

Meeting the Grand Challenge to Eliminate Racism

Social Work Licensure Reconsidered: Empowering Pathways to Equitable Futures

Policy Recommendations

- Eliminate testing for entry level licensure for CSWE-accredited graduates.
- Support alternative licensing and reciprocity and increased data transparency practices.
- Publish data on the psychometric properties of all ASWB tests and annually publish data on test taker demographics and outcomes.

Issue

The Association of Social Work Boards' (ASWB) 2022 release of demographic data on passage rates for social work licensure exams has revealed stark disparities¹ among racial and ethnic groups of test-takers across all levels of social work licensure: for Blacks (57% clinical; 52% masters exam; and 38% Bachelors), Latinos (77% clinical; 71% masters; and 59% bachelors), Native Americans (74% clinical; 72% masters; and 71% Bachelors), Asian (80% clinical; 76% masters exam; and 64% Bachelors) and Whites (91% clinical; 91% masters exam; and 82% Bachelors). Because ASWB exams are the sole method of testing accredited social work program graduates seeking licensing, these disparities raise serious concerns about equity and inclusion within the profession and highlight the need for comprehensive reform to ensure just and accessible pathways to licensure.^{2,3}

Social work education is competence-based, with rigorous standards set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE).⁴ The Board of Accreditation (BOA—formally known as the Commission on Accreditation) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is recognized as the accrediting body for social work education programs.⁵ Successful

¹ Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). (2022). 2022 ASWB exam pass rate analysis: Final report. <https://www.aswb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022-ASWB-ExamPass-Rate-Analysis.pdf>

² Bloxom, Q., & Anderson, B. (2024). Deconstructing Social Work Exam Bias: Advocacy Practice Guidelines to Close the Gap. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 21(2), 236–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2023.2278691>

³ DeCarlo, M. P. (2022). Racial Bias and ASWB exams: A failure of data equity. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 32(3), 255–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211055986>

⁴ <https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-EPAS.pdf>

⁵ Board of Accreditation. (n.d.-b). CSWE. <https://www.cswe.org/about-cswe/governance/governance-groups/boa/>

completion of a CSWE-accredited program signifies that a graduate possesses the necessary knowledge, values, skills, and processes to practice safely and ethically as outlined in the Education and Policy Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Currently, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) stands as the sole method for testing social workers for national licensure in all 50 states and the District of Columbia for students who have successfully completed accredited social work education programs. However, historically, ASWB licensing exams are not based on the EPAS as produced by CSWE. Exam questions are generated from social work practitioners who submit questions for review and consideration, which differs from the testing of social work competencies as outlined in EPAS (2022)⁶.

Another problem with ASWB as the sole method of licensure testing is the lack of any alternative form of assessing social work competencies for licensure. Coupled with a growing shortage of mental health professionals, several states have proposed legislation that allows for alternative testing for licensure beyond ASWB testing practices. However, another approach is for social work education programs to work with state agencies to ensure that competence evaluation standards are objective through student demonstration of individual skills, values, cognitive and affective processes⁷ as approved by the CSWE Board of Accreditation. To date, Illinois, Rhode Island, and Utah have all passed legislation that removes the bachelor's exam and the master's exam as a requirement for mental health practice reimbursement while still maintaining licensure standards for the clinical exam. Other states are in the process of proposing legislation and some have tried and failed. These states are moving towards the development of alternate licensure testing methods at the state level.

Simultaneously, there is a movement within states to reduce the escalating cost reflected within the bureaucratic process of professional licensure for human service professionals. States should develop alternative social work licensure testing practices, provide reciprocity to neighboring states as part of a compact,⁸ and only charge

⁶ Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation Commission on Educational Policy. <https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-EPAS.pdf&clen=539839&chunk=true&pdfilename=2022-EPAS.pdf>

⁷ McDonald, C., Davis, M. & Benson, C. Using Evidence-Based Learning Theories to Guide the Development of Virtual Simulations. *Clin Soc Work J* 49, 197–206 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00809-9>

⁸ Social Work – National Center for Interstate Compacts: The Council of State Governments. National Center for Interstate Compacts | The Council of State Governments. (n.d.). <https://compacts.csg.org/compact-updates/social-work/>.

processing fees. Such a practice would reduce the cost burden to test-takers and facilitate greater access to licensing and professional practice. Moreover, such a practice would be instrumental in increasing the number of licensed social work professionals and help to reduce present day shortages of mental health professionals across states and regions of the country.

According to the website, Study.com, ASWB testing costs for social work exams are currently as follows: \$230 for the associate's degree exam; \$230 for the Bachelor's exam; \$230 for the Master's exam; and, \$260 for the Advanced Generalist exam. To add, there are a host of costs based on scheduling and processing fees (normally at the state level). The ASWB practice test is available for the price of \$85 each. Students who take ASWB exams multiple times must pay full exam fees each time, which not only is extremely costly but has important equity issues given disparities the previously mentioned disparities in pass rates. Robust reciprocity agreements across states would reduce the financial burden and administrative hurdles facing qualified social workers.

Finally, ASWB must engage in greater transparency and annually publish complete data on test-takers. As a public regulatory agency, it is important that ASWB becomes fully transparent on test-taker demographic data and testing outcomes. Such data should include the psychometric properties of the examinations and appropriate reliability and validity measures that ensures public confidence \.

Policy Recommendations

1. Eliminate testing for entry level licensure for CSWE-accredited graduates.

Licensure can be granted with oversight from state authority based on completion of all requirements and graduation from an accredited social work education program.

2. Support alternative licensing and reciprocity and increased data transparency practice.

States and regions can develop pathways to licensure based on graduation, experience, continuing credit hours, and professional development through work place supervision and evaluation.

3. ASWB must publish studies on the psychometric properties of its clinical licensure examination and annually publish data on test-taker demographics and outcomes.

ASWB must be fully transparent on the design and properties of its licensing examines and the public must be fully informed on exam testing data and test taker outcomes.

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About the Grand Challenges for Social Work

The Grand Challenges for Social Work was launched by the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare in 2016 to harness the ingenuity, expertise, dedication, and creativity of individuals and organizations within the field of social work and beyond to champion “social progress powered by science.” Additional information on the Grand Challenges may be found at GrandChallengesforSocialWork.org.