

Written by Jeann Linsley, MSW

Social workers at all degree levels continue to work for salaries that are not increasing significantly in real dollars and are generally lower than those of other professions including teaching, law, nursing, and medicine, according to recent surveys. And gender inequity remains prominent in levels of pay for social workers, with compensation for females continuing to lag behind that of males.

Experts caution that a lack of consistent comparative study in the area of social work pay makes it difficult to draw hard and fast conclusions. However, most agree that data drawn from many sources show that social work pay has remained flat over time, and that inflation and cost of living continue to decrease the relative value of social work wages.

A survey conducted by the John A. Hartford Foundation Inc., as part of a larger study of the social work labor pool, found that between 1992 and 1999, the annual rate of wage growth for degreed social workers (when adjusted for cost of living increases) was a meager 0.8 percent. Social workers with MSWs saw an annual wage growth of about one percent during the same time period, according to the study, indicating that there is only a modest education effect in the slow rate of wage growth. However, MSWs earned about 18.5 percent more than social workers with bachelor's degrees, according to the study.

While other professions experienced similarly flat wage growth during that period, survey author Michael Barth sees the trend as significant and reflecting an ongoing attitude of self-sacrifice on the part of social workers. "For social workers, mission trumps money. They care more about what they do than how much they get paid for it," he says.

The Hartford study measured income in terms of hourly wages. It found that the average hourly wage of social workers in 1999 was \$16.24. That compares with \$14.74 in 1990 and \$14.54 in 1980. (Note: These figures are in 1999 dollars.) The Hartford Foundation study found that even after important factors like age, education, and race were considered, social workers earn roughly 11 percent less than individuals working in all other occupations.

Philip H. Schervish, Ph.D., Dean of the Spalding University School of Social Work, studied recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), and found a median annual social work salary of \$37,694 for the year 2001. This figure represents people with graduate degrees in positions defined as social work. Some of those individuals may have degrees in areas other

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than social work, but define their occupations as social work, he says.

Inflation has significantly cut into the value of wages over the last three years or so—for example, the BLS data indicate that although in the 1990s wages generally kept pace with inflation, in 2000 and 2001, inflation and cost of living began outpacing salary increases. In fact, according to the BLS data, it would take a salary of \$43,082—compared with the actual \$37,694 median—to keep pace with inflation and cost of living in 2001.

“Although (social workers) are being paid more, we cannot do as much with it,” says Schervish.

A survey by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) found that the national median social work salary for MSWs was between \$41,290 and \$45,660 in 1999. This compares with a median of between \$30,000 and \$35,000 in 1995, and between \$25,000 and \$29,000 in 1993.

The NASW data reflect only wage rates of its members, most of whom are MSWs, which accounts for the higher numbers, and the survey contains no specific interpretive information on salaries, as it had a broader purpose of gathering data for policy and service delivery.

Nancy Bateman, manager of the Specialty Practice Section of NASW, says it would be too difficult to comment on the overall significance of the NASW survey for social work pay, or to compare it with other data.

“This (survey) represents NASW members. It’s hard to get an analysis that would represent all social workers in the country,” she says. “It’s like comparing apples and oranges.”

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The Hartford and the NASW surveys showed pronounced gender differences in social work wages. The Hartford survey reported a “pronounced and persistent male-female wage differential” in the analysis of wages for social workers, degreed and non-degreed.

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Average hourly wage for male social workers in 1999 was \$17.90, about 14 percent higher than the comparable figure of \$15.56 for females, the study notes. In 1980, male social workers' average hourly wage was \$16.15, compared with \$13.66 for their female colleagues, it states.

This wage trend comes at a time when the social work profession appears to be even more female-dominated than in past years. For example, almost 80 percent of NASW membership was female in 1999, compared with about 75 percent in 1991, the study indicates.

The NASW survey found that men earned significantly more than women, with a median income for men reported at \$54,290, compared with \$43,510 for women.

Batemen noted that this finding is significant, but said more study is needed in order to draw conclusions about the results.

Michael Ramos, LISW, a social worker with a nonprofit agency in Cincinnati, Ohio, has begun to feel like a martyr, because after six years at his agency, his salary is still a comparatively low \$34,000 annually.

“My priority when starting my career was helping others.... As I've gotten older and met people from other professions, I've begun to feel like a martyr.... It's frustrating that other professionals with similar levels of education, like lawyers, librarians, and engineers, command higher salaries.”

“Social workers are too willing to accept lower salaries. I'm not sure why that is,” he says.

Tamitha Price, MSW, BSW, executive director of the Missouri NASW chapter, says that national trends aside, what she sees are particularly weak salaries for social workers in her state.

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“Salaries are a very weak area for the profession of social work and especially in Missouri. Social workers do not get paid very much, depending on what job setting they are in. We are often given the same or maybe a slight increase over counselors,” she says.

In Missouri, BSW incomes (at all experience levels) range from \$18,000 to \$27,000. MSWs usually start at around \$30,000 and go to \$40,000, she says. Those incomes have increased only “a couple thousand” over the past five or ten years, she says.

“Without advocacy at the state level...we don’t have jobs or good salaries,” says Price. “Advocacy is not just for students. It’s who we are, all the time.”

Price also urges social workers to negotiate their salaries (if employed in an agency). “Any social worker in America can negotiate salary. It’s whether they believe in their skills enough to advocate for what they deserve when they go into a job interview.”

SIDEBAR

How Do Private Practice Salaries Compare?

Income for social workers in private practice held steady against inflation between 1997 and 2000, while incomes of other licensed professionals, such as psychologists and family therapists lost ground, according to a survey by Psychotherapy Finances, a publication for mental health providers.

But social workers’ incomes are likely to continue to be flat or perhaps drop a little between 2000 and 2003, according to sources with the publication. Social workers in private practice earned a median annual income of \$55,512 in 2000, a 7.8 percent increase from 1997. By comparison, psychologists in private practice experienced an approximate two percent drop in their incomes during the same time period.

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The increase in social work income “is nothing to brag about because to a large degree, this simply reflects that social workers’ incomes were lower to begin with than their colleagues in psychology,” says Editor John Klein.

Klein predicts that, while it’s too early to say what the 2003 numbers will show, “it’s apparent to me that the last three years have been just as bad or worse than the three years before that.”

Nearly all clinicians who are dependent on managed care reimbursement are getting paid substantially less than they were five years ago, according to the survey.

The new gender gap

Since 1979, two gender trends have remained constant in the surveys conducted by Psychotherapy Finances. One is that women’s income has steadily gained on men’s. The second is that the proportion of women who respond to the surveys increased.

However, even though there continues to be an increase in female practitioners responding to the surveys, the gap between their incomes and those of men has widened for the first time in 20 years, the survey states. For example, in 1997, female social workers in private practice earned about 87 percent of that of men. In the latest (2000) survey, women earned only 80 percent of what their male colleagues earned.

The study indicated that men seem to be responding more aggressively to managed care, charging their self-pay clients more, and eliminating low-paying managed care business more quickly than their female colleagues.

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