

Careers in Psychology: Social Work

Social workers help individuals obtain tangible services, provide counseling to individuals and families, and work to improve social and health services in communities. Like many “helping” professions, social workers are concerned with improving the quality of individuals’ lives. Unlike other professions, however, the underlying assumption of social work is that change comes through working from a “top-down” approach. That is, individual change largely results from changing larger structures such as communities, groups, and families. Social workers often work to change social problems such as domestic violence, inadequate housing, substance abuse, and unemployment. It is not unusual for social workers to directly advocate for a client by finding adequate resources and specialists to provide needed services.

Job Description

Social workers are employed in a wide variety of settings. For example, they may practice in community mental health services where they provide individual and family counseling or help facilitate adoptions and foster care placement. Social workers are also found in hospitals, schools, social service agencies, and correctional facilities. The setting in which a social worker is employed will likely depend on the individual’s area of specialization. These areas include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. **Clinical:** These social workers offer psychotherapy to individuals, families, or groups.
2. **Child welfare or family services:** Some social workers help families who are trying to adopt children or help place children with foster families. Social workers in this field may help troubled families solve their problems so that children are not removed from their home. These professionals may go into homes to teach parenting skills or to work with youth who are having difficulty behaving appropriately at home.
3. **Child or adult protective services:** Social workers in this specialty are responsible for investigating reports of child or elderly abuse and may have to remove the abused individual from the home.
4. **School:** Social workers in this specialty may help disabled students integrate smoothly into the general school population. They also work with students who are having emotional problems and arrange for needed services outside of the school setting.
5. **Community:** Social workers in this specialty develop social policy to better aid communities.

Educational Requirements

It is possible to find employment in the social work field with a B.S.W. (Bachelor of Social Work). With a B.S.W., employment is most likely to occur within the court system, in agencies such as Family Independence Agency, and in case management positions.

Obtaining a masters of social work (M.S.W.) allows for employment in almost all fields of social work and lets the social worker practice independently. A Ph.D. in social work is not necessary unless you want to teach social work at the university level. Social work M.S.W. programs are competitive, however, so it is important to know the prerequisites for the schools that interest you. M.S.W. programs place more emphasis on applied volunteer experience than on research experience (although research skills are necessary), so find opportunities to work in the community prior to applying to graduate school. Many students who are admitted into M.S.W. programs have worked for several years in social service fields after obtaining their undergraduate degree. This does not mean, however, that students are not accepted into M.S.W. programs immediately following graduation.

Further Information

For more information about social work, go to www.socialworkers.org

For information about graduate study in psychology, see *Graduate Study in Psychology* (updated frequently). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. This book describes graduate programs in all fields of psychology, with information about admission requirements. Ask for it at the Reference Desk of the library. For information on psychology careers, visit www.apa.org (click into “Students” and then into “Considering a Career in Psychology?”)

See www.bls.gov/oco for the U. S. Department of Labor’s *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.