CAREER KIT

Social Worker Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Social Worker

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

Most entry-level social workers have a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW), while clinical social workers need a master's degree (MSW), years of supervised experience, and a passing score on a state clinical exam. Every state licenses clinical social workers, and many also license other social workers, usually using exams from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). Plan on 4 years for a BSW and about 6–8 years total to become a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW).

Timeline	4 years (BSW) to 6–8+ years (MSW plus supervised hours for LCSW)
Typical cost	$20,000–$150,000+ for degrees, plus a few hundred dollars for exams and licenses
Education	BSW for entry-level jobs; MSW from a CSWE-accredited program for clinical work
License	State license; required for clinical social workers in all states, and for some nonclinical roles in many states
Median pay	$61,780 per year
Job outlook	+6% (2025–35), faster than average; about 69,100 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Choose your direction: nonclinical or clinical

Time: 1–2 weeks

Nonclinical social workers help people find services, manage cases, and protect children or vulnerable adults; many of these jobs accept a BSW. Clinical social workers diagnose and treat mental, behavioral, and emotional problems and need an MSW plus a clinical license. Knowing which path you want tells you how much school to plan for.

2. Earn a bachelor's degree (BSW or another major)

Time: About 4 years · Cost: $20,000–$100,000+

A BSW from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the most common requirement for entry-level jobs and includes a supervised field placement. Most states require licensure applicants to graduate from a CSWE-accredited program. If you already have a degree in psychology, sociology, or another field, you can go straight to an MSW.

3. Earn an MSW if you want clinical or advanced work

Time: 1–2 years · Cost: $20,000–$80,000

An MSW generally takes two years and includes a supervised practicum. Many programs offer advanced standing for recent BSW graduates, which can shorten the degree to about one year. Pick a CSWE-accredited program; online, part-time, and weekend formats are common.

4. Pass the ASWB exam and get your first license

Time: 1–3 months of study · Cost: $230 for the Bachelors or Masters exam, plus state license fees

Most states use ASWB exams at four levels: Bachelors, Masters, Advanced Generalist, and Clinical. New MSW graduates usually take the Masters exam for a license often called LMSW or LGSW, depending on the state. Each state board decides which exam and which license titles apply.

5. Complete supervised clinical experience

Time: About 2–3 years

To become an LCSW, you work under an approved clinical supervisor after your MSW. The length varies by state. California, for example, requires 3,000 supervised hours over at least 104 weeks, and Texas requires at least 3,000 hours over at least 24 months with at least 100 hours of supervision.

6. Pass the ASWB Clinical exam and earn your LCSW

Time: 1–3 months · Cost: $260 for the Clinical exam, plus state license fees

After your hours are approved, you take the ASWB Clinical exam. Some states add a state law or ethics exam; California requires its own California Law and Ethics Exam. Once licensed, you can practice clinical social work independently in that state and must complete continuing education to renew.

7. Find your specialty

Time: Ongoing

Common fields include child and family services, schools, hospitals and health care, mental health and substance use, aging, and military and veterans services. Some school social work jobs also need a state education credential. Choose field placements that match the area you want to work in.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree (BSW)	$20,000	$100,000	Typical range, varies by school
Master's degree (MSW)	$20,000	$80,000	Typical range, varies by school; advanced standing can lower the cost
ASWB Bachelors or Masters exam	$230	$230	Per ASWB
ASWB Advanced Generalist or Clinical exam	$260	$260	Per ASWB
State license application fees	$50	$400	Typical range, varies by state
Paid clinical supervision (if not provided by employer)	$0	$10,000	Typical range; many employers provide supervision for free
Exam prep materials	$0	$300	ASWB sells an official practice test
Total	**$40,540**	**$191,190**	

Requirements

Education	A BSW is the most common requirement for entry-level nonclinical jobs. Clinical social workers need an MSW from a CSWE-accredited program. Most states require licensure applicants to have graduated from a CSWE-accredited program.
Clinical license	All states require clinical social workers to be licensed. The usual route is an MSW, supervised clinical experience after graduation, and a passing score on a clinical exam. Titles include LCSW, LICSW, and LISW depending on the state.
Nonclinical license	Some states also license nonclinical social workers at the bachelor's or master's level (for example, LBSW or LMSW). Rules vary by state, so check your state social work board.
Supervised experience	Required for clinical licensure. The amount varies by state and may take several years. California requires 3,000 hours over at least 104 weeks; Texas requires 3,000 hours over at least 24 months.
Exams	Most states use ASWB exams (Bachelors, Masters, Advanced Generalist, Clinical). Some states add a law and ethics exam.
Background	Most state boards and employers run criminal background checks, especially for work with children and vulnerable adults.
Skills	Active listening, empathy, clear documentation, crisis management, cultural awareness, and knowing local services and resources.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Plan your route

Days 1–30

Goal: Choose BSW, MSW, or LCSW goals and learn your state's rules.

- ☐ Decide whether you want nonclinical or clinical work
- ☐ Look up your state social work board and its license levels
- ☐ Compare 3 CSWE-accredited programs on cost and format
- ☐ Check whether you qualify for advanced standing
- ☐ Read 20 local social work job postings
- ☐ Talk to a working social worker

Phase 2: Build experience

Days 31–60

Goal: Get field experience and prepare for licensure.

- ☐ Apply for a field placement or volunteer role
- ☐ Practice writing case notes
- ☐ Learn local resources: housing, food, health care
- ☐ Download the ASWB content outline for your exam
- ☐ Take a crisis intervention or mental health first aid training
- ☐ Ask about supervision options for future LCSW hours

Phase 3: Apply and get licensed

Days 61–90

Goal: Land a job and schedule your exam.

- [ ] Write a resume highlighting field placements
- [ ] Apply to agencies, hospitals, schools, and nonprofits
- [ ] Prepare for interviews using this kit
- [ ] Apply to your state board for exam approval
- [ ] Schedule the ASWB exam
- [ ] Set up a supervision plan if you are pursuing LCSW

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Official transcripts
- ☐ Degree or proof of graduation
- ☐ Field placement evaluations
- ☐ State license application
- ☐ ASWB exam registration
- ☐ Supervision plan or agreement
- ☐ Resume and cover letter
- ☐ Professional references
- ☐ Background check documents

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

ASWB Bachelors exam

What it is: For BSW graduates in states that license bachelor's-level social workers. Multiple-choice, 4 hours.

How to prepare: 4–8 weeks using the ASWB content outline and practice test.

ASWB Masters exam

What it is: For MSW graduates seeking a master's-level license such as LMSW. Multiple-choice, 4 hours.

How to prepare: 6–10 weeks of review of practice, ethics, and assessment.

ASWB Clinical exam

What it is: For clinical licensure such as LCSW after supervised experience. Multiple-choice, 4 hours.

How to prepare: 2–3 months focused on diagnosis, treatment planning, and ethics.

State law and ethics exam (some states)

What it is: California, for example, requires the California Law and Ethics Exam for LCSW candidates.

How to prepare: Study your state's laws and regulations for social workers.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why did you choose social work?
Tip: Share a real reason tied to helping people and justice.

2. How would you handle a client in crisis?
Tip: Explain safety assessment, de-escalation, and referrals.

3. How do you set boundaries?
Tip: Give examples of professional limits.

4. Tell us about a difficult case from your placement.
Tip: Protect confidentiality and focus on what you learned.

5. How do you handle mandated reporting?
Tip: Show you know the law and would report.

6. How do you document your work?
Tip: Mention timely, objective notes.

7. How do you prevent burnout?
Tip: Describe self-care and supervision.

8. How do you work with clients from different cultures?
Tip: Show cultural humility.

9. What do you know about our agency?
Tip: Research their programs.

10. How would you handle an ethical dilemma?
Tip: Mention the NASW Code of Ethics and supervision.

11. Are you pursuing licensure?
Tip: Share your timeline.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?
Tip: Mention LCSW or a specialty.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed a 900-hour MSW field placement in community mental health
- Managed a caseload of 25 clients, coordinating housing and health services
- Conducted psychosocial assessments under supervision
- Wrote timely case notes in an electronic health record
- Provided crisis support and safety planning
- Facilitated a weekly support group for caregivers
- Earned a BSW from a CSWE-accredited program

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Choosing a program that is not CSWE-accredited
2. Not checking your state's license rules
3. Losing track of supervised hours
4. Waiting too long to take the ASWB exam
5. Ignoring burnout and self-care
6. Skipping a field placement that matches your goals

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Social Workers**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm

- **CSWE**

https://www.cswe.org

- **ASWB**

https://www.aswb.org

- **NASW**

https://www.socialworkers.org

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $42,790	**$61,780 per year ($29.70 per hour)**	More than $100,090

Outlook: BLS projects 6% growth from 2025 to 2035, faster than average, with about 69,100 openings a year. There were about 816,100 social worker jobs in 2025. Median pay in May 2025 was $67,880 for healthcare social workers, $60,280 for mental health and substance abuse social workers, and $59,550 for child, family, and school social workers.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Social Workers, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.