

Social Work Research

General Background

Social workers provide or administer the bulk of mental health and many other health and human services across this nation, especially serving those with complex needs, and individuals living in rural and underserved communities. Despite the huge resources invested in the delivery of services, there is a lack of funding to study and test the range of social work interventions and to translate research findings into real world settings. The beneficiaries of social work research are the children, youth, adults, families, and communities who receive health and mental health services. Public agencies, legislatures and managed care providers focused on outcomes and accountability will also be beneficiaries. By increasing knowledge for public policy decisions and social work practice based on social work research, we can improve both prevention and treatment interventions. Better outcomes and more cost-effective service delivery will result.

Social work research explores the complex interventions that are needed to respond to society's most underserved populations, those experiencing health disparities, and those at greatest risk for abuse and neglect. Social work researchers are on the forefront in identifying care coordination interventions to keep older persons safely in their homes, in identifying strategies to address the well-being of youth aging out of foster care, and preventing neglect through neighborhood based family-focused interventions. Research by social workers is also making major contributions to our understanding of how to recruit and retain the most qualified and committed staff in our public child welfare and mental health systems.

Consumers, practitioners, policy-makers, educators, and the general public would benefit from an expanded social work research agenda that more fully examined:

- Societal issues such as health care, substance abuse and community violence; family issues including those of military and veteran's families, child welfare and aging.
- Strategies and solutions that enhance individual, family and community well-being.
- Resiliency, strengths and needs of underserved populations.
- Effectiveness of organizations and service systems to deliver health and human services and to retain competent, qualified, culturally competent staff.
- Inter-relationships among individuals, families, neighborhoods and social institutions to provide empirical support to improve service delivery and public policies.
- Psychosocial problems, preventive interventions, treatment of acute and chronic conditions, and community, organizational, policy and administrative issues.
- Community economic development.
- Health disparities and exploring the needs of special populations.

Despite these important areas that can be studied through social work research, there is insufficient funding for social work research across government agencies and foundations. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has historically been the major funder of social work research. Since 2000, other institutes of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have increased social work research funding, however it continues to be a very minor part of the NIH budget (Zlotnik, 2008).¹ NIH developed a Plan for Social Work Research (NIH, 2003; 2007),² but several of its recommendations have not yet been fulfilled.³

Recommendations

- Increase the availability of research funding to support research agendas across social work fields of practice, addressing both clinical and system level interventions.
- Expand opportunities to establish research careers for social work researchers through fellowships and traineeships for faculty, doctoral students, post-doctoral fellows, and agency-based researchers, with a special focus on researchers from underrepresented population.
- Promote the dissemination and implementation of research into real world settings and to encourage communication between researchers and practitioners.
- Develop a database of evidence-informed psychosocial interventions.
- Fund social work research. Currently, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) devotes less than one percent of its research budget to social work research, despite the fact that social work research finds solutions to some of society's most pressing problems.

References

- ¹ Zlotnik, J. L. (2008). Research: History of Research. In T. Mizrahi, & L. Davis (Eds). *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (20th Edition), pp. 521-526. Washington, DC: NASW & Oxford Press
- ² National Institutes of Health. (2003). *NIH Plan for Social Work Research*, retrieved February 29, 2008 from http://obssr.od.nih.gov/Documents/Publications/SWR_Report.pdf.
- ³ National Institutes of Health. (2007). *NIH Plan for Social Work Research: Progress Report*.

Additional Resources

Hamilton, L., Hunt, V., Murphy, Y., Norris, A.N., & Zajicek, A.M. (2009). *Incorporating intersectionality in social work practice, research, policy, and education*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Kirk, S.A. (Ed.). (1999). *Social Work Research Methods*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.