A Comparison of In Person and Online Master's of Social Work Graduates:

Demographic and Educational Background, the Jobs They Take, and the Populations They Serve

Findings From the 2018 Survey of Social Work Graduates

George Washington University Health Workforce Institute

Introduction and Background

The Survey of Social Work Graduates, developed by the George Washington University Health Workforce Institute (GW HWI) in collaboration with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and a committee of social work deans and directors, collects data on the backgrounds of new social workers, the jobs they are taking, the services they are providing, the populations they are serving, and their experience in the job market. In 2018 the GW HWI surveyed graduates from more than 50 master of social work (MSW) programs across the country and received responses from more than 1,400 MSW graduates.

The survey is intended to provide the social work education community, policy makers, and current and prospective social work students with better information on the social work workforce and the job market for social workers. Appendix 1 describes the survey method.

Data from the Annual Survey of Social Work Programs conducted by CSWE indicates that almost 80% of accredited baccalaureate and master's social work programs offer part of their program in an online or hybrid format. Nineteen percent of these programs state their entire program is online at the master's level (CSWE, 2017).   The increase in the number of social work programs (44) offering online education combined with the sophistication and growth of digital technologies has seen distance education or online learning become a staple in higher education. Allen and Seamen (2013), who have been tracking online course enrollment across the United States for over a decade, found that the growth in enrollment for online learning courses is now increasing faster than for on-campus offerings. The cost of online education versus traditional education can vary widely depending on the educational institution, resources provided and whether differences between the programs exist. A number of resources exist to help calculate the costs of online education including the US Department of Education College Scorecard (US Department of Education, 2018).

With the increase of these programs, the number of social work students primarily receiving their social work instruction online has been growing. This report compares the demographic and educational backgrounds, jobs taken, populations served, and job search experience of MSWs who primarily received their social work instruction in person compared to those whose instruction was primarily received online.

Although a majority of MSW respondents to the 2018 Survey of Social Work Graduates (71%) received 90% or more of their social work education in person, 17% received 90% or more of their social work education online, and 12% received an education that blended in-person and online instruction. A comparison reveals interesting and important differences between MSWs who received their education predominantly in person versus online. This brief presents some of the key differences.[1]

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[1]The 2018 survey did not gather detailed information about those who responded that their education was a blend of in-person and online. For purposes of this analysis, those who received blended instruction are excluded.

Summary of Findings

MSW graduates who had received almost all their instruction online were older, more experienced, more likely to practice in small towns or rural areas, and more likely to be African-American than MSW graduates who received most of their education in person. The online graduates were also more likely than in-person graduates to be working for government, with children, with individuals on Medicaid and with mental health and/or substance abuse issues, and to be returning to organizations they had previously worked for. Online MSW programs appear to offer access to social work education to individuals who might not otherwise have it.

Key Findings

Demographic and Educational Background of MSW Graduates

- Online MSWs were less likely to be male than in person MSWs (5% vs. 10%; $p < 0.10$); see Figure 2.
- Graduates who had received primarily online educational instruction were significantly older than graduates who had primarily received in-person educational instruction: 58% of online graduates were older than age 30 compared to 25% of in-person graduates ($p < 0.01$); see Figure 3.
- Online MSWs were more likely to be African-American than in-person MSWs (28% vs. 23%) but less likely to be Hispanic (10% vs. 14%); see Figure 4. However, these differences are not statistically significant.
- Online MSWs were far more likely to have worked for 6 or more years before enrolling in a social work program (54% vs. 23%; $p < 0.01$); see Figure 5.
- Online MSWs were also less likely to have been full-time students throughout their social work education (67% vs. 84%; $p < 0.01$); see Figure 6.

Employment Outcomes and Populations Served

- Online MSWs were more likely to go to work in government positions than in-person MSWs (23% vs. 17%). On the other hand, in-person MSWs were more likely to go into positions in private, not-for-profit organizations (32% vs. 28%) and positions in hospitals (10% vs. 6%). However, differences in principal position by program delivery are not statistically significant; see Figure 9.
- Online MSWs were more likely to be employed after graduation in rural or smaller communities (57% vs. 30%; the overall difference in practice demography is statistically significant at the 1% level); see Figure 10.
- Online MSWs were more likely to enter positions focused on children and families (44% vs. 33%) and individuals with substance abuse issues (9% vs. 6%), whereas in-person

MSWs were more likely to be focused on people receiving health care (16% vs. 9%). Differences in groups served are not statistically significant by program delivery; see Figure 11.

- Online graduates were slightly more likely to be working with children and adolescents (36% of online graduates indicate that more than 50% of their clients are between than ages of 11 and 17 relative to 25% of in-person graduates; $p < 0.10$). On the other hand, in-person graduates were significantly more likely to report that over 50% of their clients are older than 65 years (27% vs. 14%, $p < 0.05$); see Figure 13.
- Online MSWs were more likely than in-person graduates to report that a majority of their clients have substance abuse issues (45% vs. 33%, $p < 0.10$) and/or mental health issues (70% vs. 63%, not statistically significant); see Figure 14.
- Online MSWs were more likely to report that more than 50% of their clients need assistance with activities of daily living (30% vs. 27%) than in-person MSWs. However, this difference is not statistically significant; see Figure 14.
- Online graduates were also more likely to report that a majority of their clients are on Medicaid (76% vs. 69%; not statistically significant) and living below poverty level (78% vs. 67%, $p < 0.05$); see Figure 14.
- Online MSWs reported slightly lower average and median incomes than in-person MSWs: 61% of the online graduates reported earning an annual income of $40,000 or more compared to 74% of the in-person MSWs ($p < 0.10$); see Figure 16.

Job Search Experience

- Compared to in person MSWs, online MSWs were far more likely to return to an organization they had previously worked for after completing their social work education (46% vs. 20%, $p < 0.01$); see Figure 17.
- Recent MSW graduates with primarily online instruction who were looking for a position applied to fewer jobs, on average, relative to in-person graduates (this difference is not statistically significant; see Figure 20). Online MSWs also had a less difficult time finding a job they were satisfied with than in-person graduates (52% vs. 43%; $p < 0.10$); see Figure 21. This may be related to the higher percentage of online graduates who returned to organizations for which they previously had worked.
- For those having a difficult time, online MSWs were more likely to cite an overall lack of jobs (14% vs. 8%) as the single most important reason for their difficulty. However, inadequate compensation was the reason most often cited by those in either instruction type (Figure 22).

As shown in Figure 24, there was virtually no difference in terms of likelihood of recommending a social work degree to others (in-person, 90.3% vs. online, 89.8%).

Figure 1: MSW Graduates by Program Delivery Type: In Person, Online, and Blended Methods
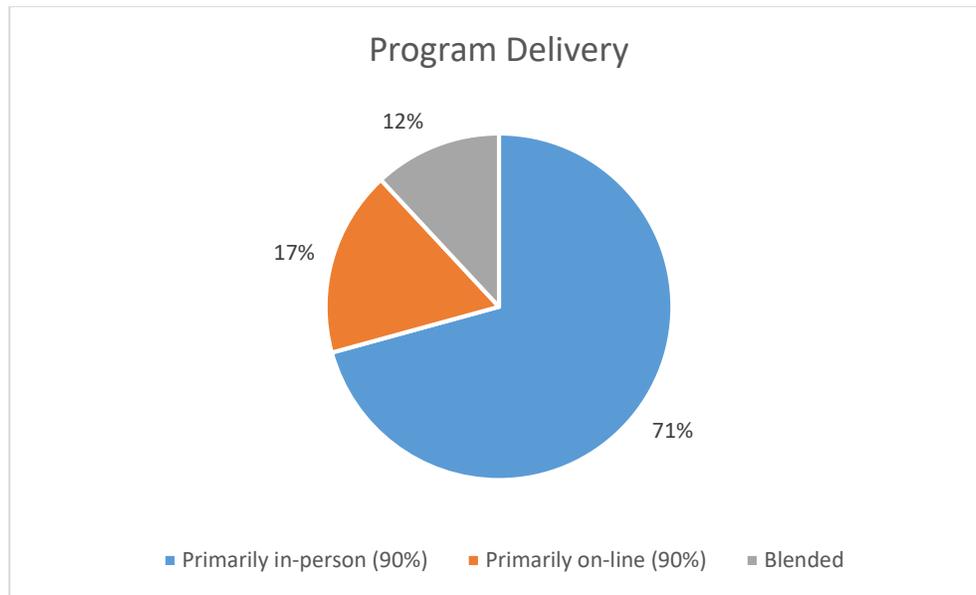

Note: The specific question asked was, "Outside of your field placements, how was your program mainly taught?" *Primarily online* is defined as 90% or more of instruction online; *primarily in person* is defined as 90% or more in person; all others are defined as *blended*.

Demographic and Educational Backgrounds of MSW Graduates

Graduates receiving primarily online educational instruction were significantly older than graduates who had received primarily in-person educational instruction (58% of online graduates were older than 30 compared to 25% of in-person graduates). Online MSWs were less likely to be male (5% vs. 10% in-person), more likely to be African-American (28% vs. 23% in-person), and far more likely to have been working for 6 or more years (54% vs. 23% in-person). Online MSWs were also less likely to have been enrolled as full-time students throughout their social work education (67%) relative to in-person MSWs (84%). Online MSWs were more likely to return to an organization for employment after their education than in-person MSWs (46% vs. 20%). Online MSWs were also more likely to be employed after graduation in rural communities or smaller communities (57% vs. 30%).

Figure 2: Male MSWs by Program Delivery Type (%)

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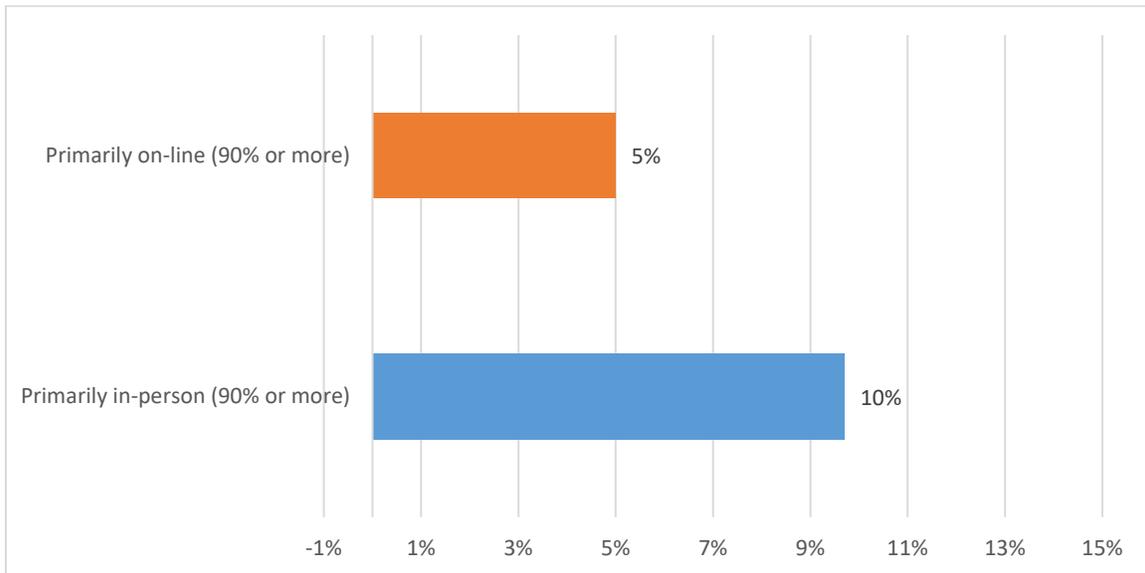
Figure 3: MSW Graduates by Age and Program Delivery Type (%)
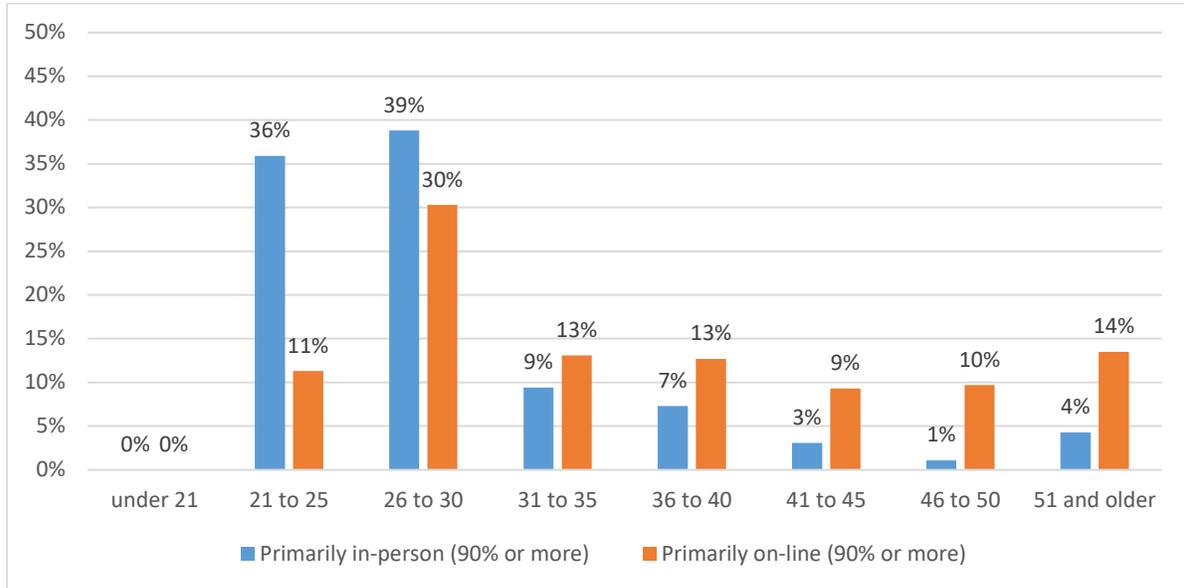
Figure 4: MSW Graduates by Racial/Ethnic Group and Program Delivery Type (%)
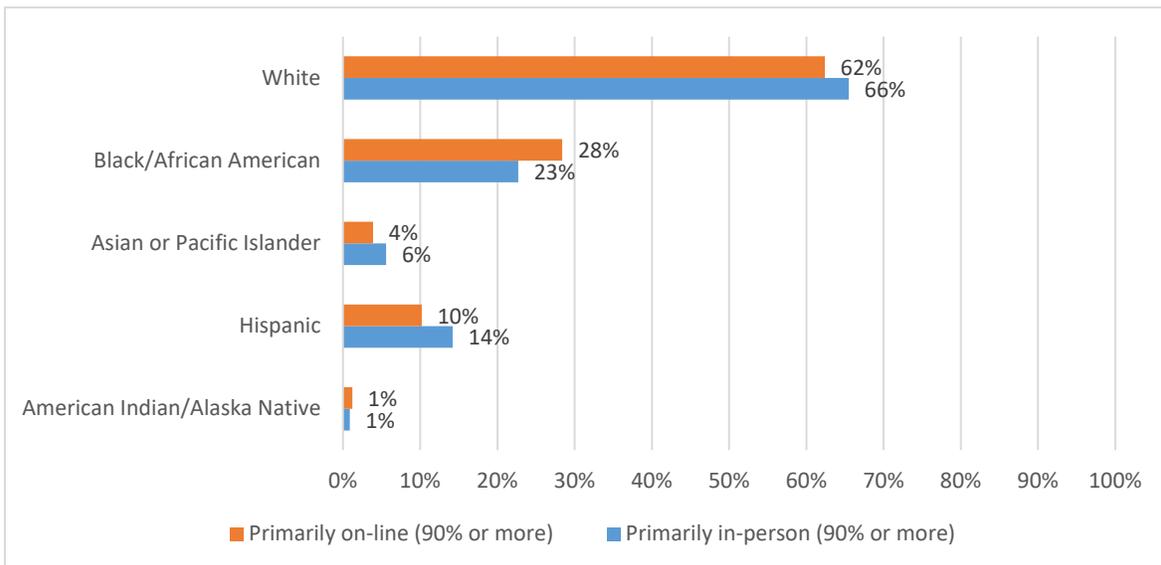
Note: Categories do not sum to 100% because race and ethnicity questions were asked separately.

Figure 5: MSW Graduates by Work Experience and Program Delivery Type (%)
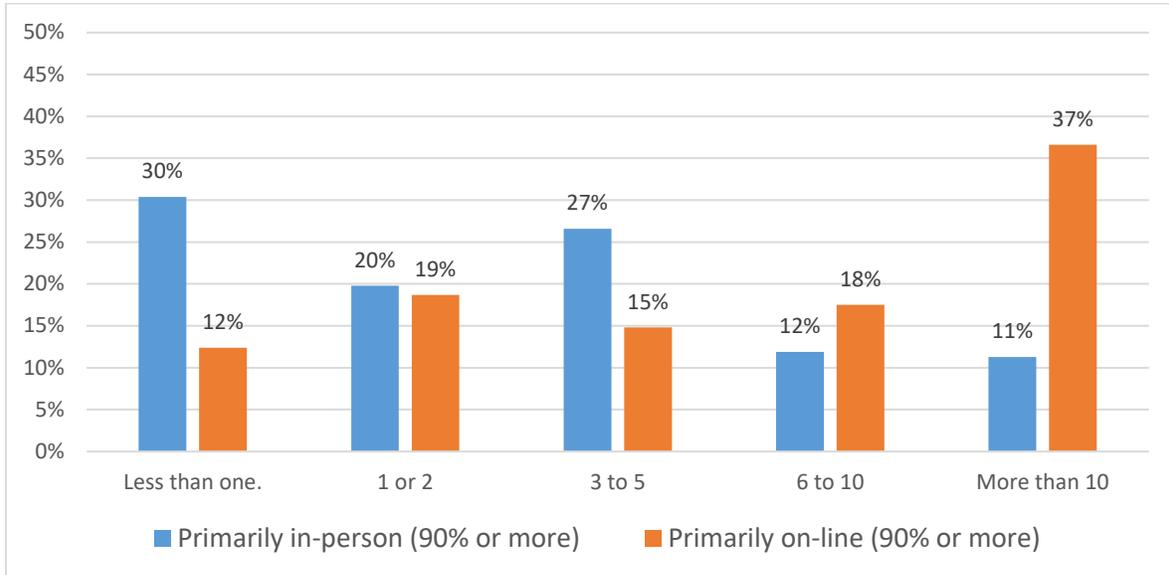
Note: Specific question asked was, "How many years were you working before entering the social work education program you recently graduated from?"

Figure 6: Online and In Person MSW Graduates Enrolled as Full-Time Students (%)
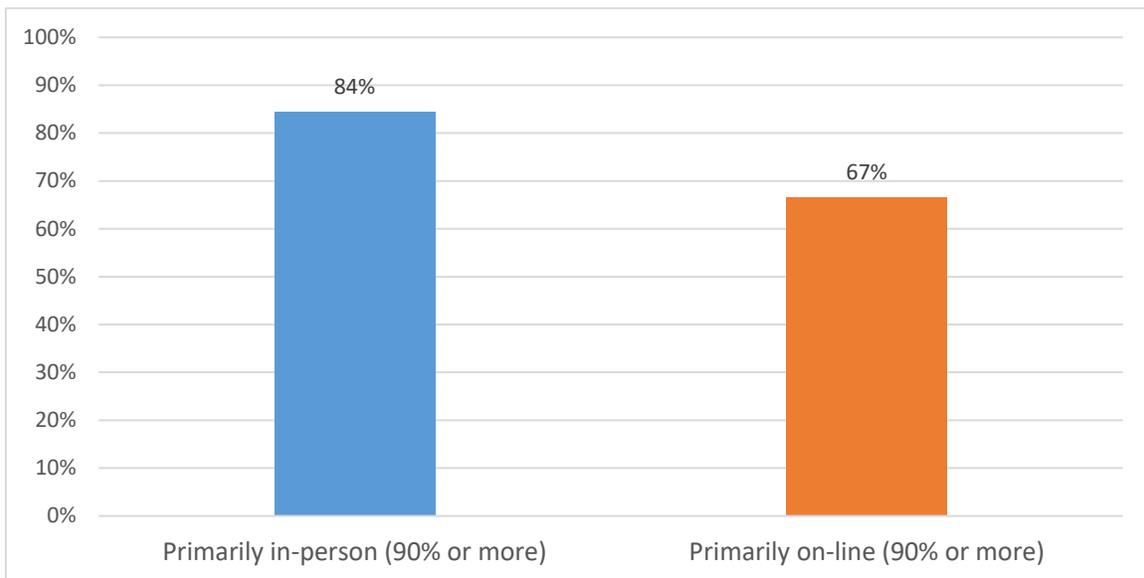
Note: Specific question asked was, "Were you enrolled as a full-time student throughout your program?"

Figure 7: General Focus of Education Program for Online and In Person MSW Graduates (%)
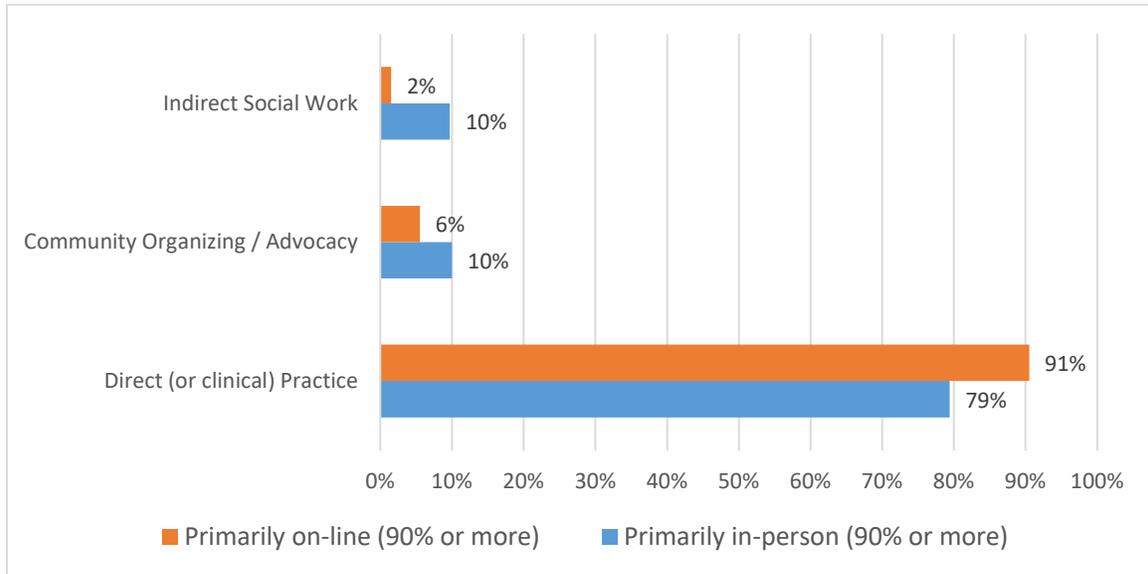
Note: Specific question asked was, "Which of the following best describe the general practice focus of your program of study?" Excludes "None of the above" category; categories do no sum to 100%.

Figure 8: Declared Program Concentrations for Online and In Person MSW Graduates (%)
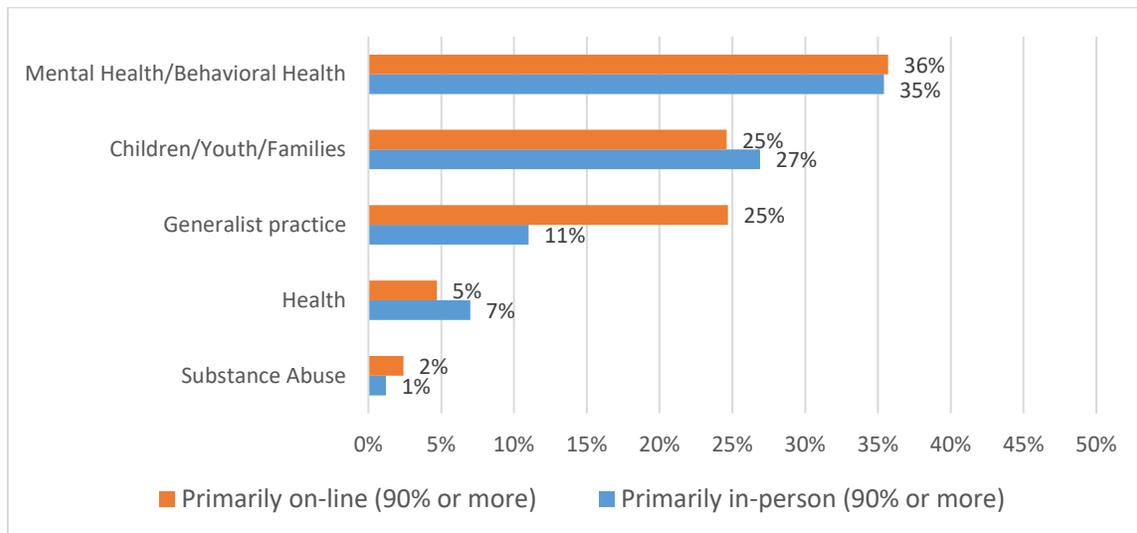
Note: Specific question asked was, "Which of the following best describes your declared concentration in this program?" Excludes "Aging", "Military", "Immigrant", "International", "Criminal Justice" and "Other" categories.

Employment Outcomes and Populations Served

Recent MSW graduates whose programs had used primarily online instruction were more likely to go to work in government positions than MSWs with primarily in-person instruction (23% vs. 17%). On the other hand, in-person MSWs were more likely to go into positions in private, not-for-profit organizations (32% vs. 28%) and positions in hospitals (10% vs. 6%). Online MSWs were more likely to enter positions focused on children and families (44% vs. 33%) and individuals with substance abuse issues (9% vs. 6%), whereas in-person MSWs were more likely to be focused on people receiving health care (16% vs. 9%). Online graduates were slightly more likely to be working with children and adolescents (36% of online graduates indicate that more than 50% of their clients are between than ages of 11 and 17 relative to 25% in-person graduates). In-person MSWs were more likely to say that over 50% of their clients were older than 65 years (27% vs. 14%).

Online MSWs were more likely to report that a majority of the patients they work with have substance abuse issues (45% vs. 33%) or mental health issues (70% vs. 63%) than in-person MSWs. Online MSWs were more likely to report that their clients need assistance with activities of daily living (30% vs. 27% in-person). Online MSWs also had a greater share of clients on Medicaid (76% vs. 69% in-person) and living below poverty level (78% vs. 67% in-person). Overall, in-person MSWs tended to report higher income than online graduates: 74% of the in-person graduates reported earning $40,000 or more in annual income compared to 61% of the online MSWs.

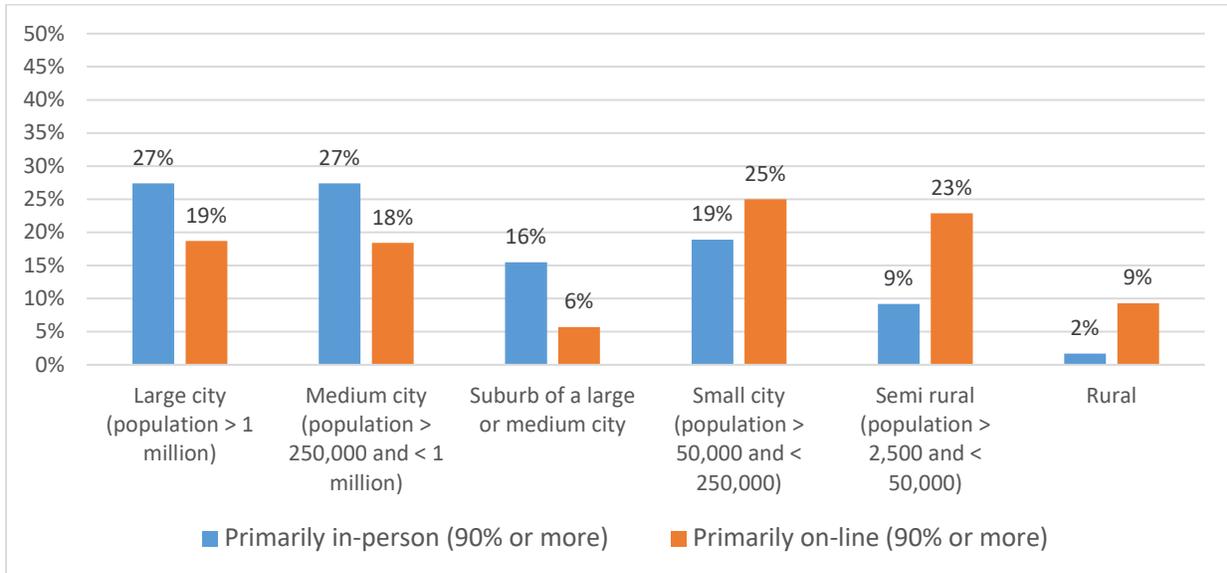Figure 9: Employers of MSW Graduates by Program Delivery Type (%)
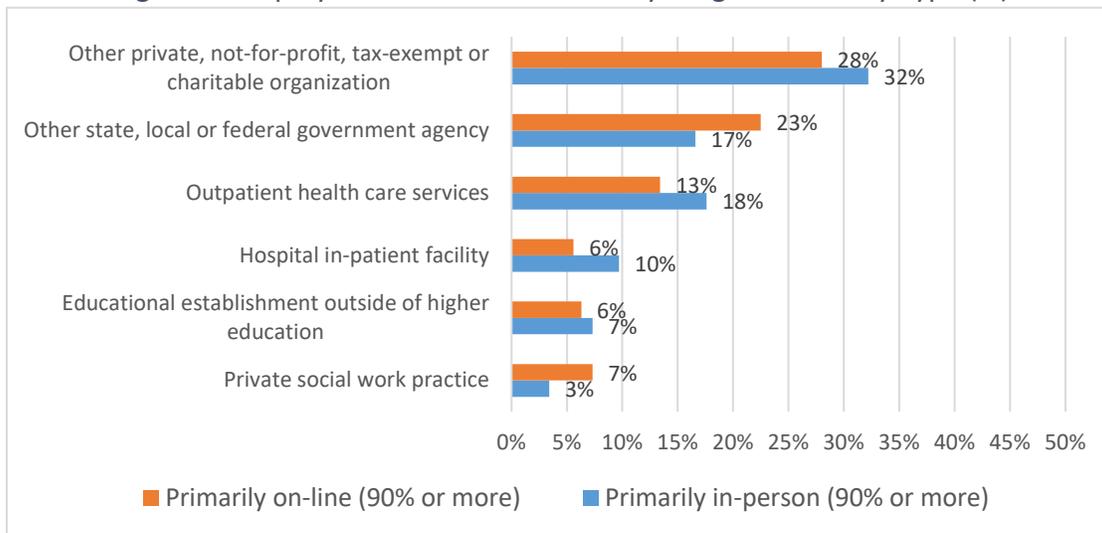
Note: Specific question asked was, "In your principal position, who are you (or will be) working for? Includes only MSWs who are actively working in direct services as social workers; includes only top six categories; does not add to 100%.

Figure 10: Demographics of Location of MSWs' Employment by Program Delivery Type (%)

Note: Specific question asked was, "Which best describes the demographics of the principal area in which you are/will be practicing?" Includes only MSWs who are actively working in direct services as social workers.

Figure 11: Main Populations Served by MSW Graduates by Program Delivery Type (%)
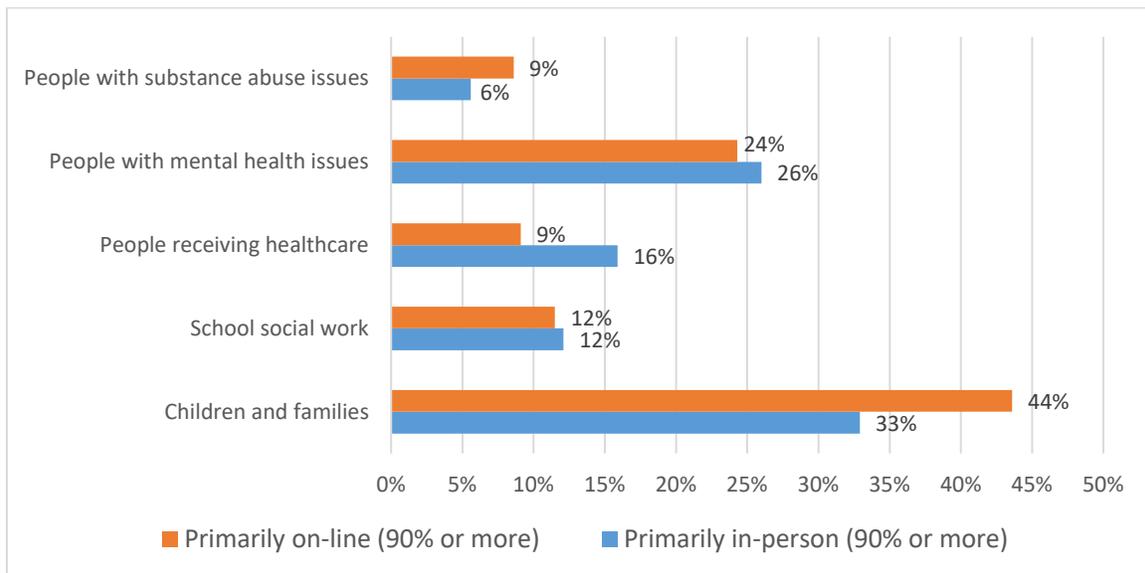
Note: The specific question asks, "Which of the following do you consider to be the main focus of work in your principal position?" Includes only MSWs who are actively working in direct services as social workers. Excludes "other" category; does not sum to 100%.
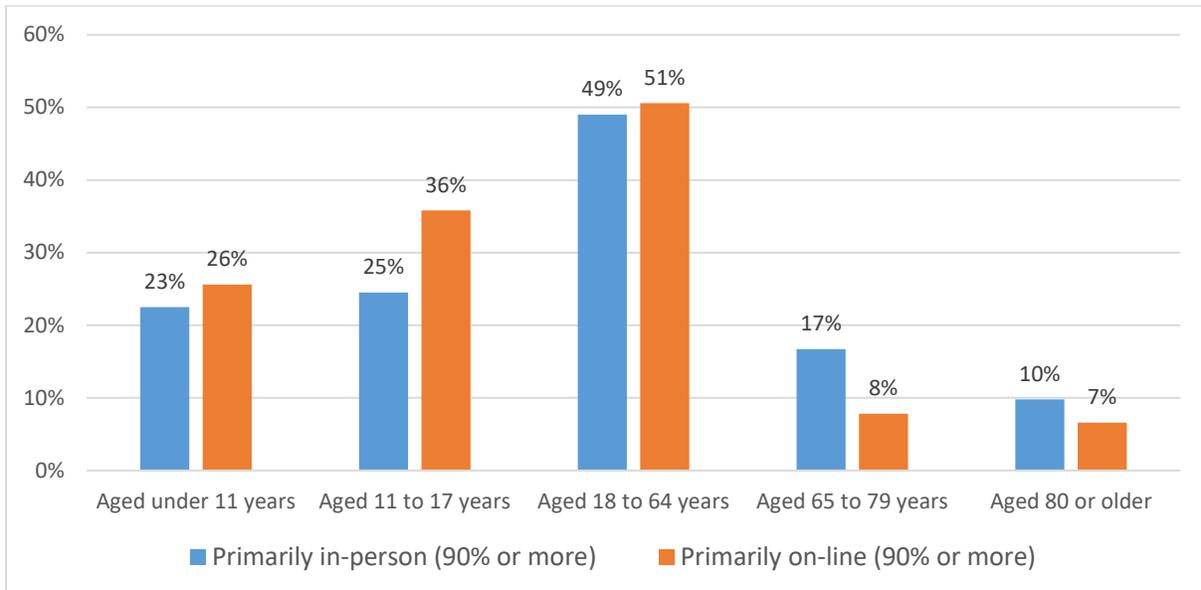
Figure 12: Online and In Person Respondents Providing Mental Health/Behavioral Health Services to More than 50% of their Clientele (%)
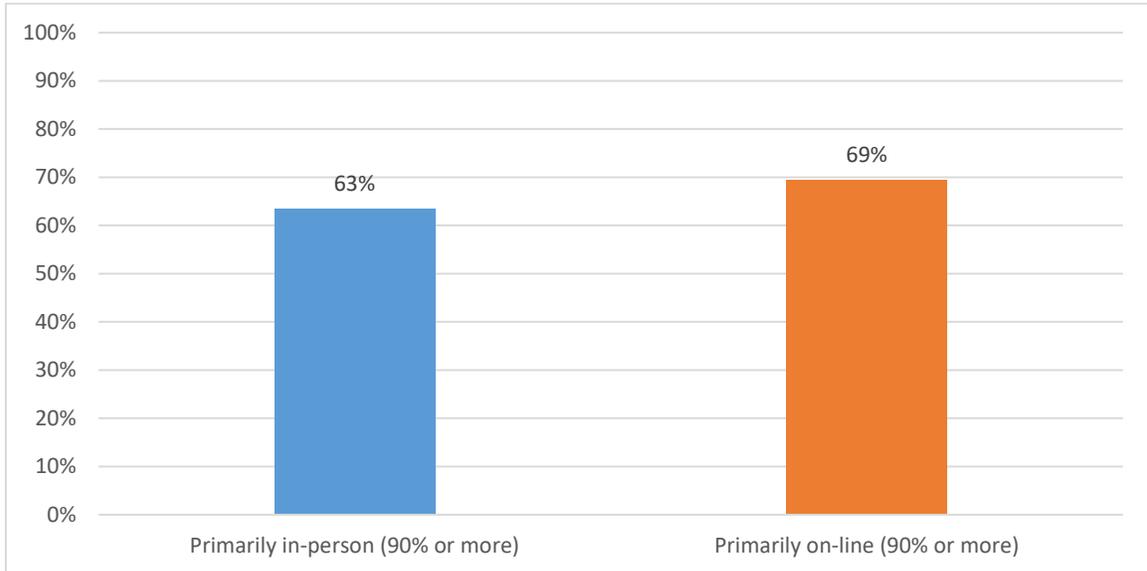
Note: Includes only MSWs who are actively working in direct services as social workers.

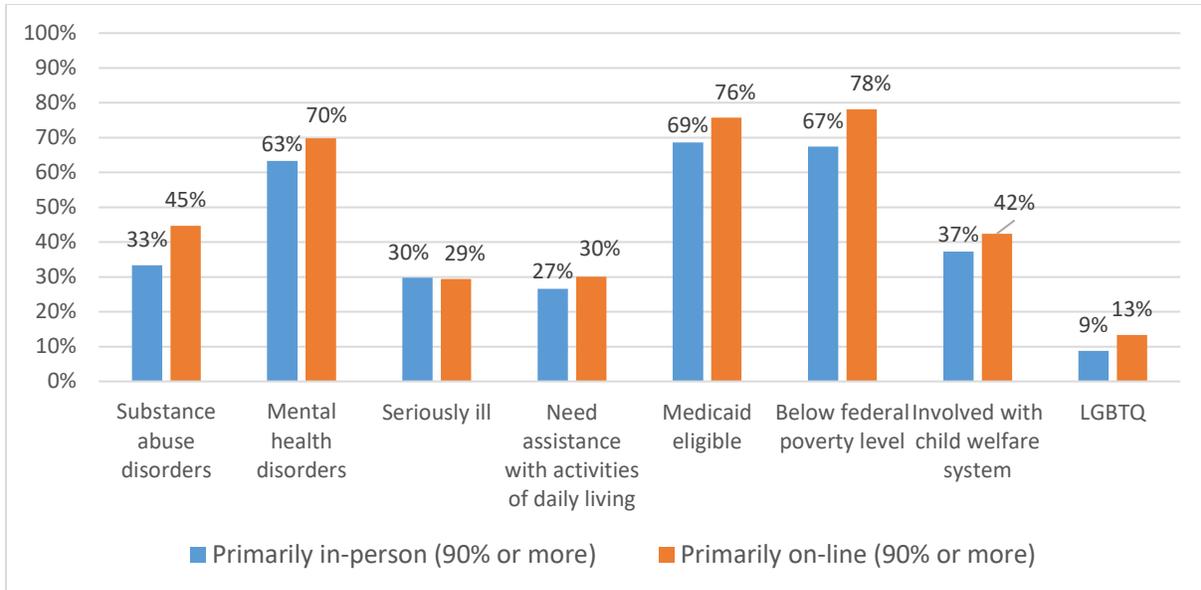Figure 13: Online and In Person MSW Respondents Serving Various Age Groups (%)

Note: Each clientele question was asked independently. Survey participants may have responded to more than one age category; thus, categories do not add to 100%. Note: Includes only MSWs who are actively working in direct services as social workers.

Figure 14: Online and In-Person MSW Respondents Serving Various Needs Categories (%)


Note: Each clientele question was asked independently. Survey participants may have responded to more than one needs category; thus, categories do not add to 100%. Note: Includes only MSWs who are actively working in direct services as social workers.

Figure 15: Average Expected Income among MSWs Employed Full-Time ($)
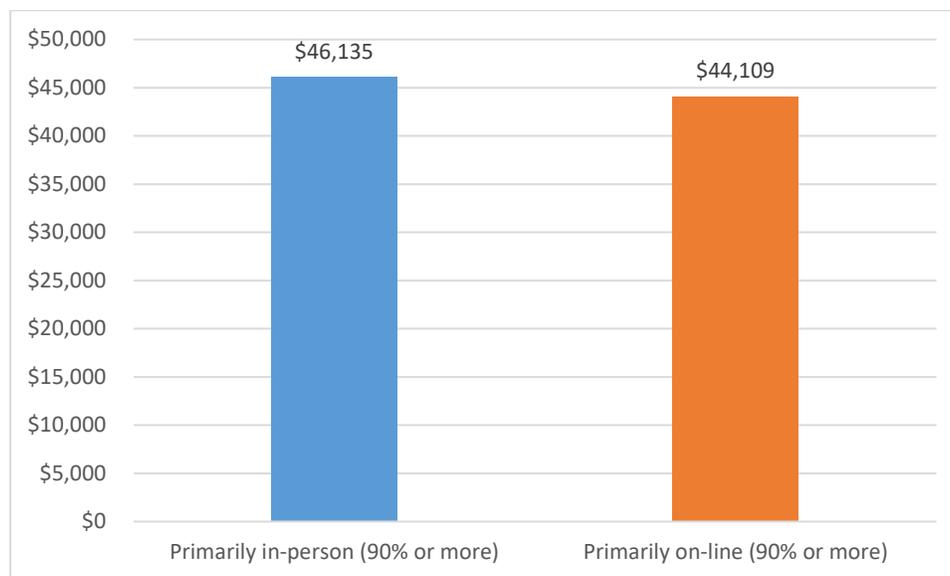
Note: Includes only MSW graduates working full-time and those who are actively working in direct services as social workers.

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Figure 16: Median Expected Income among MSWs Employed Full-Time (%)
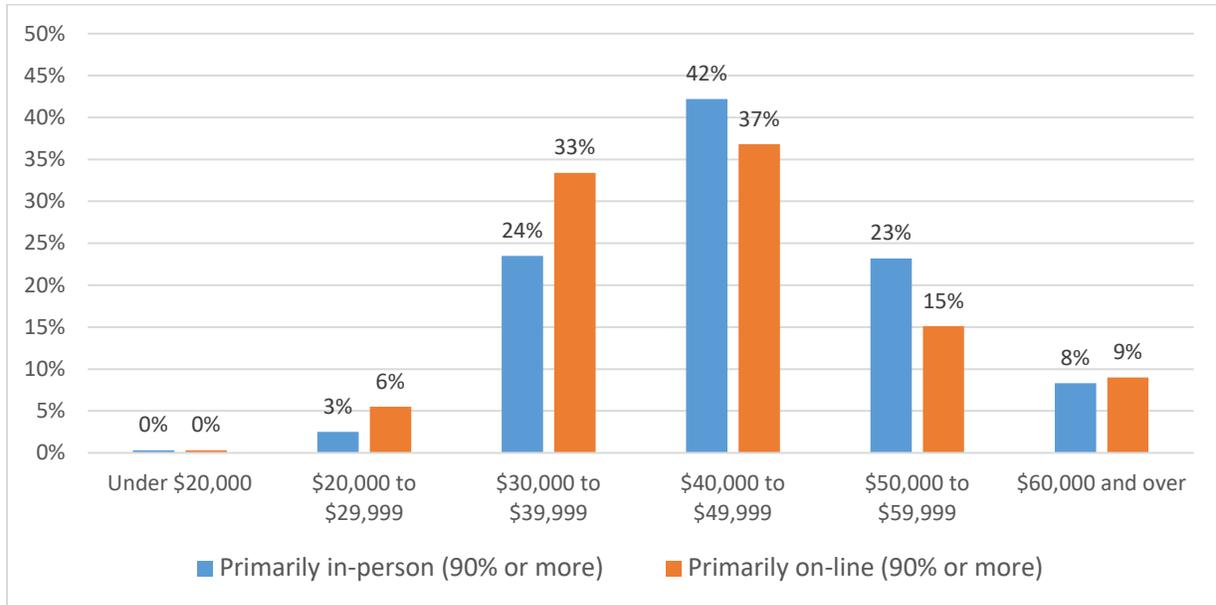
Note: Includes only MSW graduates working full-time and those who are actively working in direct services as social workers.

Job Search Experience

Recent in-person graduates who were looking for a position after graduation applied to more jobs, on average, and had a more difficult time finding a position they were satisfied with compared to online graduates (52% vs. 43%). For those having a difficult time, online MSWs were more likely to cite an overall lack of jobs (14% vs. 8% in-person) and in-person MSWs were more likely to cite a shortage of desired settings (21% vs. 8% online) as primary reasons. However, inadequate compensation was the most common reason provided by both online and in-person MSWs.   There was little difference in terms of likelihood of recommending a social work degree to others.

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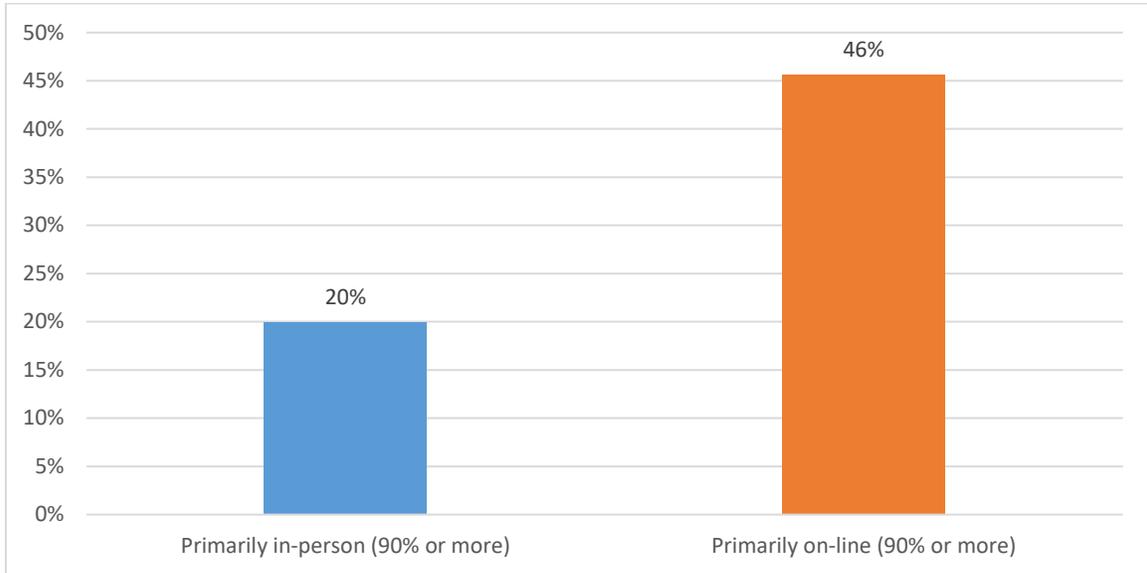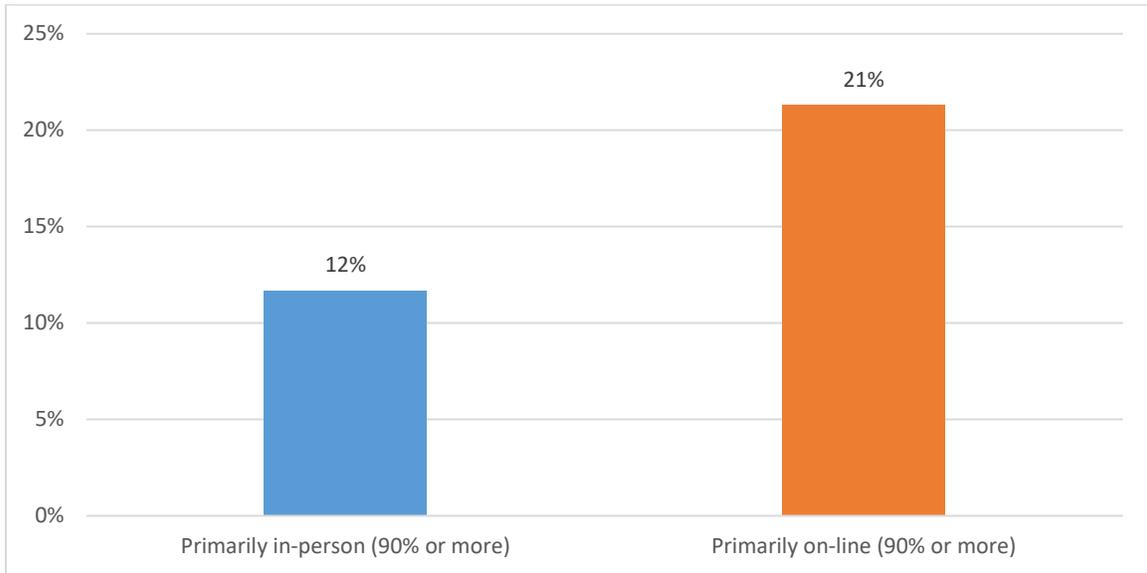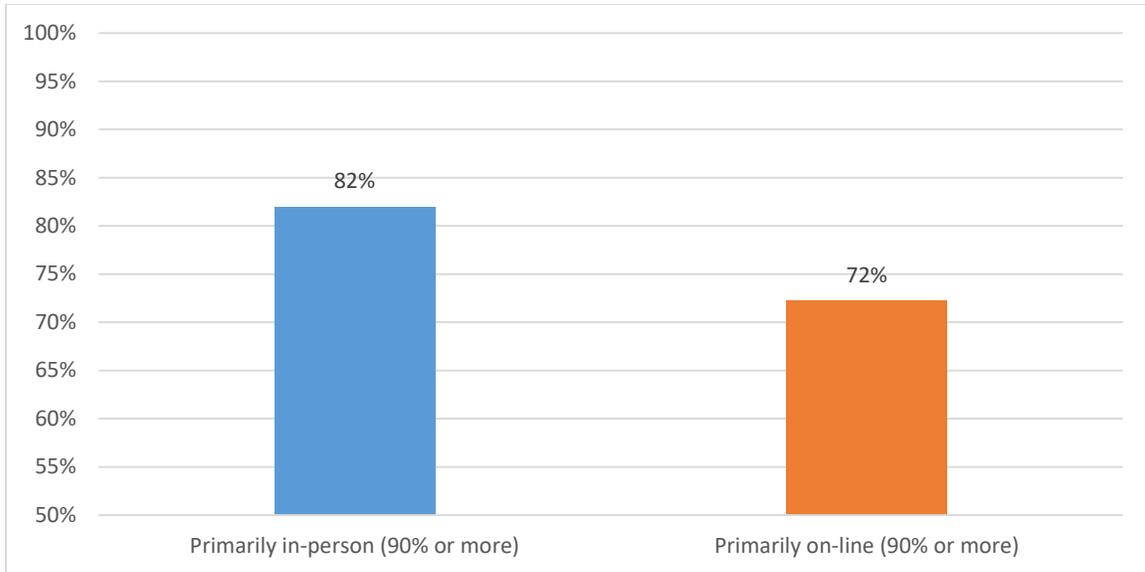Figure 17: MSWs Returning to a Prior Employer after Graduating, by Program Delivery Type (%)

Figure 181: MSW Graduates Who Did <u>NOT</u> Search for Employment after Graduating in 2018, by Program Delivery Type (%)

Figure 19: Respondents Offered a Social-Work Related Position, by Program Delivery Type (%)

Note: Specific question asked was, "Have you been (or were you) offered a social work-related position?" Percentage offered a position include those who said "Yes, and I accepted the offer" and "Yes, but I am still searching."

Figure 20: Respondents Who Applied to More than 10 Social-Work Related Jobs, by Program Delivery Type (%)
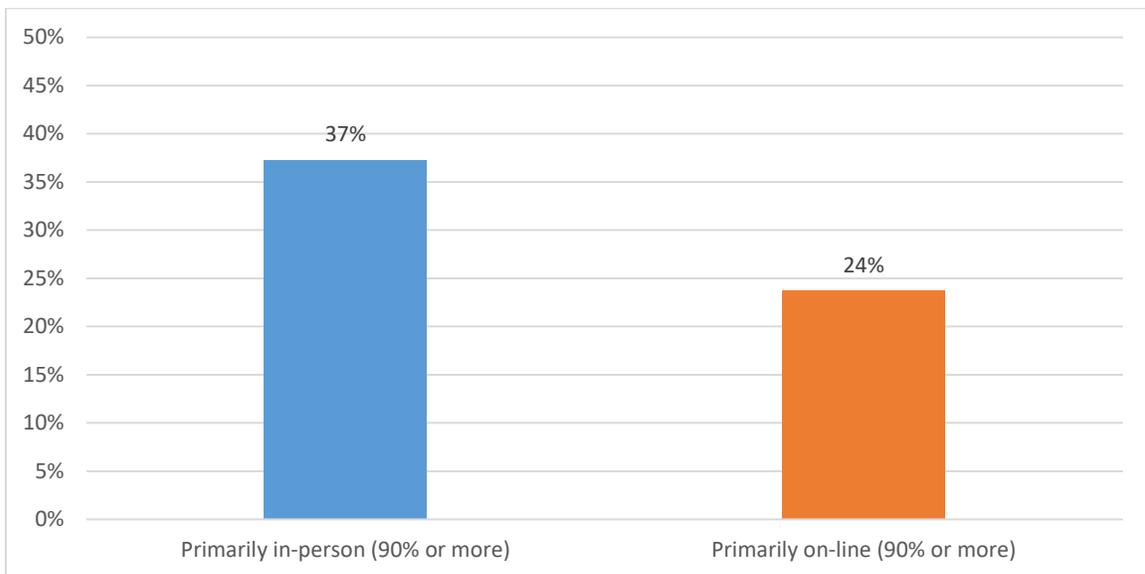
Figure 21: MSW Respondents Who Reported Difficulty Finding a Satisfactory Social Work Position, by Program Delivery Type (%)
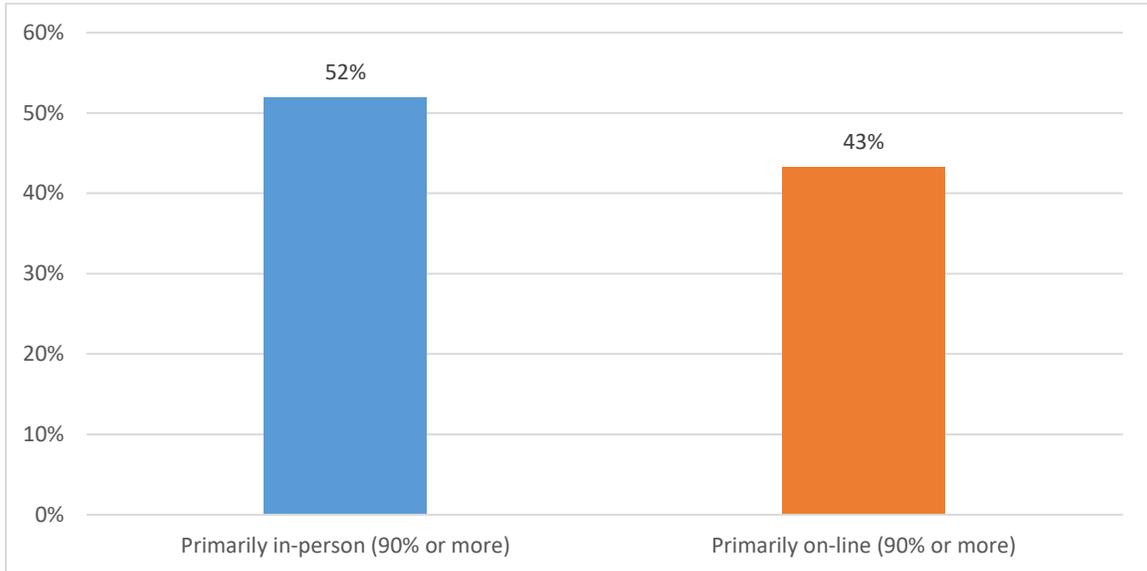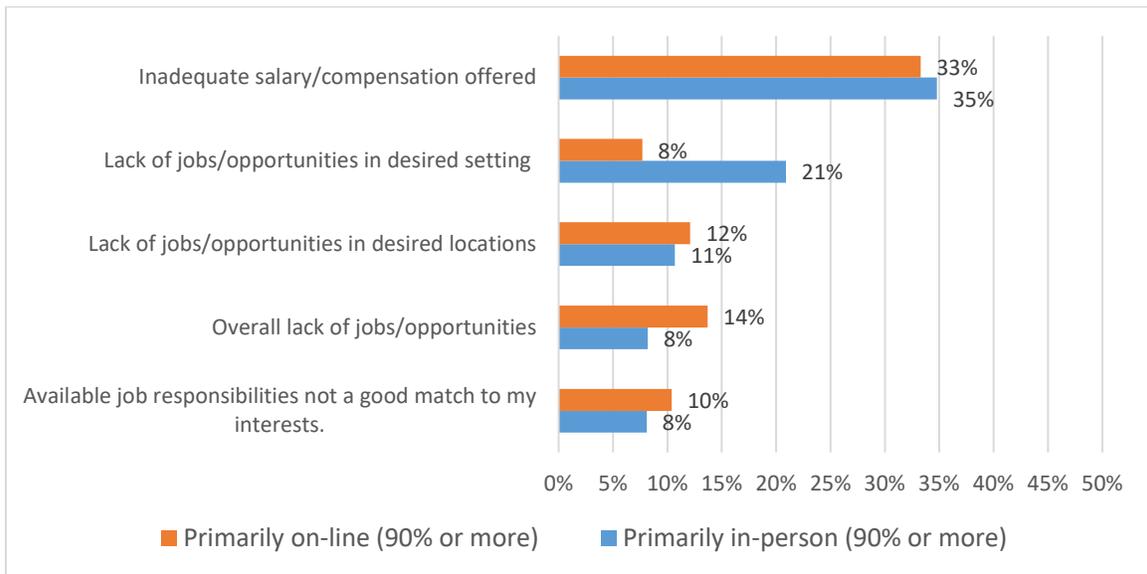

Figure 22: Top 5 Reasons Reported for Difficulty in Finding a Job, by Program Delivery Type (%)

Note: Specific question asked was, "What would you say were the main reasons for difficulty finding a position you were satisfied with?"; "What would you say is the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT reason?"

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Figure 23: Respondents Reporting Change of Plans Due to Limited Social Work Job Opportunities, by Program Delivery Type (%)
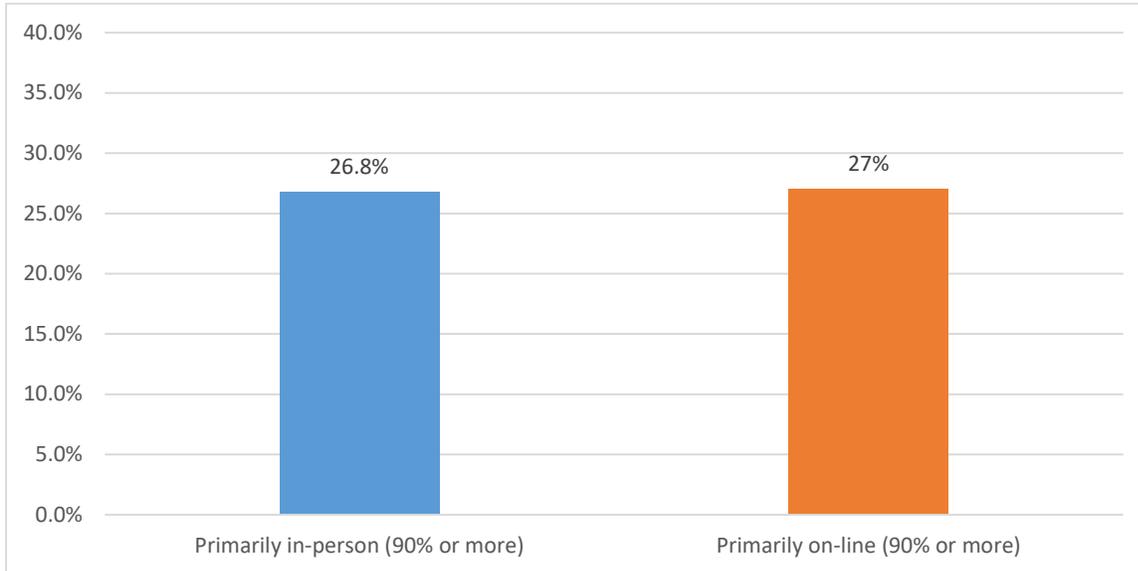

Figure 24: Respondents Who Would Recommend a Social Work Degree to Others, by Program Delivery Type (%)
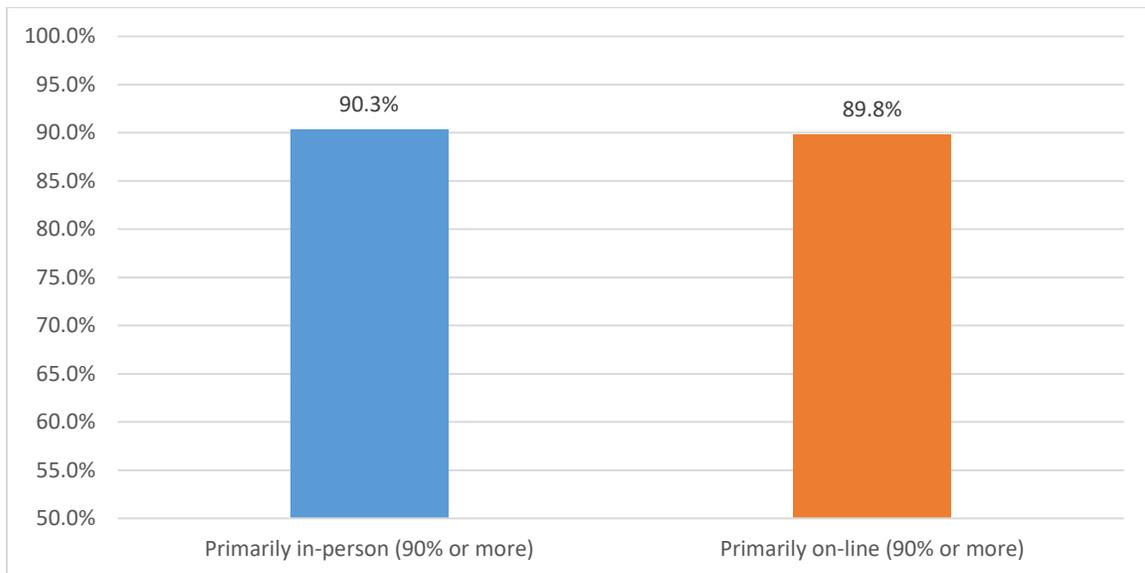
Figure 25: Percentage of Respondents Who Plan to Continue Their Social Work Education, by Program Delivery Type
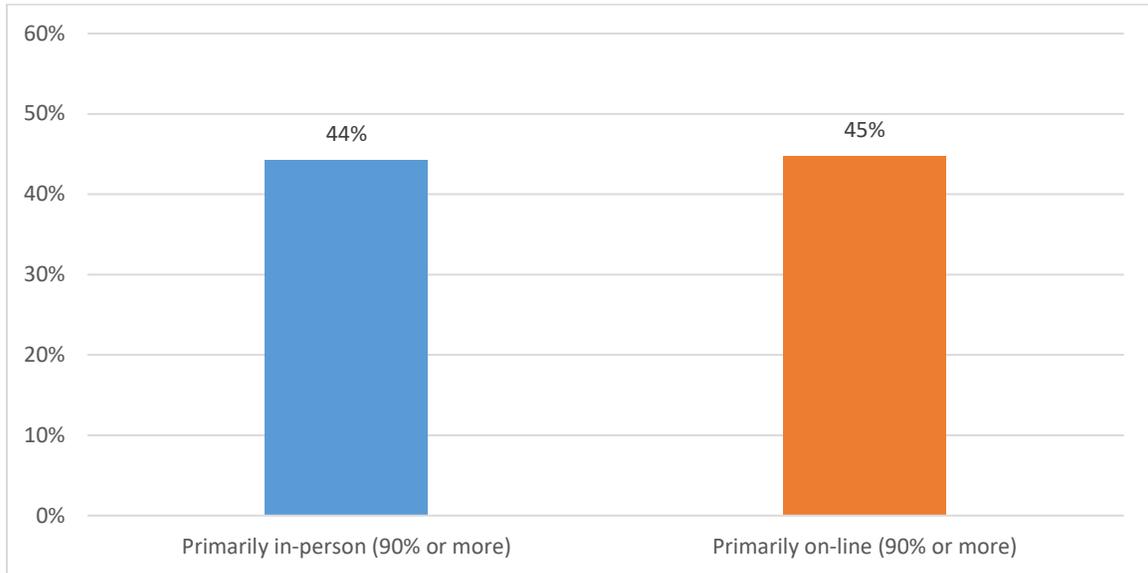
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Appendix: Survey and Weighting Method

Overall Survey Method

The target group for the survey includes students graduating with a social work degree in 2018, including bachelor of social work (BSW) and equivalent degrees, such as bachelor of arts in social work (BASW), and master of social work (MSW) and equivalent degrees, including master of social service (MSS), master of science in social administration (MSSA), or master of science in social work (MSSW). The survey was conducted in early fall to allow time for spring graduates to have searched for employment. It captured information from students graduating between January and August 2018. All accredited social work programs in the United States were invited to participate in the survey.

When fielding its surveys, GW HWI uses REDCap survey software, which can establish a unique survey link for each participant via e-mail to prevent duplicate responses and enable the sending of survey reminders only to those who have not yet responded. A few schools provided GW HWI with e-mail addresses from their records. However, student e-mail addresses generally were obtained when schools forwarded invitations with a REDCap public Web link to their students in May, June, and July 2018. This enabled interested students to sign up for the survey in advance and provide e-mail addresses that would still be valid when the survey went live in late August. To maximize the number of responses, a $20 incentive was offered for the first 1,100 MSWs and 400 BSWs to complete the survey. Lists of survey registrants were sent to the schools from which they graduated for confirmation of graduation status. REDCap was then used to conduct the survey via unique Web links e-mailed to each of almost 2,500 confirmed registrants. The survey launched at the end of August 2018 and closed after 4 weeks with 1,780 responses. Data cleaning and exclusion of individuals who did not enter degree program information reduced the final figure to 1,716 valid responses for a response rate of 68.9%. This figure includes 1,377 valid responses from MSWs.

Application of Survey Weights

Generally, poststratification weights are constructed by calculating the ratio of the population proportion of the weighting variable and the sample proportion of the weighting variable. The sample proportion comes from our 2018 Survey of Social Work Graduates, and the population proportion is derived from Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) data on 2018 social work graduates. Our survey had multiple characteristics that we wanted to balance with the overall population. Therefore, we constructed weights using four variables:

1. **Auspice**: the institutional auspice or sponsorship (e.g., private school versus public school) of the college or university containing the respondent's social work program

2. **Region**: the region where the social work program presides (e.g., Mid-Atlantic region, West Coast region)
3. **Race**: respondent's race (e.g., Black, White, Asian)
4. **Ethnicity**: specifically, Hispanic ethnicity (i.e. Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic)

Given our desire to weight on 4 characteristics, we construct survey weights using a manual iterative strategy. We compute each of the 4 weights sequentially over 3 cycles, for a total of 12 iterations. First, we compute the *auspice* weight (weight A), weight the data using weight A, and then generate the weighted frequencies for *region*. Next, we compute the *region* weight (weight B), weight the data using weight A *x* weight B, and then generate the weighted frequencies for *race*. Third, we compute the *race* weight (weight C), weight the data using weight A *x* weight B *x* weight C, and then generate the weighted frequencies for *ethnicity.* Finally, we compute the *ethnicity* weight (weight D), which completes the first cycle (the first 4 iterations).

For the next cycle we re-compute the auspice weight (weight A') using all 4 weights from the first round (weight A *x* weight B *x* weight C *x* weight D), and continue the iterative process through weight D'. This process is repeated again for a total of 3 cycles and 12 iterations. The resulting data is therefore weighted by weight A'' *x* weight B'' *x* weight C'' *x* weight D'' until the weighted frequencies and population frequencies converge. The final survey weight is equal to the product of all 12 weights.

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