COMMUNITY conversations

Social Work Journeys

This report details an independent study aimed at gathering insights from social workers across the United States and Canada on their professional journeys and licensure exam experiences through a series of Community Conversations. Key themes that emerged from the Community Conversations are detailed in this report. The study spanned from January 2023 through August 2023.

OVERVIEW

The Community Conversations effort focused on gaining a deeper insight into the lived experiences of individuals within the social work community. The effort was conducted by the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), an independent nonprofit research organization, and was sponsored by ASWB. A total of 601 social workers across the United States and Canada participated in these conversations. A range of modalities was offered to encourage wide participation, including facilitated in-person and virtual conversations, as well as an online self-paced survey.

Participants candidly shared personal experiences and insights related to their motivations for pursuing careers in social work, educational backgrounds, experiences with the licensing exams, and ideas for reimagining the licensing process. The Community Conversations generated a valuable collection of reflections and recommendations.

The study highlighted common reasons that prompt individuals to join the social work profession, including the motivation to help others and the desire to support and improve the lives of marginalized and vulnerable people. It also pointed out challenges and obstacles, such as professional stigma, inadequate compensation, and expenses related to education, supervised experience, and licensure. In discussing social work educational experiences, the conversations focused on the types of resources that social workers found helpful. They identified people (e.g., colleagues and instructors), study materials, and financial resources as the most important supports. As far as preparing for the licensing exams, social workers most referenced their experiences in higher education, including field placements, as sources of the knowledge they needed. In the third phase of the conversations, social workers shared their experiences and challenges with the licensing exams. Common themes that arose were a desire for changes to exam structure and administration, retakes, and accommodations. They shared their helpful exam preparation strategies. Many identified the need for licensure for their jobs or in their jurisdictions as the main motivation to take the licensing exams. Some social workers expressed concerns about the appropriateness of the licensing exams in Canada. The final phase of the conversations asked social workers to reimagine the licensure process. Social workers frequently expressed a desire for changes to the testing experience and the difficulty of capturing social work demands in an exam. Another suggestion was to consider alternatives to the current exam format.

This report offers reflections and recommendations to the social work community based on the qualitative data gathered from social workers. The recommendations target system-wide areas of concern and seek to engage the social work educational, professional, and regulatory communities. Recommendations to the education community include focusing on financial and exam readiness support for students. Another recommendation of interest to professional organizations is to identify and implement strategies for enhancing the status of the social work profession to increase visibility and recognition and reduce financial challenges to those choosing the profession.

Suggestions for ASWB and its membership, the social work regulatory community, include increasing communication about the exam development process and the ways ASWB guards against bias; considering changes to exam structure by, for example, allowing partial retesting; addressing accessibility by adding remote exam administration; and exploring the addition of alternative ways of assessing competence beyond a multiple-choice exam. Other recommendations involve the financial impact of licensure, including making study resources available, changing the fee structure for exam retakes, and partnering with educational institutions to increase the connection between social work curricula and licensing exam content.

Taken together, the qualitative data, the reflections, and the recommendations gathered in the Community Conversations report create a picture of the lived experiences of social workers.

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INTRODUCTION

To better understand the experiences of members of the social work community about the licensure process and licensing exams, ASWB contracted with the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), an independent non-profit research organization, to facilitate focus groups and gain insight from the social work profession.

HumRRO and The CODE Group, a woman- and Black-owned firm with expertise in developing innovative and inclusive organizational strategies, collaborated on the vision for and facilitation of focus groups titled "Community Conversations" from January 2023 through May 2023.

The purpose of the Community Conversations was to provide social workers with the opportunity to engage in rich discussions with their peers and discuss their unique social work journeys. The role of a Community Conversation participant was to share their lived experiences and provide information about their motivation to become a social worker, their educational background, their experiences with the licensing exam(s), and re-envisioning the licensing process.

Conversation sessions were offered in person (across the United States) and virtually (including one dedicated to Canadian social workers). Participants were also given the option to submit responses via a self-paced survey, either in writing or by video, so that anyone unable to attend a live meeting could participate.

Feedback was collected on the examination process, and participants brainstormed about possible additional ways of assessing competence.

Facilitators guided participants through the journey map process, created and maintained a safe space for participants to share their thoughts and ideas, included all voices, listened carefully, and took notes that accurately captured the conversations.

This qualitative research will help ASWB to continue to develop fair, reliable, and valid assessments for the future of social work and to inform its future initiatives aimed at closing exam performance gaps.
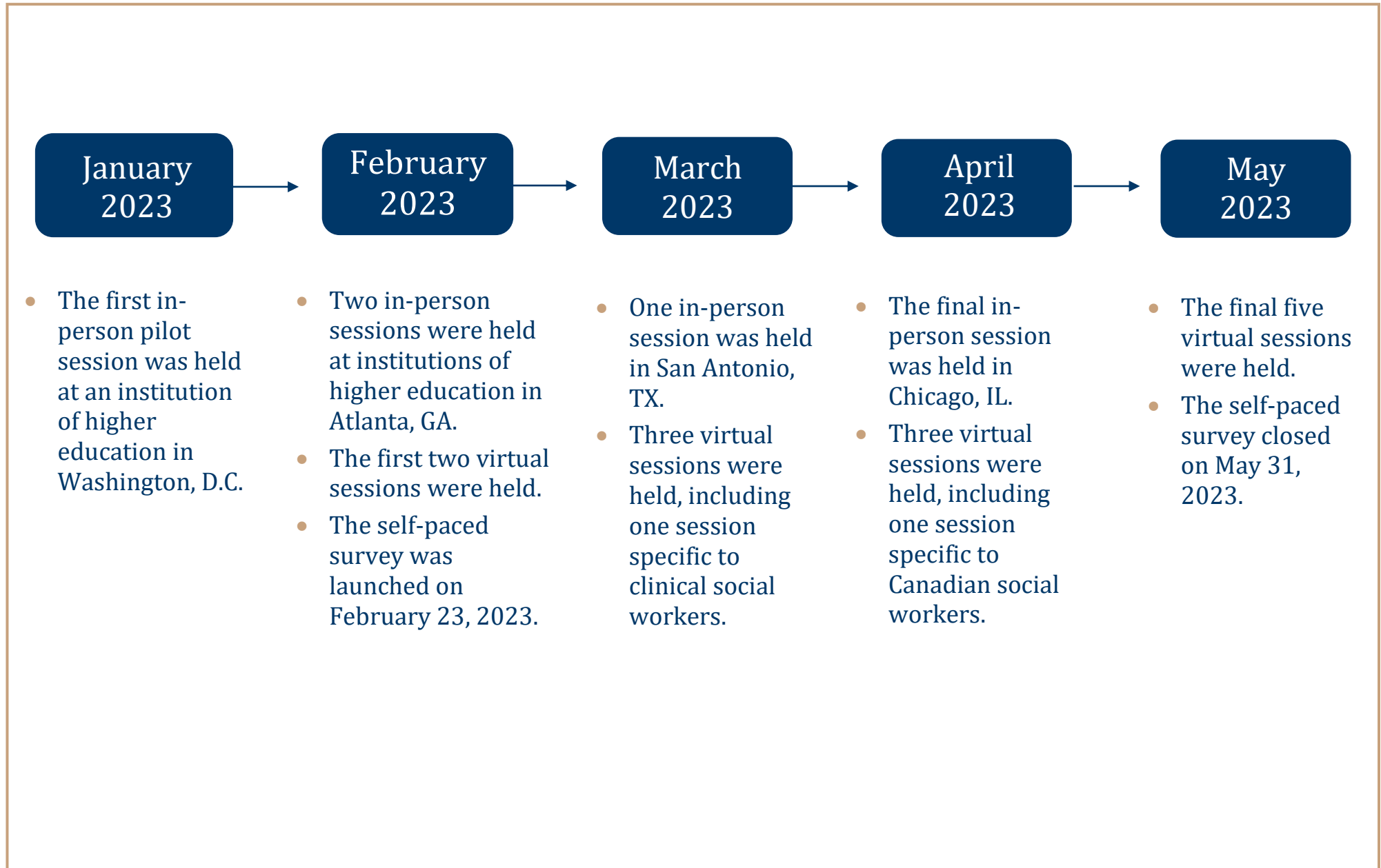
This report is organized into three major sections:

- Methodology
- Findings/Key Themes
- Recommendations

"*THANK YOU FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY. I TRULY LOVE SOCIAL WORK AND SEE SO MUCH POTENTIAL. I REALLY HOPE THAT YOU LISTEN TO FEEDBACK NOT JUST FROM ME BUT FROM ALL THE PEOPLE PARTICIPATING AND IMPLEMENT THE CHANGES THAT ARE NEEDED.*" **SURVEY PARTICIPANT**

TIMELINE

January 2023	→	February 2023	→	March 2023	→	April 2023	→	May 2023

January 2023
- The first in-person pilot session was held at an institution of higher education in Washington, D.C.

February 2023
- Two in-person sessions were held at institutions of higher education in Atlanta, GA.
- The first two virtual sessions were held.
- The self-paced survey was launched on February 23, 2023.

March 2023
- One in-person session was held in San Antonio, TX.
- Three virtual sessions were held, including one session specific to clinical social workers.

April 2023
- The final in-person session was held in Chicago, IL.
- Three virtual sessions were held, including one session specific to Canadian social workers.

May 2023
- The final five virtual sessions were held.
- The self-paced survey closed on May 31, 2023.

PARTICIPATION COUNTS

601 INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATED IN COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
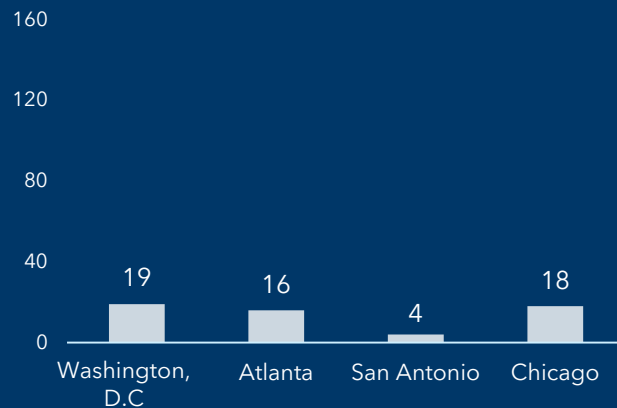
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Community Partners*
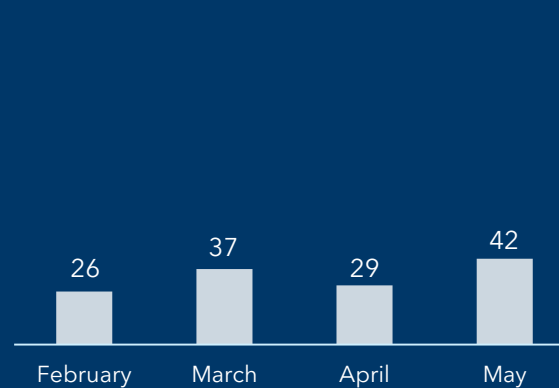
9
Task Force Members**

57
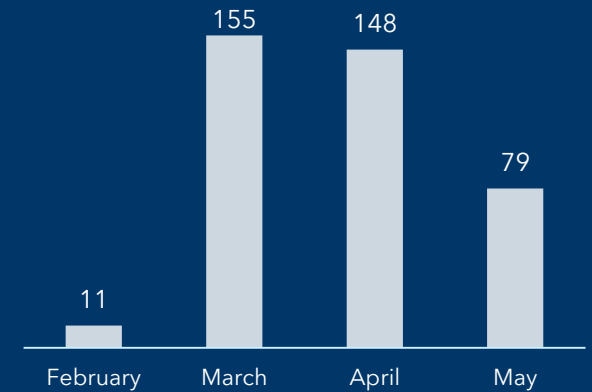In-Person Participants

134
Virtual Participants

393
Survey Respondents

In-Person Participation Counts
(Total = 57 participants)

Location	Count
Washington, D.C	19
Atlanta	16
San Antonio	4
Chicago	18

Virtual Participation Counts
(Total = 134 Participants)

Month	Count
February	26
March	37
April	29
May	42

Self-Paced Survey Counts
(Total = 393 Respondents)

Month	Count
February	11
March	155
April	148
May	79

* Community partners are the on-site liaisons for our in-person sessions who secured the location, marketed the event, welcomed participants, and observed small group discussions to ensure the voices of the community were represented.

** Task force members are the Practice Analysis Task Force (PATF) members who participated in the small group discussions for both in-person and virtual sessions, and collaborated with the primary

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS: GENDER AND EXPERIENCE

Table 1. Across all three modalities, women constituted the largest proportion of participants in the Community Conversations.
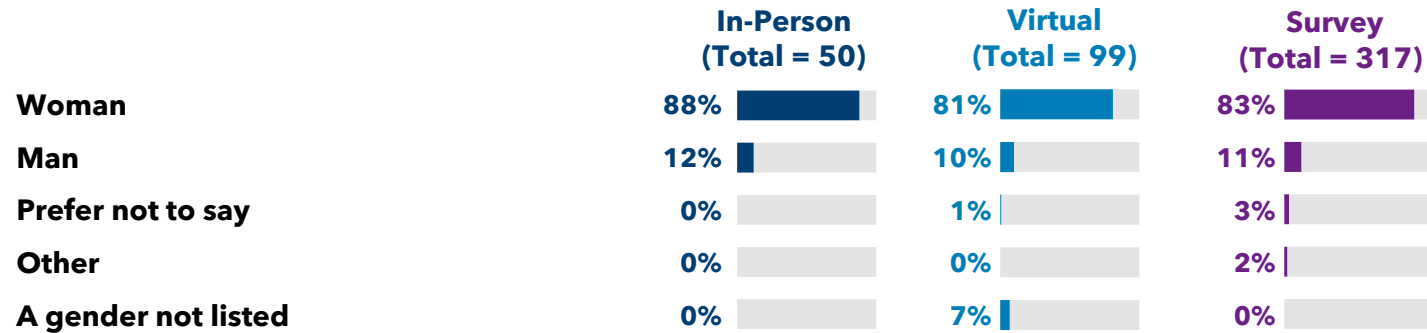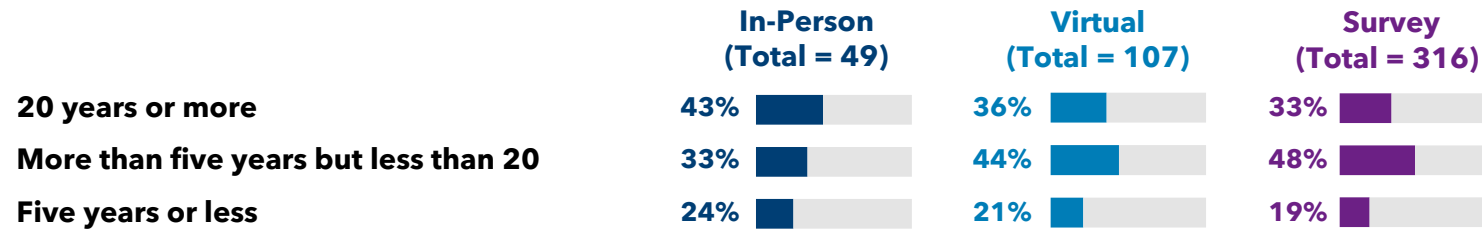
	In-Person (Total = 50)	Virtual (Total = 99)	Survey (Total = 317)
Woman	88%	81%	83%
Man	12%	10%	11%
Prefer not to say	0%	1%	3%
Other	0%	0%	2%
A gender not listed	0%	7%	0%

Table 2. For the in-person Community Conversations, the highest proportion of participants had 20 or more years of experience in social work. In the virtual Community Conversations and the self-paced survey, the highest proportion of participants had more than five but less than 20 years of experience in social work.

	In-Person (Total = 49)	Virtual (Total = 107)	Survey (Total = 316)
20 years or more	43%	36%	33%
More than five years but less than 20	33%	44%	48%
Five years or less	24%	21%	19%

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS: RACE AND ETHNICITY

Table 3. Participants who self-identified as African American/Black constituted the largest proportion of participants for the in-person Community Conversations. They also represented the second-largest demographic group among participants who took part in the virtual Community Conversations and self-paced surveys.
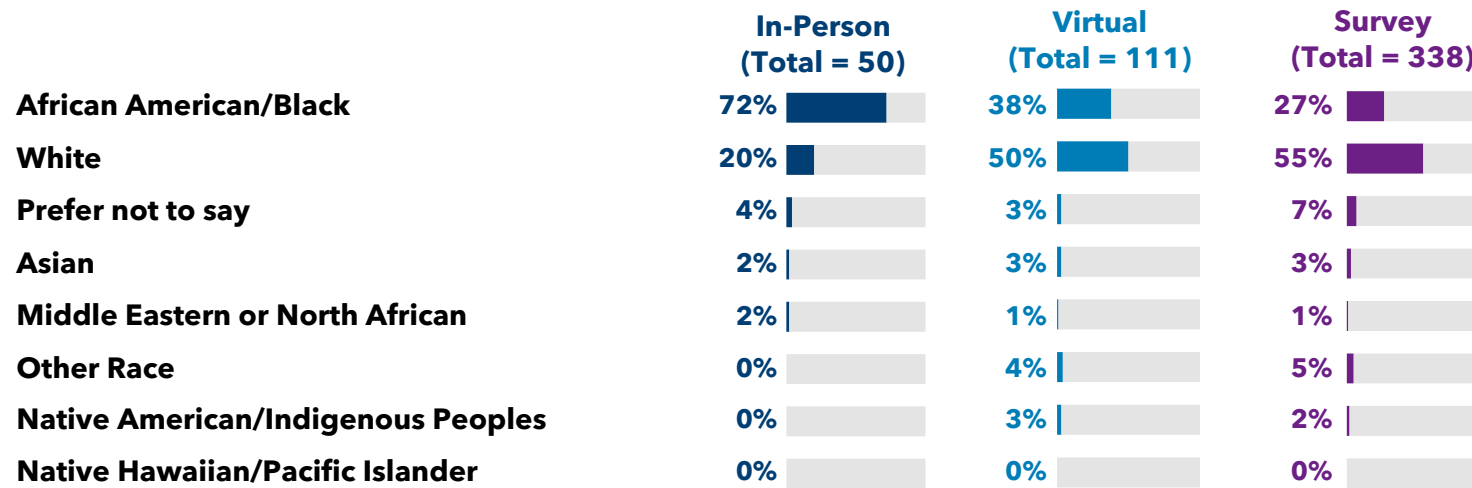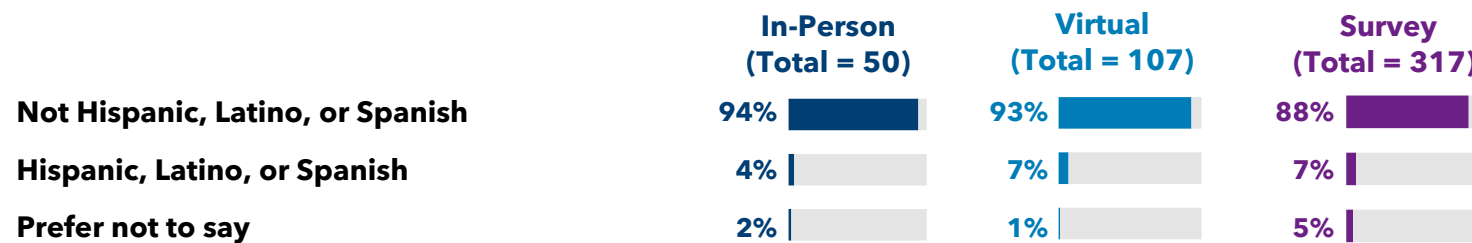
	In-Person (Total = 50)	Virtual (Total = 111)	Survey (Total = 338)
African American/Black	72%	38%	27%
White	20%	50%	55%
Prefer not to say	4%	3%	7%
Asian	2%	3%	3%
Middle Eastern or North African	2%	1%	1%
Other Race	0%	4%	5%
Native American/Indigenous Peoples	0%	3%	2%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0%	0%	0%

Table 4. Less than 10% of participants identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish descent.

	In-Person (Total = 50)	Virtual (Total = 107)	Survey (Total = 317)
Not Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	94%	93%	88%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	4%	7%	7%
Prefer not to say	2%	1%	5%

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS: EXAM AND LICENSE

Table 5. Most participants had taken at least one of the ASWB social work licensing exams. Only a small percentage of participants had no prior exam exposure.
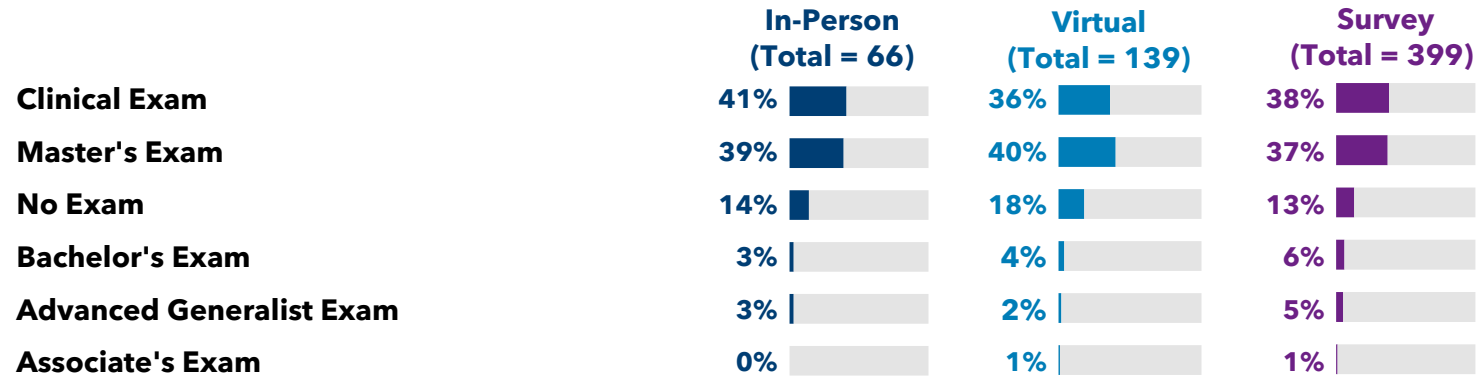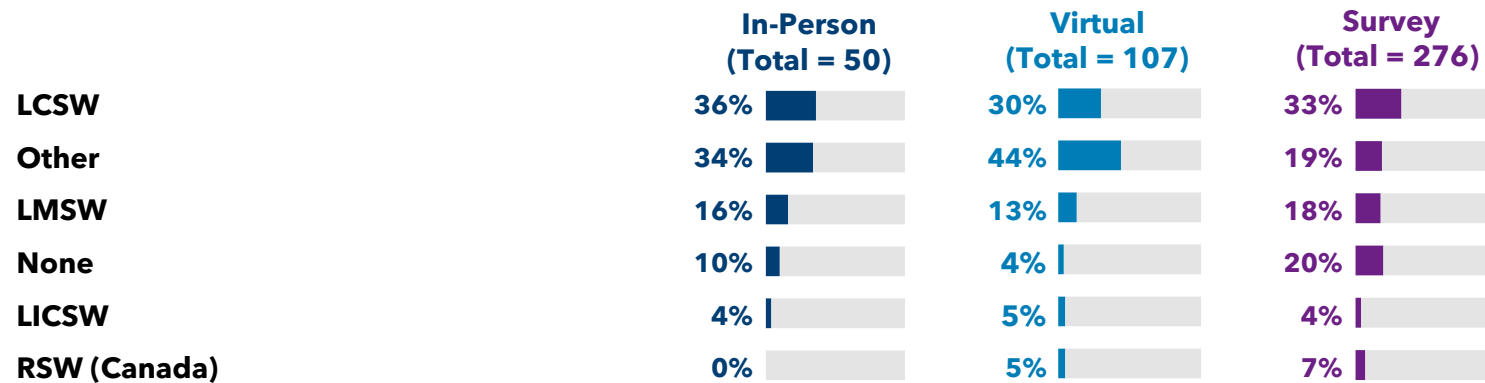
	In-Person (Total = 66)	Virtual (Total = 139)	Survey (Total = 399)
Clinical Exam	41%	36%	38%
Master's Exam	39%	40%	37%
No Exam	14%	18%	13%
Bachelor's Exam	3%	4%	6%
Advanced Generalist Exam	3%	2%	5%
Associate's Exam	0%	1%	1%

Table 6. Most participants held a social work license. A smaller proportion of participants did not have a license.

	In-Person (Total = 50)	Virtual (Total = 107)	Survey (Total = 276)
LCSW	36%	30%	33%
Other	34%	44%	19%
LMSW	16%	13%	18%
None	10%	4%	20%
LICSW	4%	5%	4%
RSW (Canada)	0%	5%	7%

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS: DEGREE AND SETTING

Table 7. Participants holding a Master of Social Work degree (MSW) constituted the largest proportion of participants across all three modalities.

	In-Person (Total = 50)	Virtual (Total = 107)	Survey (Total = 318)
MSW	88%	85%	83%
BSW	4%	7%	4%
DSW	2%	4%	2%
Other	6%	4%	10%
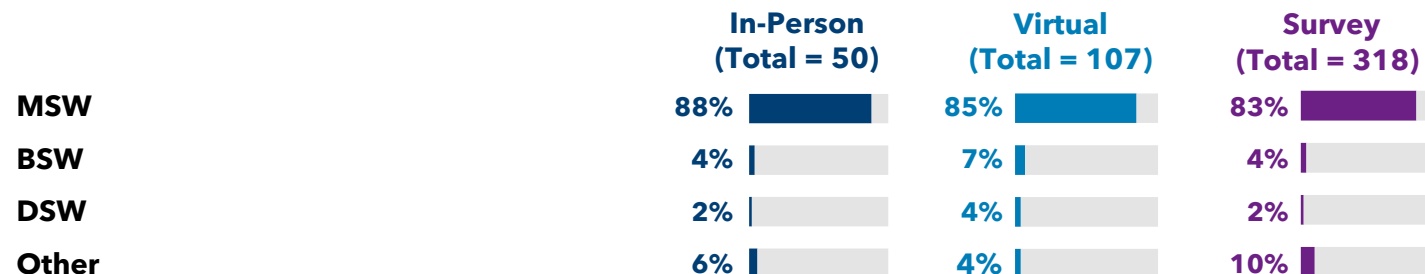
Table 8. Across all three modalities, most participants indicated they practice social work in urban areas, followed by suburban areas and rural areas.

	In-Person (Total = 41)	Virtual (Total = 106)	Survey (Total = 313)
Urban	61%	52%	50%
Suburban	27%	31%	28%
Rural	12%	17%	22%
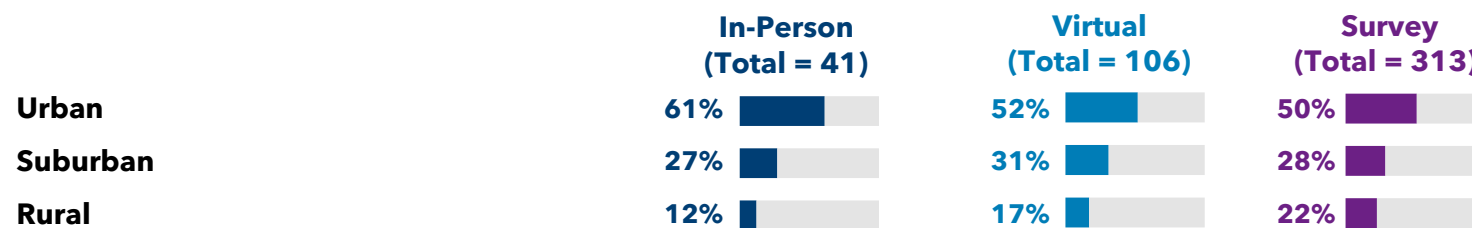
Additionally, participants were prompted to include other demographic characteristics that they wanted to share (e.g., sexual orientation, age, neurodiversity, location, etc.). For the in-person sessions, 20 participants responded to the prompt, 10 of whom disclosed their age, seven their sexual orientation, and five their location. For the virtual sessions, 40 participants responded to the prompt, 28 of whom disclosed their age, 21 their sexual orientation, six their neurodivergence, and four their disability status. Finally, six participants responded to the prompt for the self-paced survey, four of whom disclosed a genderqueer/non-binary identity.

METHODOLOGY

Across the five in-person sessions and 13 virtual sessions, HumRRO and The CODE Group adopted a participant-centric design by using a journey map technique to gather information about community members' thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding their social work journey.

The journey map used during the Community Conversations served as a visual and interactive platform that helped participants navigate and discuss their motivations, feelings, actions, and perceptions of challenges and opportunities for improvement across four phases of their social work journey: (1) becoming a social worker, (2) pursuing an education, (3) the licensing exam, and (4) present circumstances and re-envisioning the licensure process.

Each in-person session started with an introduction to the Community Conversations effort and the intended goals for the session. Participants then provided their consent to participate. After explaining of the purpose and procedure, participants were divided into smaller breakout groups to reflect on and discuss the four phases of the social work journey. Within the smaller groups, participants shared their thoughts on sticky notes in response to each question and then collectively deliberated on the combined responses.

The virtual sessions used the same design with the exception that facilitators introduced the participants to a virtual journey map hosted on MIRO, an online collaborative workspace. Participants typed their responses onto virtual sticky notes using MIRO and placed them on the map. In cases where participants experienced difficulty with the platform or expressed interest in a less structured format, facilitators pivoted to alternative designs, such as asking participants to share their thoughts without sticky notes and capturing their responses in notes. Each in-person and virtual session took approximately three hours. Before the sessions, all facilitators attended training delivered by the CODE Group, which focused on best practices for facilitating group discussions and navigating difficult conversations.

For the self-paced survey, participants responded to a subset of open-ended questions (identified as priority questions in the virtual and in-person sessions). Participants also had the option to record their answers and upload video/audio files.
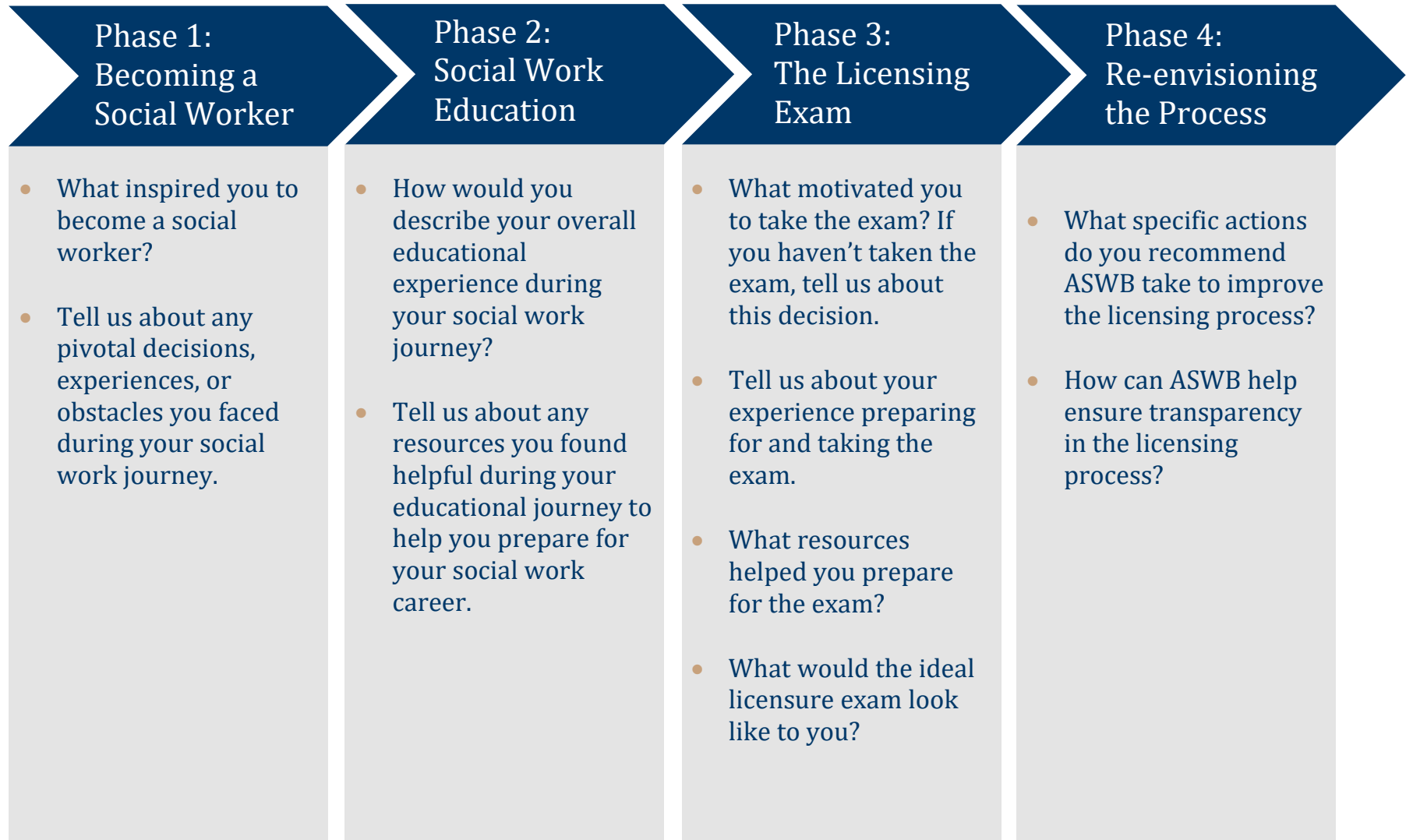
Participants were asked to voluntarily complete a demographic questionnaire and a process evaluation survey (e.g., satisfaction with the session) at the end of the in-person and virtual sessions. Participants taking the self-paced survey were only asked to complete the demographic questionnaire.

At the completion of the sessions, the final datasets consisted of responses from 393 participants on the self-paced survey, 134 participants from the virtual sessions, and 57 participants from the in-person sessions.

BERTopic[1], a natural language processing technique, was used to analyze the qualitative data and identify topics in participants' responses (~ 3,000 quotes) with the aim of grouping similar responses based on their content. BERTopic searched for patterns of similarity within the quotes to group them into topics.

The output provided information about the specific terms that best characterized each topic as well as the most representative quotes. The most representative quotes for each topic were reviewed to identify a topic label that best captured its meaning. As the last step, topics for each journey map question were evaluated within each phase and were grouped together based on similarity to comprise themes for ease of interpretation.

JOURNEY MAP

Phase 1: Becoming a Social Worker

- What inspired you to become a social worker?

- Tell us about any pivotal decisions, experiences, or obstacles you faced during your social work journey.

Phase 2: Social Work Education

- How would you describe your overall educational experience during your social work journey?

- Tell us about any resources you found helpful during your educational journey to help you prepare for your social work career.

Phase 3: The Licensing Exam

- What motivated you to take the exam? If you haven't taken the exam, tell us about this decision.

- Tell us about your experience preparing for and taking the exam.

- What resources helped you prepare for the exam?

- What would the ideal licensure exam look like to you?

Phase 4: Re-envisioning the Process

- What specific actions do you recommend ASWB take to improve the licensing process?

- How can ASWB help ensure transparency in the licensing process?

FINDINGS
PHASE 1: BECOMING A SOCIAL WORKER

The qualitative results from Phase 1 highlight key themes related to participants' motivations, experiences, and challenges in becoming a social worker. The responses were categorized into three main sections: Inspiration to become a social worker, experiences of becoming a social worker, and challenges/obstacles faced during the social work journey. In the narrative below, the themes that emerged for each question of the journey map are summarized. Additionally, Table 9 provides representative quotes for each theme and the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within each phase.

Inspiration to become a social worker

The first and most prominent theme indicated that participants pursued social work because of their general motivation and passion for helping others. The second theme indicated a desire to support or advocate for historically marginalized communities and people with disabilities. The third theme indicated an interest in directly improving the lives of vulnerable populations or groups who are more likely to face obstacles, such as single mothers, individuals in nursing homes, and those in the criminal justice system.
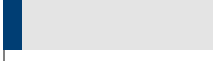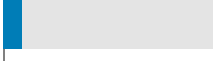
Experiences of becoming a social worker

The first and most prominent theme involved participants' pivotal life experiences, including having family members who were social workers or received social work services or experiencing traumatic or difficult personal events. The second theme was similar to the first theme but described participants' firsthand experiences that were generally less oriented toward negative life events. These firsthand experiences included volunteer work, early job experiences, and realizing that social work aligned with their personality or disposition. The third theme described participants' nonlinear path to social work. The paths that participants described often involved pivoting from their original educational intentions or undergraduate degrees. Other times, participants described wanting a career change after being established in a different field.

Challenges/obstacles faced during the social work journey

The first and foremost theme was the professional stigma social workers may encounter. Specifically, participants described social workers as being undervalued in society, receiving lower pay than comparable professions, and having reservations due to negative stereotypes about the profession. The second theme described barriers to entry for a career in social work. Many comments on this theme described difficulties with paying for school and exams, returning to school after a delay, and passing the exam to begin practicing. The third theme was closely related but emphasized the financial struggle and sometimes support many participants experienced regarding their education and the exam.

Table 9. Phase 1 Key Themes

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Inspiration to become a social worker	Motivation to help others	"I feel that becoming a social worker is the best decision I ever made - knowing I make a difference to help others makes me feel grateful and happy."	**33%**	
	Support for marginalized groups	"I grew up with a sister with Down Syndrome and through this personal experience wanted to advocate, assist others who are marginalized."	**9%**	
	Improving the lives of vulnerable populations	"To help those in need and to advocate for those less fortunate. My father-in-law was in a nursing home that was not very good, and I wanted to change the environment of nursing homes and the only way I could do that is by becoming an advocate."	**7%**	
Experiences of becoming a social worker	Pivotal life experiences prior to social work	"I was inspired by my experience in the TRIO Upward Bound program and in recovery. I had a love for mental health, helping people, and making change and I thought that social work would give me the best opportunities to make change in the world around me."	**12%**	
	Firsthand experience	"Living in an urban area, I was witness to systemic and judicial injustice very early on. Even more personal was having a cousin who was taken from her mother due to her mother's addiction issues. My cousin's journey in the system was horrific, I wanted to circumvent that for other children and families."	**10%**	
	Non-linearity of the process	"I wanted to become a social worker because I always wanted to help people. I became a mother before I went to college, but I always wanted to help people directly. I pursued my master's and with being on campus and being around others, I realized I liked helping people."	**9%**	

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Challenges/obstacles faced during the social work journey	Professional stigma	"Pushing against the idea that social workers are going to be poor, as well as sticking with the same job for an entire career. I wanted to advocate for social workers to go for what they want. Challenges are, as a Black woman, serving as a bridge between people because often there is a lack of context and lack of information about Black culture."	10%	
	Entry into profession	"I was attending school and working full time and then I had an internship on top of it. I know there is going to be some level of feeling unprepared in the field, but I was not supervised closely. I self-advocated and was sometimes brushed off."	6%	
	Finances	"I found the process of formal education in social work to be extremely difficult and gatekeeping. As a returning student, I didn't qualify for much in terms of government loans, so ended up doing school full-time while working full-time. During my unpaid practicum (which the non-profit industry relies on), I worked seven days a week, plus classes, to get my education and pay my bills."	3%	

*Note: The Percentage indicates the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within Phase 1.

PHASE 2: SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The qualitative results from Phase 2 highlight several themes related to the resources participants discussed as available or unavailable during their educational journey as well as critical educational experiences. In the narrative below, the themes that emerged for each question of the journey map are summarized. Additionally, Table 10 provides representative quotes for each theme and the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within each phase.
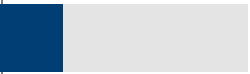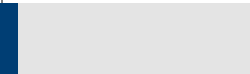
Resources during the educational journey

The first and most prominent theme focused on the people who helped participants during their education. Such individuals included instructors, advisors, colleagues, classmates, and online communities who provided advice, support, and mentorship. The second theme consisted of comments regarding exam preparation. Although a few participants mentioned the potential usefulness of external resources such as YouTube videos or the preparation course offered by the National Association of Social Workers, most comments under this theme mentioned how education failed to prepare participants for the exams as well as the lack of consistent test preparation materials. The third theme regarded financial resources. Participants mostly discussed the lack of financial resources and commented that emergency funds and scholarships should be more readily available, as well as that student loan forgiveness should be applicable to social workers.

Educational experiences during the social work journey

Four themes emerged regarding the participants' critical educational experiences. The first theme consisted of general comments about participants' graduate school experiences, which often included descriptions of their trajectory from undergraduate to graduate education. The second theme focused on participants' perceptions of the usefulness of their applied field experiences, which included internships, practicums, and field placements, for preparing them for the demands of a career in social work. The third theme consisted of comments describing challenges that were unique to non-traditional students (i.e., older students, those who work full-time jobs, and/or students with children). These comments were frequently about the logistical challenges associated with traveling to classes while simultaneously balancing other responsibilities. The fourth theme described the usefulness of coursework. Comments that fell under this theme focused on clinical courses as a useful part of social work education. Other effective coursework structures included skill development courses (e.g., active listening), interactive courses, and courses that emphasized lived experiences.

Table 10. Phase 2 Key Themes

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Helpful resources during the educational journey	People resources	"Other colleagues and people who were going through it. There were people who had been practicing for years who were taking classes with us. Talking to them was a great experience. I did a summer research program and worked with PhDs. The practicum and field instructors were helpful. We had a great professor of color who took it by storm, and we all gravitated to him. Being in the same place I did my undergrad was helpful."	**26%**	
	Exam preparation materials	"I first had to realize my learning style, understand a bit about Linguistics and critical thinking, and apply this consistency in my test-taking strategy. I made scheduled consistent uninterrupted weekly study time for 3 months."	**8%**	
	Financial resources	"Scholarships would have been helpful."	**7%**	

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Preparing for the exam	General graduate school experiences	"I was originally getting a BSW and changed because I thought there was no research in social work but I came back to social work for my MSW because I knew social work was the career for me and I even felt more confident going into the field having a different background and different experiences."	**24%**	
	Useful field placement/internships	"My internship was the most helpful. Not just that but my supervisor who was also a minority had the knowledge of who to place me with and was able to identify the right fit. I was able to work with all different people in that placement which helped me change some of my preconceived notions about those groups."	**22%**	
	Perspectives from non-traditional students	"No online courses, so had to attend courses in-person which was difficult to balance with a full-time job, had to often sleep in car. Had understanding supervisor who helped with scheduling to best of their ability."	**8%**	
	Coursework	"Classes that were interactive, training on trauma in clinical setting helped a lot. DSM and ethic courses."	**5%**	

*Note: The Percentage indicates the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within Phase 2.

PHASE 3: THE LICENSING EXAM

The qualitative results from Phase 3 highlight key themes related to challenges, strategies, and recommendations surrounding the social work licensing exams. In the narrative below, the themes that emerged for each question of the journey map are summarized. Table 11 provides representative quotes for each theme and the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within each phase.

Challenges with the exam

The first theme focused on exam structure. Some comments reflected perceptions that questions on the exam were intentionally confusing, left out critical information, and underemphasized cultural differences. Other comments reflected negative perceptions of the exam administration experience, specifically that the testing centers felt unwelcoming and were distracting. The second theme was related to the first but focused on the procedure of taking the exam. Comments reflected negative experiences with testing centers but also described issues registering for the exam and apprehension about paying for the exam. The third theme consisted of comments about accommodations for taking the exam. Specifically, participants described difficulty acquiring accommodations and the need for better accommodations for some examinees (e.g., more time for English language learners).

Preparing for the exam

The first theme that emerged consisted of comments about helpful test preparation strategies. The comments mentioned practice tests, tutors, advice from instructors, and study guides. The second theme that emerged emphasized the usefulness of study groups, professional networks, and the sharing of study materials within those networks.

Ideal licensure process

The first theme described potential modifications to the current process and/or exam itself. For instance, some comments suggested including more diverse perspectives in the exam content, the sufficiency of supervision for licensure, and requiring test preparation courses in graduate school. Others suggested alternative assessment methods such as a portfolio. The second theme reflected participants' comments about opportunities to retake the exam. These comments called for free or reduced-cost retakes, less time required between retakes, and retakes that only featured the parts of the exam an examinee did not successfully pass.

Motivation to take the licensing exam

One theme emerged that focused on participants' need for licensure to pursue certain jobs in certain states. More specifically, participants explained they needed to pursue licensure to be eligible for particular jobs.
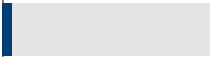
Future of the licensure exam for Canadian social workers

The first theme expressed a need for an exam that was tailored to the Canadian experience and explained that there is currently no exam in parts of Canada (e.g., Ontario). The second theme expressed general concern about implementing a licensing exam requirement in Canada.

The usefulness of education as exam preparation

One theme emerged. The comments that fell under this theme that is often regarded the perceived purposes of the exam and social work education. Particularly, the comments focused on the perceived inadequacy of the exam as a means of measuring whether one is qualified to be a social worker, as well as whether formal educational experiences adequately prepared them for the exam.

Table 11. Phase 3 Key Themes

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Challenges with the exam	Exam structure	"The exam is quite challenging for those who aren't great test takers. The types of questions asked seem to be tricky and not clear. It is also very frustrating to not know which questions you missed or what the correct answers are."	21%	
	Exam administration	"While taking the test, it's uncomfortable knowing that someone is watching you on video when you walk into the testing center vetted already. I feel like they watch you as if you will cheat, how? It's uncomfortable. There are just way too many people in that testing room that is anxiety-driven."	8%	
	Need for exam accommodations	"I feel the last 3 times I have given my all to pass but I feel the structure of the tests and the verbiage could be awfully confusing for someone that [English] language is their second language. I have noticed if someone explains things to me, I could understand it better, but unfortunately for the test we can't provide that. I have accommodations for 2 extra hours and a dictionary but that has yet to help me."	5%	

	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Preparing for the exam	Helpful test preparation strategies	"I took the practice test and looked at any online test with rationales. Made flashcards and pocket prep. I practiced like a fiend. Practiced flashcards late and made the cards for anything I didn't know. Wanted to cover everything."	31%	
	Study groups	"I sat for my first licensing exam (master's level) in spring of 2001 and my clinical exam in spring of 2003. I used the [available materials] and joined a small study group locally to help study. Not being a very confident test taker, this process was stressful for me. I was relieved to have passed the exam at both levels at the first pass."	1%	
Ideal licensure process	Potential modifications to the exam	"Four hours is too long of an exam, shorten the exam and make the questions more relatable to practice. There is often not enough information in the questions to provide an adequate answer."	11%	
	Exam retakes	"I would allow for you to retake only the part you failed instead of the complete exam."	4%	
Motivation to take the licensing exam	Need for licensure for certain jobs or in certain states	"I was working in child welfare, and I did not need a license to do the work I was doing. When I relocated to a different state, I couldn't find a decent job without having a license. That's when I decided to get my LMSW."	11%	

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Future of the licensure exam for Canadian social workers	Need for the exam to be tailored to the Canadian experience	"For Canada, there needs to be specific content to Canadian issues as some systems and processes work differently. Laws and legislation is different as well."	**3%**	
	Concerns about exam administration in Canada	"If the province where I live adopts this exam, I am very, very concerned that a US-based company is going to try and create something used in Canada."	**1%**	
The usefulness of education as exam preparation	Purposes of educational experience and the exam	"My MSW program did not educate me on how to take the exam or what to expect with it. I was frustrated that I spent so much money on my degree and had no idea what the exam would be like."	**3%**	

*Note: The Percentage indicates the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within Phase 3.

PHASE 4: RE-ENVISIONING THE PROCESS

The qualitative results from Phase 4 highlight participant perspectives on proposed modifications to the social work licensing process. Several key themes emerged, each shedding light on critical aspects of the examination and licensure system. In the narrative below, the themes that emerged for each question of the journey map are summarized. Additionally, Table 12 provides representative quotes for each theme and the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within each phase.

Proposed Modifications to the licensing process:
Phase 4 of the journey map posed two questions to participants. Specifically, the questions asked participants what modifications they would propose to improve the licensing process and ensure transparency. Since both of these questions aim to explore ways to improve the licensing process, they were merged for analysis, resulting in the identification of eight themes.

The first theme regarded modifications specifically to the testing experience. These included suggestions such as shortening the test, omitting the unscored questions, minimizing distractions, improving operations in the testing centers, and including scheduled breaks during the

The second theme focused on the difficulty of capturing social work demands in an exam. In particular, the comments expressed apprehension that a standardized exam is appropriate for the field, as well as perceptions that the exam often involves choosing answers that go against one's experiences.

The third theme called for alternatives to a standardized test. Rather than passing an exam, social workers would be able to apply for licensure directly through the state, pay the necessary fees, or fulfill other requirements to obtain their license. This approach was aimed at addressing concerns about fairness and accuracy associated with standardized testing.

The fourth theme expressed participants' general desire for universal licensure. Some participants noted other career fields that have adopted universal licenses (e.g., physicians), and the desire to reinstate policies that allowed social workers to practice during the pandemic.
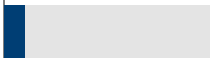
The fifth theme described participants' thoughts about retaining the exam with potential modifications. Specifically, the comments expressed the need for an exam to reach parity with other licensed professions but recommended more prominent official study materials, updating the interface of the exam, reducing the subjectivity of the questions, increasing the relevance to current social work demands, and lowering the cost of exam preparation and the exam itself.
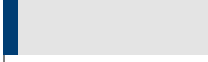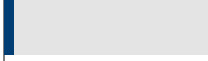
The sixth theme concerned transparency and equity in the licensing process. The comments expressed a desire for the exam to be open for review, clarify how items are developed and tested, and abide by the code of ethics.

The seventh theme called for a reevaluation of the licensure process. The comments here expressed a big-picture desire to reconsider the purpose of the exam.

The eighth and final theme concerned participants' general call for more mentorship and training during the process.

Table 12. Phase 4 Key Themes

Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Proposed modifications to the licensing process	Modifications to the testing experience (e.g., question structure, testing administration)	"You should not have to take the exam more than two times if you miss by a few points. Also, change the test environment. You should be allowed to take the exam at home with monitoring available."	**25%**	
	The difficulty of capturing social work demands in an exam	"One of the most significant challenges with the current exam is that it does not account for cultural differences that are encountered in the community, which creates unrealistic scenarios on test questions. Although we have a set of ethical guidelines to follow as social workers, these guidelines do not always address the unique cultural differences and challenges that we face in our work. As a result, the exam questions may not accurately reflect the types of situations that social workers encounter in the field."	**23%**	
	Consider alternatives to a standardized exam	"Use portfolios, essays, simulations, or something other than an exam to assess competence."	**18%**	
	The desire for universal licensure	"Create a universal license instead of just specific to your province/ state. The 'universal' conversation for social work has not been discussed yet."	**10%**	

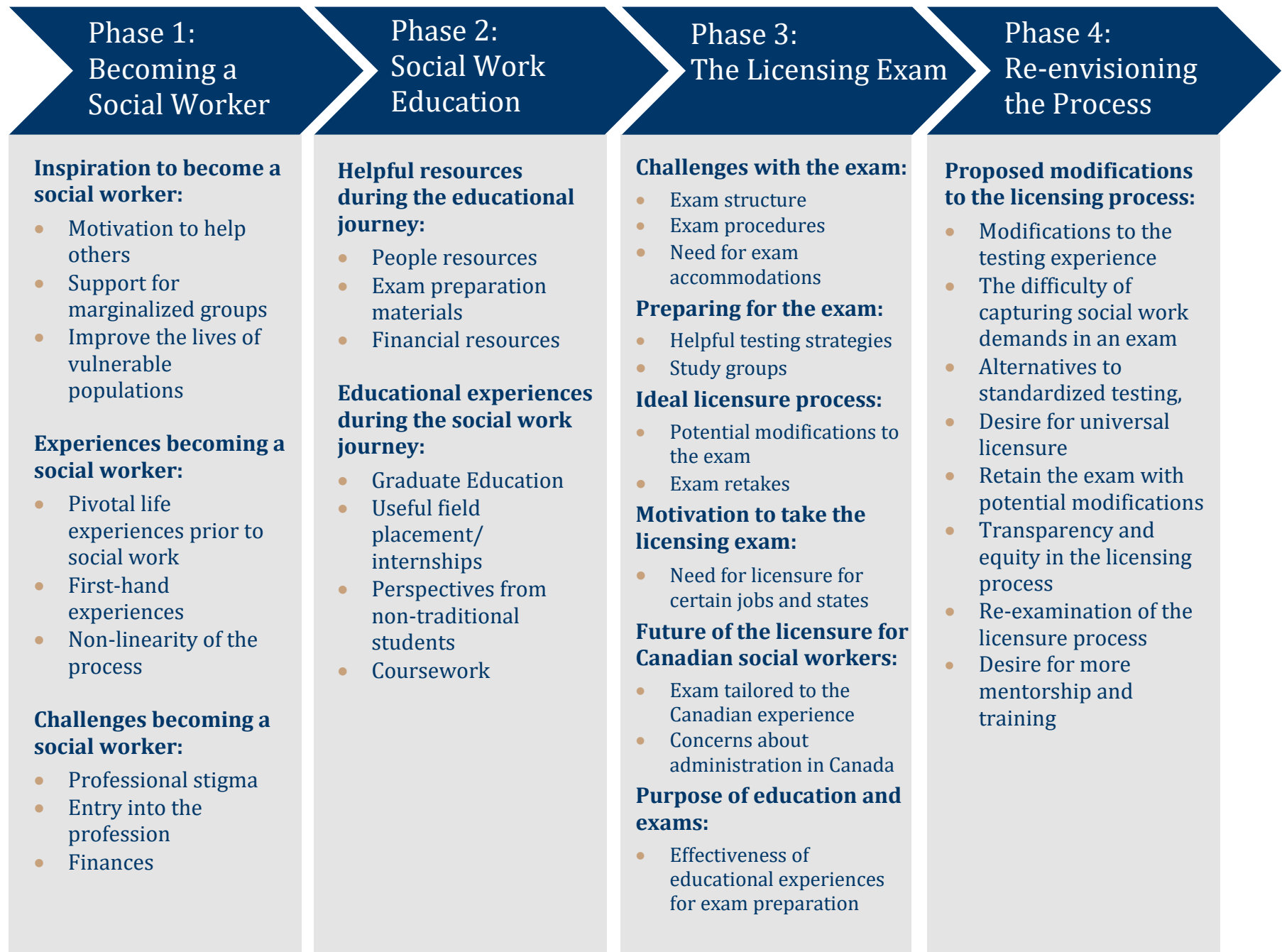| Question	Key Theme	Representative Quote	Percentage*	
Proposed modifications to the licensing process	Retain the exam with modifications	"Exams are necessary for parity (i.e., if every other profession is required to take an exam, eliminating licensure for SW could perpetuate a negative view of the field)."	**9%**	
	Transparency and equity in the licensing process	"Transparency on how items are developed, tested, and by whom; ASWB needs to be proactively transparent on efforts current and future to address disparity/bias; state licensure regulations need to be clear on how to access disability accommodations; ASWB needs to understand the huge variety of types of disability accommodations that should be offered."	**7%**	
	Re-evaluation of the general licensure process	"I suggest they re-evaluate the licensing process and come up with alternate paths for social workers to become licensed. I believe a more beneficial way to receive a license would be working directly under a certified social worker for 2 years. Experience should count more than a test."	**5%**	
	Desire for more mentorship and training	"One year of supervision with a committee that includes a social worker in the area of specialization, an employment supervisor, and two community members that have received services in the past."	**3%**	

*Note: The Percentage indicates the percentage of quotes that fell under each theme within Phase 4.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

Phase 1: Becoming a Social Worker

Inspiration to become a social worker:

- Motivation to help others
- Support for marginalized groups
- Improve the lives of vulnerable populations

Experiences becoming a social worker:

- Pivotal life experiences prior to social work
- First-hand experiences
- Non-linearity of the process

Challenges becoming a social worker:

- Professional stigma
- Entry into the profession
- Finances

Phase 2: Social Work Education

Helpful resources during the educational journey:

- People resources
- Exam preparation materials
- Financial resources

Educational experiences during the social work journey:

- Graduate Education
- Useful field placement/ internships
- Perspectives from non-traditional students
- Coursework

Phase 3: The Licensing Exam

Challenges with the exam:

- Exam structure
- Exam procedures
- Need for exam accommodations

Preparing for the exam:

- Helpful testing strategies
- Study groups

Ideal licensure process:

- Potential modifications to the exam
- Exam retakes

Motivation to take the licensing exam:

- Need for licensure for certain jobs and states

Future of the licensure for Canadian social workers:

- Exam tailored to the Canadian experience
- Concerns about administration in Canada

Purpose of education and exams:

- Effectiveness of educational experiences for exam preparation

Phase 4: Re-envisioning the Process

Proposed modifications to the licensing process:

- Modifications to the testing experience
- The difficulty of capturing social work demands in an exam
- Alternatives to standardized testing,
- Desire for universal licensure
- Retain the exam with potential modifications
- Transparency and equity in the licensing process
- Re-examination of the licensure process
- Desire for more mentorship and training

REFLECTIONS

Based on the valuable insights gained from the Community Conversations, this section presents a set of reflections and suggestions for moving forward. The reflections are based on key findings that emerged from the sessions and are not an exhaustive list of all relevant themes. When applicable, the suggestions offer potential courses of action but are also not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive. Importantly, improvements are a community- and system-wide effort that will only be successful if everyone, including ASWB, contributes.

Social Work Experience: Community members express a range of motivations for entering the field of social work, such as a passion for helping others and a commitment to advocating for historically marginalized communities. Many social workers often cite intrinsic motivation as the primary factor behind their decision to pursue a career in social work. This internal drive, combined with the perception that the field is undervalued in society, and the financial obstacles throughout the process, underscore the need for future initiatives to identify strategies for enhancing compensation for social workers and recognition of social work as a profession.

Education: Community members express the importance of coursework, applied field experiences, and external resources, but

they face challenges due to a lack of consistent test preparation materials and limited financial resources, such as readily available funds and scholarships to support their education. It would be beneficial to make sure that test preparation materials are effectively communicated and accessible, and to explore options to expand financial support for various communities, with a particular focus on those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Exam Structure: Community members express a disconnect between the current exam content, what they experience on the job, and the needs of their respective communities. They want to see greater transparency regarding the development of current exam content and improvements to the retesting process. Such efforts may come in the form of:

- Ensuring exam content reflects situations experienced by social workers engaging with diverse communities
- Providing clear and frequent communication of the test development process to both test takers and the public, including addressing potential misinformation about the exam process

- Continuing to engage the community in the exam development and licensure process
- Considering section retesting/partial retesting
- Exploring whether administering the exam throughout Canada is appropriate and relevant to Canadian regulations, requirements, and culture.

Exam Administration: Community members want to see improvements in the exam administration experience. The current conditions of on-site testing are seen as both inaccessible and unfavorable to test-takers. In certain cases, such unfavorable conditions may cause harm to test-takers. These improvements may come in the form of:

- Addressing accessibility, standardization of protocols, and overall "feel" (e.g., welcoming, professional, supportive) of the on-site exam administration experience
- Exploring the potential of remote exam administration

Finances and Resources: Community members express facing financial strain while trying to handle the costs related to the licensing process.

REFLECTIONS (CONTINUED)

These costs include exam fees, expenses for retaking the exam, and the necessary preparation materials. Improvements to finances and resources may come in the form of:

- Offering complimentary or reduced-cost access to study resources, such as exam preparation workshops, review materials, and practice tests
- Examining the fee structure for exam retakes and considering the implementation of a reduced fee
- Exploring partnerships with educational institutions to help bridge the gap between social work curricula and the content evaluated in licensing exams

Alternate Assessment Options:
Community members express the desire to investigate alternative assessment options either as a substitute for or an addition to the current standardized exam. This suggestion may translate to:

- Providing opportunities for test-takers to showcase their knowledge, skills, and real-world application, including, but not limited to, project-based assessments, portfolio submissions, and supervised work hours