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### Becoming a Social Worker

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Becoming a Social Worker

Professor St. Louis

Autumn Truesdale

Capstone Final

## **Part 1**

Social work has been around for many centuries. Throughout all this time, social work has taken many shapes and forms necessary to get to where we are today. Throughout this paper, I will do a deep dive into the history and goals of the profession, explain why and how I can see myself excelling as a social worker, and the job requirements needed to obtain a job suitable to my interests.

By the early stages of the 19th century, a shift took place. There were three movements throughout the 19th and 20th centuries where an emphasis was placed on mental health illnesses. The first movement was the Moral Treatment Movement which was implemented in 1770-1900 that focused on humane treatment in institutional settings. Nearing the beginning of the 20th century came the mental hygiene movement that replaced the previous one. This movement lasted roughly from 1900-to 1945 and it was an initiative that focused on the improvement of mental health, with a focus on having specialized psychiatric units and psychotherapy. Lastly, after World War II, the third mental health movement gained momentum. From the early 1950s to the present day, the deinstitutionalization movement focused on providing services and care for people within their communities rather than in institutional settings. The importance of providing mental health treatment and services and keeping the mentally ill outside of various institutions was a vital piece of this movement. (Kirst-Ashman, 2017)

Social work education started in 1898 when the New York Charity Organization Society offered a summer course to train charity workers and by 1919, 17 US and Canadian schools of social work joined together to form the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Work. By 1927, the group changed its' name to the American Association of Schools of Social

Work (AASSW) and established membership requirements through education. (Kirst-Ashman, 2017)

Fast forward a few decades, in the 1950s, social workers turned more towards psychotherapy and casework. During this time, 85% of social work students selected casework as their orientation of choice. Those with a master's in social work (MSW) were more sought after than those that just had a bachelor's in social work (BSW) because BSWs was not yet accredited. With the growing importance of social work and providing people with the resources and services they needed, seven separate professional organizations came together to form the National Association of Social Workers, better known as NASW. The purpose of this organization was to provide a unified front to move the profession ahead. (Kirst-Ashman, 2017)

As shown throughout the history of social work, there has been an emphasis placed on providing services and resources for people that cannot provide these services on their own. Social workers primarily work with offenders that are 18 years old and under and their responsibilities include promoting social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and empowering people to enhance their well-being. Social workers are tasked with working with the youth who have committed a criminal offense; they assess the needs and situation of the client; plan, provide, or coordinate services; explain the conditions of the sentence, parole, or rehabilitation ordered by the court; and manage their case. They also might have to work with family members to provide the necessary resources, services, and support needed on a case-by-case basis. (ZipRecruiter Marketplace Research Team)

To become a Social Worker, the applicant must have a bachelor's degree in either social work, human development, or psychology to become a caseworker; organizational skills, and a willingness to work with young clients and their families. Some employers prefer a master's in

social work or human development and different jurisdictions have additional requirements for social workers in the criminal justice system. There also might be a requirement of having experience working with children since that is an area that I am heavily interested in. The hiring process to be a social worker is typical for any other job, there is a criminal background check that is conducted and an education, licensure, and certification verification with Human Resources. (Indeed, *Social Worker (MSW/LMSW)*) Depending on the state there are different requirements, but in the state of New York, there is a training that pertains to child abuse identification and reporting. Everyone in the state that has either a licensed master's in social work (LMSW) or a license in clinical social work (LCSW) must take this training as well as receive continuing education credits. There is a requirement of 36 credits for every three years of your licensing registration period. In addition to all these requirements, social workers are considered mandated reporters. As mandated reporters, they are required to complete training to recognize, and report suspected child abuse and/or neglect (*How to become a social worker in New York 2021*).

To be an effective social worker, I think you must embody a few essential qualities. These are having compassion, being empathetic, having good communication skills, being assertive, and being understanding in every situation. Growing up less fortunate has taught me that no matter how hard things get, I can always get through the adversity that is placed in front of me. Coming from a single-parent household, I have an ample number of examples of how hard it is for a parent to not only take care of themselves but also their kid(s). With my bachelor's degree in Communication, my master's degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice, and my future master's degree in Social Work, I would love to touch as many people's lives as possible and help people, especially juveniles, embrace and acknowledge the fact that things in

life aren't always easy or handed to you but with hard work, determination, and belief in yourself, it can take you places. Ease their stress when it comes to food and housing insecurities so fewer children are worrying about when their next meal is coming and if they have a place to sleep at night.

I am interested in this profession because I want to be a part of the change happening in the world. Due to the recent events in our country and being a person of color, I feel as though it is a part of my responsibility as a young, black woman to help my community and myself in creating a more just and equal world. Between racial inequality, educational gaps, and the disparities that are present in the world like having access to resources and services, there are many roadblocks that people of color and minorities face, and I would like to help alleviate some of their struggles.

Even though social workers are doing great work and can help a lot of people, they are not compensated as such. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average annual salary as of May 2020 was \$51,760, while there was a potential to make upwards of \$85,820. This implies that there may be opportunities for advancement, but it could so insinuate that you get more money based on skill level, a particular location, and years of experience (*Expected social work salaries by degree level, 2022*) Some benefits of being a social worker include dental insurance, flexible spending account, health insurance, life insurance, paid time off, parental leave, tuition reimbursement, a retirement plan and more. These benefits are very important to create a healthy environment to prevent burnout as well as, basic human rights that everyone deserves as another form of payment for their hard work (ZipRecruiter Marketplace Research Team).

Being a social worker, like many other professions in the world, isn't easy work. There is a high demand for social workers due to the climate in which we live but on the other hand, there is not enough incentive for social workers to stay in the profession besides just helping people and their families. There is an extreme risk of burnout from social workers due to the strain and stress of the job. According to a study assessing burnout in social workers by Siebert (2006), the results indicated a current burnout rate of 39% and a lifetime burnout rate of 75%. Burnout most often occurs in areas of social work where practitioners work directly with traumatized clients; however, compassion fatigue is also rooted in stressful work environments and organizations (Lloyd et al., 2002). Working in a stressful work environment is not unknown to social workers. When getting a new "client," social workers are probably meeting that person and their family during the worst moment in their life. Stressful work environments may be a factor in staff shortages or high turnover due to burnout, contributing to the demands on the social workers employed there, and required documentation and paperwork are critical but can be challenging to get completed in a timely way when there is more immediate client need requiring the social worker's time and attention.

One program that piques my interest is The Second Chance Act Youth Offender Reentry Program. Their primary goal is to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships between state agencies, local government, and community- and faith-based organizations to attempt to resolve the challenges moderate to high-risk juvenile offenders may face regarding recidivating and reentry into society from juvenile detention centers or jails. (OJJDP, 2020). I am interested in this program because they work directly with juveniles with lowering recidivism rates, as well as provide the youth with the necessary education needed to excel in society and remove themselves from troubling situations that get them in trouble.

After solidifying my role as a juvenile social worker, I see my progression throughout the profession being as such: start as an entry-level social worker then I get both my master's and license in social work so that I become an LMSW. I hope to merge my interpersonal skills from my Communications undergraduate degree with the skills I acquired from both my master's in Criminology and Criminal Justice and future master's and licensure in Social Work to make the world a better place. I aspire of opening my community center that would help children and young adults change their future to get themselves and their families out of generational poverty and away from prison/jail by helping those who are recently released to get back on their feet and navigate life outside of prison. With this community center, my sole purpose would be to give back to my community that helped raise me, as well as give hope and inspire people who look like me that anything is possible if they commit themselves. By being a social worker, I would have first-hand experience in helping juveniles get their lives back on track.

## **Part 2: Social Work Policy**

According to the NASW, “the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers). Social work seeks to provide people with access to resources and organizations that are necessary to better people's lives. Social workers should be motivated and driven to help people both socially and economically. Ways in which economic development can occur is by people in the society and the government investing in providing proficient services and developing programs that help those in need engage in productive employment that can help reduce their governmental needs.

There are three levels to social work: micro, mezzo, and macro. On the micro level, social workers are tasked with protecting and helping defenseless communities, like young children, people with mental disabilities, victims of domestic abuse and violence, and the elderly community. Social workers who work at the micro level provide one-on-one, family, and small group services to clients that address a wide range of social issues. This is not an exhaustive list, but some of these issues may include housing support, substance abuse counseling, and mental health therapy (*Micro vs. mezzo vs. Macro Social Work: Differences and similarities* 2019).

Secondly, at the mezzo level, social workers are primarily focused on helping vulnerable populations at the large group, organizational, and small community levels. Clinical social workers can provide more specialized care for their clients like diagnosing mental health illnesses and providing treatment options. They also can work with both victims and offenders that are involved in the criminal justice system. With valuable experience and education, it gives clinical and licensed social workers more freedom to help their clients in a way that social workers with just a bachelor's cannot do themselves (*Micro vs. mezzo vs. Macro Social Work: Differences and similarities* 2019). Lastly, macro-level social work focuses primarily on research, program development for small and large communities, policy advocacy and analysis, and work with non-profit administration. Macro social work is very distinct from micro and mezzo because of its focus on policy and research. (*Micro vs. mezzo vs. Macro Social Work: Differences and similarities* 2019). Social work is a profession that is very valuable and can be very rewarding, but it is not without its downfalls. This paper is going to address violence against social workers and highlight ways in which society and members of the profession themselves can find ways to improve.

## **Social Work Violence:**

Workplace violence among social workers typically includes physical abuse, the verbal threat of assault, verbal abuse, and property damages (Newhill, 1996). Social workers are often sent alone and unarmed to address and assess dangerous situations in certain neighborhoods that require more security and surveillance. Social workers put their lives in danger every day conducting potential life-changing interventions, but what measures are taken to ensure their safety?

Since the introduction of the social work profession, social workers have put themselves in harm's way in some way shape, or form while helping clients and most times, their families as well. Social workers are in a helping profession which means that they are equipped to deal with and help clients that could be suffering from mental illness, have experienced trauma, or have been negatively influenced by generational poverty and possibly homelessness. All these factors, plus many more can put a social worker's safety at risk. According to a study conducted by Newhill, there has been an identified hierarchy of risk based on the primary area of practice: criminal justice, drug and alcohol services, and child welfare were identified as "high risk" areas of practice, and health care services and services for older people were identified as "low risk." Social work has an in-person component that has shown vital to clients' treatment (Lyter & Abbot, 2007). Going to a client's home exposes more risk factors for social workers: being targeted for representing a specific agency, going into dangerous neighborhoods, and clients may become violent are just some of the safety concerns social workers face in the field. There needs to be training put into place that helps social workers navigate stressful situations, as well as social work agencies adopting a policy that could have the potential to reduce the number of social workers physically, mentally, and/or emotionally assaulted on the job.

With the rising number of attacks against social workers, it is surprising that more people are unaware of how dangerous social work can be. Social service agencies that work with vulnerable juvenile and adult populations need field safety and training in addition to the training social workers would already receive during their orientation period. Addressing the risks social workers endure, just goes to show that there is an imminent need for more traction and change. By gaining more publicity, it can help produce the necessary policies to help reduce violence against social workers.

Social workers can be in immediate danger when working with clients and they may have a false sense of security during the interaction since social worker violence isn't as publicized as other workplace violence. Social work violence comes in many forms, such as verbal attacks, and physical attacks that have the potential to result in hospitalization, and in rare cases, death (Harkey, n.d.). With the studies that have already been conducted, there is little to no evidence pinpointing how and why social workers are harassed while out in the field but Tully, Kropf, and Price suggested that there is a shift in the population social workers are involved with regarding their demeanor, temper, and relationship with authority.

Like many jobs in the world, one gender can overpower another, regarding social work, females are the main applicants and employees but that is not to say that males are not hired and needed in this line of work. The rate at which male and female social workers are subjected to violence remains to be studied, but current studies have shown that those who work with public agencies are more prone to violence than those that work with private (Newhill & Purnell Hagan, 2010). Other studies show that social workers with the least amount of experience (0-5 years) are more susceptible to experiencing violence (Tully, Kropf, & Price, 1993; Kelley, 2010). This statistic might be because of the lack of home visits and safety training.

Lyter and Abbot, 2000 reported that with the lack of specific home visit training, they adapt and adopt protective styles that are suitable to them, their environment, and their aspect of social work. This study led to five specific types of home visitors: the frightened avoidant type, the clueless type, the naïve/compassionate type, the bravado type, and the informed type (Lyter & Abbott, 2007). First, the frightened avoidant type of home visitor has an abundant amount of fear about home visits and will either try to avoid them altogether or rush the visit to avoid facing their fears. Secondly, the clueless type appears disinterested and avoids safety policies and practices but only gets involved after an incident has occurred to themselves and/or a colleague. Third, the naïve and compassionate type believes that everyone will recognize their positive qualities since they are caring and empathetic. This mindset led the social worker to potentially believe that risk may be the necessary price to pay for serving humankind or that they are immune to workplace violence because of their demeanor. Fourth, the bravado type brags about their ability to handle any situation and sees themselves as invincible; and lastly, the informed type gives off the persona that they are well-informed about the risks that come with home visits and consistently exercise safe practices of social work (Lyter & Abbott, 2007). Workplace fear is a real thing for social workers, and it should be taken seriously and addressed throughout agencies across the world.

Social workers rely heavily on their sense of awareness and their ability to adjust to any abrupt actions given the clientele that they work with. Unfortunately, with a steady increase in the number of cases, social workers are more susceptible to experiencing burnout. When social workers are overworked and physically, mentally, and emotionally drained it can decrease their sense of awareness putting them at a higher risk of experiencing violence. Burnout is a psychological response to chronic workplace stressors and is thought to have three dimensions:

emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and diminished personal achievement (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Emotional exhaustion is related to a social worker's feelings of being overwhelmed and overworked. Depersonalization highlights the worker's negative or excessively detached responses to various aspects of the job. And lastly, diminished personal accomplishment is concerned about the social worker's feelings of incompetence and lack of achievement at work (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). Social worker burnout is a serious and very prevalent problem because it can negatively affect their quality of work, as well as hurt social work in its entirety. The next part of the paper will examine three potential solutions to help better ensure the safety of social workers both in and out of the field.

### **Solution 1: Mandated Safety Training**

Even though there is little conversation being had about workplace violence social workers face, it is still a necessary conversation that needs to be had. Through the research, other social workers and those close to the social work profession have proposed certain solutions but they are not targeting the perpetrators. There are three solutions to this sleeping giant that might have the potential to change the trajectory of the path the profession is heading towards. One solution could be implementing a safety training program that is mandatory for all social workers specializing in all aspects that are based on previous and present social worker experience. Being afraid has many ramifications and while fear is associated with this line of work, I believe that social workers would be better at their job and have more time to worry about their clients if they are not simultaneously worrying about their own life and safety. Knowing to assess and address safety issues can be very beneficial. Social workers are more than likely alone, working with clients while they are under duress. Because there is a lack of safety training in the

discipline, the most feasible way to implement safety training programs might be while someone is at the undergraduate or graduate level. By starting with this specific population, aspiring, and established social workers will gain the necessary education needed to address certain situations while simultaneously participating in their field placement, making them better prepared to enter the workforce. There should be a requirement that articulates that all social workers, regardless of the degree level, need to participate in a fresher course on safety training every 3-5 years since the economy is always changing. Another element that can be added to safety training is self-defense. Self-defense accompanied with more adequate interpersonal skills can have the potential to save a life. Even though it is in a social worker's job description to help any and every one in need of government services and resources, it doesn't negate the fact that social workers can be put in extreme circumstances that can be hard to navigate through without the necessary training. Due to the clientele that social workers deal with daily, it is unfortunate to think and say that self-defense may become the only tactic that may prevent violence against social workers.

### **Solution 2: Zero Tolerance Policy:**

In addition to placing more emphasis on safety training, there needs to be more of an incentive for clients not to harass or abuse social workers. The second solution is meant to alleviate stress and fear social workers may have when working in this profession. By adopting a 'zero tolerance policy across the country and potentially worldwide, clients can become aware of the consequences of physically assaulting or harassing social workers. 'Zero tolerance is a one-strike policy that prohibits clients from physically and sexually assaulting a social worker. If an

assault against a social worker is committed, it results in automatic removal from the agency, as well as further consequences based on if the social worker wants to press charges.

A study conducted by the NASW in 2004 surveyed 10,000 social workers with a 50% response rate and found that 44% stated that they faced personal safety issues in their primary employment practice. Additionally, 30% of those respondents felt their supervisors did not address their safety concerns adequately (Harkey; Newhill & Purnell Hagan, 2010). It is problematic that social workers do not feel heard by their superiors and that even when their concerns are voiced, they are met with disregard and carelessness. Supervisors and those who are in charge that does not report or stand up for their employees are part of the reason why we are here as a country. It shouldn't and it can't be solely up to the social workers experiencing discomfort at their job to instill change and produce great results. There needs to be a collective effort from everyone involved to help practitioners feel more at ease when they walk into work. This policy directly involves clients' behaviors and how they can negatively affect the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of social workers. By adding this element to the profession, it can serve as a stepping-stone to reducing workplace violence and the fear surrounding social work and as another layer of protection for the social workers.

### **Solution 3: Implementing a policy so that social workers do not go on home visits alone**

To effectively change violence against social workers, there needs to be more importance placed on their safety. The increasing number of cases coupled with the low supply of social workers produces an overworked environment. Having a low supply forces social workers to take on more cases and it increases the potential for safety measures to be neglected. To combat the deterioration of safety precautions, there needs to be a policy put in place that mandates

social workers to be accompanied on home visits. There has been a rise in the number of social workers who burn out due to stress, that is physically, mentally, and emotionally abused and harassed, as well as a few social workers that have been killed.

There is a social worker safety bill that was passed in 2009 after a social worker was killed. According to EHS Today, Teri Zenner was a social worker and case manager with the Johnson County (Kansas) Mental Health Center who in 2004 was stabbed to death during a routine, in-home visit with a client. The purpose of the bill is to provide a grant program that was focused primarily on providing workplace safety measures, equipment, and training for social workers, domestic violence outreach staff, and others that work with potentially violent clients. There is a need to increase public awareness and understanding surrounding social worker safety and how having policies in place can serve as a deterrence factor. By looking at multiple studies that have been conducted over the years, it begs the question: why hasn't anything been done? Why are we, as a society, reactive, rather than proactive in keeping our social workers safe? Do more people have to get hurt or die for change to occur? Even though this is a very real issue and is prevalent among social workers today, doesn't mean that they should continue to suffer in silence.

### **My Future in Social Work:**

By being a prominent figure in the community that is geared towards helping others, there will always be scrutiny and backlash. Unfortunately for social workers, the backlash we face can potentially manifest itself as violence in various forms. Throughout the research, there has been an emphasis placed on more safety training that is needed for social workers, so they are better equipped with handling stressful situations and how workplace violence is unfortunately inevitable in this line of work. As I embark on this journey to become a licensed social worker, I

will make sure I hold my safety at the utmost importance, right above providing and giving great care and services to my clients. I will also prioritize my mental and physical well-being so that I could potentially avoid getting burned out of the profession.

Due to the high demand and low supply of social workers, there is a high rate of burnout because of the large caseloads. To make sure that I do not fall into that category, I will try my best to maintain a great work-personal life balance by taking mental and physical rest days for myself. For me to be a successful social worker that stays in the profession for a long time, I will need to exercise these mental health days so that I can give my clients my best self. In addition to mental health days and being able to compartmentalize my work life from my one, I will use everything that I was taught while obtaining my master's in criminology and criminal justice and my bachelor's in communications. Providing people with the necessary resources, programs, and services is vital in making sure that they can better their lives, but I also believe that communication plays a vital role in that. To give people the right resources accurately and effectively, you first need to listen before speaking. I feel as though having a communications background will help me tremendously with picking up on various verbal and nonverbal communication skills while being able to assess a situation to make sure that I can stay in control and maintain order with my clients.

I want to become a social worker because I am committed to serving my client and bettering their life, as well as striving to achieve social reform. Working in social work would allow me to work with any population in a variety of settings, help change people's lives, bring them hope, and see the true power of healing and transformation. I would be making a difference and making the world a better place which is my goal while being a social worker. I especially appreciate that this field values and fights for diversity and civil rights. The NASW has been an

advocate for LGBTQ rights, immigration rights, and other issues that people are struggling with right now. I want to be the voice for people that feel silenced and advocate on their behalf. Social work is a very rewarding profession.

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