

## THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL WORK AS A PROFESSION

Leon Ginsberg

**Abstract:** *This is an introductory, overview article that summarizes some of the major issues social work will encounter as a profession in the 21st Century. Employment trends are projected. Clinical and other direct services employment appears to be much more pervasive than employment in organization and management of services. Professional employment data show that nonmetropolitan employment will be more prevalent than employment in large cities. Social work in schools will be a major area of growth. So will programs to provide treatment and other alternatives to prison for those involved with illegal drugs. Some of the effects of current political issues and the 2004 elections on social work are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Bureau of Labor Statistics, Council on Social Work Education, employment trends, nonmetropolitan employment, social work in schools, illegal drugs, politics*

### INTRODUCTION

Where is social work going? What social problems will demand our attention? Those are the kinds of questions futurists ponder. They are also the kinds of questions any profession should pose, while also working to influence the answers. In part, our destiny as a profession is within our grasp. However, we are also affected by forces much larger than ourselves.

It is one of the unfortunate truths about social work that we do not always have accurate or comprehensive ideas about where we are going. That is, in part, a reflection of our lack of information about where we have been. Although the history of social welfare is reasonably well-developed and documented by many scholars (For contemporary examples, see Day (2003,)), Axinn and Stern (2005,)) Jansson (2005,)) and Herrick and Stuart, 2005) the social work profession's history is not so well known. In many ways, the decades roughly between the era of the achievements of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond and whoever is currently making major contributions to the field are largely lost. Who still writes or teaches about Chauncey Alexander, Bertram Beck, Mitchell Ginsberg, and Elizabeth Wisner—all of whom were powerful molders of the modern social work profession? We have been through some critical and complicated times and have influenced the ways in which social welfare developed. But much of our information is only sporadically and vaguely retained.

This special issue of *Advances in Social Work* includes articles on most of the seminal subjects in our field. It should be a beacon for those who want to try to understand what is coming and where we are going.

As an introduction, this article attempts to describe some of what we may expect to influence the ways in which social work practice and theory will evolve during the coming decades. These observations are about trends and issues that appear to have the greatest

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Leon Ginsberg is Dean and Carolina Distinguished Professor, College of Social Work, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208.

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potential for influencing the profession for the first half of the Twenty-First Century.

## THE PROFESSION—TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS

Some of our researchers have reported on recent trends in social work as a profession, basing their data on special studies or on surveys of members of our national organizations, especially the National Association of Social Workers (Gibelman and Schervish, 1996, Ginsberg, 2005) However, the most comprehensive information is that provided by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) which engages full time in surveying American occupations and employment. Its Occupational Outlook Handbook (2004) reports on most of the known occupations in the United States and projects their futures. Social work and human services fields related to the profession are among those studied and reported upon in the Handbook.

### A Mammoth Occupation

Although we may sometimes tend to think of ourselves as part of a small, almost marginal profession, social work, when we include all the levels at which we practice, is quite large. The BLS (2004) says there were 477,000 social work jobs in 2002. It also reports there were some 300,000 social work and human services assistants at that time.

If one adds the numerous jobs that are not defined as social work but which probably employ many social workers such as drug and alcohol counselors, corrections personnel, and aging services employees, it is probably accurate to say that there are more or less one million broadly defined social work jobs in the United States.

### Future Projections

The BLS (2004) says that social work will grow, on average, more rapidly than other occupations through at least 2012. There will be more competition for jobs in metropolitan areas than in nonmetropolitan, but there will be jobs in cities as well as towns. The steady increase in social work employment is based, according to the BLS, on several factors:

1. The increasing proportion of the population that will be elderly, meaning more people will require the kinds of social welfare and health services that social workers provide.
2. A tendency to reorient prevention of and services for those who use illegal drugs from law enforcement to treatment. According to Barrett and Foley (2000) there are some 400,000 people incarcerated in U.S. prisons, for drug convictions, who constitute almost a quarter of the nation's incarcerated population. Treating substance abuse as a criminal issue is much more expensive than providing therapeutic services.
3. Further public efforts to integrate people with disabilities into the mainstream of American society.
4. A growing child and school population, which will demand more services of the kinds social workers provide.

In some ways, the BLS projections make social work's future appear to be similar to its

current configuration. The prediction is that almost all social workers will be employed in direct services work—in three categories: child, family, and school social workers, the largest group; medical and public health social workers; and mental health and substance abuse social workers. Although the profession has an historic commitment to work with larger systems, the bulk of employed social workers have always been in the direct services. That is where the employment has been and is likely to continue to be. According to the Council on Social Work Education (Lennon, 2004) over half of all MSW field instruction students are in direct services placements. That group, combined with those that have no field placement definition specified and those in generalist placements, suggests that almost all social work education is in the direct services. Ironically, the best-paying and most prestigious employment in social work is in the organization and administration of such services. (Gibelman and Schervish, 1996) Therefore, although most social workers may be defined now and in the future as “micro” workers, the reality is that the top levels of those services will be in “macro” practice. For the future, community organization and other macro specialization education and practice are likely to remain only small parts of the industry. However, like social group work, which has largely disappeared as a specialty, but is stronger than ever through group services in clinical agencies, organization and management are likely to be important professional roles for social workers in direct practice agencies.

### **The Political Future**

For most of social work's history, government has played a major role in determining how many of us are prepared for practice and how many of us are employed. So we are connected with government in many ways. One of the qualities of social work, and one that separates us from other human services professions, is our formal involvement in government and politics and our commitment to work towards political improvement. We teach about and support movement towards the realization of social justice not only for our profession but in the larger community and in the world. That sets us apart from others engaged in similar work and makes us something more than a self-involved trade or occupation. We take stands on policy issues that affect those we serve. We endorse candidates for office who support the kinds of legislation and administration that benefit people who are disadvantaged or who face disabilities. We encourage our fellow professionals to be politically active, even to seek public office. In the future, we are likely to continue in that posture.

However, we are something of an exception. According to Menand (2004,) ours is a largely non-political nation, when measured in terms of our citizens' political interests and knowledge. Americans are largely ignorant of and bored by politics. Either they don't care or so generally distrust politicians that they don't often bother voting or becoming involved with candidates or campaigns. Menand (2004) cites a number of facts that support the supposition. He suggests that about twice as many people have no political views, at all, as have coherent positions on public issues. A majority cannot name their U.S. senators or representatives. Some of the positions Americans hold are contradictory—believing that taxes should be lower and that government programs should grow; opposing more “welfare” but supporting more help for poor people; between 22 and 44 percent say

they don't care who wins presidential elections.

Unless things become terrible—on the order of the 1929 Depression or World War II—American non-involvement and public apathy towards the political process will continue. Although the conventional wisdom views such attitudes as threats to American democracy, it is possible that they may be functional. The Al Gore-George W. Bush 2000 Florida election fiasco, for example, would have led to blood in the streets in some other, more politically involved, nations. The consensus of the Democratic Party leaders was not to make it an issue—that public calm and orderly government were more important than who won the election. In the U.S., keeping politics cool and peaceful is perhaps one of our greatest strengths. Americans, by and large, only become emotionally involved in the political process when they are hurting personally. American government works to avoid agitating the citizenry. Our political sophistication and economic knowledge are such that government can keep the economy from collapsing, from allowing unemployment to become widespread, and, with careful use of medical and public health knowledge, from allowing too many people to become ill at the same time. Social workers and social welfare programs are part of what government uses to keep the populace relatively satisfied. Although political parties reward their friends and punish their enemies, they won't let large numbers suffer too much. It's bad American politics.

Interestingly, the 2004 elections drew more voters than any other in American history. Some commentators suggest that the issues, such as the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the war in Iraq, were large enough and the divisions between those who wanted to see President George W. Bush reelected and those who did not were strong enough to encourage voting. It is too early to know whether or not that election signals a change in the foregoing analysis of American attitudes towards politics and elections.

Voter turnout in 2004 was the heaviest since 1968 with some 60 percent of eligible voters casting ballots. And because the population of eligible voters was the largest in American history, President Bush received more votes than any other president and was reelected by a comfortable majority. (Fineman, 2004) It is likely he and his cabinet, which has changed since his first term, will support policies similar to those of his first four years. Since the National Association of Social Workers supported the Democratic candidate, as it usually does, the profession probably cannot expect strong support from the Bush presidency. That is probably also true of other professional groups, such as journalists. CBS television personality Andy Rooney, commenting on November 7, said that the representatives of the media were split 50-50 between Bush and his opponent, John Kerry. Fifty percent were strong supporters of Kerry and fifty percent intensely disliked Bush, he said.

We'll see gradual political changes but so long as most people are fairly well off, we will not see many grand disruptions. Things will change so incrementally that they may be hard to notice. We won't want to repeat the Depression or the Civil Rights Movement or other such wrenching social changes. Wealth may be gradually channeled away from the poor and the middle classes to the upper; we may see armed international conflicts that not everyone will view as being in our best interests; and these trends may be reversed as one party or another is in power. But the task of our political leaders seems to be keeping us relatively happy and even unaware that public policy changes our personal circumstances. So long as we are, many of us will ignore politics and those in power will be able

to stay there.

Humorist P.J. O'Rourke (2004, p. 5) probably summarizes American citizen political thought well. "America is not a wily, sneaky nation. We don't think that way. We don't think much at all, thank God. Start thinking and pretty soon you get ideas, and then you get idealism, and the next thing you know you've got ideology, with millions dead in concentration camps and gulags. A fundamental American question is 'What's the big idea?'" But if 2004 set a trend, some of those comments may no longer be applicable to US politics.

### **The Primacy of the States**

In the last century, some questioned the need for the continued existence of state governments. Communications and transportation were such that the nation could get along with a few administrative districts and save all the costs of operating state governments, some concluded. Of course, American government evolved quite differently. In fact, the states became more powerful than ever, especially in the 1980's under President Ronald Reagan, and have continued to be an important level of governing. That is especially true for social welfare programs, many of which are largely financed through block grants from the federal government to the states. The growing importance of state governments is likely to be one of the most important influences on the future of social work.

### **State Licensing**

The growth of state government power became even more important to social work when every state adopted a program of licensing, certifying, or otherwise regulating social work. (Association of Social Work Boards, 2004) With licensing, the power of the states over social work practice and, ultimately, social work education has shifted away from educational programs and the national organizations such as the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers to the state licensing boards. The licensing boards duplicate many of the functions of our national bodies such as promulgating ethics, exercising quality control, and adjudicating complaints against social workers. Although the boards generally require CSWE accreditation as a way of controlling the quality of educational preparation, that could change. Some states provide some kinds of licenses to graduates of non-CSWE accredited programs.

Over recent years, we have seen the decline and, in some cases, the end of national social welfare organizations. The National Conference on Social Welfare ceased to operate. NASW stopped offering national conferences. In some locales, it has ceased holding regular membership meetings. Of the million or so people who are identified with social work in some ways, only some 15 percent are members of NASW, and that figure includes social work students and retirees. State regulation has rendered much of the program of the national organizations, especially NASW, less relevant than they were in the mid-Twentieth Century, when social work was seeking public recognition. Credentials such as membership in the Academy of Certified Social Workers and the specialty sections of NASW have less relevance than they otherwise might because of licensing and other public regulation. If the existing national organizations are to survive until the end of the

current century, they will need to carefully examine and modify their programs and activities. In the current era, much of the money raised by state NASW chapters comes from sponsoring symposia and other continuing education—to which many participants flock because of state licensing continuing education requirements, which is another example of the influence of licensing. Perhaps the most important role of the national organizations is influencing legislation to benefit social workers and social welfare programs. That remains one of NASW's most critical contributions to the profession.

In addition to their role in helping social workers meet continuing education requirements, it almost seems that many of the national social welfare organizations remain in existence because the states and social work students finance social work education programs which, in turn, finance the national bodies. CSWE, the Bachelors Program Directors, the Interuniversity Consortium for International Social Development, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the National Association of Deans and Directors, are all largely financed by organizational dues that come from state appropriations, educational and research grants to schools, and student tuition. Only one national organization, the Association of Social Work Boards, which coordinates the state licensing efforts and prepares and administers most of the state licensing exams, seems to have a solid role in social work's future.

### IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS

Some of the current unsettled social issues that affect social work will be major influences on what we become.

#### Same Sex Unions

Although President George W. Bush and other leading public officials support a constitutional amendment forbidding marriages between people of the same sex, we probably won't see such an amendment adopted. However, such marriages will be officially forbidden in most states, which hold the ultimate power over family law. That may or may not make a major difference in life styles. Our system of laws enables people who want unions with others of the same sex to do so—to have and adopt children, in many cases, to own property together, and to be each other's benefits beneficiaries. Even the most opposed politicians cannot stop such unions, especially since the U.S. Supreme Court found laws against consensual sex between adults of the same sex unconstitutional. Formal marriage is only one approach to such unions. And formal marriage, as the basis for unions between individuals, has declined throughout the Western world. It is likely that there will be continued same sex unions, legally sanctioned as formal marriages or not, along with further declines in formal heterosexual marriage.

#### Health Care

An unsettled issue that will likely be settled, in some ways, during the first half of the Century, is the provision of universal health care insurance for Americans. Of course, the issue is complex and politically charged. Health care is a large American industry and the second largest employer of social workers. Medicare and Medicaid, now 40 years old,

were the early programs designed to deal with the issue. In more recent years, programs to extend Medicaid to low income children, whose parents may not qualify, covered increasing numbers. A complicated prescription program for Medicare recipients will extend that coverage to more seniors and persons with disabilities.

Much of the discussion about health care deals with the increasing high costs of receiving it—costs that cannot be borne by all but the wealthiest Americans—without some sort of third party coverage. However, the genesis of the high costs is less often mentioned. In fact, the health services and health care have developed more dramatically than have the costs of obtaining them. When Medicaid and Medicare became law, through the 1965 amendments to the Social Security Act, coronary bypass surgery and organ transplants were in their infancy. Even kidney dialysis, which now involves large numbers of social workers, was just becoming available. Health care providers and educators had only recently learned about the use of exercise for heart patients, who had earlier were advised to lead sedentary lives. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was twenty years in the future. Pharmaceuticals for treating depression, psychosis, severe acid reflux, and many other conditions were not yet developed. Although there were antibiotics, their use in treating ulcers, was not known. Modern forms of x-ray did not exist. There was much that was not known and much that could not be diagnosed or treated. We recognize that the life span is longer but don't always connect it with the incredible and expensive advances in health care.

Somehow—through some sort of national health insurance, probably—the health care payment discrepancy between those who have and those who do not have third party coverage will be resolved. As discussed earlier, American politics will not permit such discrepancies to continue. As is currently the case, social workers will continue playing major roles in the organization and delivery of health care—and in dealing with the social elements of the provision of care. Their roles are likely to increase with the advent of extended coverage.

## **Multiculturalism**

Many years ago, this writer suggested that the United States could, in the future, become "Latinamericanized." I had just returned from a sabbatical in South America and concluded that instead of the Latin American nations becoming more like the United States, the United States was becoming more like Latin America. The diminution of the middle classes and the increasing division of the population into rich and poor was much like Latin America's distribution of wealth. The growth of the security industry and the belief among many people that they needed alarm systems and police patrols was another similarity. Since that time, those trends have continued but a new phenomenon also has influence. That is the widespread movement of people from Latin America into every part of the United States. My state of South Carolina had barely enough Latinos in its population to count them when I came here 20 years ago. Now the bank toll free numbers offer Spanish as well as English menus. Stores stock favored Latino food products. And bilingual social workers, who know Spanish as well as English, are aggressively sought by employers.

This multicultural trend is likely to continue, although by mid-Century, it is likely that

the Latin American immigrants as well as those from the rest of the world will become well-integrated into the U.S. mainstream, such as the forbearers of those of who were born here did in the last Century. The integration of the large immigrant population will continue to make demands on social workers, especially those who speak languages other than English.

### **Religious and Political Fanaticism**

Because much of social work originated in religious initiatives, it is difficult to view religious behavior as a potential social problem. However, religious and political fanaticism—or the translation of religious commitment into political and public action—have the potential for exacerbating and sometimes causing social problems.

Perhaps the best known and most often cited example of violent problems that emanated from religious-political zealotry is the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington by members of groups identified with radical Islamic movements. Although the best known among them is Al Qaeda, in more recent times the Ansar al-Sunna Army, operating in Iraq (MSNBC, 2004,) was identified as murdering a dozen Nepalese hostages and threatening to kill two kidnapped French journalists, if France refused to lift its ban on children wearing Muslim head scarves to school. Kidnapping and taking hostages is perhaps the most effective and least demanding of terrorist acts because it requires few financial or personnel resources as well as few weapons. And one need not be a combatant to be taken hostage or beheaded. Most of the hostages have been ordinary citizens engaged in construction projects or food services. Beheading hostages is no more deadly than other forms of execution but it terrifies people—especially when those bloody acts are telecast. Of course, the overwhelming majority of Muslims condemns such acts, taken in the name of the religion.

However, the other two Mosaic religions, Christianity and Judaism, also include groups that pursue policies in conflict with much of what social work supports. A small, Texas-established, with a California address, Christian group, Christian Exodus (August, 2004) expresses alarm at the directions in which the United States is moving, especially the separation of church and state as manifested in bans on school prayer and the public display of the Ten Commandments. They want the repeal of the 14<sup>th</sup> (equal protection of the law,) 16<sup>th</sup> (the income tax,) and 17<sup>th</sup> (direct elections of Senators,) to the Constitution as well as an end to tolerance of homosexuality and federal funding and influencing of education. Their action plan is to move thousands of Christians who agree with them to South Carolina in groups of 12,000 who would, in turn, change the state to one in which its philosophy would prevail. This is only one of many small groups proposing quite radical changes in the United States. However, even the Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant denomination, have a vocal minority that proposes that Christians remove their children from public schools because they are “secularized.” (Knauss, 2004)

What some may call fundamentalist Jewish groups opposed the founding of Israel as being impious while others equally fervently believe that it is the sacred duty of Jews to take all of the area now occupied by Palestinians as well as Israelis and preserve it for the coming of the Messiah. (Ruthven, 2004)



These examples of religious fanaticism coupled with political agendas affect broader and broader bands of world society and will be important influences on social work programs and services in much of human society.

### CONCLUSION

Clearly, social work has a secure future. In some ways, it prospers under diverse conditions—when times are good, governments want to spend more for social services. When times are bad, we want to spend more to address human problems. Social workers are involved in both.

The issues will be different in the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than they were in earlier years. However, great social change is such that it may not be detectable except in retrospect.

And some of the pervasive, historical phenomena that continually affect human society—politics, family life, and religion, will be among the more important influences on the evolution of that future as well as the ways in which social workers discharge their responsibilities.

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**Author's Note**

Address correspondence to: Leon Ginsberg PhD, College of Social Work, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. e-mail: Ginsber@gwm.sc.edu.