

In 2024, the Association of Social Work Boards conducted an analysis of the practice of social work, reenvisioned as the Social Work Census, to gather information about the social work workforce and to update the content and weighting of the blueprints for the entry-to-practice competence assessments for social work licensing. Beginning in 2026, all exams will reflect the new blueprints.

Why analyze practice?

The practice analysis is critical for ensuring that the content of each exam is relevant to current professional practice and reflects the expertise of a diverse group of subject matter experts. Survey responses shape the blueprints for the exams — the content areas in which questions are asked and the number of questions in the content areas. The four blueprints, a separate one for each exam (Bachelors, Masters, Advanced Generalist, and Clinical), become the basis for the licensing exams until another practice analysis is done.

The primary link to validity

Validity is defined as the degree to which an examination measures what it is intended to measure, and a practice analysis is the primary link to a licensing examination's validity. Because competence assessments for licensure are designed to evaluate whether a test-taker has, and can apply, the knowledge necessary to perform a job or practice a profession, the content of the examinations themselves must be job related. Thus, a competence assessment for licensing must measure what a candidate should know to enter social work practice and must be built based on a rationale that clearly shows how the content of the examination reflects that applied knowledge.

Establishing content validity requires a way of finding out what people in the profession are actually doing and how important those activities are to competent entry-level practice. Through a carefully structured practice analysis, an accurate picture of a profession is created. By relying on the results of the practice analysis, examinations can be developed that define the applied knowledge required for entry to practice. A practice analysis that covers the full range of applied knowledge needed for safe, competent, and ethical entry-level social work practice and uses input from a statistically significant number of respondents is the basis for the construction of valid examinations.

The portrait of the profession captured in a practice analysis is not everlasting, however. Professions change over time, so new practice analyses must be conducted to reexamine job-related knowledge. This is ASWB's seventh such study since the first analysis was completed in 1981.

Subject matter experts selected for diversity and inclusion

ASWB staff were assisted by staff from Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), a nonprofit personnel research and consulting firm. In addition, ASWB appointed subject matter experts who were selected for diversity in gender, race and ethnicity, practice setting, and geographic location.

Social Work Workforce Coalition: This group included a range of U.S. and Canadian social work organizations that represent diverse perspectives and provided input into the Social Work Census. Members helped identify emerging trends in social work practice for use in the practice analysis survey and contributed questions to the workforce study section of the Census.

The practice analysis is critical for ensuring that the content of each exam is relevant to current professional practice and reflects the expertise of a diverse group of subject matter experts.

Practice Analysis Task Force: This 32-member task force, a diverse group selected from more than 1,000 U.S. and Canadian social work applicants, developed the survey content and reviewed wording and format of the survey's 128 knowledge statements. The task force also reviewed the survey results and recommended content percentages for the examination blueprints.

The Social Work Census

Along with its fellow members of the **Social Work Workforce Coalition**, ASWB conducted the Social Work Census, an online survey. Designed to reach more social workers than ever before, the Census launched on March 1, 2024, Social Work Month, and ran through the end of June. The data from the survey allows ASWB to develop a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of who social workers are and what they do.

The Social Work Census had two sections, and the data from each section serves a different purpose.

- The **workforce study** asked for information about social workers' education, employment, licensure, demographics, and intersectionality. Results help ensure that the practice analysis is based on a representative sample of the social worker population and helps to build an understanding of the social work workforce.
- The **practice analysis** asked about the applied knowledge needed to practice social work safely and ethically at entry to practice. Results are used to build the blueprint for the next iteration of the competence assessments for social work licensing.

Though the survey invited participation from everyone calling themselves social workers, only responses from licensed individuals are used to build content outlines for the competence assessments.

Inclusive outreach, record participation

ASWB substantially increased its outreach compared to past practice analyses to include input from as many social workers as possible. These efforts included:

- A custom-built website, swcensus.org, with all content provided in English, French, and Spanish, went live on November 5, 2023, and began collecting contact information from individuals wishing to be notified.
- Email messages were sent to those who signed up on the Social Work Census website and the candidate database of individuals who had passed an exam (514,082). Some states also provided email addresses of licensees, allowing them to be directly notified of the survey.
- An extensive marketing campaign included a paid social media element that generated 18.6 million impressions by 3.7 million users, more than 216,000 engagements, and 130,000 clicks, with 48,532 users eventually clicking through to survey. Organic social media led to 170 posts, 271,607 impressions, 12,875 engagements, and 5,562 post clicks.
- Multiple outreach efforts accompanied the marketing campaign, including exhibit booths at conferences, workshops, and panel discussions.
- Many Social Work Workforce Coalition members provided additional assistance to ASWB in publicizing the survey.

Respondents could access the survey using a link provided in the email invitation and posted on the Social Work Census website.

To incentivize participation, all respondents who completed the survey were eligible to receive two hours of continuing education credit and were invited to select a charitable organization to receive a \$1.00 donation. After the Census closed, ASWB donated nearly \$24,000 to 13 organizations connected to the social work profession and causes that are aligned with social work values.

A practice analysis that covers the full range of applied knowledge needed for safe, competent, and ethical entry-level social work practice and uses input from a statistically significant number of respondents is the basis for the construction of valid examinations.

Participation in the survey was the largest in the history of ASWB practice analyses. The final usable sample included 25,263 responses from every U.S. and Canadian jurisdiction.

The 2024 Practice Analysis impacts all ASWB examinations

Associate — A few jurisdictions use the Bachelors examination for candidates who do not have degrees in social work for an associate license. A lower passing score is used.

Bachelors — The Bachelors examination is intended for individuals with a baccalaureate degree in social work.

Masters — The Masters examination is intended for individuals who hold a Master of Social Work but who do not have post-degree supervision.

Advanced Generalist — The Advanced Generalist examination is designed for advanced practitioners who do macro-level, generalist, administrative, or management work. It is one of the two exams intended to be taken by social workers who have a Master of Social Work or higher degree and the required postgraduate supervised experience.

Clinical — The Clinical examination emphasizes direct, micro-level mental health services. It is intended to be taken by social workers who have a Master of Social Work or higher degree and required postgraduate clinical supervision.

New blueprints

The changes made to the licensing exam blueprints based on this practice analysis include structural and editorial modifications for comprehensiveness and relevance to current practice.

Task force members noted that redundancy existed in the current blueprints, so statements were reorganized to improve the clarity of the content outlines. While the number of knowledge statements was decreased, very little exam content was judged to need removal. Instead, the outlines went through a process of consolidation. Consequently, the new content outlines will be more easily understood by candidates and more easily usable by question writers.

Structurally, all examination blueprints were updated from four content areas to three and were reorganized because of the similarities in the practice of social work in all categories of practice. The restructuring maintains the distinct nature of each exam and its corresponding practice category.

Another change concerned terminology. Knowledge, skills, and abilities statements (KSAs) were converted to applied knowledge statements to better reflect the purpose of the assessment to determine a social worker's competence in applying knowledge rather than recalling information.

Statistical comparisons of the survey responses indicated minimal differences in ratings between the United States and Canada. Accordingly, the blueprints for all four categories of licensure exams reflect a valid, reliable interpretation of the social work profession in both countries.

One significant finding was that the values and ethics content area was ranked as more important than in previous studies. Accordingly, the blueprints emphasize this content area by consistently giving it the highest percentage of questions.

The content areas and percentages of questions about each area appear on the next page. A complete listing of the content outlines with competencies and applied knowledge statements is available at aswb.org/2026exams.

One significant finding was that the values and ethics content area was ranked as more important than in previous studies.

Passing score study

In late 2025, a passing score study will be conducted by a panel that reviews anchor exams for each exam category. Subject matter experts will take the exam, rate each test question for probability that it would be answered correctly, and discuss minimum competence in the content measured by the exams to derive the pass point — the point on which pass–fail determinations are made — on the anchor exam.

Comparing 2018 and 2026 blueprints

The 2026 blueprint includes updated and reorganized major content areas from the 2018 blueprints. Applied knowledge statements — and questions testing that knowledge — that may have been included in the 2018 content area *Human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment* are integrated into the three major domains of the 2026 exams.

DOWNLOAD

2024 Analysis of the Practice of
Social Work at
aswb.org/2026exams

2026 Masters exam

2018 Comparison

- 25% Professional relationships, values, and ethics
- 27% Human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment
- 24% Interventions with clients/client systems
- 24% Assessment and intervention planning



2026 Clinical exam

2018 Comparison

- 19% Professional values and ethics
- 24% Human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment
- 27% Psychotherapy, clinical interventions, and case management
- 30% Assessment, diagnosis, and treatment planning



2026 Bachelors exam

2018 Comparison

- 20% Professional relationships, values, and ethics
- 25% Human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment
- 26% Interventions with clients/client systems
- 29% Assessment



2026 Advanced Generalist exam

2018 Comparison

- 27% Professional relationships, values, and ethics
- 23% Human development, diversity, and behavior in the environment
- 32% Intervention processes and techniques for use across systems
- 18% Intervention processes and techniques for use with larger systems



The Association of Social Work Boards is the nonprofit association of social work regulatory bodies in the United States and Canada. Members include all 50 U.S. states; Washington, D.C.; the U.S. Virgin Islands; Guam; the Northern Mariana Islands; and all 10 Canadian provinces. The mission of ASWB is to provide support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance safe, competent, and ethical practices to strengthen public protection.

©2025 Association of Social Work Boards

Association of Social Work Boards • 17126 Mountain Run Vista Ct., Culpeper, VA 22701

888.579.3926 • aswb.org