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# SOCIAL WORK SALARIES

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## SOCIAL WORK SALARIES<sup>1</sup>

**S**Ocial work is not often recommended as a remunerative calling. The impression persists that in considerable measure its practice should constitute its own reward. Some social workers themselves hold and advocate this view; and it is undoubtedly true that few have entered this field in the hope of liberal financial return. This fact may explain the apathy with which the present low salaries of social work are borne. It is not the purpose of this article to explain why social work salaries are low, but rather to present evidence which seems to indicate that both actually and relatively they are much too low to augur well for the development of social work as a profession.

The accompanying diagrams tell concisely what has happened to the wage in this occupation during the last thirteen years. They present some of the significant results of a brief study undertaken last summer by the Department of Statistics of the Russell Sage Foundation with the purpose of tracing the course of salaries in social work over the period of rising prices and wages during and just after the World War, and through the subsequent period of adjustment up to the present time. Because the data on which the study is based are not numerous, the results should not be proffered without some reservations. These may best be made by explaining briefly the source and nature of the data themselves.

The study was planned for quick completion. Carefully devised forms were sent out to about two hundred social work organizations in the United States and to a few in Canada with requests for records of actual salaries, classified by position, paid in one month (the same month each year) of each year since 1913, or for so many of these years as might be possible. To supply this infor-

<sup>1</sup> This article originally appeared in the *Survey*, February 15, 1926.

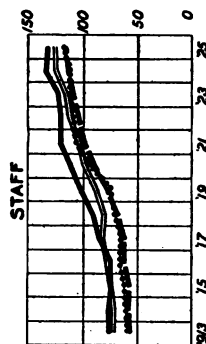
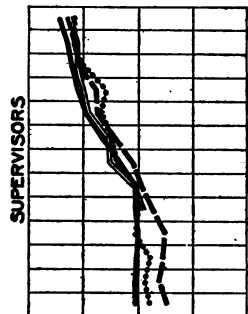
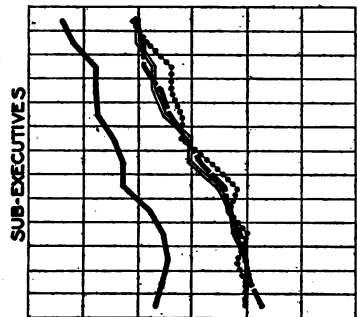
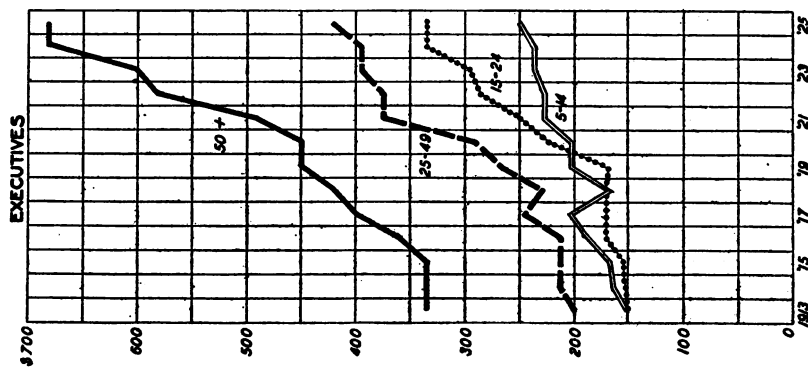


DIAGRAM 1.—THE COURSE OF FULL-TIME MONTHLY SALARIES OF SOCIAL WORKERS  
IN LARGE CITIES FOR FOUR GRADES OF POSITION, CLASSIFIED BY SIZE OF  
ORGANIZATIONS IN 1925.

(The size of organizations is indicated on the curves in the first section of the diagram.)

mation was not a small task, and while the response was good, some of the returns were delayed; the last were received in December. In 1925, 132 organizations and 2,300 persons are represented by the data used.

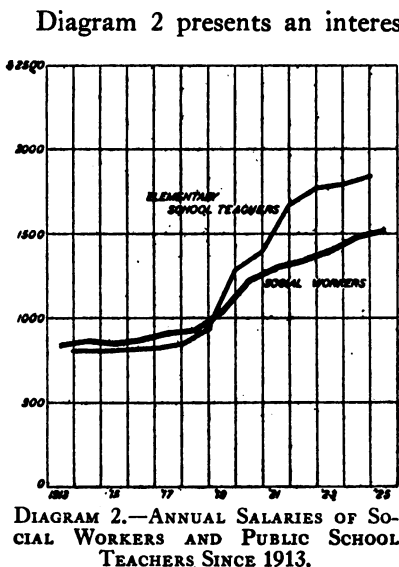
Obviously the results concern organized social work. The larger organizations are represented in greater proportion than the small ones. Family and child welfare, including probation, outweigh other fields. The data, though few, were submitted to intensive classification, and the agreement shown by the results obtained after subdivision affords the best evidence we have that they are representative.

The series of diagrams on the opposite page show for executives, sub-executives, supervisors, and staff, the course of salaries since 1913 in cities of more than 300,000 population. Of 21 such cities in the United States, 18 are represented, and in these cities are 63 of the 132 organizations. One Canadian city is also represented here. By staff is meant the lower rank of professional workers: for example, in family case work, the case worker; in child welfare work, the field worker. The curves trace average, specifically median, salaries in four groups of organizations classified according to size in 1925: those with 5 to 14; 15 to 24; 25 to 49; and 50 or more professional workers, respectively, as indicated in the first section of the diagram. Only full-time salaries are recorded.

Briefly, the facts shown in this diagram are these. Actual salaries have been gradually increasing since 1913. For the two lower grades of position the increase began not much before 1916. The salaries of executives have advanced much more both actually and relatively than have the salaries of other grades of positions. With the exception of the salaries of executives in the larger organizations, social work salaries in 1925 are surprisingly low. Size of organization has a direct effect on the amount of salaries of executives. Sub-executives in the largest organizations are paid distinctly more than sub-executives in smaller organizations. Size of organization affects very little the salaries of supervisors and of the rank and file of the staff.

Diagrams for cities of from 100,000 to 300,000 population, and for smaller cities, give similar salary trends and similar levels of salaries for the lower grades of position. The full series of over-

lapping curves for staff combine to give a single curve beginning in 1913 at a monthly salary of about \$70 and ending in 1925 at \$126. Equivalent annual salaries are \$840 and \$1,517. Perhaps 75 per cent of all social work personnel is "staff." Staff includes recent recruits but it also includes the majority of the experienced social workers. It is with these salaries particularly that we are concerned. They are the representative social work salaries. Moreover, they would very largely determine the average for all social workers.



The typical elementary teacher's wage in 1925 is shown as \$1,844 per year, which in some cases is augmented by a pension allowance, and often by earnings from extra work in summer. The corresponding figure for salaries of senior high school teachers is \$2,434. Contrasted with these salaries is the typical annual social work salary of \$1,517.

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It is unfortunate that there is not, among the numerous price indexes now available, one to measure the cost of living for single professional workers. Lacking this, it is profitable to compare the meager increase in social work salaries since 1913 with the rise in the cost of living for "workingmen's families," to which each of the three available indexes of the cost of living in the United States applies.

This comparison is shown in Diagram 3. Cost of living rose sharply from 1915 to 1920, while social work salaries were moving moderately, and the value of the social work salary dropped to a low point.

With the decline of prices in 1921 and 1922, social work salaries gained in value, but the salary curve catches up with the cost of living only in 1924, and in 1925 is barely above it.

The ratio of salaries to cost of living gives the index of "real" salaries, or of purchasing power, which is also shown in this diagram. This curve recording the purchasing power of the social work salary drops from 1913 to 1919, where it registers a value 32 per cent below the 1913 level. After 1920 the curve rises, but in 1925 it shows social workers only about 3 per cent better off than they were thirteen years ago, notwithstanding the greatly increased requirements for social work, which mean materially more education and training, and probably more experience on the part of the average worker.

Social work is confronted at the moment with a marked shortage of workers. Most social work organizations experience high turnover, some as high as 50 per cent in the course of a year. This field presents the condition, anomalous in the light of the law of supply and demand, of scarcity of workers and low wages. Lack of funds

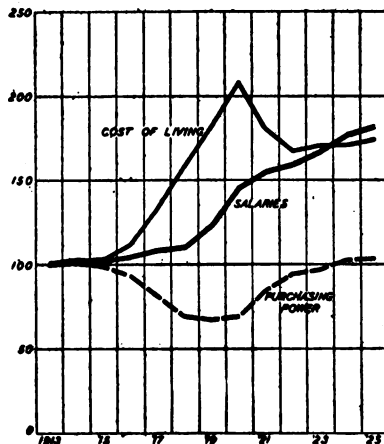


DIAGRAM 3.—SOCIAL WORKERS' SALARIES AND THE COST OF LIVING SINCE 1913. 1913=100.

for social work is the common excuse offered. High turnover and lowered standards must be the cost paid. Ignoring the injustice this imposes on the social worker, it has important bearing on the character of the work. It is open to question how far professional social work can advance on the wage theory carried over from the time when social work was merely benevolence.