



Summary Report

Social Worker Recruitment and Retention in
New Brunswick



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Project Title

Social worker recruitment and retention in New Brunswick

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How to Cite This Product

McDonald, T., Miah, P., & Morehouse, J. (2026). Social worker recruitment and retention in New Brunswick. Fredericton, NB: DataNB.



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Why is This Study Important?

Social workers play a vital role in supporting individuals, families, and communities across New Brunswick (NB). They provide clinical services, respond to complex social needs, and help uphold the well-being of some of the province's most vulnerable populations. Yet, despite this essential work, NB continues to face persistent challenges in attracting and retaining enough social workers to meet growing demand. Shortages have been documented for years, and recent pressures - including rising caseload complexity, heightened burnout, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 period - have intensified concerns about the stability of the workforce.



These challenges are unfolding at a time when the province is experiencing significant demographic and economic change. Population growth, increased in-migration, and shifting community needs have placed additional strain on social services. Strengthening recruitment and retention is therefore a central priority for the NB Association of Social Workers (NBASW) and for the province as a whole.

Effective workforce planning requires a clear understanding of the factors that shape who enters the profession, who stays, and who leaves. This study explores and analyzes these factors by linking social worker registry data, university graduation records, and provincial Medicare data from 2010-2024. This approach makes it possible to examine not only whether graduates remain in NB, but whether they register as social workers, continue practicing over time, or step away from the profession altogether. It also allows for a closer look at how recruitment and retention patterns vary across demographic and employment groups, and how these patterns have shifted during periods of heightened strain.

By providing a clearer picture of who is entering and staying in the profession - and where vulnerabilities may exist - this study offers evidence to support long-term workforce planning and to inform strategies aimed at building a stable, sustainable social work workforce for NB.

How Was This Study Completed?

To undertake this study, we used administrative data from the NBASW registry, which provides yearly information on all registered social workers in the province from 2010 to 2024. These data were linked with provincial Medicare records and university graduation data to track when individuals graduate from Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs in NB, whether they register to practice in NB, how long they remain registered, and whether they stay in the province after leaving the profession.

To explore these questions, we used both descriptive statistics and multivariate models. Logistic regression was used to identify factors associated with BSW graduates becoming registered social workers and with unregistered social workers leaving NB. To study how long social workers remain registered, the analysis used survival models to estimate the likelihood of leaving the profession over time while accounting for characteristics such as employment role type, education, and demographic factors. More details on the data sources, definitions, and modelling approaches are available in the [full report](#).



Limitations

While reading the results, it's important to keep a few limitations in mind. For instance, NBASW registration typically occurs between January and March, and late renewals are not captured in the data, which means some individuals may appear to have left the profession when their registration simply occurred after the cutoff.

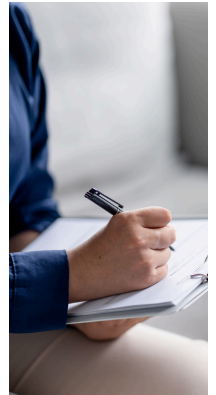
BSW graduates from the University of New Brunswick's BSW program are not included in the analysis due to the very recent launch of the program (in 2024). Likewise, social work technicians are not included in the analysis because the NBASW only gained legislative authority to regulate them in 2024. They will appear in future work.

As a result, the findings reflect the experiences of social workers during the study period but do not capture the full range of pathways that will be possible as technician regulation and bridging programs continue to expand.

How Has the Workforce Changed Over Time?

NB has seen steady growth in the number of registered social workers over the past decade, but the makeup of this group - and the pathways into it - have shifted.

More individuals are registering as social workers overall, yet a smaller share may be working in frontline roles, and fewer BSW graduates are entering the profession immediately after graduation.



Overall, the Workforce has Grown

The number of registered social workers increased by **39%** between 2010 and 2023 (from 1,635 to 2,275).

On a per-capita basis, the number of social workers per 100,000 New Brunswickers rose by **25%** (from 217 to 271).

However, the Share of Frontline Workers May Be Decreasing

At the same time, the share of social workers with a frontline status **declined** from 73% to 67%, and the share who reported non-frontline roles **increased** from 16% to 22%.

↳ While this could mean a growing share of social workers are not directly engaged in client-facing practice, it's important to note that many workers (especially new registrants) leave this registration field blank.

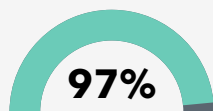
What Graduate Recruitment Patterns Suggest Going Forward

Just over half of BSW graduates from NB universities register as social workers in NB within one year of graduating, and about two-thirds eventually enter the profession. While a declining number of graduates since 2020 has placed added pressure on the system, UNB's recently launched BSW program is expected to increase the number of social work graduates (and the supply of new registrants) going forward.

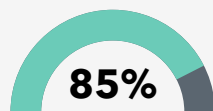
How Long do Social Workers Stay in the Profession?



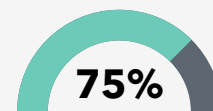
Most new registrants continue practicing for several years after entering the profession.



97%
remain registered
after 1 year



85%
remain registered
after 3 years



75%
remain registered
after 5 years

These patterns show that early-career retention is strong, with most departures occurring later in a social worker's career.

Attrition Rates (i.e., Unregistering) are Generally Low

On average, **5%** of social workers who were registered in NB in a given year chose not to renew their registration the following year.

- ↳ Only **4%** of social workers left without returning in a later year. Of those who did return, the majority (**70%**) did so within three years.
- ↳ Attrition rates were only **3%** for frontline and non-frontline workers but were much higher (**14%**) for those in "Unknown" roles. This isn't surprising, as many in "Unknown" roles would have been unemployed.

However, Social Workers Can Remain Registered but Stop Practicing

Patterns of stepping away from practice have shifted in recent years, with some social workers unregistering while others re-registered as "non-practicing."

- ↳ Annual exits from practice rose from **5-6%** before 2019 to around **10%** in the pandemic and post-pandemic years that followed.

So, Who is Most Likely to Leave?

We used statistical models to help identify which characteristics are associated with a higher or lower likelihood of social workers leaving the profession and leaving the province.

Here's what we learned:

Practicing members are less likely to unregister.



Social workers who are actively practicing have a **57% lower risk** of unregistering compared to those not currently practicing.

New registrants are more likely to stay registered.

New registrants have a **54% lower risk** of leaving the profession than social workers with more years of registration.



New Brunswickers are also more likely to stay.



Social workers not born in NB have a **26% higher risk** of unregistering compared to those born in NB.



What Affects Social Workers' Likelihood of Leaving the Province?

Employment Status Before Unregistering Matters.

Social workers who were not employed the year before unregistering have **58% lower odds** of leaving NB than those who were employed before unregistering.

COVID-19 Also May Have Impacted Provincial Retention.

Those who unregistered after COVID-19 have **59% lower odds** of leaving the province than those who unregistered before the pandemic.

Conclusions

Taken together, these findings show that while the number of registered social workers in NB has grown, the province is facing increasing pressure to maintain a strong practicing workforce. More social workers are stepping away from active practice than in previous years, and a growing share may be moving into non-frontline roles. These shifts suggest that day-to-day working conditions and increasingly complex service demands are playing a larger role in shaping career decisions. At the same time, fewer new graduates are entering the profession right away, and recent graduating classes are smaller. Many do join the workforce eventually, but the slower and shrinking inflow makes it harder to keep pace with service needs.

The statistical models highlight the importance of connection - to the work, to stable employment, and to the province. Social workers who are actively practicing or early in their careers are more likely to stay registered with the NBASW, while those with fewer ties to NB or less stable roles face higher risks of leaving the profession. However, leaving the profession does not necessarily mean leaving the province. Those who unregistered after the COVID-19 period were less likely to leave NB than earlier cohorts, suggesting that many pandemic-era exits were shaped by work-related pressures rather than decisions to relocate. A similar pattern appears among individuals who were not employed as social workers the year before they unregistered; this group was more likely to remain in NB, reflecting situations such as retirement, further education, or work in other fields that anchor them locally.

Overall, the study points to a workforce that relies heavily on a core group of practitioners with strong roots in the province and in their workplaces. Supporting early-career entry, improving conditions that help social workers stay engaged in practice, and strengthening recruitment into frontline roles will be important for ensuring a stable and responsive workforce for NB.



Questions?

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