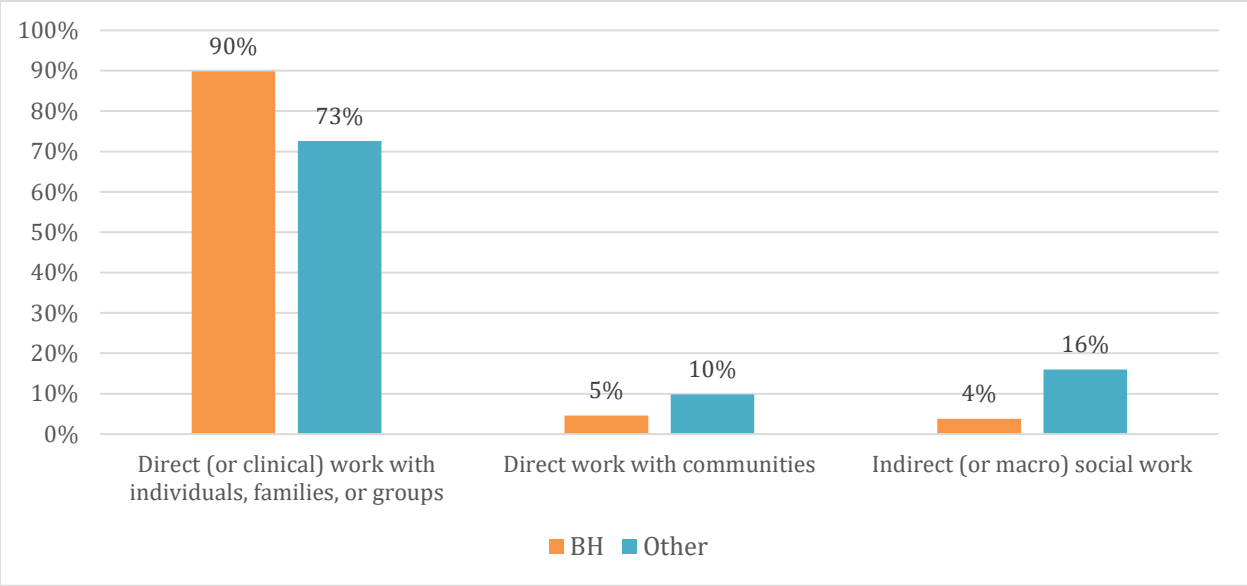
Figure 15: Prior Work Experience of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "How many years were you working before entering the social work education program you recently graduated from?"

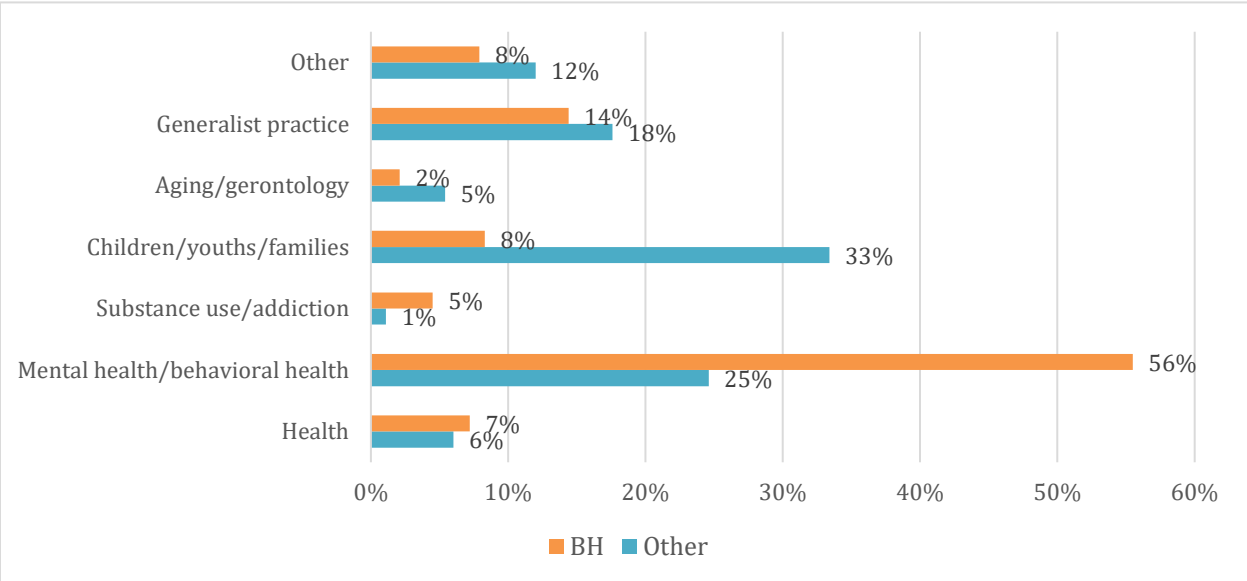
Most MSWs in BH jobs (90%) focused primarily on direct social work in their MSW program, compared with just 73% of MSWs in other focus areas (Figure 16). As expected, most recent MSWs in BH jobs focused on mental health/behavioral health or substance use/addiction in their MSW program (61%), compared with 26% of MSWs in other focus areas. However, many MSWs in BH jobs also had concentrations in areas such as health (7%), children and families (8%), or advanced generalist practice (14%) (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Educational Program Focus of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Which of the following best describes the general practice focus of your program of study?"

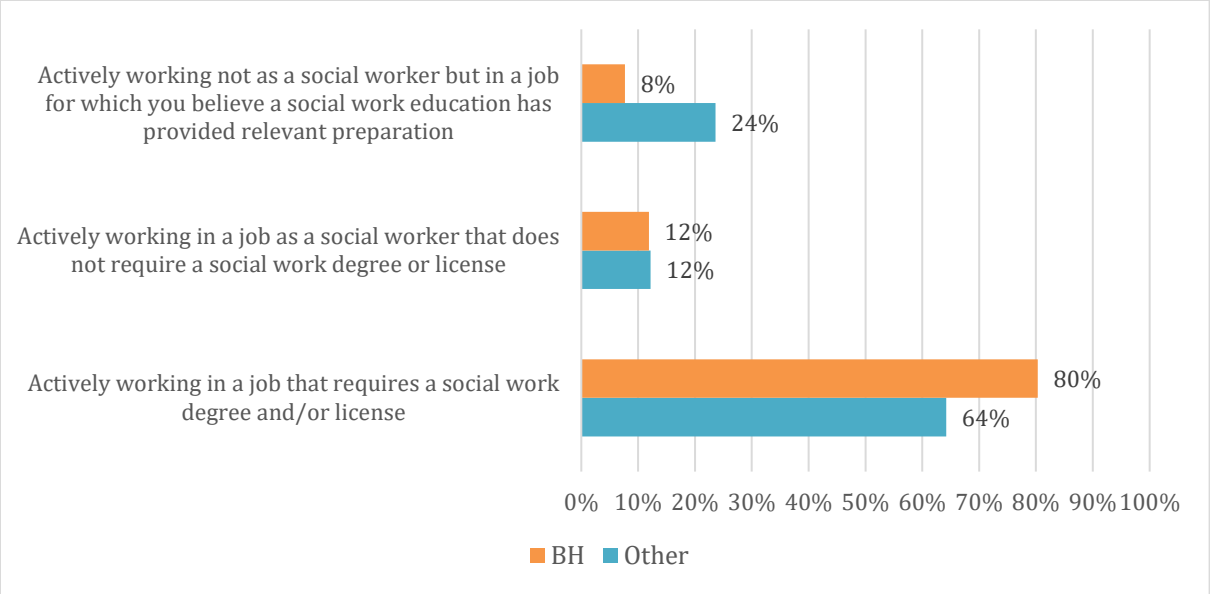
Figure 17: Educational Program Concentration of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: “Which of the following best describes your declared 'specialization' or 'concentration' in this program?

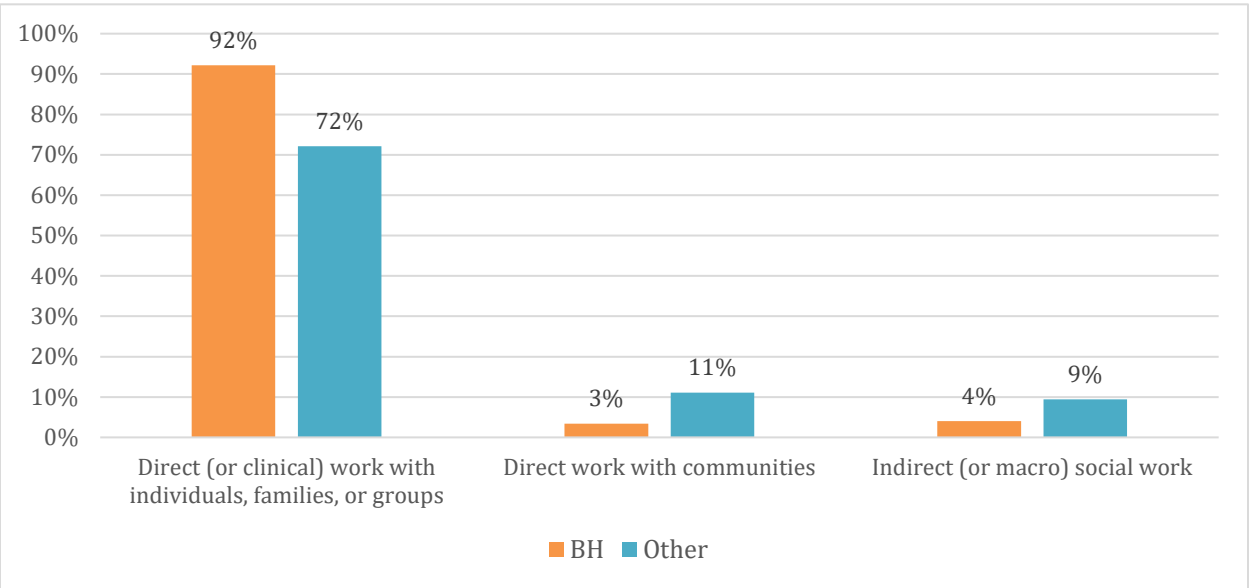
Relative to recent graduates in other focus areas, MSWs in BH jobs were more likely to be working in a job that requires a social work degree or license (80% BH vs. 64% Other) (Figure 18). Most social workers in BH jobs were working primarily in direct social work with individuals, families, or groups (92%) (Figure 19). In contrast, among social workers working in other types of jobs, only 72% were working in direct social work with individuals and groups; 11% were working directly with communities and 9% were working in indirect social work (Figure 19). Among social workers working in BH, about a third were working in outpatient health care services (32%) and almost a quarter were working for private not-for-profit organizations (23%). Most social workers working in BH jobs were working in positions that require an MSW degree (29%) or social work license (54%). Recent MSWs working in other types of jobs were slightly more likely to be working in jobs that require only a BSW or other bachelor’s degree (20% Other vs. 13% BH) (Figure 20). Among social workers working in other types of jobs, 43% were working for private nonprofit organizations (Figure 21). Similar to the overall population of recent MSW graduates, social workers working in BH jobs were working primarily in large or medium-sized cities (51%). Approximately one third were working small cities and rural or semirural areas (Figure 22).

Figure 18: Principal Position of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



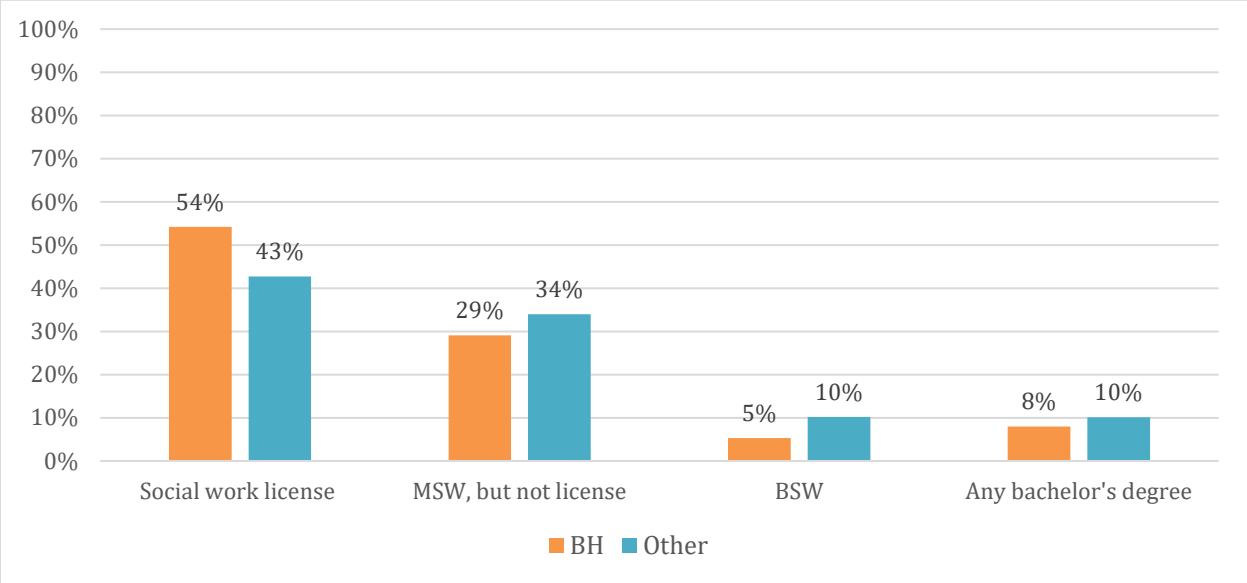
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Which of the following best describes your principal position (or the position you are about to start)?" Includes only those who stated that they were currently working or had accepted an offer of work.

Figure 19: Principal Role of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



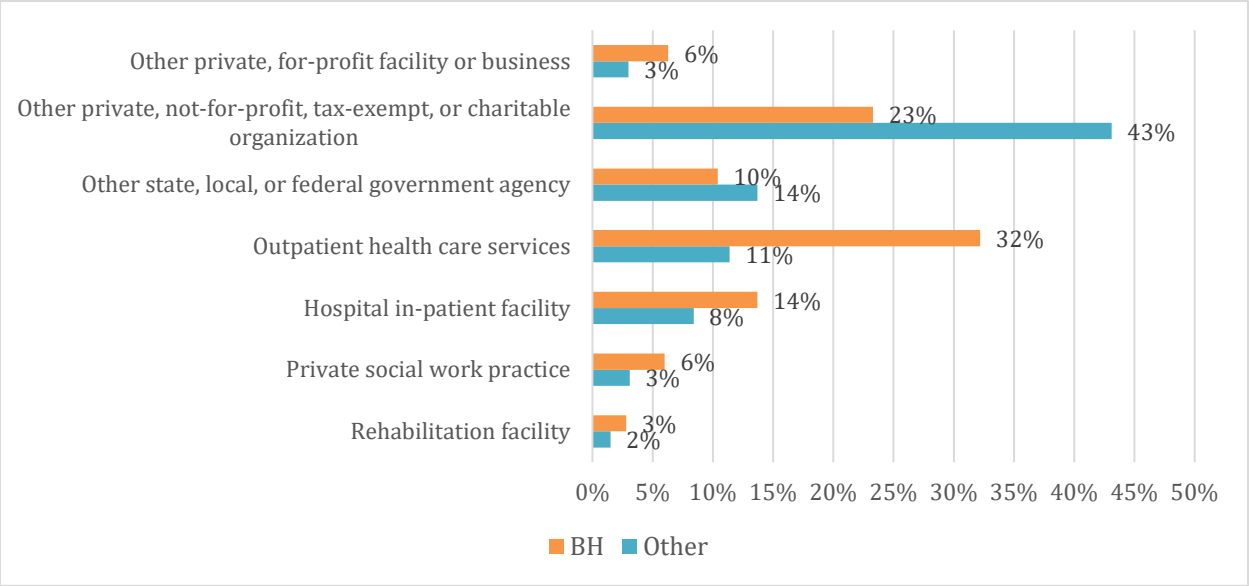
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "In your principal position, what best describes your role (select only one)?" Includes only those who were actively working as social workers.

Figure 20: Minimum Educational or Licensing Requirement of Principal Position for MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



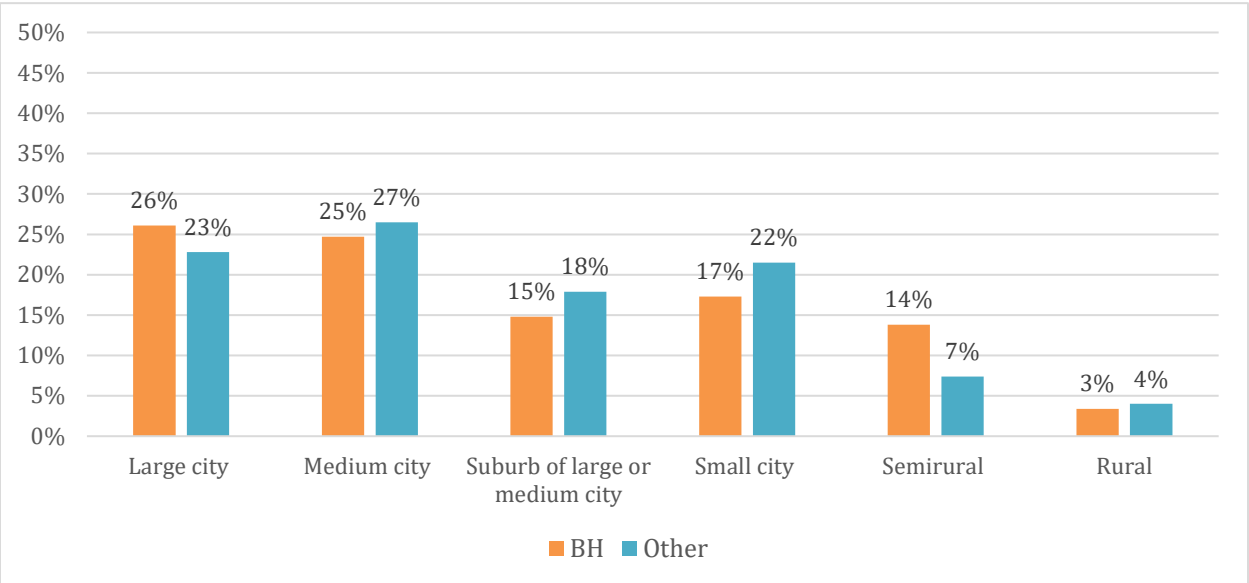
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "What is the minimum educational or licensing requirement for your current principal position (or the one you are about to start)?" Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work.

Figure 21: Job Setting of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Which of the following best describes the primary setting you are working in (or about to work in)?" Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work.

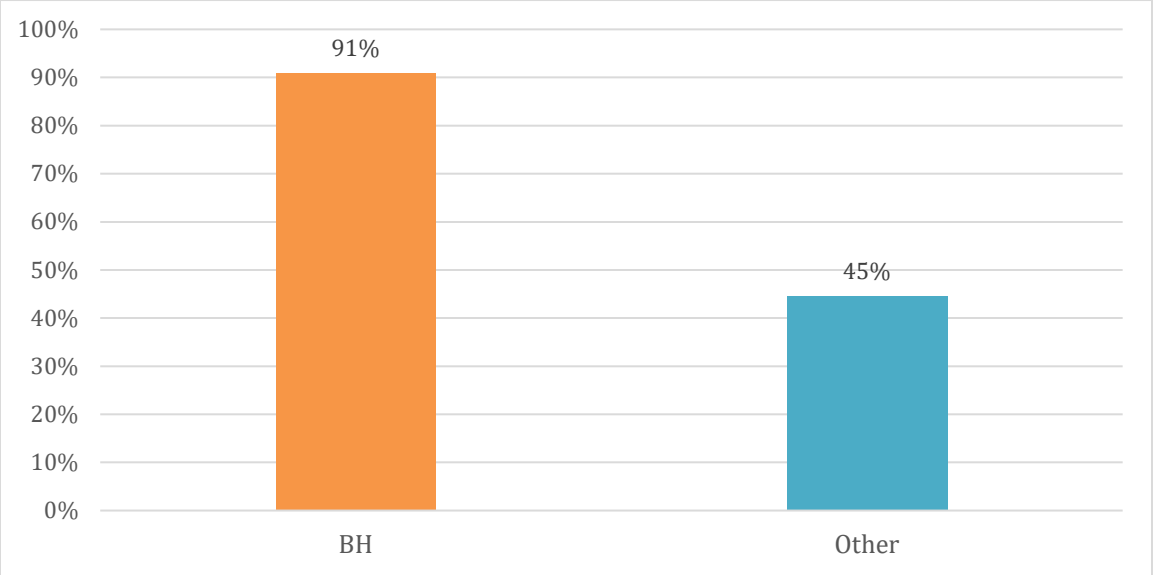
Figure 22: Practice Area Demographic for MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Which best describes the demographics of the principal area in which you are/will be practicing?" Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work.

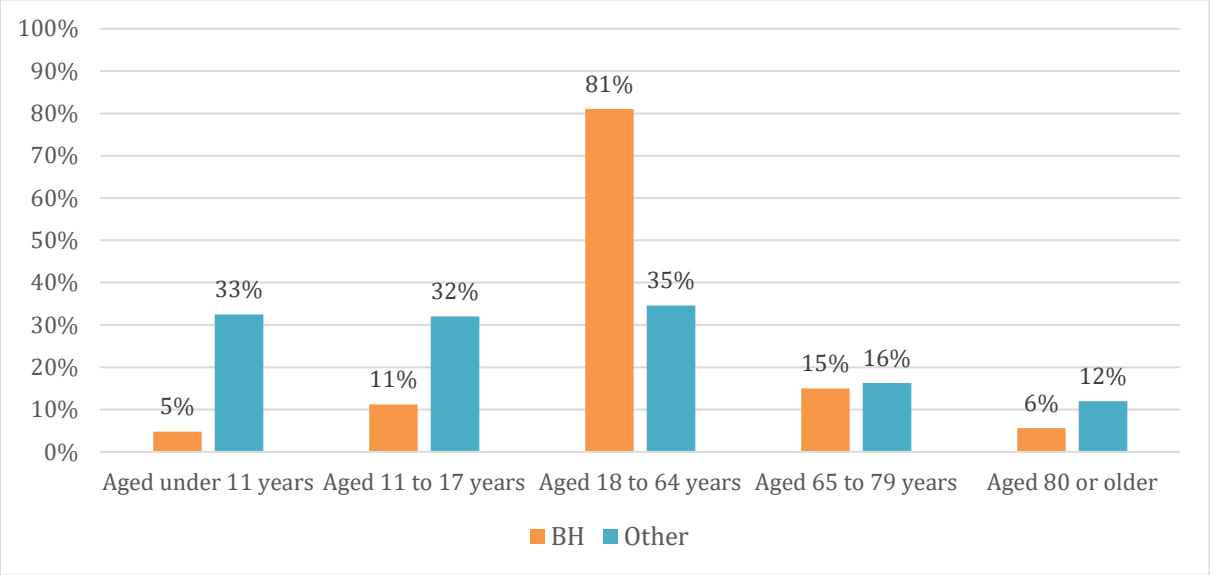
As expected, most social workers working in BH (91%) provided BH services to a majority of their clients. In contrast, only 45% of social workers in other job types provided BH services to a majority of their clients (Figure 23). Most MSWs in BH jobs were working primarily with adult clients aged 18 to 64 years old. In contrast, among social workers working in other types of jobs, only 35% were working primarily with adult clients; 65% were working primarily with children or teens under the age of 18 (Figure 24). Most MSWs in BH jobs served primarily clients with mental health disorders (88%) or SUDs (66%), as well as clients who are Medicaid eligible (65%) or fall below the federal poverty level (68%). Many MSWs in other focus areas also reported serving primarily clients with mental health disorders (60%). However, most MSWs in other focus areas reported working primarily with clients below the federal poverty level (71%) or clients involved with the child welfare system (42%) (Figure 25).

Figure 23: BH Service Provision Among MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



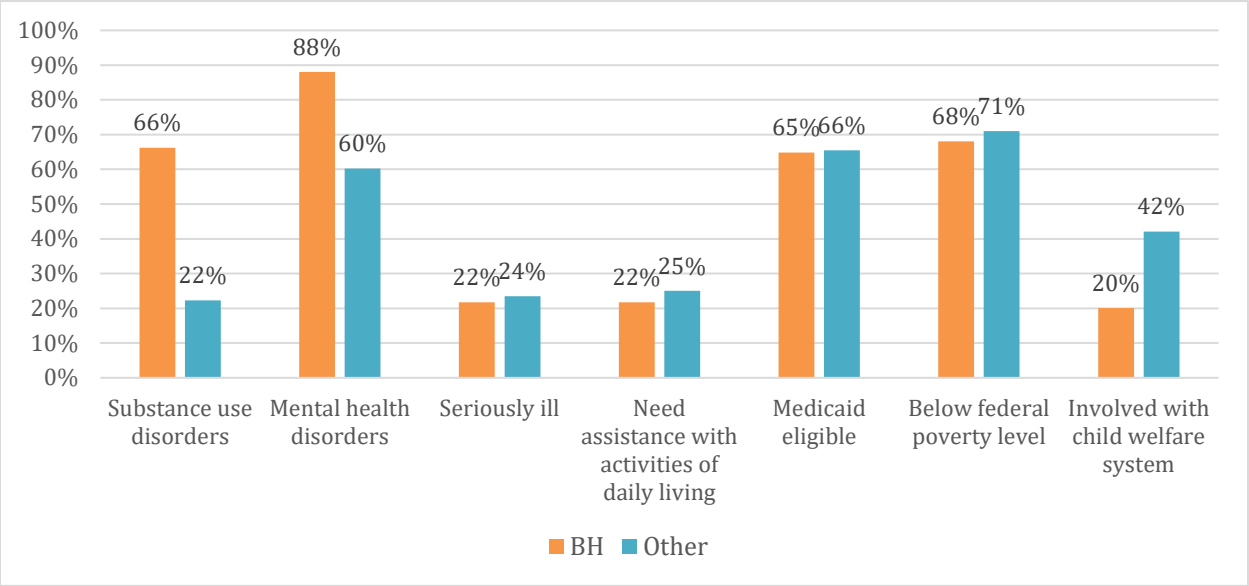
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. This figure illustrates the percentage of MSWs in BH and other job types that provide mental health and SUD services to a majority (>50%) of their clients. Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work.

Figure 24: Age of Clientele Served by MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Approximately what percent of clients served by your agency (or of clients within the groups that are the focus of your organization's effort) are in each of following age groups? If you have not yet started your new position, please estimate if you can." Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work. Some respondents indicated more than one age group as their primary focus.

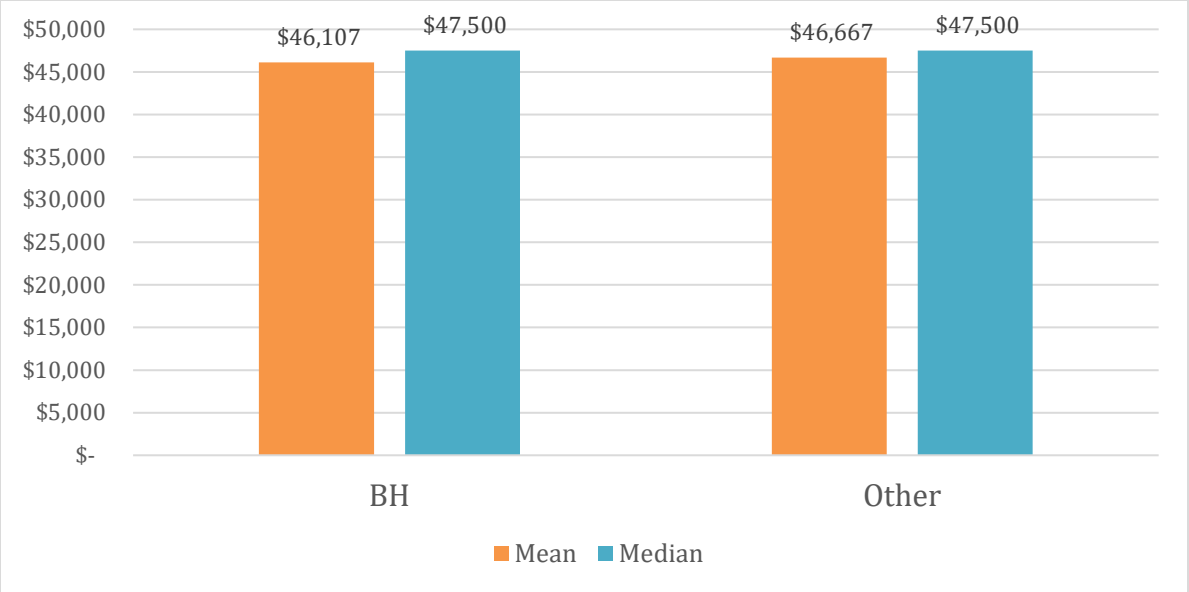
Figure 25: Characteristics of Clientele Served by New Social Workers: Percentage with a Majority of Clients by Characteristic



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Approximately what percent of your current clients (or clients you expect to have in your new position) would fall into each of following categories? (Note: Each question is independent; clients are likely to be reported in multiple categories.)." Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work.

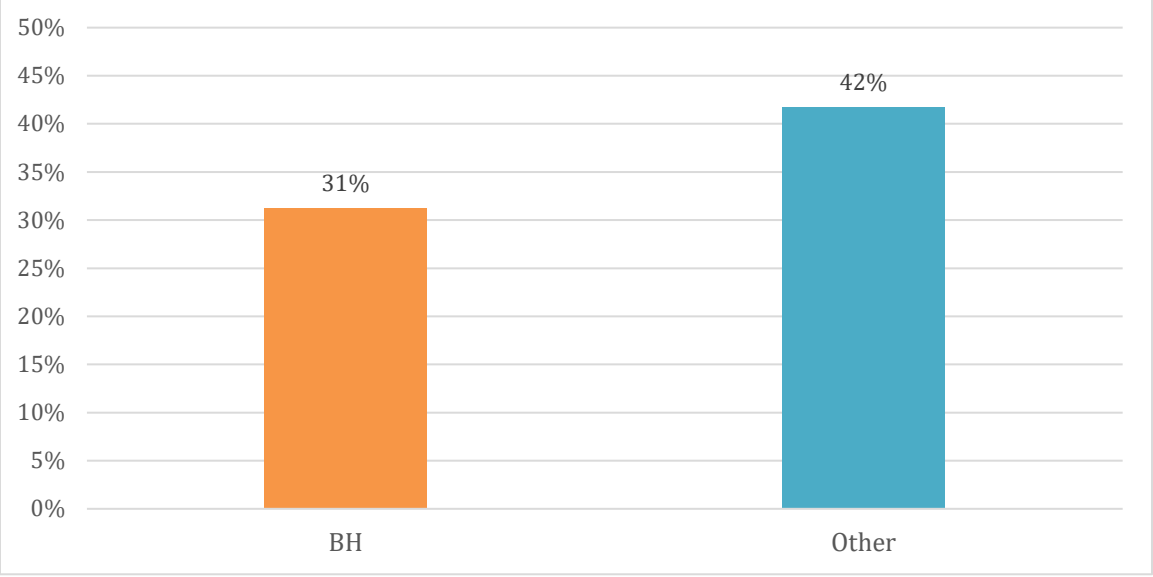
Salaries for recent MSWs in BH jobs were very similar to those with MSWs in other focus areas (Figure 26). However, MSWs in other focus areas were also more likely to report difficulties in the job market. Among MSWs in other focus areas, 42% had difficulty finding a social work position they were satisfied with (compared with 31% of MSWs in BH jobs), and 25% said they had to change their plans due to limited social work–related opportunities (compared with just 19% of MSWs in BH jobs) (Figures 27 and 28). Most MSWs in BH jobs said they intended to become licensed clinical social workers in the next 5 years (92% BH vs. 76% Other) (Figure 29). Although some MSWs in BH jobs had plans for continuing their education, most reported having no plans for continuing their education at this time (65% BH vs. 59% Other) (Figure 30).

Figure 26: Mean and Median Income of MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



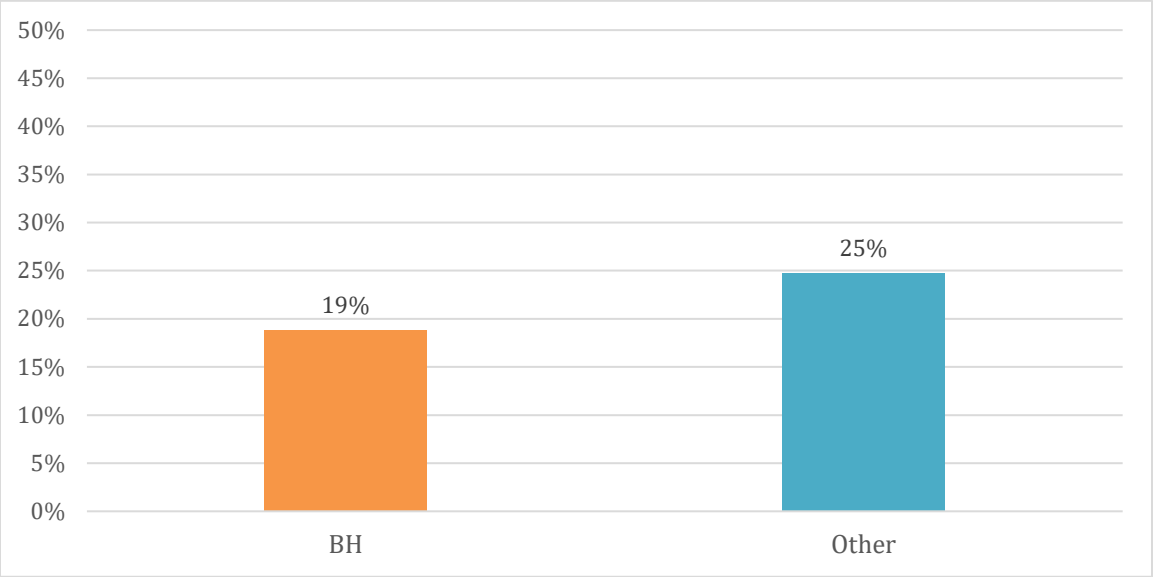
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "What is your expected annual gross income from your principal position (the one you spend most time in)?" Includes only those who were actively working in direct social work.

Figure 27: Job Search Difficulty Among MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



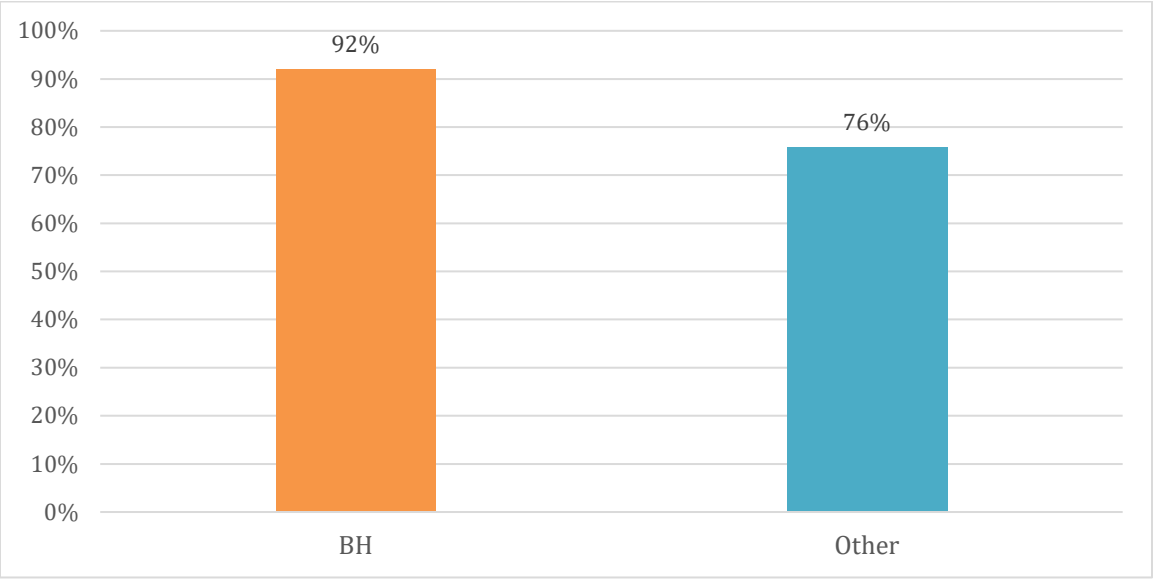
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Did you have difficulty finding a position that you were satisfied with?" Includes only those who searched for a job.

Figure 28: Percentage of MSW Graduates Who Needed to Change Their Career Plans Due to Job Market Difficulties, by Main Job Focus



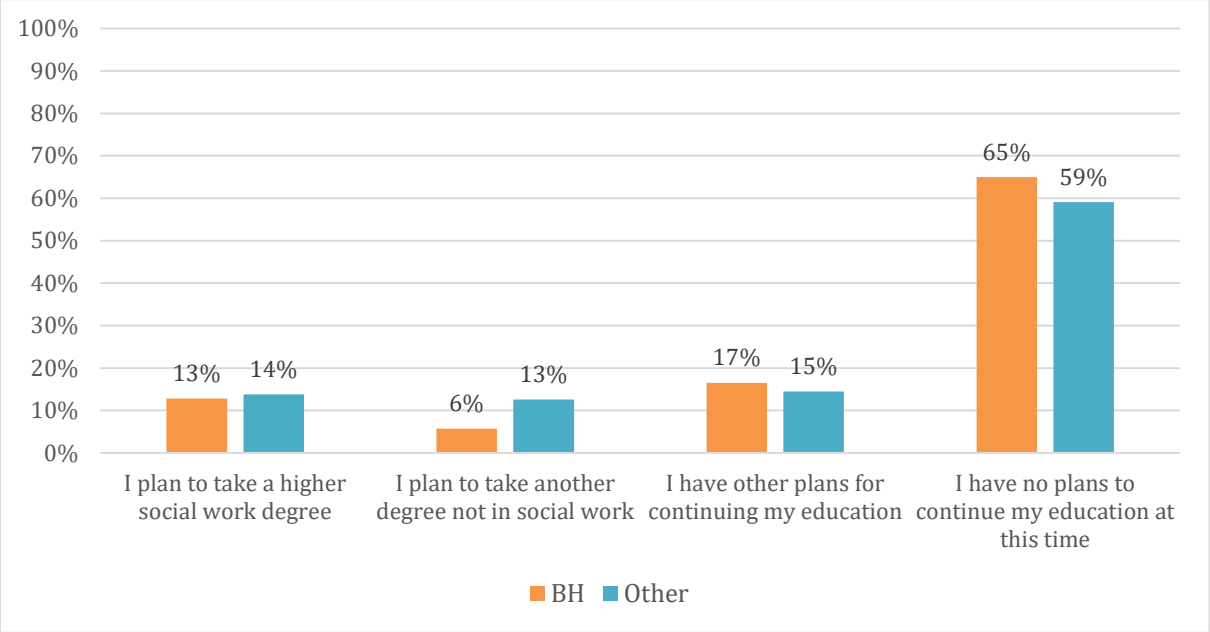
Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Did you have to change your plans because of limited social work–related job opportunities?" Includes only those who searched for a job.

Figure 29: Future Licensure Plans Among MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Do you intend to become a licensed clinical social worker within the next 5 years?"

Figure 30: Plans for Continuing Education Among MSW Graduates, by Main Job Focus



Note: The denominator is the total number of new MSWs in jobs focused on BH (including mental health disorders or SUDs) versus other areas of focus. Survey question: "Do you plan to continue your education?"

C. Appendix: Survey and Weighting Methodology

Overall Survey Methodology

The target group for the survey was students who graduated with a graduate social work degree in 2019, including MSW and equivalents such as MSS, MSSA, or MSSW. The survey was conducted in early fall to allow time for spring graduates to have searched for employment. The survey captured students graduating between January and August 2019. All accredited social work programs in the United States were invited to participate in the survey.

When fielding its surveys, the Mullan Institute uses REDCap survey software, which provides a unique survey link for each participant via e-mail to prevent duplicate responses and enable the sending of survey reminders only to those who have not yet responded. Although a few schools were able to provide the Mullan Institute with e-mail addresses from their records, in most instances student e-mail addresses were obtained by sending students a Web link to the survey. Programs forwarded an invitation with a REDCap public Web link to their students in May, June, and July of 2019 that enabled interested students to sign up for the survey in advance and provide an e-mail address that would still be valid when the survey went live in late August.

To maximize the number of responses, a $20 incentive was offered to all MSWs who completed the survey. Lists of survey registrants were sent to the schools from which they graduated for confirmation of graduation status. REDCap was then used to conduct the survey via unique Web links e-mailed to each of almost 1,412 confirmed registrants. The survey launched on August 27, 2019 and closed after 4 weeks (September 23) with 1,068 responses. Data cleaning and exclusion of individuals who did not enter their degree program information reduced the final figure to 1,045 valid responses, for a response rate of roughly 74%.

Application of Survey Weights

To increase the representativeness of our survey sample, we applied post-stratification weights to crosstabulations of the entire MSW population and to subpopulations. Generally, poststratification weights were constructed by calculating the ratio of the population proportion of the weighting variable and the sample proportion of the weighting variable. The sample proportion came from our 2019 Survey of Social Work Graduates, and the population proportion was derived from the 2019 CSWE social workers. Our survey included multiple characteristics

that we wanted to balance with the overall population. We therefore constructed weights by using four variables:

- **Auspice:** the institutional auspice or sponsorship (e.g., private school vs. public school) of the college or university containing the respondent's social work program
- **Region:** the region where the social work program resides (e.g., Mid-Atlantic region, West Coast region)
- **Race:** respondent's race (e.g., Black, White, Asian)
- **Ethnicity:** specifically, Hispanic ethnicity (i.e., Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic)

Given our desire to weight on four characteristics, we constructed survey weights by using a manual iterative strategy. We computed each of the four weights sequentially over three cycles, for a total of 12 iterations. First, we computed the auspice weight (Weight A), weighted the data with Weight A, and then generated the weighted frequencies for region. Next, we computed the region weight (Weight B), weighted the data with Weight A × Weight B, and then generated the weighted frequencies for race. Third, we computed the race weight (Weight C), weighted the data with Weight A × Weight B × Weight C, and then generated the weighted frequencies for ethnicity. Finally, we computed the ethnicity weight (Weight D), which completed the first cycle (the first four iterations).

For the next cycle we recomputed the auspice weight (Weight A′) with all four weights from the first round (Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D) and continued the iterative process through Weight D′. This process was repeated again for a total of three cycles and 12 iterations. The resulting data were therefore weighted by Weight A" × Weight B" × Weight C" × Weight

D" until the weighted frequencies and population frequencies converged. The final survey weight was equal to the product of all 12 weights.

First Cycle	**Second Cycle**	**Third Cycle**
Weight A (auspice)	Weight A′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D	Weight A″ × Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight C′ × Weight D′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D
Weight A × Weight B (auspice × region)	Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D	Weight A″ × Weight B″ × Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight C′ × Weight D′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D
Weight A × Weight B × Weight C (auspice × region × race)	Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight C′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D	Weight A″ × Weight B″ × Weight C″ × Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight C′ × Weight D′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D
Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D (auspice × region × race × ethnicity)	Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight C′ × Weight D′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D	Weight A″ × Weight B″ × Weight C″ × Weight D″ × Weight A′ × Weight B′ × Weight C′ × Weight D′ × Weight A × Weight B × Weight C × Weight D **= Survey Weight**