

## **How Many School Social Workers are in the United States?**

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### **Abstract**

This research project aimed to compile data on the total number of school social workers in the United States. Dr. Brenda Lindsey and a team of eight research students led the project on behalf of the National School Social Work Census project. Research can be unpredictable, and the process of determining the number of school social workers in each state varies. Numerous methods were employed to gather information, such as making phone calls, sending emails, submitting Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, utilizing LinkedIn, and extracting data from each state's Department of Education website. Our team faced numerous challenges and needed to think creatively to gain access to the information and assistance we needed. The goal was to showcase our progress and shed light on the lack of organization and accountability surrounding the number of school social workers in each state.

*Keywords:* Department of Education, student services, school counselors, school social workers.

**About the Authors:** *Brandon is a junior BSW student. He is interested in examining substance abuse and suicide rates in the veteran population and evaluating the resources available to veterans and their families while undergoing the military-to-civilian transition.*

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## **Introduction**

The objective of this research initiative was to comprehensively assess and analyze the presence of school social workers in schools across the United States. Every state has specific policies and regulations for determining and keeping track of school social workers. These policies differ in terms of the education, certification, and credentials required to be considered a school social worker. By collecting data on the number of school social workers in the United States, we can gain insight into each state's standards for maintaining records and the requirements for holding this position. Our goal was to compile a census of U.S. school social workers to better understand the challenges involved in obtaining this data. We hope to address the gap of understanding and knowledge that lies between how school social workers are distributed and what their responsibilities are. This data is intended to guide future policy and educational practices.

## **Methods**

We utilized various methods to obtain the number of school social workers in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. We accessed each state's Department of Education to gather important contact information such as phone numbers, emails, and LinkedIn profiles, as well as research data entries if the website provided it. We used the contact information to get in touch with state employees who might know the headcount of school social workers in their state, or if they could connect us with someone who did possess that number. For some states, we needed to submit FOIA requests or other forms of data requests. Other potential sources of information included contacting school districts, the Department of Health, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and other government agencies to gather the headcount of school social workers for each state.

## **Results**

In total, we found 49,135.10 school social workers in the United States. Mississippi was the only state where we were not able to obtain a valid number. Our final total is an estimate based on what our research team was able to gather through the various methods we used.

## **Discussion**

Gathering information on the number of school social workers in the United States proved to be a complex task. Although the project itself had a clear goal, obtaining the data was anything but straightforward. The challenges arose from the fact that different states use vastly different reporting systems and record-keeping methods. Complicating matters further, some states overlap the roles of school social workers, therapists, and counselors, making it difficult to obtain accurate numbers. To navigate this, we found that the most reliable method was to request FOIA reports from the state's Department of Education website and search for any available data entry reports. However, some states were hesitant to provide information over the phone, posing a significant obstacle. Despite our efforts, many of our emails, phone calls, and voicemails went unanswered, which was disheartening. Fortunately, some states were cooperative and guided us toward the right channels to obtain the necessary information. After exhausting all available avenues, it became clear that some states lacked a clear-cut way of separating the data to accurately define the number of school social workers.

The data implies that if states are unaware of the number of school social workers in their respective state, there may be a shortage of these professionals in school districts where their expertise is crucial. School social workers play a vital role in providing emotional and mental support to students, staff, teachers, families, and communities. They serve as intermediaries between students, parents, and teachers, provide assistance to students with physical or learning

disabilities, intervene in student conflicts and misconduct, advocate for student rights, and evaluate school-related policies. A shortage of school social workers means students may lack access to these essential services and resources, which are crucial for academic readiness. Policies and adequate funding can help bridge the gap between the recording of school social workers and the specific credentials and education required for this role in a school setting. Furthermore, there is a growing need for a national database to consistently assess the demand for school social workers in underserved school districts.

### **Acknowledgments**

Dr. Brenda Lindsey, Zane Schneider, Janna Kravac, Ethan Kye, Kassidy Mcguire-Olsen, Zane Schneider, Cassandra Coplea-Seidensticker

### **References**

Data collection was obtained through the various Department of Education websites and other government-related websites tasked with keeping records and data on state employees. In some cases, email and phone calls were utilized to navigate the Department of Education to locate the proper contact needed to obtain the data for various individual states. At times, a FOIA request was required. In the case of Illinois, the list of school social workers was provided to Dr. Lindsey directly from the state.

# How Many School Social Workers Are There In The United States?

## National School Social Workers Census Project

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the course of this semester, Dr. Brenda Lindsey, with the UIUC's School of Social Work, led a team of eight undergraduate research assistants who set out to find the total number of school social workers in the United States.

Each student was assigned individual states, with the hope of obtaining the number of school social workers. While working as a team, the students learned how to gather data by calling representatives of various school districts, analyzing data, generating reports, and creating presentations. Additionally, the team attended weekly meetings to review findings and collaborate on any bottlenecks and issues that might have arisen.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

How many school social workers are there in the United States?

### AIM

The original goal of this research project was to comprehensively quantify and analyze the prevalence of school social workers across schools in the United States.

This project, a collaboration between Dr. Lindsey from the School of Social Work, the School Social Work Association of America, and the research students involved, sought to fill a critical gap in the current understanding of the distribution and roles of school social workers, thereby informing future policy and educational practices.

By the end of the project, the aim shifted to also incorporating the methods that states and school districts use to keep count of the official social workers in their respective areas.

Total number of School Social Workers in the United States:

**49,135.10**

This is an estimated number, based off our findings.

### METHOD

#### Who was counted?

K-12 educational employees in the United States with the title of School Social Worker or similar (e.g. Student Services Coordinator).

#### To acquire this count, we...

- Accessed public staff records when available
- Contacted Department of Education officials via
  - o Email
  - o Phone
  - o LinkedIn
- Submitted data requests to state Departments of Education
- Submitted Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to state Departments of Education
- Contacted individual school districts
- Contacted state Departments of Health
- Sought out 3rd-party counts of school social workers

### RESULTS

The team found many of the states were happy to cooperate and were helped point us in the right direction to try to find answers. However, once we exhausted the available avenues, there simply did not seem to be a clear-cut way for many of the agencies to separate data in a way that clearly defined the number of school social workers.

#### STATES UNABLE TO PROVIDE DATA

- Mississippi

#### STATES ABLE TO PROVIDE DATA

- The map below will illustrate the data for the states we were able to obtain the information from.

### CONCLUSION

The road to obtaining information regarding the number of school social workers in the United States was complex. Many of the states use drastically different reporting systems and record keeping methods. This project was straightforward in terms of what we were doing; counting the number of school social workers in the United States. However, the path to finding this data wasn't linear.

#### MOST EFFECTIVE METHOD

- The most accurate and effective pathway to receiving the information was through requesting FOIA reports via the different governmental websites.

#### LEAST EFFECTIVE METHOD

- It seems most of the agencies are quite hesitant to give this information over the phone, which proved to be a hurdle to overcome throughout the project. Many of our emails, phone calls and voicemails went unanswered, which was discouraging.

### TAKEAWAYS

- "Research is messy" -Dr. Brenda Lindsey
- Some states are more organized and have a headcount of school social workers readily available. Other states required us to do more research and were more difficult to obtain information from.

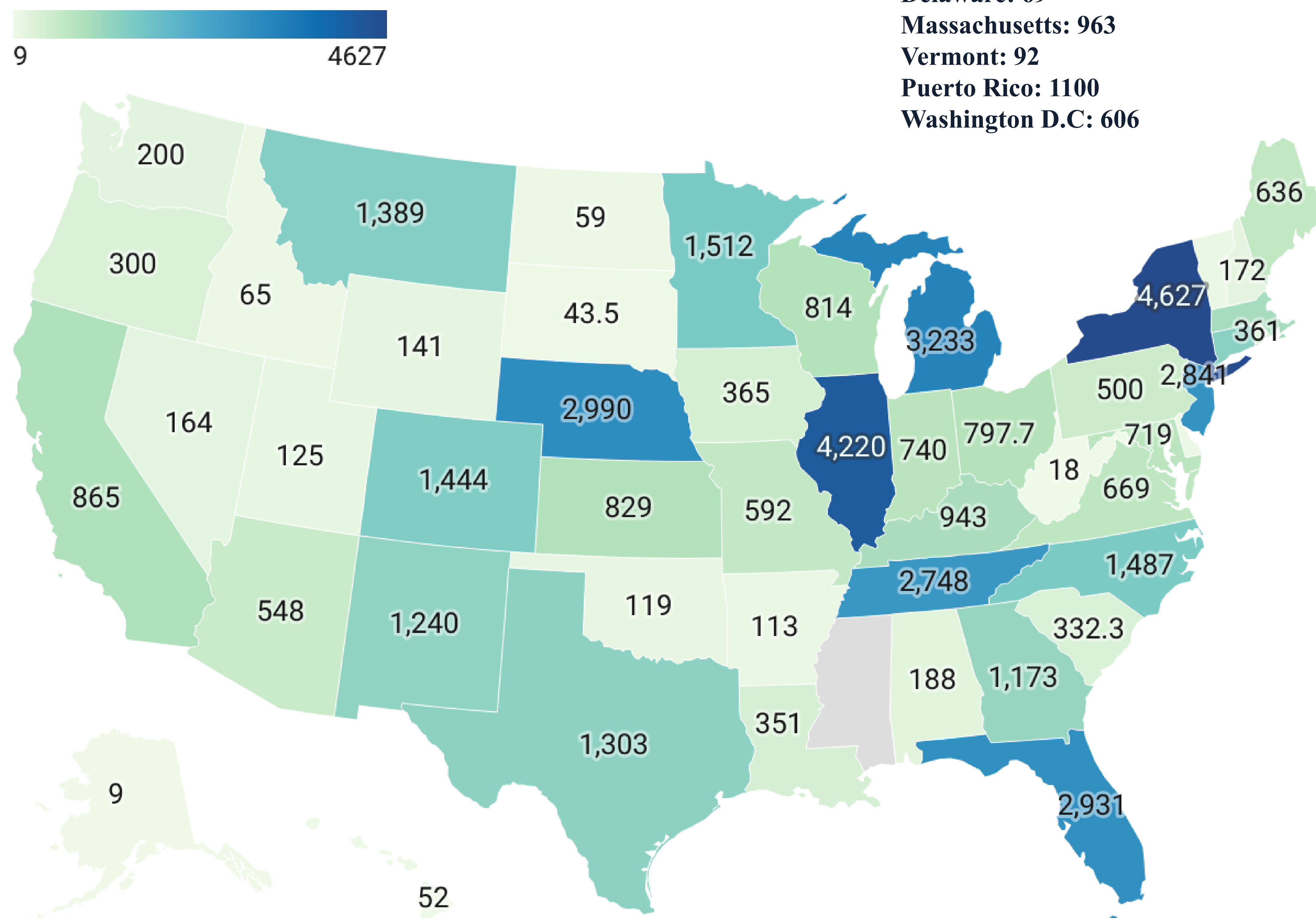
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Data Map created with Datawrapper

## School Social Workers by State



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