

# A Quantitative Analysis of Job Satisfaction and Burnout Among Rural and Urban Social Workers

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## BACKGROUND

Issues concerning burnout and job satisfaction among social workers received considerable attention 25 – 30 years ago, with the literature tapering off since that time. From the empirical studies available, the majority were based on findings from urban Ss with considerably less known about rural care providers. Evidence suggests that problems associated with recruitment and retention of social workers can often be attributed to burnout and job dissatisfaction (Beensterboer & Baum, 1984; LeCroy & Rank, 1987; Maslach, 1976; 1986). Recent research suggests rural social workers show significantly higher levels of burnout and job dissatisfaction compared to norm sample groups (DeStefano et al., 2005a; DeStefano et al., 2005b). Other findings support the notion that differences exist between rural and urban social workers perceptions of workplace challenges and joys (Mackie & Berg, 2005).

Jerrell (1983) found that among rural social service staff, those who worked near where they grew up were more likely to be satisfied than those not sharing this characteristic. Other predictors to rural social service-based job dissatisfaction were low salary and conflict with supervisors (Solly & Hohenshil, 1986). Human service workers were found to be prematurely exiting employment in both rural and urban areas, often because of issues associated with burnout and job satisfaction (Jerrell, 1983; Mor Barak et al, 2001). The lack of social workers due to burnout and job satisfaction are believed to contribute to the lack of adequate staffing, ineffective and inefficient treatment, and the reduced quality of care to consumers (Mor Barak et al, 2001).

While some information about rural social work burnout and job satisfaction exists, little is known about specific differences between groups. Therefore, this study was developed to further investigate these differences and other related questions.

## STUDY PURPOSE, GOALS, AND HYPOTHESES

### Purpose

To examine levels of burnout and job satisfaction among rural and urban social workers.

### Goals

1. Develop a better understanding of workplace burnout and job satisfaction, especially about rural social workers.
2. Compare levels of burnout and job satisfaction between groups.
3. Compare levels of burnout and job satisfaction between specific employment foci.
4. Seek inferences and explanations regarding individual, social, and employment factors related to burnout and job satisfaction.

### Hypotheses

1. There are no differences in levels of burnout between groups.
2. There are no differences in levels of job satisfaction between groups.
3. A combination of individual, educational, and occupational characteristics are associated with job burnout and satisfaction among rural and urban social workers.

## RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach, et al., 1996) and job satisfaction with an inventory adapted from Jerrell (1983). Probability sampling was used to increase scientific rigor. Population sampled were from four predominantly rural western states (AK, MT, SD, WY) and four predominantly rural eastern states (ME, MN, MS, WV). States were selected based on their rural nature. All but one (WV) contained at least one “frontier” county (counties with > 7 persons per square mile). Sampling frame from the eight states included 7,700 members of the NASW. Approximately 3,000 randomly sampled names from NASW list were rented from private vendor. PI reduced number in half by using every other name on the list to select final sample of Ss (N = 1,665). Dillman’s (2000) Tailored Design Method of survey development was used. Two anonymous mailings were conducted. The first included the survey packet, the second was a reminder postcard. Apriori power analysis was used to identify minimum needed number of respondents (381 subjects). Calculated as medium effect size of .15, alpha = .05, power = .95. The response rate was 787 (53%).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Bivariate and Ordinary Least Squares Regression statistics were used to examine:

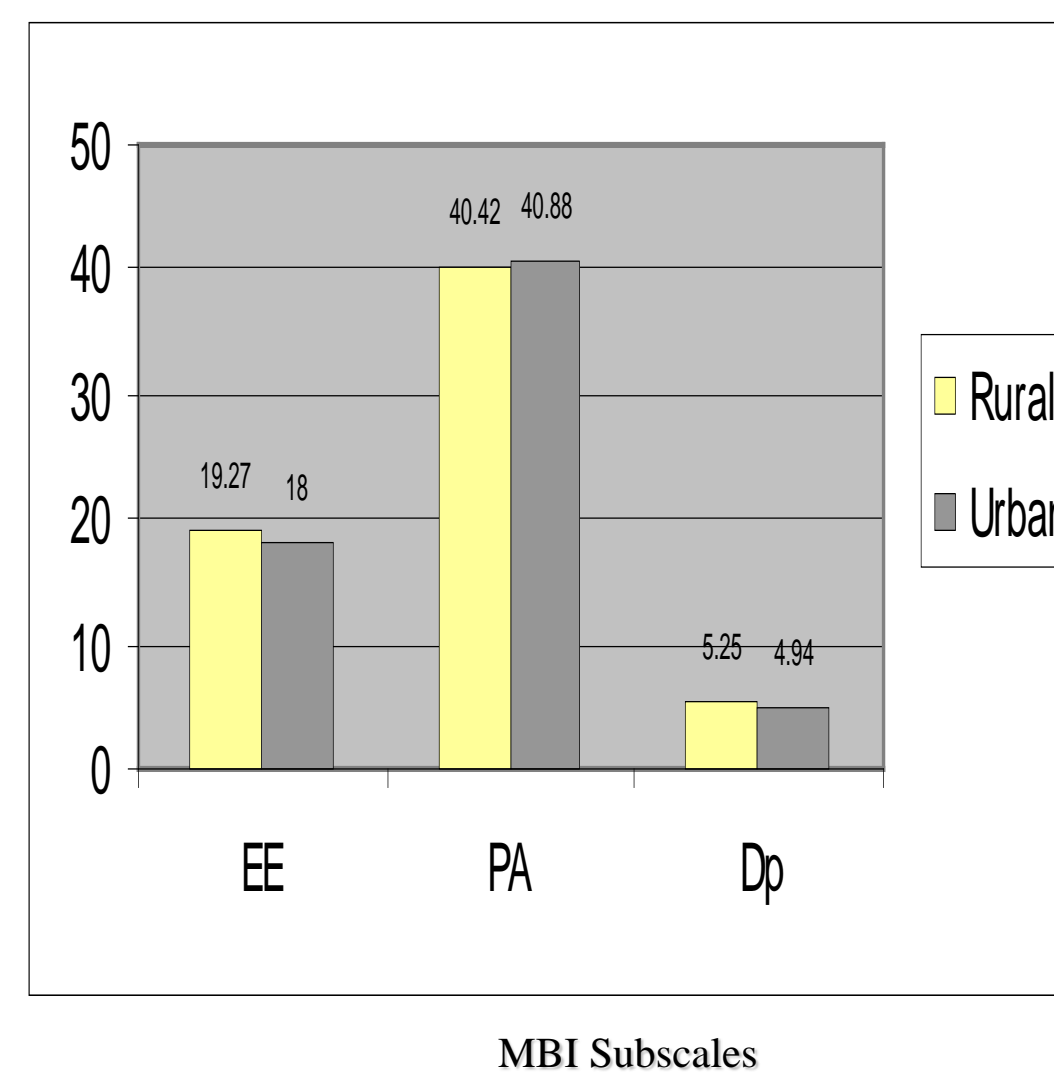
1. Differences between rural and urban social workers on levels of burnout and job satisfaction.
2. Individual, educational, and employment characteristics associated with burnout and job satisfaction.

## RESULTS

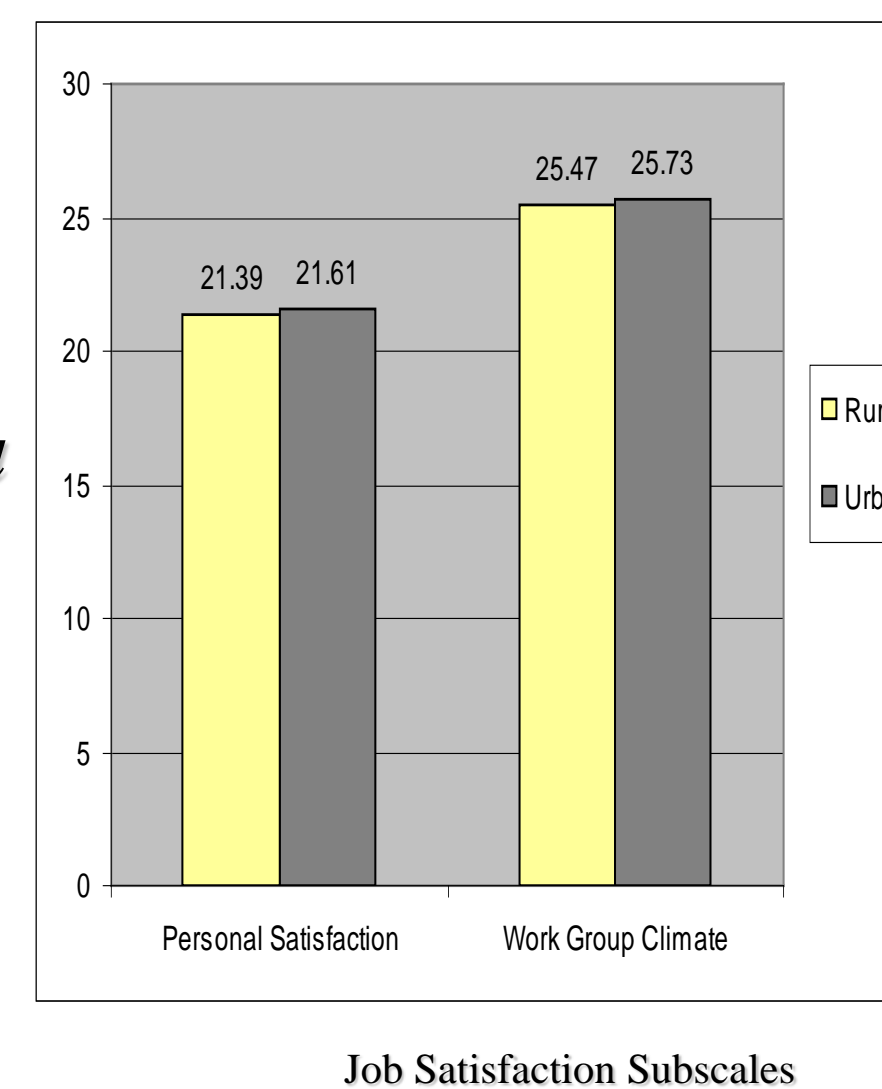
No statistical differences were found between rural and urban social workers’ general levels of burnout or job dissatisfaction (see graphs 1 & 2). On a three-point scale of *high*, *average*, and *low*, both groups show average levels of *EE*, low levels of *PA*, and low levels of *Dp*. However, OLS Regression analyses of eight predictor variables for burnout and job satisfaction revealed significant differences (see tables 3 & 4).

- Among the MBI subscale Emotional Exhaustion (EE), two predictors were found significant:
  1. Length of time as a social service provider, and
  2. Number of hours worked per week.
- Among the MBI subscale Depersonalization (Dp), two predictors were found significant:
  1. Masters degree in practicum location, and
  2. Length of time as a social service provider.
- Among the MBI subscale Personal Achievement (PA), one predictor was found significant:
  1. Length of time as a social worker for rural workers only.
- Among the job satisfaction subscale Personal Job Satisfaction (PJS), two predictors were found significant:
  1. Undergraduate practicum location among urban workers only, and
  2. Length of time as a social worker.
- Among the job satisfaction subscale Work Group Climate (WGC), two predictors were found significant:
  1. Length of time as a social worker among urban workers only, and
  2. Location where worker grew up among rural workers only.

**Graph 1.**  
Mean Levels of MBI Burnout for Rural and Urban Social Workers



**Graph 2.**  
Mean Levels of Job Satisfaction for Rural and Urban Social Workers



**Table 3.** Significant MBI Outcomes

Differences between Rural and Urban Social Workers on MBI subscale *Emotional Exhaustion (EE)*.

Variable	Rural (N = 244)				Urban (N = 204)			
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Length of time as a social worker	.24	.06	-.26	-3.71***	-.27	.08	-.28	-3.33***
Number of hours Per week worked	.26	.05	.06	4.97***	.14	.07	.14	2.09***

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .001

Note: Rural R Square = .195, Urban R Square = .115

Differences between Rural and Urban Social Workers on MBI subscale *Depersonalization (Dp)*.

Variable	Rural (N = 246)				Urban (N = 203)			
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Masters degree practicum location	-.21	.94	-.14	-2.21*	4.09	1.46	.19	2.80*
Lengths of time as a social worker	-.11	.30	-.27	-3.74***	-1.0	.04	-.23	-2.70*

\*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .001

Note: Rural R Square = .127, Urban R Square = .103

Differences between Rural and Urban Social Workers on MBI subscale *Personal Achievement (PA)*.

Variable	Rural (N = 244)				Urban (N = 194)			
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Length of time as social service provider	.09	.04	.20	2.59*	.07	.05	.13	1.52

\*p < .05

Note: Rural R Square = .036, Urban R Square = .060

**Table 4.** Significant Job Satisfaction Outcomes

Differences between Rural and Urban Social Workers on Job Satisfaction subscale *Personal Job Satisfaction (PJS)*.

Variable	Rural (N = 227)				Urban (N = 198)			
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Undergraduate course-work w/ rural content	-.13	.92	-.09	-.140	3.02	1.33	.17	2.26*
Length of time as social service provider	.09	.04	.19	2.58*	.09	.04	.20	2.24*

\*p < .05

Note: Rural R Square = .079, Urban R Square = .097

Differences between Rural and Urban Social Workers on Job Satisfaction subscale *Work Group Climate (WGC)*.

Variable	Rural (N = 220)				Urban (N = 196)			
	B	SE	$\beta$	t	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Location where respondent grew up as a youth	1.63	.78	.14	2.08*	.43	.94	.03	.462
Length of time as social service provider	.08	.04	.13	1.76	1.0	.05	.17	1.98*

\*p < .05

Note: Rural R Square = .067, Urban R Square = .068

## CONCLUSION

Based on these data, burnout among rural and urban social workers was measured at the average level on the subscale *EE* and low on *PA* and *Dp*. While no significant differences were found on general burnout or job satisfaction constructs (graphs 1 & 2), differences were identified among predictors across subscales (tables 3 & 4). The amount of time Ss spent working as social workers, number of hours worked per week, masters degree practicum location, location where Ss grew up, and undergraduate coursework with rural content were all found to predict the likelihood of burnout or job dissatisfaction. However, it is important to note that while statistically significant differences were found, the amount of variance explain by the R square statistics were slight. Suggestions for future research include conducting a longitudinal investigation on burnout and job satisfaction among both groups.