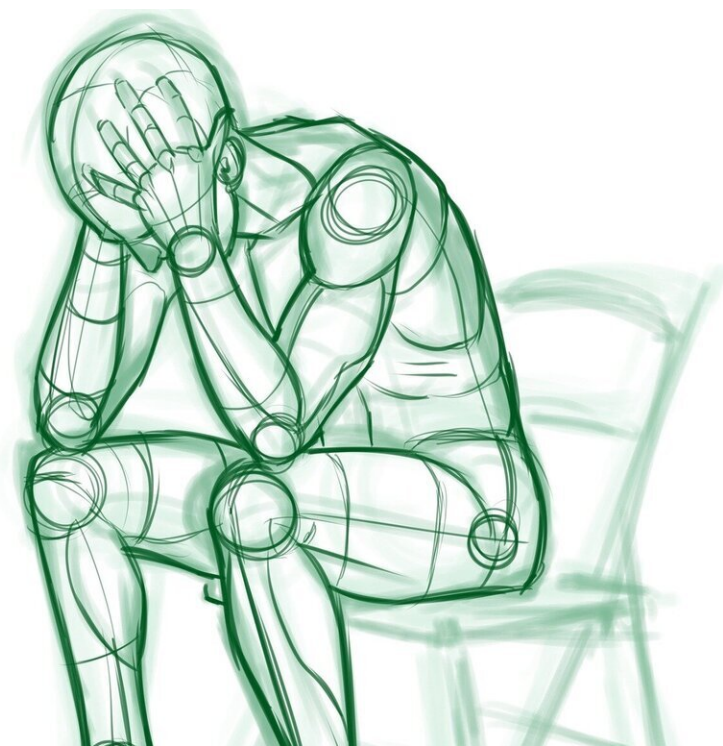


Social workers experienced depression, PTSD, and anxiety at alarming rates during pandemic

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A new study published in the journal *International Social Work* has uncovered concerning rates of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety among social workers.

Stressors related to COVID-19 were the strongest factors associated with the negative mental health outcomes. Those who experienced a higher number of pandemic-related stressors—such as [health concerns](#), increased caregiving responsibilities, violence in the home, family stress due to confinement, and stress associated with [work-life balance](#)—experienced mental health problems at a higher rate compared with those who were not as impacted by pandemic-related hardships.

"Like physicians, nurses and other allied [health care providers](#), [social workers](#) are feeling the impact of the pandemic, and it is showing up in their mental health," says lead author Ramona Alaggia, a professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work (FIFSW) and the Margaret and Wallace McCain Chair in Child and Family. "As we celebrate Social Work Week in Ontario March 6—12 and National Social Work Month in March, it is important to recognize the stressors that affect social workers and the well-being of those working in this essential field."

An alarming 40% of the sample reported depression—which is four times higher than the general population. The rate of reported depression among social workers is also substantially higher than other [health care professionals](#) working in COVID-19 related conditions, where the prevalence rate of depression has been found to be 24%. In total, one fifth of the sample reported PTSD while 15% reported anxiety.

"As personal stressors among social workers have increased, so too have the needs of those they serve," says co-author Esme Fuller-Thomson, FIFSW professor and director of the Institute for Life Course and Aging at the University of Toronto. "With rising rates of domestic violence, [child abuse](#), mental health illnesses and addictions, death rates in long-term care systems, and homelessness, social workers' jobs have become more demanding than ever."

The majority of survey respondents were from Ontario and married or in common law unions. Half of the respondents had children under the age of 18, and 85% were women, which is consistent with the number of women working in the social work field.

"Recent trends clearly indicate women have felt the most negative employment change and job loss during COVID-19," says Carolyn O'Connor, co-author and a doctoral candidate at FIFSW. "Time studies consistently show that women are usually the ones carrying most childcare and domestic responsibilities at home. Meanwhile, COVID lockdowns made working from home even more stressful as parents juggle work demands with home-schooling, while experiencing isolation and fewer supports."

The study also found that the social workers most affected by [mental health problems](#) tended to be younger, less experienced and less established in their profession. Levels of resilience were also measured. Those who were older and had higher income had higher resilience scores.

"Job instability is common early in a social worker's career, especially when working within a neo-liberal environment that promotes precarious, contractual work conditions with fewer benefits and lower pay," says co-author and FIFSW Ph.D. candidate Keri West.

Alaggia says that in her work with community-based agencies, she has observed that social workers have been leaving in high numbers since the start of 2022, with some agencies reporting as much as 30% shortfalls in staffing levels and significant problems filling those positions.

"It seems a tipping point has been reached where-by social workers are leaving traditional settings because of low wages, job insecurity and meager benefits," Alaggia says. "Given the essential societal roles that

social workers' play, strategies to sustain the profession into the next generation and future generations are urgently needed. These strategies should include a trauma informed approach and strong [mental health](#) supports for staff. This may be a defining moment in the social work field and building resilience into social service systems is the way forward."

More information: Ramona Alaggia et al, Troubled times: Canadian social workers' early adversities, mental health, and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, *International Social Work* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00208728221144380](#)

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