

Macro Social Work

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Introductory Guide to Macro Social Work

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Macro social work is a broad field that centers on the investigation of larger scale social problems, and the development and implementation of social interventions that aim to effect positive change at the community, state, and national levels. Macro social work encompasses such practices as social work research, program development for small and large communities, program evaluation, community-based education initiatives, policy analysis and advocacy, non-profit administration and leadership, and organizational development.

Due to the wide variety of responsibilities and roles that fall under macro social work, social workers in this field can work in many different settings, including but not limited to political advocacy groups, universities and other research institutions, non-profits and volunteer organizations, and government think tanks. Specific macro social work roles include but are not limited to policy advocates and analysts, community and human services specialists, program development specialists, and research associates and analysts. Macro social workers typically collaborate

with a larger team of researchers, advocates, activists, analysts, educators, and/or government employees.

Overview of Careers in Macro Social Work

Similarly to micro and mezzo level social work, macro social work focuses on understanding individuals in the context of their environment and how social issues such as socioeconomic disparities; racial discrimination and other forms of prejudice; state and national legislation; and organizational structures at the group, community, state, and national levels contribute to challenges that individuals face individually, in their families, at work, and in their social circles. However, unlike micro social work (sometimes referred to as direct practice or clinical social work), macro social work does not focus on assessing and addressing people's problems through one-on-one or even small group assessments, diagnosis, counseling, and treatment. Instead, macro social workers typically help individuals indirectly through one or a combination of the following:

- **Investigating Social Issues:** Through research, community outreach, previous direct practice work, and other methods of data collection, macro social workers can discover or learn about issues that affect the well-being of large groups of people—for example, pollution that affects local, city, and state communities, a lack of

community health resources for the elderly, the LGBTQ community, and the long-term unemployed.

- **Developing and Managing Programs for Populations in Need:** Macro social workers in certain roles can work to develop programs and initiatives that aim to help certain communities or demographics. For example, a macro social worker might work at a non-profit whose mission is to help people access adequate medical care and health education; part of his/her job might be developing support programs and community outreach initiatives to assist various populations.

- **Advocating for Populations in Need:** Macro social workers can serve as advocates for disadvantaged populations, such as youth involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, recent immigrants, victims of domestic violence, or the physically and/or mentally disabled. As advocates, these social workers might lobby for changes in legislation, reach out to government officials about issues present in the community, educate community members about pressing issues, and mobilize groups of people, among other methods.

- **Educating the Community:** Community education can be a part of advocacy, or can be an instrument for social change in and of itself. For example, macro social workers may design and implement educational initiatives centered on teaching the community about diabetes management and other health topics, or

host seminars for the public about planning for college. They may also develop educational materials intended for widespread dissemination, such as pamphlets on disease prevention or blog posts, to educate the public about important social topics.

Macro social workers can take on a wide variety of roles that involve some or all of the core tasks described above. Current and prospective macro social work students should keep in mind that position titles for macro social workers tend to vary and may be hard to categorize, as they are often not as concretely defined as clinical/micro social work roles. For example, while a clinical social worker who works in a psychiatric setting will typically be called a psychiatric or clinical social worker, a macro social worker who designs and manages human services programs and initiatives might be called a human services specialist, community specialist, or program development specialist.

In addition, students should note that it is possible to work in both macro and micro social work, and in some cases, social workers may wish to gain direct practice experience prior to working on more macro level social work initiatives. Due to the broad and varied nature of macro social work, the following job descriptions should be viewed as simply an introduction to some of the many roles that macro social workers might be qualified for, depending on their specific areas of interest.

Policy Advocates and Analysts

Social workers who work as policy advocates and analysts typically raise awareness of systemic problems that lead to individual challenges, and work to develop macro-level strategies to address large-scale social issues. Jessica Warner, LMSW, who works at The Legal Aid Society as a Forensic Social Worker, collaborates with social workers, attorneys, and paralegals to provide advocacy and in-house expertise in the development of policy improvement initiatives aimed at helping children and adolescents involved in the juvenile justice and/or child welfare systems. “[S]ome of the specific things we do to develop and implement law and policy reform strategies include identifying and researching systemic trends impacting our clients, conducting background literature reviews, investigating agency and placement procedures and conditions through record reviews, site visits and interviews with residents, monitoring compliance with settlements by reviewing records, following up with our staff to see how client services have improved or not, and meeting with providers to raise concerns,” Ms. Warner told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Social work policy advocates and analysts can work at nonprofit organizations, including human rights groups, think tanks, and pro-bono law firms. They often are part of an interdisciplinary team, and can interact with other human services organizations to effect social and legislative change. For example, Ms. Warner

explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “[My colleagues and I at The Legal Aid Society] also participate in many citywide initiatives and coalitions, provide internal and external trainings, developing testimony for city council hearings, and write letters to the governor.”

Community and Human Services Specialists

Social workers who are community and human services specialists may work in government public health and/or human services departments, housing and relief aid agencies, and organizations that provide education, resource navigation, and other support services to veterans, immigrants, the homeless, people struggling with disabilities or addictions, and other vulnerable populations within the community. The work settings that employ community and human services specialists may be comprised of a mix of micro and macro social workers. For example, a state government’s public health department may have direct practice social workers providing individual services to people in need of disability services, and macro social workers who provide program development guidance, organizational support, and policy interpretation where/when needed.

Karamoko Andrews, LMSW, who works as a Public Health Social Work Consultant for New York City Human Resources Administration’s Department of Social Services, explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com how he provides guidance, support,

and systems advising to staff members and contracted vendors of New York City's WeCARE program. "[WeCARE] assists individuals who are recipients of public assistance and may have a medical or mental health barrier to employment," Mr. Andrews explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com. "As an onsite representative of WeCARE Operations, I provide consultation to the contracted provider on service administration and delivery; which may include information systems related issues, policy interpretation and resolution of programmatic issues. I have also co-developed and administered quality assurance tools to measure vendor performance, which makes their services more efficient and beneficial to clientele."

Program Development Specialist

Program development specialists typically design, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of human and social services programs. They can work at universities, government public health departments, community health centers, social services agencies, human rights groups, and other organizations that address social problems at the local, state, national, and international levels. Examples of initiatives that program development specialists may work on include support programs for children with disabilities or career development programs for adults who have been recently released from prison.

Program development specialists often work with other members of a team to identify the need and available resources for certain programs, and to balance the interests of different stakeholders. In an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, Amy Beaulieu, LCSW, who is a licensed clinical social worker and program development specialist in Bloomington, Indiana, described her program development responsibilities in her past role as a Policy Associate for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). “I helped develop ideas for systems improvement initiatives alongside managers at DHHS based on needs assessments that I helped to conduct or that were done by their own staff,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “Priorities for program development were often in line with funding priorities and federal program improvement guidelines. We made sure to include the perspectives of providers and consumers at every step along the way of the process.”

Research Associates and Analysts

Research associates and analysts work in university and other research settings to investigate the origins, development, and effects of macro-level social problems, and to disseminate their findings to the general public and people in helping professions (such as clinical social workers, therapists, and counselors). Social work research can also involve exploring and/or evaluating different methods to address an existing social problem. The

process of conducting social work research involves identifying a problem in society, applying for research funding, and collaborating with an interdisciplinary team to collect data, run tests if applicable, and evaluate and publish the results.

Social work research differs from other types of academic fields in that it focuses specifically on issues that directly impact the well-being of people in society, and how social workers and other professionals can address these issues. “What draws me into social work is that I feel it has a very applied piece to it,” Kevin Shafer, PhD, who works as an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Brigham Young University, told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “I feel that my studies might actually get applied in clinical or macro settings and might help people.” Dr. Shafer believes that the field of social work research is distinct from other disciplines because of its practical significance and its adherence to the mission of improving the well-being of individuals and families within their communities. “I believe that social work research is unique from that of other social sciences or even other helping disciplines, like Psychology or Marriage & Family Therapy because it is inherently value-oriented,” he explained, “It should be rooted in the values of social work, outlined by the NASW and motivated by a desire to improve the lives of others.”

Community Educators

Social workers who focus on community education typically design or engage in large-scale education initiatives aimed at helping communities who are struggling with challenges such as health issues (ex. diabetes, obesity, asthma), substance abuse, the need for vocational training or career advancement services, and resource navigation (ex. Medicare and Medicaid, unemployment assistance, etc.). Community educators may also work to measure, analyze, and improve the effectiveness of certain educational programs.

Community Outreach Specialists

Community outreach specialists can work for non-profit or human services organizations to help them effectively reach out to their target populations. Community outreach specialists can also be independent consultants hired on contract by non-profit agencies and associations that need help in reaching or positively impacting their target audiences. For example, Rachel L. West, LMSW, who owns her own advocacy and community outreach consultancy, told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “As a consultant I provide advocacy and community outreach solutions to nonprofits and social good organizations. In addition to consultancy work with organizations, I offer career coaching to helping professionals as well as consultation and training to private practice clinicians on the use of social media.”

Building a Career in Macro Social Work

Due to the broad and diverse nature of macro social work as a field, the path to entering macro social work may look different for each individual. However, there are strategies that social work students and even practicing clinical social workers can implement to enter macro social work. The following section contains advice from practicing macro social workers on potential ways to explore and craft a viable career in macro social work.

Learn About Macro Level Social and Political Forces

In general, individuals who wish to become macro social workers should try to gain a strong understanding of the policies, systems, and larger scale political and social circumstances that impact the well-being of the population(s) they wish to serve. “A very in-depth knowledge of the policies that guide the practices in any field of social work is extremely critical, as it is the framework for the work being performed and the guiding principles for any working professional,” Karamoko Andrews, LMSW advised. “Students and new practitioners often come with fresh ideas and concepts and may get discouraged when encountering bureaucracies, challenging the status quo, or having thought patterns that defy business as usual. This energy is important and necessary, as the practice areas continue to evolve and fresh ideas

are required.” Students interested in macro social work should thus try to take classes in law, public policy, community leadership, behavioral health care systems, and other concepts relevant to their specific areas of interest within macro social work.

Jessica Warner, LMSW similarly advises social work students to take adequate macro level coursework during their graduate social work program. “I definitely recommend that social work students take courses in policy and/or law if they can. Many social work programs have one or more of each as electives,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “Even if the specific subject isn’t particularly interesting to the student, it would be worth it just to learn more about how law and public policy work. Completing a dual degree program in public policy or law would be even better than just taking a couple of courses.” Ms. Warner also recommends that students interested in macro level social work actively seek field placements that will give them relevant experience, and/or volunteer at organizations that do the kind of work they wish to do post-graduation. “[J]ust getting a foot in the door of an organization that does advocacy work, either through a field placement or volunteer position becomes even more important,” she said, “Both would be even better of course. Community activist and organizing work is useful as well.”

Gain an Understanding of Social Work at the Micro Level

In addition to taking classes and completing field education and/or volunteer work that teach them about large scale social and political concepts and forces, social workers who wish to make an impact at the macro level should also have an understanding of how larger forces impact people at the individual (i.e. psychological, emotional, behavioral, and familial) level. Some social workers begin working in direct practice prior to progressing to macro social work in order to better understand the challenges their target population encounters.

Jessica Warner, LMSW, explained how direct practice social work gives social workers valuable insight into individuals' experiences of social problems, and thus helps them be more effective at the macro level. "I absolutely think all social workers should do some direct practice social work first," she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, "I actually think anyone who works in social services, social change, human rights, etc. (not just social workers) should work at a direct practice level first. That is how you get to know the nuances of the real issues that real human beings face."

Find Mentors and a Community in the Field

Both during and beyond their graduate social work program, students who wish to work in macro social work should be proactive and connect with people already in their fields of interest.

Dr. Shafer noted the immense value of finding mentors throughout one's academic and professional career, explaining to OnlineMSWPrograms.com, "You should think about who the professors are in your program that have similar research interests as you and go talk to them, see what they are doing, and ask if they are looking for help. This is absolutely crucial. [...] I know people are always nervous doing these things, but I'm 100% positive that professors and professionals who are approached are always happy to hear of someone's interest in their work and are willing to help them get started. That's been my experience. I love including students in my work and find mentoring to really be the most satisfying aspect of my job."

Current and prospective macro social workers may find mentors and other valuable relationships by engaging with organizations that specifically support macro social workers. For example, the Network for Social Work Management is an international organization that provides educational and professional development resources, trainings, networking opportunities, job listings, and conferences to social work managers and other individuals in community and human services leadership positions. Similarly, the [Association for Community Organization and Social Administration \(ACOSA\)](#) is a membership organization that serves macro social workers, community specialists, policy practitioners, and non-profit leaders. ACOSA hosts symposiums

and other networking events and promotes research and professional development in the areas of community leadership, policy analysis and advocacy, and other macro level social and human services. The [National Association of Social Workers](#) and its [state-level chapters](#) also offer resources, conferences, and networking opportunities for macro social workers.

In addition to reaching out to academic institutions and professional associations, social workers who wish to enter macro-level practice should actively seek connections with other professionals in this field by tapping into their existing social and professional networks and being creative about finding people who can help or advise them. For example, social workers could reach out to relevant communities on social media and macro social workers who have their own blogs or websites for advice, support, and additional connections. Two websites that provide such advice and support are [The Political Social Worker External link](#) and [Social Work Helper](#) .

Be Creative and Flexible

One particular challenge of macro social work is the fact that macro social work roles tend to be less defined than more clinical or direct practice social work positions. Rachel L. West, LMSW, who has counseled numerous macro social workers on career development and optimizing their career search, told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “One of the obstacles a social worker

interested in macro practice faces is the lack of information about finding a job. Most career centers will only have information pertaining to working in a therapeutic or healthcare setting. So that's not that helpful for someone interested in pursuing grant writing, policy analysis, etc.”

Knowing how to search for jobs that are relevant to one's interests, and understanding the skills and knowledge one brings to the table can be powerful strategies, Ms. West noted. “Many [of the social workers I counsel] know what they would like to do but aren't sure where to look or what search terms to use. Plugging in “social worker” or “MSW” into search on a job board dedicated to jobs in the healthcare industry isn't going to lead to a posting for a community organizer position,” she explained, “One of the things I do is work with them to get a clear understanding about what they like doing, what skills they already have, and what skills they need to develop in order to get the career they want. I find a lot of them vastly under estimate the knowledge and skills they have.”

Finding ways to gain in-depth experience in social, political, and human services systems that are relevant to one's career interests can also be deeply valuable. For example, in her interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, Jessica Warner, LMSW explained how volunteering to take on additional responsibilities at The Legal Aid Society, and seeking additional roles and connections that related to her interests, allowed her to gradually

build a unique career in juvenile justice and child welfare advocacy. “I assisted the unit I work in now, our special litigation and law reform unit, on an investigation for about a year, I started joining internal committees to improve our practice, and I started providing field instruction to MSW students,” she explained, “The Legal Aid Society also began asking me to co-facilitate trainings for new staff and, after some time, I developed a couple of trainings and workshops as well. I also joined some external coalitions, including the NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents and the Juvenile Justice Coalition, for which I am now a Co-Chair.”

Despite the lack of very defined roles and professional paths in macro social work, social workers interested in this field may be able to craft a rewarding career for themselves through a combination of determination, flexibility, creativity, and initiative.

Why Macro Social Work is an Important Field

Macro social work is an incredibly important field that is central to the mission of social work, which, according to the [National Association of Social Workers](#), is “[T]o enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs of those who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty.” The far-reaching impact of effective social work research, political advocacy, community education, and program

development means that macro social work is a necessary complement to direct practice or therapeutic social work.

In discussing her personal drive to work with and for youth at The Legal Aid Society, Ms. Warner told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “Essentially I want to change the social conditions that create the high level of need for social services. Unfortunately there are many ways in which certain members of our society are both marginalized and oppressed, and it’s important to me to keep doing my part to push back against that on behalf of both children and people who are institutionalized.” Ms. Warner also noted, “I certainly believe social services are necessary, as we will always have members of our society who have a need for them for different reasons, but it’s most important to me to fight for social change and social justice.” Through a combination of both clinical work to address social challenges at the individual level, and larger scale change through various channels (research, advocacy, education, and programming), both micro and macro social workers can collaborate to promote social progress and well-being.

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