# Who Is a Social Worker? Lessons on Sampling From Political Participation Research

Patrick Meehan
Jason Ostrander
Shannon R. Lane

*Abstract: Defining social workers for the purposes of research is not as straightforward as it sounds. To date, researchers who have examined social workers as a group have used a variety of sampling methods. Multiple methods speak to the variety of options for defining social workers. Understanding membership within the profession is a precondition to understanding research about the behavior of those within the profession. This research note explores these sampling methods in detail. Each has its advantages, but none are without their own disadvantages, some of which bias their view of the profession. As researchers who have considered the political behavior of social workers, we consider six methods for sampling social workers that have been used to understand their behavior in this specific domain. Importantly, the sampling methods examined here can be applied to research about social workers outside of politics. These include sampling (1) members of professional organizations, (2) licensed social workers, (3) social work students, (4) graduates of social work programs, (5) social work faculty, and (6) members of social work-related occupations. After reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of each, we provide scholars a table for reference. The authors recommend that the Council on Social Work Education, National Association of Social Workers, and several other professional associations pull together members to explore a unified definition of social work through integrated practice and refrain from focusing on what makes us different.*

*Keywords: Political social work, macro social work, research methods, professional identity, sampling*

What makes someone a social worker? Is it their education? Job title? Level of licensure? Their own identification as a social worker? Something else? While this may seem to be a philosophical question, those who study characteristics of social workers must answer that question as they develop their research. While we do not suggest we can answer the question in one definitive way, we recognize that researchers who want to identify behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics of social workers or the effects of interventions must determine the key characteristics that determine membership in the group as part of their research methodology.

## Significance

We are concerned with the question of how researchers define social workers to create their sampling for two reasons. First, diverse definitions of "social worker" can present challenges in comparing results across studies. Second, without thoughtful considerations

Patrick Meehan, MSW, PhD, School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Jason Ostrander, MSW, PhD, School of Social Work, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT. Shannon R. Lane, MSW, PhD, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, New York, NY.

of the reasons for defining membership in the group in a specific way, the sampling approach may introduce additional bias into the research process.

In this inquiry, we used studies of the political behavior and participation of social workers as a case study for understanding methods of identifying social workers for a study sample. In this research note, we describe the most common strategies used to sample social workers regarding political behavior. Importantly, these strategies are applicable to research on social workers on topics outside of political participation. We explain some of the advantages and disadvantages of using each strategy, and where potential bias threatens the validity of the resulting research. At the conclusion, we provide a summary table that outlines these advantages and disadvantages.

## Sampling in Political Social Work Research

We have identified six ways of identifying social workers for sampling used in political social work research. Individuals are identified as social workers based on membership in social work organizations, typically the National Association of Social Workers (NASW); licensure; social work student status; holding a social work degree; social work faculty status; and employment in social work-related occupations. There is limited large-scale data available to researchers on the demographics of social workers. The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) does not publish demographic information about test-takers, which would allow researchers to better understand social workers more broadly and compare research samples to the general population. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) reports annual statistics on social work education; however, they omit demographic information on students. NASW does not publish demographics of their members. Both NASW and CSWE have supported workforce studies, including the most recent, a study of 2018 graduates (CSWE, 2020).

### Professional Organization Membership

Many professional organizations exist to work towards advancing the field of social work or a subfield, to develop guidelines for best practices, and to help social workers engage in activities such as collective action and legislative advocacy (Davis et al., 2021). Research that examines members of professional organizations has sampled members of national organizations such as the National Network for Social Work Managers (NNSWM) and the Association for Community Organization and Social Action (ACOSA; Mary, 2005), the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA; Cuellar et al., 2018), the Migration and Child Welfare National Network, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), Latino Social Workers Organization, Association of Oncology Social Work, Clinical Social Work Association, and the National Association of Forensic Social Workers (Park et al., 2011), and state-level organizations such as the Minnesota Association of Macro Practice Social Work (AMPSW; Hill et al., 2010). The most common membership association used by research into social workers' attitudes and behaviors is the NASW and its state chapters on topics ranging from the use of evidence-based practice (Tuten et al., 2016), perceptions about the relationship of firearm ownership to child

neglect (Jennissen et al., 2019), and the use of spirituality and religion in their practice (Vetvik et al., 2018).

The use of the NASW membership as a proxy for identification as a social worker in political social work research goes back at least to 1981, when Wolk used a NASW list to sample social workers. Sampling members of NASW has logistical ease and introduces a cross-section of fields of practice. Wolk (1981) was curious to know the political behavior of social workers, and whether they lived up to the profession's history and traditions of political activism. Fundamentally, though, the decision to join NASW and the decision to be politically active are not necessarily independent of each other. As a result, Wolk (1981) was sampling social workers who may have been more politically active than social workers in general. Based on the responses from this sample, Wolk (1981) concluded that political activism among social workers "seems to occur in the same degree as for other professional groups and business executives" (p. 287). However, the bias introduced into the sample through NASW membership makes this conclusion tenuous.

Consciously updating our understanding of the political behavior of social workers, Ezell (1993) replicated Wolk's (1981) research with randomly selected members of the Washington State Chapter of NASW. He estimated that his sample of 500 represented 25% of the state's membership. He received a total of 353 respondents, or a reported response rate of 63.8%, and found that African American and macro social workers, respectively, were more politically active than their colleagues. With a nod to Wolk's (1981) contention that the profession played a minimal role in shaping policies, Ezell (1993) argued his results showed significant growth in political activism during the Reagan era. Addressing the geographic limitations of previous studies of NASW members, Rome and Hoechstetter (2010) sampled 3,000 NASW members nationwide. With 1,274 responses, they achieved a 43% response rate. In this sample, roughly half of respondents were politically active. The authors argued that participants engaged in either "passive" or "active" forms of political participation. Activities categorized as "passive" forms of political participation included contacting elected officials via phone or letter, reading the news, and writing a letter to the editor. "Active" forms of participation included testifying at a legislative hearing, campaigning for an elected official, participating in a rally or protest, and voting. Because all three studies sampled NASW members, these results can be compared, but not generalized to other social workers.

Sampling methods using NASW membership have the advantage of cutting through the clutter of social work practice. As the largest membership organization in the profession, and the one that sets the Code of Ethics, it is an efficient way of reaching one subset of social workers. The primary disadvantage of NASW membership is that it represents a group who have self-selected into membership. The decision to join NASW may introduce bias and leave out significant groups of social workers of interest to the researcher (Davis et al., 2021), and therefore this sampling method is not appropriate for many types of research about social workers. It should also be noted that joining NASW has a financial cost, so social workers who are not able to afford that cost will not be represented in the research.

**Licensed Social Workers**

While Wolk was the first to study political social workers who were NASW members, a trend that Wolk could not have foreseen when he was writing in 1981 was the growth of social work licensure across the United States in the past four decades. The transition to licensure within the profession has had implications for social work practice and education, with an increased emphasis over time on interpersonal mental health counseling. Social work today resembles more of a health profession than it did at the time of Wolk's study. Licensed social workers have formed the basis of many studies about social workers, including examinations of secondary traumatic stress among social workers (Bride, 2007) and attitudes toward sexual minority clients (Alessi et al., 2015).

Hamilton and Fauri (2001) were the first to use licensed social workers as a sampling pool to understand the political behavior of social workers. Out of a sampling frame of approximately 32,000, they employed a random sample of 600 licensed social workers in New York State. They received 242 responses, or a rate of 48%. They hypothesized that NASW membership predicted political participation and may have introduced bias when used to understand the political behavior of social workers. Based on their survey of licensed social workers, they found membership in NASW is indeed predictive of political participation. Because their sampling frame included both NASW members and non-members, they were able to assess the relationship between NASW membership and political participation in a way other studies had not been able to do. However, their results were geographically constrained to New York State.

Ritter (2008), using a more diverse and richer sampling pool, compared the political participation of licensed social workers to the general public. Ritter's sampling frame included 95,000 licensed social workers from 11 states around the country and excluded states that licensed only clinical social workers. Based on a random sample of 524 individuals, Ritter's research showed that, unlike the general public, social workers engaged in politics regardless of their access to resources (e.g., free time, family income, political skills). Being a member of a recruitment network (e.g., religious organization, NASW) was also a predictor of political participation, based on the Political Activities Scale, which asks respondents to record the level of involvement in various modes of political activity such as voting, civic engagement, electoral participation, and so forth.

The recently completed National Study of the Political Participation of Licensed Social Workers (Ostrander, 2020) illustrates how licensure can be used to obtain larger sample sizes than was possible using NASW membership. This study obtained licensure information for social workers in 25 states, yielding a sampling frame of over 144,000. From a random sample of 45,000, responses from 3,033 individuals (a response rate of 7%) were collected. A comparable sample from NASW member lists would have been one-third the size.

Many of the same advantages that apply to NASW members as a sample apply to licensed social workers as well, with one additional advantage. As with NASW membership, licensure cuts across occupations and practice areas within social work. The scale of licensure, though, dwarfs that of NASW membership. Title protection in many

states requires individuals to possess licensure if they want to call themselves a "social worker" professionally, although title protection in other states only requires a social work degree.

Although licensure allows for larger sample sizes than is possible through NASW membership alone, these samples are not without bias. The three biggest disadvantages with the use of licensure as a sampling frame are the underrepresentation of macro practitioners, potential for exam bias, and the cost of licensure. Macro practitioners are less likely than others to obtain licensure, even in the few states with macro-focused licensure (Donaldson et al., 2014). Employers of macro social workers may not need or value licensure. For an in-depth discussion of macro practice and licensure see Donaldson et al. (2014). Overall, a sample developed from licensure will likely over-represent micro practitioners and under-represent macro practitioners and those in non-traditional social work settings where licensure is not required.

The second disadvantage of using licensure to sample social workers is the potential bias in the licensure exam. We have no way to formally assess the bias within the exam given the lack of information provided by ASWB, which devises and administers the licensing exam. However, Castex and colleagues (2019) reviewed sample licensure questions and available data and expressed significant concerns about the bias within the exam.

The final disadvantage is the significant cost associated with licensure, including the cost of the exam, initial and continuing licensure fees to the state, and the cost of continuing education credits to maintain licensure. These costs likely mean that social workers who are unable to afford to pay these fees will be unable to become licensed or maintain a license, and therefore may be underrepresented in resulting research. The ASWB does not release demographic information that would allow outside researchers to assess whether "social workers with economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds have difficulty passing their licensing exams" (Castex et al., 2019, p. 212). This is not true of licensure in other professions.

**Social Work Students**

Students represent another potential source of information about social workers. As a group, they offer advantages to researchers relative to NASW membership or licensure. For example, students have expressed interest in social work by pursuing it, but have often not yet professionally sorted themselves into micro or macro practice areas. Likewise, students have not passed or failed the licensing exam. Moreover, CSWE accreditation standards ensure students receive exposure to similar content and curricula no matter what college or university they attend. A number of researchers have taken advantage of their access to social work students as research participants. For example, several researchers have examined students' perceptions of the causes of poverty (Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Delavega et al., 2017; Sun, 2001).

Examples of political social work research with students includes Swank's (2012) sample of political behavior among social work students at a historically Black college and

the Michigan Law & Social Work Study, which surveyed 545 MSW students from four Michigan universities regarding their interest in running for elected office (Meehan, 2019).

As with all methods, student samples present disadvantages. Social work students are still establishing their professional identities and beliefs; their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior as students may not be representative of their later behavior as professionals. In addition, not every student who obtains a BSW or MSW will practice as a social worker, stay in social work long term, or identify as a social worker. Finally, most studies of students focus in on those who are in one program, limiting generalizability outside of that program.

**Graduates of Social Work Programs**

Social work researchers frequently study graduates of social work programs. Bloomquist et al. (2015) studied self-care and quality of life among social workers chosen from the MSW alumni of a university, while Bae et al. (2020) looked at compassion satisfaction and its relationship to factors such as emotional intelligence, organizational factors, and work-life balance. Starr et al. (1999) surveyed MSW alumni to learn about their career paths. Given this, it is surprising that few studies in political social work have examined social work graduates as a whole, likely given the difficulties in establishing a sampling frame without relying on licensure or professional membership. One political social work study (Lane & Humphreys, 2011) used purposive sampling through available lists of elected social workers and internet searching, as well as snowball sampling to contact 416 social workers who met the study criteria (graduates of BSW, MSW, PhD, or DSW programs who had run for elected office); 270 (66%) responded to the survey. Participants came from different programs, were both NASW members and non-members, and included those licensed and not licensed.

The advantages of sampling graduates of social work programs are many. This group represents people with social work educations who would not be included in NASW or licensure sampling and who are past the student phase of life and more firmly into their professional identities. The largest disadvantage of this sampling is that it is very time-intensive. There is no existing sampling frame to draw from and no way to know how representative the sample is of individuals who have earned a social work degree. In addition, this approach may sample people with social work degrees who are not practicing or identifying as social workers.

**Social Work Faculty**

Social work faculty are rarely assumed to be representative of all social workers. Researchers have surveyed social work faculty on topics relevant to their teaching of social work students, for example social work licensing (Miller et al., 2017) and curricula (Grady et al., 2010) or topics relevant to their own careers like mentoring (Wilson et al., 2002) and being "out" in the academy (Prock et al., 2019). A dearth of studies in political social work employ social work faculty—including field-based staff—as a sampling frame. One seminal study, Mary et al. (1993), explored the political behavior of social work faculty

and field instructors and was informed by the works of Wolk (1981) and Ezell (1993). Mary and her colleagues used Milbrath's (1965) Hierarchy of Political Activity Scale, and demonstrated similar findings to both Wolk's and Ezell's studies. However, they also found that social work faculty questioned social workers' engagement in politics. Mary (2002) later replicated her earlier study with modifications, showing similar results.

Wolk and colleagues (1996) surveyed faculty and staff to understand the opportunities and barriers for political field placements. The authors found that only 20% of bachelor of social work programs and 43% of master of social work programs offer political placements. Pritzker and Lane (2014) surveyed field directors and found low numbers placing students in political placements. Both studies reported the perception of faculty/field staff that students are not interested in such placements, but did not survey students for their perspectives.

Social work faculty are highly educated and generally have a significant amount of practice experience. This offers researchers the opportunity to understand what content is being offered in implicit (e.g., classroom and field) and explicit (e.g., trainings and student organizations) curriculum. The disadvantages of using social work faculty as a sample includes that faculty do not represent the larger social work profession, which limits generalizability. Social work faculty may be overwhelmed and unlikely to respond to research requests. Their perceptions of their programs may not match with students' experiences. Lastly, social work faculty may over-represent clinical specialists and underrepresent mezzo and macro specialists.

**Related Occupations**

Another method of identifying a sample is to examine the occupations that typically define social work practice. These could include mental health counselors, child welfare officers, case workers, non-profit program managers, community organizers, and so on. These individuals are often considered to be practicing social work, whether they call themselves social workers or have a social work education or license. The major advantage to this population is representing a wider array of individuals who would otherwise be excluded through NASW membership or licensure. Research about self-care targeting healthcare social workers was able to use this method by contacting employers who typically employ healthcare social workers, such as hospitals and nursing homes (Miller et al., 2017). A 1999 study of social workers as a whole found that 22% of those who identify as social workers are African-American, compared to only 6% of those with a formal degree in social work (Kadushin, 1999, as reported by Castex et al., 2019), suggesting that this group may be significantly different from the other groups studied, all of whom have social work education as one of their core requirements.

There are understandable disadvantages to sampling social workers in this way that also introduce bias. This group has varied educational and professional development experiences outside of the accreditation standards within the profession. This method further introduces bias through different ethical standards that might be applicable to these individuals.

Table 1. *Sampling Methods used to Study the Political Behavior of Social Workers*

| Social Work Identity | Sampling Frame | Advantages | Disadvantages | Examples |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social work education | Graduates/alumni | ● Can interpret meaning of education to practice<br>● Bridges micro/macro practice divide | ● Time intensive<br>● No known population from which to create sampling frame<br>● May include people not currently practicing social work | Lane & Humphreys (2011) |
| Social work education | Current students | ● Convenient<br>● Expressed interest in social work<br>● Less defined micro/macro practice divide<br>● Common curriculum | ● Lack professional practice experience or identity<br>● Eventual practice or occupation is unknown | Fisher, Weedman, Alex, & Stout (2001); Hylton (2015); Meehan (2019); Mizrahi & Dodd (2013); Ostrander et al. (2018); Pritzker & Burwell (2016); Swank (2012) |
| Licensure status | License holders | ● Potential sample size<br>● Satisfies title protection<br>● Identifiable through state databases | ● Macro practice applicability<br>● Exam creates barriers to entry that may be biased<br>● Cost of licensure is prohibitive | Hamilton & Fauri (2001); Ostrander (2020); Ritter (2007, 2008) |
| Professional association membership | NASW members | ● Efficient<br>● Bridges micro/macro practice divide<br>● Common ethical training | ● Self-selective, therefore not broadly representative<br>● Cost of membership is prohibitive | Dickinson (2004); Ezell (1993); Felderhoff et al. (2015); Mattocks (2018); Rome & Hoechstetter (2010); Wolk (1981) |
| Occupation | Child welfare workers, social service case workers, community organizers, etc. | ● Easily identifiable<br>● Convenient and broadly available | ● Unknown education and training<br>● Potential unfamiliarity with NASW Code of Ethics | Ostrander et al. (2019) |
| Schools of social work | Social work faculty | ● Up-to-date knowledge of social work curriculum | ● Highly educated, therefore not broadly representative | Mary et al. (1993); Mary (2001); Pritzker & Lane (2014); Wolk et al. (1996) |

## Conclusion

There is no way to define a social worker that is without disadvantage or bias. Whether researchers choose to study members of social work organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers, licensed social workers, social work students, graduates of social work programs, social work faculty, or those in social work-related occupations, researchers who examine the behaviors, attitudes, and opinions of social workers should choose carefully from among the different options to maximize the representations of social workers relevant to their interests. Table 1 summarizes the six options discussed here, their advantages and disadvantages, and provides examples of studies which have used those options for further reference.

In addition to careful consideration of their sampling options, researchers who are examining social workers should be transparent about the reasons they chose their sample, and the ways in which that might bias their study. This transparency will allow readers to compare studies on the same topic, which used different samples to evaluate the results, with that information in mind. Researchers should also consider replicating their studies with a different population or combining samples from multiple sampling frames to understand how well their results compare with other options.

Two important areas of concern across these methods are the underrepresentation of those who have financial constraints and those who practice macro social work. We encourage researchers to consider the costs involved in NASW membership and licensure when choosing to use those sampling frames, and to consider seriously whether other methods are necessary. We also encourage NASW and ASWB to release as much demographic information as possible about NASW members and ASWB exam takers, to allow researchers to assess their samples in relationship to those overall groups and allow for fuller consideration of possible bias, such as racial bias, within the ASWB exam.

One final note: most of these sampling choices involve the definition of social work by the researcher, which removes ownership of the term social worker from the participant and puts that power in the researchers' hands, without allowing the participant to define it on their own terms. This threatens the internal validity of any such study, whereby the researcher prescribes a term to the research participant with which they do not necessarily identify. We encourage researchers to ask participants whether and how they identify as social workers as part of their research, in order to continue to develop our understanding of individual identification with the profession, as well as these proscribed group identities. The authors recommend that the Council on Social Work Education, National Association of Social Workers, and other profession associations pull together members to explore a unified definition of social work through integrated practice and refrain from focusing on what makes us different. For far too long as a profession we have focused historical conflicts—micro vs macro practice, cause vs function, clinical vs policy—and should agree that social workers need a variety of skills to work at all levels of practice. This belief should appear more explicitly in professional association documents (e.g., Code of Ethics and Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards) if we are to work with marginalized and oppressed communities to improve practice and create more favorable policies.

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**Author note:** Address correspondence to Patrick Meehan, School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. Email: pjmeeh@umich.edu