SOCIAL WORKER S
An Area Worthy of Continu
Professional Concern & Att

By M. Aaron Guest

THE SAFETY OF SOCIAL WORKERS in practice has long been a concern of the social work profession. In the U.S., the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the largest and oldest professional organization for social workers, has been involved in safety for these professionals. The NASW supported research in the field (Ringstad, 2005) and developed the "Guidelines for Social Work Safety in the Workplace" (NASW, 2013). These guidelines provide specific recommendations for safety in the context of social work practice. Three principles shape the guidelines. First, safety must be understood in the context of social work practice. Second, social workers have the right to report safety concerns. Third, there are universal safety precautions that should be applied to social work practice.

Events such as the deaths of social workers Laura Sobel, who was shot by a client as she left her office, and Christine Loeber, one of three mental health workers killed in a veterans home shooting in California, have reinvigorated the conversation around the safety of the nearly 680,000 social workers in the U.S. (Baker, 2018; BLS, 2016; Wright, 2015). Recognizing the need for examining the safety of social workers in practice early on, a group of South Carolina social workers sought to conduct a needs assessment of social work safety in the state to understand the environments in which social workers work. Under the direction of the NASW South Carolina Chapter and with the support of the NASW Foundation through a Ruth Fizdale Chapter Grant, a needs assessment of social worker safety was conducted. Brief results from this assessment are presented in this article. Based

on the findings, a summary of recommendations is provided for discussion and to encourage future scholarship in this arena. The findings support existing guidelines and give a new direction to the social work profession as it continues to work toward ensuring clients' and social workers' individual and professional safety.

The recommendations are based on a state-wide needs assessment of 554 social workers in South Carolina. Needs assessments are used in various clinical and community settings and are beneficial in determining the disparity between the current situation and the desired situation (Soriano, 2012). A survey was used to collect needs assessment data. The survey was distributed electronically through the state colleges and departments of social work, NASW South Carolina membership list and the South Carolina licensure list, the most accessible and representative list of social workers in the state. The survey was sent to a total of 1,824 emails (30.37% response rate) as a subsample of the 8,440 self-identified practicing social workers in the state (BLS, 2019). A total of 664 individuals started the survey, with 554 completing the survey. The survey consisted of 58 questions, including eight opportunities for open-ended responses. The survey included questions related to bullying and harassment by coworkers (e.g., "Have you ever been the victim of bullying or harassment at your place of work?"), experiences of violence in the field (e.g., "Have you been involved in a violent incident while at work or field?"), training and education around violence and safety (e.g., "How much training did you receive on safety from violence in the workplace during your formal social work course of study?"), occurrences of violent situations in the field (e.g., "Which of these violent incidents have occurred in your workplace?") and self-efficacy/knowledge of how to respond to unsafe conditions (Ringstad, 2005). Demographic data were collected through a modified CDC (2016) behavioral risk factor surveillance system demographic form. Social work practice information such as area specialization, education and licensure status was also collected using previously developed NASW questions. A copy of the instrument is available upon request. Ethical approval was given by the NASW Washington, DC.

Findings From the South Carolina Needs Assessment of Social Work Safety

Survey respondents represented all state regions, multiple social work practice areas, various employment types and degree types held (Table 1). Most respondents were female (89.1%), white (56.7%), held a Master of Social Work (40.8%) and were licensed (58%). Fewer than one-third (27%) stated that they had been

KEY TAKEAWAYS
- Many factors have added to the increasingly unpredictable environment in which social workers provide services.
- Supported through a Ruth Fizdale Chapter Grant, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) South Carolina Chapter conducted a needs assessment of perceptions and realities of social work safety in South Carolina.
- Results indicate that while many social workers are aware of policies and procedures and perhaps may understand proper safety protocol, this does not necessarily result in action in the field. The results also highlight potentially unsafe behaviors due to the nature of social work positions, job duties, organizational structure and expectations.
- NASW guidelines should be utilized as a tool and resource to build awareness and training opportunities by organizations that employ social workers to ensure appropriate education and safe working environments.

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victims of bullying or harassment in the workplace by coworkers (Table 2, p. 22). Of those who identified as victims, 36.9% reported acting against this behavior, while 48% stated that they did not. On average, 44.4% said they participated in some form of unsafe work behavior (e.g., working in a setting alone, working without other individuals knowing where you are) 0 to 5 times a month, while 25.9% reported that they engaged in some unsafe work behavior 16 or more times a month (Table 3, p. 22). In most instances, these unsafe work behaviors violate the NASW safety guidelines and general safety principles (e.g., working without others knowing where you are and without a way to contact others). More alarming, 32.8% stated that they had been victims of verbal assaults or threats, including 7.1% of victims of physical assaults from adults and 8.9% victims of physical assault from adolescents. It is important to note that not only those who experience the assault are affected. Roughly 12% of respondents stated they had witnessed workplace violence, and 31.3% stated they knew about such events occurring (Table 4, p. 22).

Fortunately, training and education do occur, with 69.5% stating that they received training to recognize and handle assaultive behavior. However, only 8% reported that they were prepared to handle workplace violence. Identifying an opportunity for further communication, only one-third of respondents (33.4%) stated that they were aware of the NASW "Guidelines for Social Work Safety in the Workplace."

The survey revealed that social workers in South Carolina often engage in unsafe workplace behaviors to deliver service to their clients. There appear to be few or no organizational repercussions for engaging in unsafe behavior. While organizations appear to offer some training, overall social workers were not prepared to implement these de-escalation techniques. Social workers may feel that unsafe practice behaviors and environments are simply part of the profession or that dealing with unsafe environments and hostile clients is expected in the field. As shared by one respondent, "[Social workers] . . . are especially risking their safety out in the field. I've heard about walking into meth labs unprotected from chemicals." Respondents also indicated that while clients are one source of volatile

workplace environments, coworkers, including other social workers, contributed to workplace bullying and harassment.

Although the rates of unsafe practices (44.5%) and violence (32.8%) may appear low, it is critical to understand these events in the context of the large number of professional social workers who experience similar occurrences in their own practice. Furthermore, the percentages of social workers who have heard about (33.1%) or witnessed (12%) such incidents indicate that even though they may not be directly targeted, the incidents can still influence their practice. Critically, despite a majority reporting some training, only 8% of social workers in this study indicated that they were prepared to handle unsafe workplace events.

Recommendations for Improving Social Work Safety in the Field

Feeling safe is vital to one's job satisfaction and security. When the feelings of safety and security are not present, social workers can and do feel vulnerable. In turn, this contributes to job stress and turnover (Söderfield et al., 1995). With increasing socioeconomic changes and disparities, more individuals have begun to engage with social workers as service providers (Strier, 2013). For example, at the end of the Great Recession, the Supplemental

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS

Gender	Percentage	Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Female	89.1%	White/Caucasian	56.7%
Male	10.3%	Black/African American	37.6%
Transgender	0.4%	Multiracial	3.5%
Other	0.2%	Hispanic/Latino	1.3%
		Native American/Alaskan Native	0.65%
		Other	0.21%
Highest degree received	**Percentage**	**License type**	**Percentage**
MSW	40.8%	LMSW	44.4%
Bachelors (other)	24.7%	LISW-CP	27.9%
Masters (other)	18.8%	LBSW	21.7%
B.S.W.	11.2%	LISW-CP/AP	4.3%
High school	1.8%	LISW-AP	1.6%
Ph.D.	1.8%		
Terminal degree (other)	0.08%		

BULLYING & HARASSMENT

Victim of bullying or harassment	Percentage	Response to bullying or harassment	Percentage
Yes	27%	Told someone/took action	36.9%
No	73%	Ignored it	24%
		Avoidance behavior (avoided person or situations)	23.6%
		Avoided the bully/person who harassed	23.6%
		Other	10.3%
		Stayed at home	3.4
		Bullied back	1.3%

ENGAGED IN UNSAFE BEHAVIOR

Unsafe behavior [a]	Percentage
0 to 5 times per month	44.4%
6 to 10 times per month	19.9%
11 to 15 times per month	9.8%
16 or more times per month	25.9%

Note. [a] Unsafe behaviors are defined as working without knowing when others leave, working alone, working without individuals knowing where you are or working without individuals knowing where you are.

EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AT WORKPLACE

Frequency	Physical assault from client	Physical assault from adolescent or child	Physical assault from nonclient	Verbal assault or threat	Vandalizing of vehicle or other property	Robbery
Experienced	7.1%	8.9%	1.1%	38.3%	9.4%	10%
Witnessed it	9.5%	11.8%	3.9%	14.2%	3.9%	2.7%
Knew about it/heard about it	27.2%	20.7%	21.9%	22.2%	32.8%	29.3%
Never occurred	56.2%	58.6%	73.1%	25.4%	73.1%	58.0%

Nutrition Assistance Program had increased by 18% from 2007 levels and earned income tax credit claims had risen by 21% (Moffitt, 2012). At the same time, social work agencies continue to experience budget cuts and sometimes lack the appropriate resources to meet their clients (Shapiro & Kogan, 2015).

There is a need for a multipronged approach to improve the safety of social workers. The potential for action along four interconnected domains were identified: awareness building, education and training, early social work training, and social work guidelines on safety.

Awareness Building

There must be work to build awareness around the realities of social worker responsibilities and job duties. The work environments social workers find themselves in must be mutually discussed between organizations and social workers.

Organizations

Organizations and agencies that employ and utilize social workers must be made aware of the nature of social work. Organizations should focus on developing specific policies and procedures that will assist in protecting social workers while on the job. Although social workers may be aware of existing policies and procedures, these policies may do little to protect social workers. Basic safety measures such as arranging offices so that the door is visible from the desk or chair, installing working panic buttons, establishing workable procedures for handling workplace threats, and reinforcing these procedures with regular training on safety and de-escalation methods are several ways that organizations can work to improve social worker safety.

For example, when social workers are in the field or traveling for their job, their employer should ensure that they have safe vehicles, access to cell phones and that someone within the agency knows when they are due to return. Without specific procedures in place, social workers may resort to their own methods of ensuring their safety, which may expose them to more risk. As two respondents stated, "I keep a can of wasp spray near" and "I used to take my taser and knife with me when I did home visits."

Organizations must be sensitive to incidences of workplace bullying. Workplace bullying and harassment contribute to unsafe work environments for social workers just like any other unsafe work behavior. Bullying and harassment experiences can create a hostile workplace for all, lower morale, decrease productivity and negatively affect the client. As social workers are often in smaller managed departments, they may fear reporting such activities due to interpersonal relationships or management participation. Organizations must ensure that they have well-developed written policies that are accessible to employees and ensure that those who report incidents will not face reprisal for reporting.

Social Workers

At all times, social workers should be aware of the resources available to them on the job. These workers should be adequately informed about safety policies and procedures and should be consulted in their development. Social workers should be encouraged to perform their work in line with appropriate methods and should not be put in situations that make them feel unsafe or limit their ability to perform their work in line with proper safety procedures. It should always be clear that social workers have the support of their employers. Social workers must be allowed to report safety issues such as harassment and bullying without fear of retaliation. Any perceived fear of retaliation, especially in relation to workplace bullying and harassment, could lead to the individual not taking the appropriate steps to seek support.

Continuing Education & Training

Most respondents (85%) stated that they would be interested in continuing education opportunities that promote social worker safety. A demand exists as well as a need for continuing education opportunities around safety and the social work profession.

These opportunities must be all-inclusive to the social work field and ethical code and be specific to the social worker's job duties. Employers should seek to provide specific on-the-job training, which should relate to the specific nature of work the social worker will be performing. If such training is not offered, social workers should request it. Boards of social work could support these requests through the development of regulations that require continuing education in social work safety as a requirement of licensure renewal.

These continuing education trainings should be based on best practices in workplace safety and emphasize the importance of de-escalation techniques and situation-specific safety procedures (e.g., in the event of a shooter, response to aggressive individuals with knives). Social work organizations and social workers are responsible for developing continuing education opportunities based on their knowledge and experiences to share with colleagues.

Early Social Work Training

Schools and social work programs are strategically positioned to provide initial social work training in safety.

Only 6.8% of respondents stated that they received sufficient safety training during their formal education, a fact that is particularly concerning given the more than 60,000 students enrolled in social work programs during any given year (CSWE, 2018). Although the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) mentions "supporting student safety" in Standard 2.2.7 in relation to field education, it makes no specific recommendations for ensuring that safety is adequately addressed in the classroom or that students will be prepared for safety in the workforce.

Schools and programs of social work should seek to provide students with a curriculum that addresses social worker safety through their field experience. As the accreditor of programs, the CSWE should better emphasize safety within the curriculum through the development of specific standards. Through field education, the unique opportunity can shape future generations of social workers into being safer practitioners than any prior generation. Within this, opportunities exist for alumni and social work organizational involvement, resulting in a better-informed incoming professional workforce with the foundations to be safe social work practitioners.

Social Work Guidelines for Safety

Overarching and embedded within each of these themes are the NASW "Guidelines for Social Work Safety in the Workplace," which highlight 11 domains of social worker safety and recommendations for improving social workers' daily lives and safety. These domains are organizational culture of safety and security, prevention, office safety, use of safety technology, use of mobile phones, risk assessment for field visits, transporting clients, comprehensive reporting practices, post-incident reporting and response, safety training and student safety.

Notably, the guidelines recognize that social workers should be active participants in creating a safer working culture and should not fear retaliation for advocating for safety. Safety is something that social workers and the social work profession deserve. The NASW guidelines, available from the NASW website (**http://socialworkers.org**), should be utilized as a tool and resource to build awareness and training opportunities for social workers. They should be more widely adopted within social work practice and a commitment from researchers to continue engagement with this critical field of inquiry.

Conclusion

A critical need exists for social workers to reexamine their workplace practices and identify ways to engage in safer social work practice. Likewise, the field of social work must advocate for safer social work practice settings and provide credible and useable skills to create safer work environments. At least in South Carolina, unsafe social work practices appear to be part of the norm, not the exception. Through awareness building, education and the implementation of social-worker-specific safety plans and practices, both clients and social workers' lives can be improved.

Although this article highlights social workers' experience, the findings apply to any helping profession (e.g., nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy). An increase in client loads, changing socioeconomic times, population shifts and increased healthcare utilization have led to many organizations being stretched thin. Given these circumstances, individuals may be more likely to take risks. Organizations must work with employees to encourage appropriate, safe practice, both for the employee's safety and those they serve. **PSJ**

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