

## Crisis in the Social Work Labor Force

Cheryl Hyde, School of Social Work, Temple University

Social workers constitute the largest occupational group within the education and human service workforce, providing “cradle to grave” services often to society’s most vulnerable individuals, families, and communities. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there are just over 700,000 social workers employed in the U.S. Nearly 50% of these social workers are in child, family, and school sites; 26% in healthcare organizations; 16% in mental health and substance abuse facilities; and the remainder in various other settings such as grassroots community agencies, public libraries, or creative arts programs.<sup>1</sup> Despite increasing demand for their services, an alarming shortage of agency-based social workers is forecasted.<sup>2</sup> Concerns about volatility in the social work labor force emerged as the COVID-19 pandemic waned.<sup>3</sup> While social work had once been viewed as a growth profession, recent research underscores the pernicious impact of heightened stress and distress on work engagement and worker mental health.<sup>4</sup> Low pay, precarity, and work-related stress are leading social workers to leave their jobs and the profession.<sup>5</sup>

In this policy brief, I look at a root cause of this pending crisis: neoliberalism and its impact on the human service agency-based social work labor force. Based on research in which I interviewed 60 professional human service workers, as well as other scholarship, I suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated, rather than caused, these deleterious working conditions for social workers.<sup>6</sup> To understand these broader causes and consequences of social worker burnout, one needs to grasp the consequences that 40 years of neoliberal policies have had on the human service sector.

### Highlights

- An alarming shortage of agency-based social workers is projected despite a growing need for their services.
- The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated the deleterious working conditions that are leading many social workers to leave the profession.
- Neoliberal austerity has led to pervasive underinvestment in human services and reshaped the social work profession to the detriment of human service professionals.
- Burnout, job precarity, and low wages, among other factors, are pushing social workers out of and away from social service provision.
- Significant government investment and changes at the organizational level are needed to properly support social work practitioners.

## Neoliberalism and the Welfare State

Neoliberalism emerged as an economic and cultural reaction to the growing welfare state in the mid-twentieth century. As a philosophy neoliberalism embraces reduced government spending, deregulation, and an ethos of “personal responsibility.” The expansion of the U.S. welfare state through the New Deal and the Great Society, in which public programs were charged with the amelioration of poverty, illiteracy, and health inequities, was anathema to neoliberalism’s tenets. Propelled by a significant economic downturn in the late 1970s and bolstered by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the goal of downsizing the government and eliminating the welfare state began in earnest.<sup>7</sup> Forty years later, we have a welfare state designed more for surveillance and control than compassion and assistance.<sup>8</sup>

Neoliberalism has had significant effects on the human service sector and social work in particular. Figure 1 illustrates the direct and downstream impacts the enactment of neoliberal policies has had on the human service sector. The erosion of the welfare state resulted in more than the loss of needed revenue to support programs and services, though that was significant. It delegitimized the purpose of human services and by extension the human service workforce. Providing assistance and support, especially to populations deemed “unproductive,” is anathema under neoliberalism. Social workers were not considered “essential workers” during the COVID-19 pandemic because the work they perform has been rendered “non-essential.”

The broad austerity mandate of neoliberalism is realized in the human service sector primarily through privatization and managerialism. Privatization refers to shifting public services and programs, themselves underfunded, into the private, usually non-profit, sector. The state thus serves as a contractor with and monitor of private entities now providing services. But there’s a catch: This is not a dollar-to-dollar transfer. Privatization is also accompanied by a decrease in the already inadequate public funding resulting in the mantra of “doing more for less.”<sup>9</sup> Austerity funding starves private agencies whose leadership embraces business protocols and performance measures to better compete for ever-

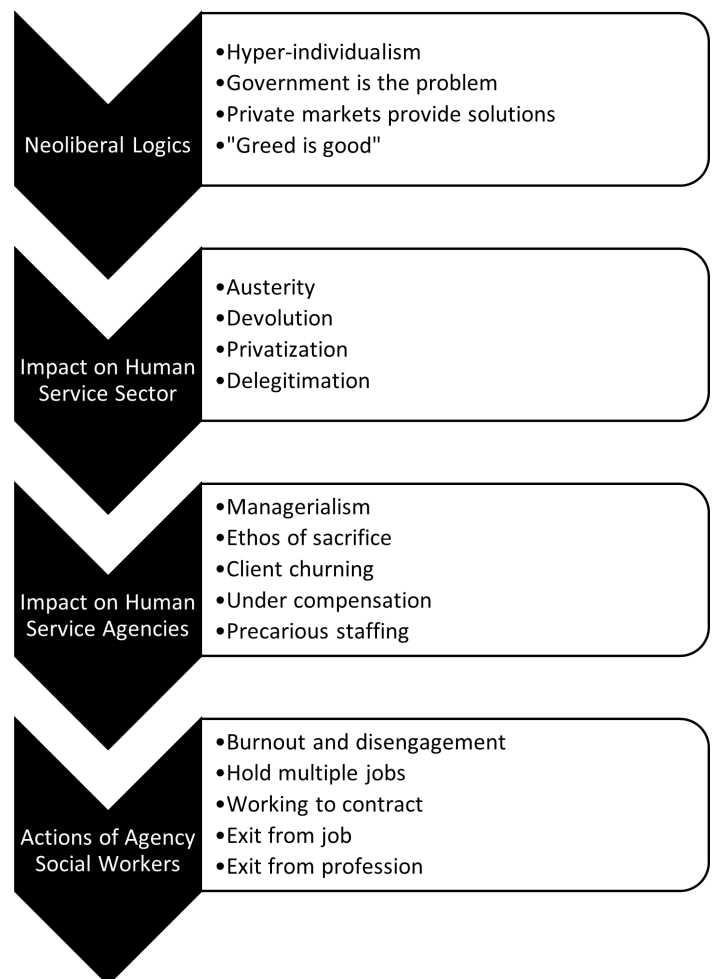


Figure 1. Neoliberal Policy Impacts on Human Services

shrinking resources. Managerialism, which relies on the use of effective and efficient strategies to run an organization, imposes business norms, values, and practices on service agencies. A critical component of managerialism is the use of “objective” performance outcome measures. Such measures value service workers based on the number of clients seen and not the quality of those relationships or the usefulness of the results. Agencies increasingly resemble factories with workers and clients as components of a treatment assembly line.

### “I love my work, I hate my job”

I interviewed 60 social workers in health, mental health, and family support agencies about their work experiences. I focus primarily on human

service agency workers who are degreed social workers (undergraduate or graduate), meaning that they have had education and training in working with individuals, families, and communities; engaging in policy advocacy; and understanding the profession's ethical mandates.

Respondents frequently distinguished their “work” from their “job”. Work involved the activities, particularly engagement and support, that practitioners do with their clients, to whom they are strongly devoted. This is not surprising given the altruistic bent of most individuals in the field. As one respondent said, “I am deeply committed to my kids [clients]. I feel that to help children and teens succeed is my calling, my passion. I love what I do.” These sentiments are in sharp contrast with respondents’ opinions of their jobs, specifically the job requirements and agency conditions that set the parameters for their work. Many expressed negative opinions about their agency climate and employment mandates, particularly since these factors seemed to compromise their abilities to do their work in ways that they preferred. Another respondent noted, “Do not get me started on all the paperwork. I carry 30 to 40 cases a week and have to document everything. There’s no agency support for this. It’s all on our own, and it’s a grind that makes you wonder if it’s worth it.”

In drawing this “work versus job” distinction, social workers are conveying the message that organizational context makes their practice nearly impossible. At its core social work is about building and maintaining relationships with clients and colleagues, relationships that are constrained because of the consequences of neoliberal policies.<sup>10</sup> Further, the emotional labor essential to these relationships instead is expended dealing with stressors of the job. Social workers are expected to sacrifice the time and energy required to meet client needs and often work extra hours without compensation or take paperwork home to complete.

Human service agencies exploit social workers’ commitment to their clients to extract the labor needed to provide services so much so that practitioners express considerable guilt or remorse if they cannot fulfill these unpaid obligations. A respondent lamented, “I’m routinely asked to stay and run an extra group and feel just terrible if I can’t

because our clients deserve to have this help. Also, you get accused of not being a team player, which bothers me a lot.” In this way practitioners internalize the neoliberal logic of what is “normal” for their work.

It might be possible for practitioners to accept some of these demands and conditions if their salaries were commensurate with the required education, credentials, and job functions. The median income for social workers is only \$58,380, a salary which in most metropolitan areas is neither sufficient nor fair. Not only do these low salaries hurt individuals economically, but this meager compensation also sends the message that the work is not valued. These concerns are exacerbated by other financial challenges, most notably educational debt. According to the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers, the average student loan debt for master’s level social workers is \$66,000.<sup>11</sup>

Given these low salaries and often predatory loan conditions, it is nearly impossible for many social workers to get out of debt. While there are various loan forgiveness and payment programs available, these often stipulate that social workers need to have been employed for 10 years, work in specific areas (e.g., rural communities), or work with specific populations (e.g., the medically underserved). None of these programs address the fundamental problems of low pay and the high cost of education. For many social workers, the economic calculus is increasingly untenable. According to one respondent, “I haven’t gotten a raise in years, and the salary was low to start with. Cost of living and student loans eat up my paycheck. I can’t believe that I’m a working professional and still need to live with a roommate to make ends meet.”

Heavy workloads, undercompensated labor, and demanding schedules often are cited as primary contributors to what is euphemistically termed “burnout.”<sup>12</sup> Burnout results from the stress and secondary trauma experienced by social workers, and it can take a significant toll on their health and well-being. Further, burnout is also associated with the compassion fatigue and moral disengagement that often signify alienation from one’s work, one’s colleagues, and oneself.<sup>13</sup> Social workers cite the lack of resources and services for their clients, ineffective

and unsupportive agency leadership, concerns about escalating harassment and violence by clients and their families, and the aforementioned high caseloads and mountains of paperwork as main contributory factors to their burnout, all factors that have been caused by and grown under neoliberalism.

The profession's response has been to advocate self-care. Indeed, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) included the following statement in its latest revision to its Code of Ethics,

Professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical social work practice. Professional demands, challenging workplace climates, and exposure to trauma warrant that social workers maintain personal and professional health, safety, and integrity. Social work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are encouraged to promote organizational policies, practices, and materials to support social workers' self-care.<sup>14</sup>

While agencies are “encouraged” to support self-care, there is no mandate to create environments that prevent burnout. No attention is paid to the systemic factors that cause worker burnout: The neoliberal logics that lead to heavy workloads, difficult work environments, and punitive outcome performance measures are rarely part of an analysis of the causes and consequences of burnout. Instead, the neoliberal ethos of personal responsibility is manifested by placing the onus for countering burnout through self-care on the individual practitioner. Neoliberalism is upheld both by not challenging the root causes of current working conditions and by emphasizing the individual's role in coping with those conditions. Workers internalize these messages and become complicit in maintaining rather than critiquing and challenging the neoliberal logics of their agencies.<sup>15</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

It should be no surprise, given the financial and emotional duress, that social workers are questioning and leaving the profession. The looming shortage of social workers, particularly in child welfare and mental health, does not bode well for the provision of services and assistance to a range of populations. Professional associations, such as NASW, have been

slow to act in ways that would provide meaningful changes to the working conditions of social workers. Local, state, and federal governments also need to take steps to support current social workers and open more pathways for individuals who want to enter the profession without being encumbered by the current financial shortfalls. Ideally, professional associations, government entities, and educational/training organizations should collaborate in ways that not just support but also legitimate social work practitioners. Some possibilities to address and mitigate the neoliberal factors that lead to social work labor market volatility include:

- Expand federal training programs such as the Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) Behavioral Health Workforce and Education and Training program that provides significant grants to support graduate students willing to practice in medically underserved areas. This program could be a model for other federal and state agencies to invest in social work education and to locate practitioners where the need is greatest.
- Lower requirements for Student Loan Forgiveness programs. Setting a threshold of 10 years of employment is beyond the reach of social workers who are considering exiting within two to three years of work.
- Establish salary standards that are commensurate with education level, job requirements, and regional cost of living.
- Expand reimbursement rates for mental health services. Insurance companies need to be pressured to pay more for mental health coverage as well as include social workers as mental health providers.
- Funders of human service programs, both public and private, need to establish reasonable caseloads and other work demands. Resource providers can play a critical role in recalibrating work demands.
- Human services, and the welfare state in general, need to be funding priorities at all levels

of government. Trends including the opioid epidemic, post-pandemic mental health issues, the aging population, rising housing scarcity, and continued economic precarity will continue to place pressure on the human services sector to provide needed support and assistance.

At the organizational level:

- Agencies must reduce caseloads and the attendant paperwork, provide productive supervision, and support a better work-home balance that includes hybrid options.
- Agency cultures need to be re-aligned with the values of social work rather than the continued use of managerialism. These values should in turn be reflected in the education and training of agency leadership within social work programs and in other disciplines (e.g., business, nonprofit management).
- Human service organizations, along with professional associations, need to focus on the systemic causes of worker disengagement and burnout, rather than holding the individual responsible for their own well-being.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope for social workers. A 2023 public opinion survey found that 80% of Americans held a favorable view of social workers, and just over half said that social workers should be paid more, perhaps suggesting that the anti-welfare sentiment of neoliberalism is waning.<sup>16</sup> Younger workers seem particularly unwilling to accept current work conditions and have initiated economic equity campaigns and pursued unionization efforts. These efforts, along with collective actions aimed at holding social work professional associations accountable, address the structural dynamics that undercut social work and link the labor rights of social workers to other human service issues such as the decarceration and abolition movements. Ultimately, it is the building of this new movement that will change working conditions and perhaps the neoliberal apparatus that drives social workers away from their calling.

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