

Social Worker

What Social Workers Do There are two main types of social workers: direct-service social workers who help people solve and cope with problems in their everyday lives, and clinical social workers, who diagnose and treat mental, behavioral, and emotional issues.

Duties Direct-service social workers typically do the following:

- Identify people who need help
- Assess clients' needs, situations, strengths, and support networks
- Develop plans to improve their clients' well-being
- Help clients adjust to changes and challenges in their lives, such as illness
- Research and refer clients to community resources, such as healthcare
- Help clients work with government agencies to apply for and receive benefits
- Respond to crisis situations, such as natural disasters or child abuse
- Advocate for and help clients get resources that would improve their well-being
- Follow up with clients to ensure that their situations have improved
- Evaluate services provided to ensure that they are effective

Social workers help people cope with challenges in every stage of their lives. They help with a wide range of situations, such as adopting a child or being diagnosed with a terminal illness. Social workers work with many populations, including children, people with disabilities, and people with addictions.

Clinical social workers, also called licensed clinical social workers, typically do the following

- Diagnose and treat mental, behavioral, and emotional disorders
- Provide individual, group, family, and couples therapy
- Assess clients' histories, backgrounds, and situations to understand their needs
- Develop a treatment plan with the client, doctors, and other healthcare professionals
- Help clients adjust to changes in their life
- Refer clients to other resources or services
- Evaluate their clients' progress and, if necessary, adjust the treatment plan

Many clinical social workers work in private practice. Some work in a group practice with other social workers or mental health professionals. Others work alone in a solo practice. In private practice, clinical social workers often do administrative and recordkeeping tasks. Among these tasks is working with clients and insurance companies to receive payment for their services. In addition, social workers market their practice to bring in new clients and to network with other professionals who may recommend them.

Direct-service social workers and clinical social workers often focus on a particular population or work environment. The following are some types of workers in this occupation:

Child and family social workers protect vulnerable children and help families in need of assistance. They help parents find services, such as child care, or apply for benefits, such as food stamps. They intervene when children are in danger of neglect or abuse. Some help arrange adoptions, locate foster families, or work to get families back together. Clinical social workers provide mental health care to help children and families cope with changes in their lives, such as divorce or other family problems.

School social workers work with teachers, parents, and school administrators to develop plans and strategies to improve students' academic performance and social development. Students and their families are often referred to social workers to deal with problems such as aggressive behavior, bullying, or frequent absences from school.

Healthcare social workers help patients understand their diagnosis and make the necessary adjustments to their lifestyle, housing, or healthcare. They provide information on services, such as home health care or support groups, to help patients manage their illness or disease. Social workers help doctors and other healthcare professionals understand the effects diseases and illnesses have on patients' mental and emotional health. Some healthcare social workers specialize in gerontological social work or hospice and palliative care social work.

Gerontological social workers help senior citizens and their families. They help clients find services such as programs that provide older adults with meals or with home health care. In some cases, they provide information about assisted living facilities or nursing homes or work with older adults in those settings. They help clients and their families make plans for possible health complications or where clients will live if they can no longer care for themselves.

Hospice and palliative care social workers help patients adjust to serious, chronic, or terminal illnesses. Palliative care focuses on relieving or preventing pain and other symptoms associated with serious illness. Hospice is a type of palliative care for people who are dying. Social workers in this setting provide and find services, such as support groups or grief counselors, to help patients and their families cope with the illness or disease.

Mental health and substance abuse social workers help clients with mental illnesses or addictions. They provide information on services, such as support groups or 12-step programs, to help clients cope with their illness.

Work Environment Social workers work in hospitals and clinics; nursing homes; community mental health clinics; schools; government; substance abuse clinics; military bases and hospitals. Although most social workers work in an office, they may spend a lot of time away from the office visiting clients. School social workers may be assigned to multiple schools and travel around the school district to see students. Understaffing and large case

loads may make the work stressful. In 2010, the industries employing the most healthcare social workers were:

- Hospitals 31%
- Nursing homes 13%
- Individual and family services 11%
- Home health care 10%
- Local government 6%

Education A bachelor's degree in social work (BSW) is the most common requirement for entry-level positions. However, some employers may hire workers who have a bachelor's degree in a related field, such as psychology or sociology.

BSW programs prepare students for direct-service positions such as caseworker or mental health assistant. These programs teach students about diverse populations, human behavior, and social welfare policy. All programs require students to complete supervised fieldwork or an internship.

Some positions, including those in schools and in healthcare, frequently require a master's degree in social work (MSW). All clinical social workers must have an MSW.

MSWs generally take 2 years to complete. Some programs allow those with a BSW to earn their MSW in 1 year. MSW programs prepare students for work in their chosen specialty and develop the skills to do clinical assessments, manage a large number of clients, and take on supervisory duties. All programs require students to complete supervised fieldwork or an internship.

A BSW is not required to enter MSW programs. In fact, a degree in almost any major is acceptable. However, coursework in psychology, sociology, economics, and political science are recommended.

Licenses Licensure varies by state. All states have some type of licensure or certification requirement. All states require clinical social workers to be licensed. However, some states provide exemptions for clinical social workers who work in government agencies.

Becoming a licensed clinical social worker usually requires a master's degree in social work and 2 years or 3,000 hours of supervised clinical experience after graduation. After completing their supervised experience, clinical social workers must pass an exam to be licensed. For more information about licensure by state, contact the Association of Social Work Boards.

Important Qualities

Compassion. Social workers often work with people who are in stressful and difficult situations. To develop strong relationships, they must have compassion and empathy for their clients.

Listening skills. Clients talk to social workers about challenges in their lives. To effectively help, social workers must listen to and understand their clients' needs.

Organizational skills. Helping and managing multiple clients, often assisting with their paperwork or documenting their treatment, requires good organizational skills.

People skills. Being able to work with different groups of people is essential for social workers. They need strong people skills to foster healthy and productive relationships with their clients and colleagues.

Problem-solving skills. Social workers need to develop practical and innovative solutions to their clients' problems.

Time-management skills. Social workers often have many clients. They must manage their time well to provide adequate service to all of their clients.

Pay Median annual wages, May 2010: \$43,000

Job Outlook Percent change in employment, projected 2010-20: 26% growth

Demand for child and family social workers should continue to grow because they will be needed to investigate child abuse cases and to place children in foster care and with adoptive families. However, growth in this occupation may be limited by budget constraints at all levels of government. In schools, more social workers will be needed to respond to rising student enrollments. The availability of federal, state, and local funding will be a major factor in determining the actual employment growth in schools.

Employment of healthcare social workers is expected to grow by 34 percent, much faster than the average for all occupations. As baby boomers age, they and their families will require help from social workers to find care, which will increase demand for healthcare social workers.

Employment of mental health and substance abuse social workers is expected to grow by 31 percent, much faster than the average for all occupations. Growth is expected as more people seek treatment for mental illness and addiction. In addition, drug offenders are increasingly being sent to treatment programs rather than to jail. As a result, use of substance abuse treatment programs is expected to grow, increasing demand for mental health and substance abuse social worker.

SOURCE:

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2012-13 Edition*, Social Workers, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm> (visited August 10, 2012).

Local Schools:

- Rutgers
- Stockton