

# Fact Sheet 2006



## SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS: A PORTRAIT

### Basic Facts

- In 2005, there were 1.7 million social service workers in the U.S. Of these, about 626,000 were counselors; 670,000 were social workers; and 276,000 were other community and social service specialists. By 2014, jobs in social service occupations are expected to grow by over 23%, nearly twice the national rate of job growth.<sup>1</sup>
- “Counselors” includes educational, vocational, & school counselors, of which there were 248,000 in 2004; rehabilitation counselors (131,000); mental health counselors (96,000); substance abuse & behavioral disorder counselors (76,000); and marriage & family therapists (24,000). Counselors work in schools, community centers, government agencies, and private practices, among other settings.<sup>2</sup>
- Social Workers are broken down into three specializations: in 2004, there were 272,000 child, family, & school social workers; 110,000 medical & public health social workers; and 116,000 mental health & substance abuse social workers.<sup>3</sup>
- “Other community and social service specialists” include probation officers, health educators, and social & human services assistants.<sup>4</sup> This last category includes a broad range of job titles, such as case management aide, social work assistant, community support worker, and life skills counselor. Unlike counselors and social workers, social service specialists typically do not hold advanced degrees, and have lower average earnings.<sup>5</sup>

### Education & Salaries

- In 2005, median annual earnings for all counselors were \$38,480.<sup>6</sup> Earnings ranged from \$27,870 for rehabilitation counselors, to \$45,570 for educational, vocational & school counselors.<sup>7</sup> The top-paying employers were elementary & secondary schools and government positions, while residential care facilities and individual & family services typically pay the lowest. For marriage & family therapists, a well-established private practice tends to be the best-paying position.<sup>8</sup>
- The median annual earnings for social workers was \$36,400 in 2005,<sup>9</sup> ranging from \$33,920 for mental health & substance abuse social workers, to \$40,080 for medical and public health social workers.<sup>10</sup> Government, school, and hospital positions are typically the best-paying jobs for all types of social workers, while individual & family services are the lowest-paying.<sup>11</sup>
- Social & human service assistants had a median annual salary in 2004 of \$24,270. Again, government positions typically had the highest salaries, with a median of \$29,270 for state government employees, while the lowest salaries were paid to those working in residential mental health and substance abuse facilities (median annual salary: \$20,410).<sup>12</sup>
- Salaries for social service workers tend to be significantly below those of similarly educated professionals. For instance, in 2005 the median annual salary for registered nurses was

\$44,620, and for psychologists it was \$50,232. The typical special education teacher earns nearly 30% more than a school social worker.<sup>13</sup>

- All but two states require counselors to be licensed, a process that typically requires a master's degree in counseling, extensive practical training and experience, and passage of a licensing exam, along with continuing education requirements.<sup>14</sup>
- Most states also require practicing social workers to be licensed, certified, or registered. This typically requires at minimum a bachelor's degree in social work; a master's is required to provide therapy and for more advanced clinical work. A Ph.D. or doctorate in social work (DSW) is useful for research and teaching positions. Currently, some 600,000 people in the U.S. hold social work degrees.<sup>15</sup>
- Among members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 91% hold an MSW as their highest degree. Six percent hold a Ph.D. or DSW, and 3% hold only a BSW.<sup>16</sup>
- Social & Human Service Assistants are not normally required to hold college degrees, although increasingly, employers are seeking individuals with advanced education or relevant work experience.<sup>17</sup>

### Rapid Growth

- The Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks job growth in two ways: the rate of growth, and the number of jobs added. At the master's degree level, two of the five fastest-growing occupations, and two of the five largest-growth occupations, are social service occupations (figures are for 2004–2014)<sup>18</sup>.
- Substance abuse & behavioral disorder counselors, and occupational therapists, are both among the five fastest-growing occupations for master's degree holders.<sup>19</sup>
- Educational, vocational & school counselors, and rehabilitation counselors, are among the five largest-growth occupations.<sup>20</sup>
- Jobs for social workers are expected to increase by 22% (124,000) by 2014, almost twice the rate of national job growth. The overall growth rate for counselors is predicted to be 21% (128,000 jobs).<sup>21</sup>
- For social service assistants, job growth is expected to be especially rapid: by 2014, the number of positions should increase by almost 30%, translating to an additional 104,000 jobs. This is nearly 2.5 times the national rate of job growth.<sup>22</sup>

### Women, Minorities, and Social Service

- Women dominate the field of social services, constituting about 80% of social workers, 70% of counselors, and 67% of miscellaneous community and social service specialists.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, women account for about 47% of the total labor force.<sup>24</sup>
- Despite their disproportionate representation, women social workers still earn less than men. One study found male social workers in Pennsylvania earning an estimated \$3,665 more per year than their female counterparts, even when controlling for variables such as experience and job role. Various other studies have also found an unexplained salary gap between male

and female social workers of around 15%.<sup>25</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that in 2005, male social workers earned 14.4% more than women in the same occupation.<sup>26</sup>

- The wage gap varies across social service occupations. For instance, in 2005 male counselors earned 8% more than female counselors; among miscellaneous social service workers, men earned 24% more than women.<sup>27</sup>
- The social service workforce is very diverse. In 2004, 30% of counselors and 32% of social workers were non-white, and among miscellaneous social service specialists, this figure was nearly 43%.<sup>28</sup>

## Union Benefits

- A significant proportion of social service workers are union members. Among social workers, 23% were union members in 2005; 21% of counselors and 24% of other social service workers were union members.<sup>29</sup>
- In 2005, social workers represented by unions earned 31% more than those without union representation. For counselors, this earnings differential was as high as 50%.<sup>30</sup> The 2005 mean weekly earnings of all other community and social service workers was a whopping 60% higher for those represented by a union than for those who were not.<sup>31</sup>
- Unions are also important in acting on social service workers' behalf, in cases where understaffing or insufficient safety and security precautions lead to an unsafe work environment.<sup>32</sup>

## Burnout and Workplace Safety

- Social services occupations can be emotionally draining. This is due in part to the nature of the work (i.e., consistently dealing with very difficult situations), and relatively low wages combined with understaffing can add to the pressure and lead to high turnover.<sup>33</sup>
- Because social service workers often work with mentally and emotionally unstable people, dwindling services and reduced benefits, and working conditions such as understaffing, working alone, working late hours, social service workers are at risk for workplace violence. Like any other workplace hazard, it is the responsibility of the employer to take reasonable measures to minimize the likelihood of workplace violence. Social service workers need safety precautions, including proper levels of staffing, careful recording of incidents, and training in self-defense, along with technological precautions such as panic alarms, bullet-proof glass and camera monitors.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 11, "Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity", 2005 Averages, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf>; Daniel Hecker, "Occupational Employment Projections to 2014", U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review*, November 2005.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, <http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Occupational Employment Projections to 2014", op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 39, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 39, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 39, op. cit.; *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Practice Research Network, “Demographics”, PRN 2:2, 2003, <https://www.socialworkers.org/naswprn/surveyTwo/Datagram2.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2006–2007 Edition, “Tomorrow’s Jobs, Table 1”, December 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hecker, Daniel. “Occupational Employment Projections to 2014”, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 11, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Koeske, G. and W. Krowinski, “Gender-Based Salary Inequity in Social Work: Mediators of Gender’s Effect on Salary”, *Social Work*, Volume 49, Issue 2, p. 309, April 2004.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 39, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Population Survey*, Table 11, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> BNA Plus, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book: Compilations from the Current Population Survey*, 2006 Edition, Table 8a.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Workplace Violence Against Social Service Workers”, <http://www.afscme.org/pol-leg/welfvio.htm>

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2004–2005 Edition, February 2004.

<sup>34</sup> “Workplace Violence Against Social Service Workers”, <http://www.afscme.org/pol-leg/welfvio.htm>

For further information on professional workers, check out DPE’s Web site: [www.dpeaflcio.org](http://www.dpeaflcio.org).

*The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 22 AFL-CIO unions representing over four million people working in professional, technical and administrative support occupations. DPE-affiliated unions represent: teachers, college professors and school administrators; library workers; nurses, doctors and other health care professionals; engineers, scientists and IT workers; journalists and writers, broadcast technicians and communications specialists; performing and visual artists; professional athletes; professional firefighters; psychologists, social workers and many others. DPE was chartered by the AFL-CIO in 1977 in recognition of the rapidly-growing professional and technical occupations.*

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