

Social Closure in Social Work: The Racial Implications of Licensure Requirements

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Abstract: *This study empirically examines the relationship between social work licensure and the racial composition of the profession in the United States through the lens of Max Weber's theory of social closure. By leveraging the variation in the timing of state-level licensure implementation, it employs a quasi-experimental setting to assess the effects of licensing on minority representation in social work. The research analyzes Decennial Census data from 1930 to 2000 using a staggered difference-in-differences design to investigate the extent to which licensure implementation relates to the proportion of non-White social workers at the county level. The findings suggest that social work licensure is associated with exclusionary patterns, limiting access for racial minorities. Specifically, the implementation of licensure is linked to a statistically significant decline in the proportion of non-White social workers, with an observed decrease of 2 percentage points that increased to a 9-percentage point decrease over 40 years. These results suggest that licensure requirements may reinforce social closure within the social work profession, perpetuating racial inequities. This study underscores the pressing need to reconsider the licensure framework to foster inclusivity and equity within the field of social work.*

Keywords: *Social work licensure; social work workforce; racial inequity; social closure; staggered difference-in-differences*

Scholars have identified two main functions of social work licensure: ensuring the quality of service and enhancing the professional status of social workers (Marks & Knox, 2015). First, licensure establishes minimum qualifications and standards for practitioners, which instills client confidence in the services provided by licensed social workers. In addition, licensure bolsters the professional standing of social workers. Following Flexner's influential 1915 address at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, where he argued that social work did not possess the traits of a profession (Flexner, 1915/2001), social workers have advocated for licensure to elevate their professional status (Thyer & Biggerstaff, 1989).

At first glance, social work appears to be a well-established and legally recognized profession. However, not all social workers have benefited equally from this professionalization. Concerns have emerged about whether licensure requirements disproportionately disadvantage racial minorities. This is an issue that has become increasingly relevant in ongoing discussions about racial equity within the field. Scholars have raised significant concerns about unequal access to licensure across racial groups (Bloxom & Anderson, 2024; Castex et al., 2019; Kim, 2022; Nienow et al., 2023; Senreich & Dale, 2021). Research suggests that racial minorities face multiple challenges on the path to becoming licensed social workers. These obstacles include the requirement to

graduate from accredited social work programs, the difficulty of navigating licensure exams, the racially biased nature of these exams, and broader systemic barriers that disproportionately disadvantage racial minorities (Bloxom & Anderson, 2024; Hirsch et al., 2024; Kim, 2022).

These disparities have significant implications for the profession. Racial representation among social workers is closely tied to the well-being of clients from minority backgrounds. Studies have shown that racial congruence between clients and social workers can enhance trust, improve communication, and ultimately lead to better client outcomes (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Cox & Ephross, 1998; Sue et al., 1991). In this context, it becomes important to examine whether social work licensure is associated with a decline in the representation of racial minorities within the profession.

This study investigates whether, and to what extent, the implementation of social work licensure is associated with a decrease in the proportion of racial minorities within the workforce. The theoretical framework underlying this research is the concept of “social closure,” as introduced by Max Weber. Weberian sociologists expanded this concept into “occupational closure,” which refers to the mechanisms by which professional groups create barriers to entry, often through licensure, to limit participation to those who lack specific credentials (Larson, 1977; Murphy, 1984; Weeden, 2002).

The dynamics of occupational closure are complex and often deeply intertwined with issues of race and socio-economic status. It is argued that as the prestige of a profession rises, often because of licensure, dominant groups such as Whites may seek to protect their interests by restricting access to the profession (Goff & Le Feuvre, 2017; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). This exclusion can take various forms, such as increasing the costs or simply limiting access to the resources necessary to obtain a license. Consequently, this creates an environment wherein aspiring social workers from marginalized groups may face significant disadvantages, reinforcing existing systemic inequities within the profession.

As noted above, existing literature has begun to explore the drawbacks of social work licensure for minorities. However, there remains a significant need for further empirical studies to substantiate these claims over time. This study uses Decennial Census data from 1930 to 2000 and employs a staggered difference-in-differences design to estimate the effects of the social work licensure implementation on the racial composition of the workforce. This design is particularly effective in isolating the specific impacts of licensure from other confounding variables, as it compares changes in workforce composition between areas that implemented licensure and those that did not, both before and after its adoption.

The findings indicate a troubling trend. Spanning seven decades of data, the analysis reveals that the implementation of licensure was associated with a decrease in the representation of non-White social workers. These results contribute to the ongoing discourse advocating for a transformation of current social work licensure practices (Hirsch et al., 2024; Morrow, 2023; Zajicek-Farber, 2024). This study calls for an inclusive system that not only recognizes the importance of professional standards but also actively dismantles barriers that hinder racial minorities from entering and thriving in the profession.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of social work licensure and introduces Max Weber's social closure theory as the theoretical foundation guiding this study. Next, it details the data and methods utilized in the study. The following section presents the analyses using a staggered difference-in-differences design. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, highlighting their implications for the field of social work.

Background

The Evolution of Social Work Licensure in the United States

Social work licensure in the United States has developed gradually over the past century. Since California passed the initial statute for social work licensure in 1945, all 50 states enacted their own licensure laws over the following five decades. Without federal standards guiding social work licensure, each state developed its own licensing procedures which varied in terms of the title of the social work license and the requirements for exams. Nevertheless, there are two common criteria for licensure shared by all states (Donaldson et al., 2014). First, it involves passing a mandatory licensing exam to obtain the title of "licensed social worker." Second, applicants for this title must graduate from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). In addition, obtaining advanced licenses typically involves acquiring two or more years of post-graduation experience under the supervision of a qualified professional (Donaldson et al., 2014).

Thyer and Biggerstaff (1989) outlined five key stages in the historical development of social work licensure. The first stage, termed the era of "friendly visitors," reflects a random entry into the field. In the second stage, social workers began forming professional organizations, beginning with the National Conference of Charities and Corrections established in 1874. The third stage saw these organizations imposing stricter requirements on social workers, emphasizing the need for educational credentials. This led to the fourth stage, where social work practice became self-regulated, marked by the establishment of standardized accredited educational programs. Finally, individual states started to implement their own licensure systems, with California paving the way in 1945. The momentum for licensure accelerated from the 1960s to the 1990s, ultimately resulting in licensure laws across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The importance of social work graduates obtaining licensure in the U.S. is recognized and promoted by professional organizations such as the CSWE, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). These organizations advocate for licensure as an essential component of professional development. Indeed, the CSWE recently published a curriculum guide to assist in teaching students about the importance of regulation (CSWE, 2018). Similarly, the ASWB developed the *Path to Licensure* (n.d.) to help social work programs prepare students to recognize the importance of regulated practice. Grise-Owens and colleagues (2016) underscore that licensing is not merely a procedural hurdle; rather, it is a critical element of the professionalization process and aligns with social work education's aim of achieving professional competency.

The Impact of “Whiteness” on the Development of Social Work Licensure

However, the development of social work licensure did not occur in a vacuum; it was heavily influenced by social dynamics, particularly the impact of “whiteness.” The origins of professional social work organizations date back to the Charity Organization Societies established in 1877, primarily comprised of wealthy White Christian women serving as social workers (Abrams et al., 2023). These women focused on assisting vulnerable urban populations; however, their efforts predominantly catered to White individuals from specific European backgrounds, such as Ireland and Italy, rather than addressing the needs of the broader vulnerable community (Del-Villar, 2021).

The emphasis on aiding specific groups served to reinforce existing social hierarchies, as the predominantly White women determined who received services and who was deemed qualified to provide them. This process not only marginalized racial minorities but also solidified the social and material privileges associated with whiteness within the profession. Consequently, the exclusionary practices that emerged during this formative period established a pattern that would persist over time. Despite a growing demand for social workers in the 20th century, opportunities for non-White individuals to enter the profession remained constrained due to various systemic barriers (Del-Villar, 2021).

In the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, social workers began to recognize the effects of institutional racism and marginalization (Abrams et al., 2023). However, the profession struggled to move beyond White-centered social work theories and practices that sidelined racial minorities (Abrams et al., 2023). Black social workers frequently faced racist attitudes and actions within professional organizations, culminating in a protest at the 1968 National Conference of Social Welfare. This event ultimately led to the formation of the National Association of Black Social Workers (Iglehart & Becerra, 1996). They also advocated for reforms in social work curricula at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Abrams et al., 2023).

Despite these efforts, the demographic composition of social workers has remained predominantly White. A 2006 study by the NASW conducted a comprehensive analysis of licensed social workers and found that 86% identified as White non-Hispanic, while only 7% were Black (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). More recent data from the CSWE in 2020 indicates slight progress, with Whites making up 66% and Blacks/African Americans representing 22% of recent social work program graduates (Salsberg et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that this study only examines recent graduates and not the broader population of licensed social workers.

Scholars have pointed out that the standardized social work license test, administered by the ASWB and available to social work program graduates, may pose a barrier for non-White test-takers. They argue that White individuals have greater access to resources that help them perform better on standardized tests than economically and educationally disadvantaged non-White individuals (Castex et al., 2019; Hirsch et al., 2024). From this perspective, societal, educational, and economic barriers continue to hinder non-White individuals from obtaining social work licensures and pursuing careers in the field (Castex et al., 2019; Zajicek-Farber, 2024).

A Weberian Perspective on Racial Disparities in Social Work Licensure

These patterns of exclusion can be theoretically understood through Max Weber's concept of "social closure," which provides a framework for analyzing how professional barriers perpetuate racial inequalities. Weber describes social closure as how certain social groups monopolize advantages by limiting access to resources and opportunities (Flemmen, 2017). According to Weber, society is not homogeneous but is instead internally divided by social closure. For instance, some groups, organizations, or institutions are open to all, while others impose specific criteria for membership eligibility (Mackert, 2012). These criteria may include race, gender, education, and religion, among others, and serve to establish boundaries that determine who is included and who is excluded (Weber, 1922/2013).

Occupational closure is a specific type of social closure that focuses on how groups organize around certain occupations in the labor market (Parkin, 1979). To gain membership, individuals typically must meet educational requirements and/or pass licensing exams. This fosters a shared identity among qualified members, who may choose to exclude or favor others based on these criteria. Such social closure has significant economic implications, creating a monopoly that benefits only those who meet the requirements and leading to higher economic returns regardless of individual effort (Sørensen, 1996). These increased returns stem from market control, allowing professional associations to raise prices for goods and services at their discretion (Redbird, 2017).

Specifically, Weeden (2002) outlines several mechanisms by which licensure increases these returns. First, barriers to entry, such as licensure, reduce the labor supply, making it difficult for individuals to enter the profession due to strict educational prerequisites for exam eligibility. Second, licensure limits the supply of professional services by preventing other professions from offering certain services. Third, licensure acts as a signal of high-quality skills to customers, ensuring consistent demand for licensed professionals' services. In addition, third-party payers, like insurance companies, typically reimburse only licensed providers, further restricting consumer choice and increasing demand for licensed services. In summary, licensure raises entry barriers, lowers market supply, drives up wages, limits workforce mobility, and reduces consumer choice and service accessibility (Alvarez, 2012; Zajicek-Farber, 2024).

These mechanisms are particularly relevant to social workers in the U.S. For instance, social workers must graduate from CSWE-accredited programs and pass background checks to apply for licensure. Each state sets its own requirements, which ultimately constrain the overall labor supply of social workers. Furthermore, certain social work services are legally restricted to licensed professionals, preventing other professions from offering them. This regulatory framework is compounded by the practices of many third-party payers, who typically reimburse clients only for services provided by licensed social workers, further increasing demand for licensed professionals. Empirical evidence supports this dynamic, showing that licensed social workers consistently earn more than unlicensed social service workers (Kim et al., 2023).

In this context, licensure for social workers acts as a form of occupational closure, placing those without a license at a disadvantage and limiting their access to better economic opportunities. Simultaneously, this closure not only restricts entry into the profession but also allows socially dominant groups, often those who are already well-established in the field, to monopolize the advantages associated with the occupation (Goff & Le Feuvre, 2017). The dynamics of occupational closure extend beyond professional credentials, intertwining with factors such as race (Weeden, 2002). As licensure elevates the economic and social status of the profession, dominant groups, such as Whites, can exploit this advantage further by raising the barriers to licensure, which hinders other groups from entering the field.

Despite concerns about occupational closure, some scholars maintain optimistic views on its outcomes. For instance, Redbird (2017) argues that the privileges of occupational closure could represent “a net gain for historically excluded workers” (p. 618) by creating a more equitable licensure process. Individuals from marginalized groups often face challenges like discrimination and nepotism when trying to enter unlicensed occupations. However, Redbird (2017) suggests that licensure may establish a fairer entry process, thus increasing opportunities for historically marginalized workers (Drange & Helland, 2019).

However, the history of social work licensure illustrates that the licensure system itself has created new barriers that disproportionately affect racial minorities. Research indicates that licensure in social work has led to the systematic exclusion of these groups, ultimately reinforcing existing inequalities rather than alleviating them (Castex et al., 2019; Kim, 2022; Morrow, 2023; NASW, 2006; Nienow et al., 2023; Senreich & Dale, 2021; Zajicek-Farber, 2024).

For instance, Kim (2022) points out that racial disparities persist across different racial groups due to underlying socioeconomic injustices, even when controlling for inherent differences. Despite adjusting for factors such as education level, state of residence, fields of practice, and demographic characteristics, significant disparities remain in the rates at which individuals of different races obtain social work licenses. Utilizing data from the Current Population Survey, Kim illustrates a notable gap in licensing rates between White and non-White social workers. However, it is important to note that her study does not address the broader impact of licensure on the overall number and proportion of practicing minority social workers.

This highlights the need to examine systematically and empirically whether and to what extent the implementation of the licensure system has been related to inclusivity and diversity in the social work profession over time, particularly within a quasi-experimental setting. To address this, this study tests the following hypothesis based on the theoretical arguments regarding occupational closure:

Hypothesis: Social work licensure is associated with a decrease in the proportion of non-White social workers in areas where licensure is implemented compared to those where it is not.

Methods and Data

Staggered Difference-in-Differences

To isolate the effect of licensure and evaluate its impact over time on the proportion of social workers from minority backgrounds, this study utilizes a quasi-experimental setting that leverages the variation in the timing of state-level licensure implementation. The traditional difference-in-differences method assumes simultaneous policy implementation. However, when policies are implemented at different times, a more generalized approach is required. Specifically, this study employs a staggered difference-in-differences method. This method is commonly used to evaluate policy effects in observational studies by comparing changes in outcomes between treatment and control groups (Rüttenauer & Aksoy, 2024).

The staggered difference-in-differences method shares some key assumptions with the traditional difference-in-differences method, notably that the average outcome among treated and control units would follow parallel trends in the absence of treatment (Roth et al., 2023). It also assumes that the treatment has no causal effect prior to its implementation (Roth et al., 2023). These assumptions facilitate the identification of the Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT).

A common approach for implementing this method is through a two-way fixed effects model. However, recent discussions in econometrics suggest that this standard approach may not adequately capture treatment effect heterogeneity, especially when the effect varies over time or across treatment cohorts (Baker et al., 2022). To address this limitation, Wooldridge (2021) proposes the extended two-way fixed effects model, which incorporates all possible interactions between the treatment, time fixed effects, treatment cohorts, and other covariates (Rüttenauer & Aksoy, 2024). By doing so, this approach allows for the identification of heterogeneous treatment effects over time and in terms of duration (Kalbfuss et al., 2024).

Table 1. *Social Work Licensure Enactment by States*

State	Year	State	Year	State	Year	State	Year
CA	1945	AR	1975	NH	1983	MS	1987
RI	1961	CO	1975	NC	1983	NV	1987
NY	1965	MD	1975	ND	1983	PA	1987
OK	1965	SD	1975	GA	1984	WA	1987
VA	1966	DE	1976	IA	1984	AK	1988
IL	1967	ID	1976	OH	1984	AZ	1988
SC	1968	AL	1977	WV	1984	HI	1989
ME	1969	MA	1977	CT	1985	MO	1989
LA	1972	OR	1979	DC	1986	NM	1989
MI	1972	TN	1980	NE	1986	IN	1990
UT	1972	FL	1981	VT	1986	NJ	1991
KS	1974	TX	1981	WY	1986	WI	1992
KY	1974	MT	1983	MN	1987		

The extended two-way fixed effects model is well-suited for this study's context. Since California enacted the first state social worker licensure in 1945, all 50 states and the District of Columbia subsequently implemented their own licensure regulations by 1992. Thus, the treatment variable in this study is the implementation of social work licensure, which occurred in a staggered manner. Furthermore, given the varied implementation timing and regional differences, it is reasonable to conclude that treatment effects are unlikely to be homogeneous across all contexts, contrary to the assumptions of the standard two-way fixed effects model. The precise timing of social work licensure enactment by each state is provided in Table 1.

Data

This study utilizes Decennial Census data from 1930 to 2000, which contains information on the social worker workforce dating back to the early 20th century. Each decennial year's data has different sampling sizes. This study prioritizes using the 5% sample if available as it contains more individuals who identify themselves as social workers. However, if there is no available 5% sample, this study chooses the 1% sample. Table 2 presents the sampling size for each decennial census dataset used in this study.

Table 2. *Sampling Size of Decennial Census Data*

Sampling Size	Decennial Census
1%	1950, 1970
5%	1930, 1940, 1960, 1980, 1990, 2000

Following each Decennial Census, this study reconstructs all variables of interest at the county level. However, as the focus of this study is on individuals with a specific occupation (social workers), it is possible that the census data might not include any social workers for a particular county each year. To address this missing data issue, this study employs multiple imputation. Multiple imputation is a recognized strategy for dealing with missing data, endorsed by scholars in many social science fields. Specifically, this study utilizes the decision tree algorithm for imputing the data. In this algorithm, the data are iteratively split into two nodes based on variables and values that optimize predictions (Rodgers et al., 2021).

Variables

Outcome: The outcome of interest is the proportion of social workers who identify as non-White. To determine this, the 1950 Census Bureau occupational classification system is utilized, available across census data spanning from 1930 to 2000, to identify social workers in each census year. Subsequently, the number of identified social workers is weighted using personalized sampling weights, enabling the estimation of the total number of social workers in each county. The non-White proportion is then calculated by dividing the number of non-White social workers by the total number of social workers in each county for the respective year.

Treatment: The treatment of this study is the implementation of social work licensure. This process began when California passed the first social worker licensure law in 1945. Subsequently, all 50 states and the District of Columbia completed the enactment of social worker licensure laws, with Wisconsin being the final state to do so in 1992.

Covariates: A total of six covariates are used for this study: (1) the log-transformed total number of social workers in each county, (2) the proportion of non-White population in each county, (3) the log-transformed value of total population, (4) the unemployment rate of each county, (5) the poverty rate of each county, and (6) metropolitan status of each county. The descriptive statistics of the variables can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics (Before Multiple Imputation)*

	n	Mean	SD
Outcome			
Proportion of non-White social workers	5936	0.13	0.18
Covariates			
Number of social workers	2275	825.12	1768.65
Proportion of non-White population	3174	0.13	0.15
Total population	3174	272815.6	533536.8
Unemployment rate	3174	0.07	0.04
Poverty rate	1698	0.01	0.01
Metropolitan status (Metropolitan=1)	2659	0.54	0.50

Findings

The findings presented in Table 4 show the overall effect of the implementation of social work licensure on the proportion of non-White social workers estimated using an extended two-way fixed effects model. Coefficients are tested using z-tests with standard errors clustered at the county level. Given that all states eventually enacted social work licensure laws (the last in 1992), the comparison group in this model comprises counties that had not yet been treated at the time of observation.

Table 4. *Extended Two-Way Fixed Effects Estimate of the Overall Treatment Effect*

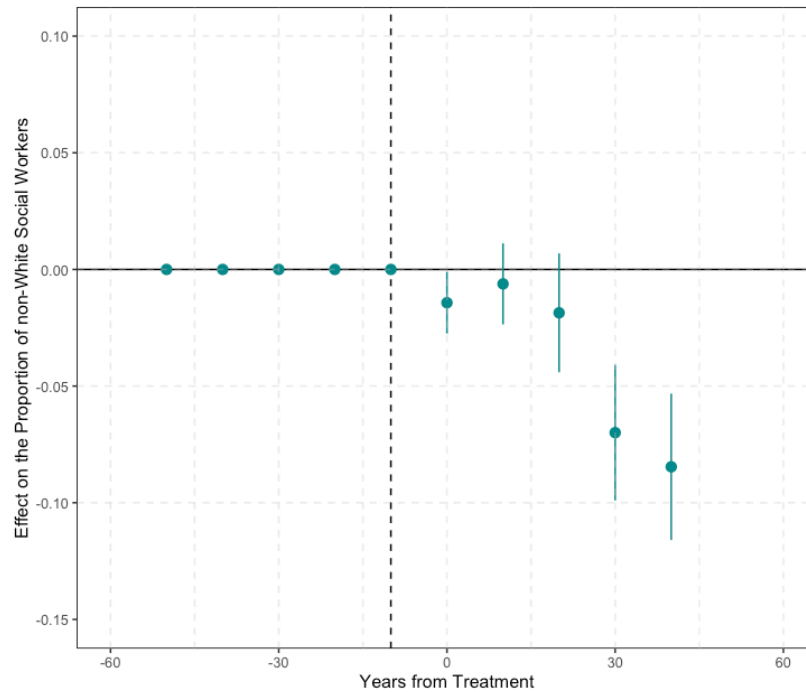
	Estimates (Standard Error)	Z Statistics	Confidence Intervals	
Implementation of Social Work Licensure	-0.02** (0.01)	-2.49	-0.03	-0.00
County Fixed Effects		YES		
Year Fixed Effects		YES		
Significance level: **<.05.				
Standard errors are clustered at the county level.				

The estimate shows that the implementation of social work licensure is associated with a decrease of 2 percentage points in the proportion of non-White social workers, with a 95% confidence interval from 0 to 3 percentage points ($p < .05$). Thus, the hypothesis of this study, which suggests a negative association between the implementation of social work licensure and the proportion of non-White social workers, is supported in terms of the

overall effect.

Following that, Figure 1 presents the findings from event-study analyses that focus on dynamic difference-in-differences estimates.

Figure 1. *Dynamic Effects of Social Work Licensures by Extended Two-Way Fixed Effects*



Note: Zero pre-treatment effects for illustrative purposes only

In Figure 1, time 0 refers to the year each county implemented social work licensure. The post-treatment estimates for the time of implementation exhibit negative coefficients. Specifically, at the time of implementation, social work licensure is associated with a decrease of 1 percentage point in the proportion of non-White social workers, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0 to 3 percentage points ($p < .05$). It is important to note that these estimates are relative to areas that had not yet implemented licensure. This early decline suggests that the introduction of licensure creates immediate barriers, likely due to stringent educational and credentialing requirements that may not be equitably accessible to all racial groups.

The dynamics shift further in subsequent decades, with the negative impact of licensure magnified to a decrease of 7 percentage points after 30 years and 9 percentage points after 40 years. The confidence intervals for these time frames are 4 to 9 percentage points and 5 to 12 percentage points, respectively ($p < .01$). This escalating decline highlights that as the licensure framework becomes more established, the effects of occupational closure intensify. Table 5 provides a summary of the dynamic effects from the extended two-way fixed effects model.

Table 5. *Dynamic Effects of Social Work Licensures by Extended Two-Way Fixed Effects*

Years Post Implementation	Estimates (Standard Error)	Z Statistics	Confidence Intervals	
0	-0.01** (0.01)	-2.11	-0.03	-0.00
10	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.70	-0.02	0.01
20	-0.02 (0.01)	-1.43	-0.04	0.01
30	-0.07*** (0.02)	-4.72	-0.09	-0.04
40	-0.09*** (0.02)	-5.28	-0.12	-0.05
County Fixed Effects		YES		
Year Fixed Effects		YES		
Significance level: **<.05, ***<.01.				
Standard errors are clustered at the county level.				

Discussion

Although previous research has raised concerns about how licensure may disadvantage racial minorities, only a few studies have empirically examined its relationship with the racial representation of the profession. This study addresses that gap by using a staggered difference-in-differences approach to evaluate whether the adoption of licensure laws is associated with a decrease in the proportion of non-White social workers. The empirical findings support the hypothesis that the introduction of social work licensure is associated with a decrease in the proportion of non-White social workers in areas where licensure is implemented, compared to those where it is not. Specifically, the proportion of non-White social workers dropped by 2 percentage points in counties with licensure.

Further analysis reveals that the effects of licensure become more pronounced over time. Using the extended two-way fixed effects model, the study found that counties with social work licensure for three decades had approximately 7 percentage points fewer non-White social workers compared to counties without licensure. This gap widens to 9 percentage points after four decades. This trend likely reflects the retirement over time of social workers who began their careers without needing a license. As these experienced practitioners retired, they left a gap that may not have been filled by new entrants from non-White backgrounds, particularly as licensing requirements became increasingly costly, stringent, and difficult to meet. The cumulative impact of these systemic barriers may have limited access for aspiring social workers from marginalized communities and thus intensified the underrepresentation of non-White professionals, resulting in a workforce that is less representative of the diverse populations it serves. This pattern of increasing exclusion aligns with theoretical predictions about occupational closure.

Max Weber's social closure theory offers insights into the exclusion of minorities from social work licensure. Weber argued that social groups strive to enhance their advantages by restricting access to opportunities for outsiders (Weber, 1922/2013). This exclusion

often occurs through licensure requirements. In this regard, scholars suggest that occupational closure functions as a social mechanism through which dominant groups can exclude marginalized ones, thereby securing the benefits and privileges associated with this monopoly (Goff & Le Feuvre, 2017). As demonstrated in the study's findings, the racial demographics of the social work profession reflect a declining diversity among practitioners since the implementation of licensure. According to recent data, although there are some notable increases in diversity, social workers continue to predominantly identify as White, highlighting persistent racial disparities. This study indicates that the licensing process may be a significant contributing factor to this declining diversity.

Importantly, these findings must be interpreted considering the broader historical context spanning the dataset's time frame. This seventy-year period encompassed major shifts in racial politics, civil rights legislation, and the professionalization of social work itself. These shifts shaped both the adoption and the effects of licensure policies, making it essential to consider them when evaluating the study's findings.

To be specific, early licensure laws were introduced during the Jim Crow era, when legal segregation and institutional racism shaped access to education and employment. Although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought about significant progress in dismantling formal barriers, structural inequalities persisted, especially in access to graduate education, a common requirement for licensure. These persistent disparities in the historical context may help explain the empirical findings, particularly the negative coefficients observed immediately after licensure was introduced.

Furthermore, beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating through the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. social policy experienced a significant neoliberal turn. This was an ideological shift that prioritized market logic and the retrenchment of the welfare state. Scholars have observed that this restructuring coincided with growing economic inequality between White and non-White individuals (Jacobs & Dirlam, 2016). Since social work licensure often requires a graduate degree, these changes likely made it even more difficult for non-White aspiring social workers to access and complete the necessary education. In this way, licensure requirements may have compounded the effects of neoliberalism by reinforcing existing structural barriers. These broader historical dynamics are important for understanding the empirical findings in this study, which show a marked decline in the proportion of non-White licensed social workers in the decades following the initial implementation of licensure.

As with any research, there are several limitations to this study. One important limitation of this study is the possibility of unobserved confounding variables. While the analysis controls for a range of observed factors and utilizes a difference-in-differences design to mitigate bias, it is possible that unobserved factors such as changes in public education funding or welfare policy that coincided with licensure implementation may have influenced access to the profession in racially uneven ways. In addition, broader economic transformation, including deindustrialization and shifts in the labor market, may have shaped racialized pathways into social work over time. While time and county-fixed effects help account for local characteristics and temporal trends, they cannot fully capture these dynamic, context-specific influences.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the data analyzed in this study are based on self-reported occupational classifications. The U.S. Census relies on respondents to select the occupation they personally identify with and does not differentiate between individuals holding a Bachelor of Social Work and those with a Master of Social Work, grouping all under the general category of “social worker.”

Despite these limitations, this study makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions by showing the extent to which social work licensure has likely changed the racial profile of professional social workers. Theoretically, by framing licensure as a mechanism of Weberian occupational closure, the research clarifies how professional restrictions reinforce systemic inequities within the social work field. This theoretical lens emphasizes the intersection of race and professional regulation, suggesting that licensure is not merely a credentialing process but a tool that can and does perpetuate exclusionary practices. The findings support the notion that licensure serves the interests of dominant groups by limiting access for marginalized communities, thereby offering a deeper understanding of how institutional structures can influence workforce diversity in the field.

Methodologically, the extended two-way fixed effects model facilitates a nuanced analysis of the temporal impacts of social work licensure on the racial composition of the workforce. This approach allows for the examination of variations over time, accounting for unobserved factors that might influence the outcomes. By utilizing a staggered difference-in-differences design, this research effectively isolates the effects of licensure, establishing a clear relationship between the implementation of licensure and changes in racial representation within the social work field.

Implications for the Social Work Profession

Licensure acts as a tool for controlling the supply of services and creating a monopoly that benefits only those who meet the established criteria (Redbird, 2017). By imposing specific educational, training, and examination requirements, licensure creates barriers that limit entry to those who can meet these standards. As a result, only individuals who fulfill these established criteria gain access to the profession, creating a closed market that privileges a select group.

This monopolistic dynamic disproportionately affects marginalized groups, particularly non-White individuals, who often face systemic barriers that hinder their ability to meet licensure requirements. Consequently, aspiring social workers from marginalized communities may struggle to navigate the licensure process, highlighting the systemic barriers that limit their entry into the field (Castex et al., 2019; Kim, 2022; Nienow et al., 2023). For instance, a report by the ASWB (2022) revealed significant disparities in exam pass rates between White and racially diverse test takers. Critics argue that the ASWB, which monopolizes social work licensing exams, operates in a manner that conflicts with core social work values (Joseph, 2024). In addition, states with more intricate licensing tiers showed lower overall pass rates, indicating that these complex structures may further exacerbate racial disparities in licensure outcomes (Ricciardelli et al., 2024). These findings raise concerns about systemic barriers limiting entry and advancement for racial minorities, contributing to their underrepresentation in a profession designed to serve

diverse populations.

To address these disparities, NASW and other social work organizations need to critically examine and reform licensure requirements to create more inclusive pathways for credentialing, particularly for candidates from racial minority groups. For example, modifications to exam content and structure that are more inclusive could positively impact the performance of both White and non-White candidates. Furthermore, exploring financial support mechanisms for non-White social work students may shed light on how economic factors influence diversity in the field. Systematic investigation of these initiatives could yield actionable policy recommendations aimed at addressing racial disparities within the profession.

In practice, social work practitioners should be encouraged to engage in discussions with accrediting bodies about the impact of licensure on workforce diversity and advocate for reforms that promote racial equity. Given the increased national focus on institutional racism, addressing disparities within the social work profession has become more urgent than ever. The diverse racial backgrounds of the clients and communities served by social workers further highlight the necessity of confronting these racial disparities in licensure (Nienow et al., 2023). As Bloxom and Anderson (2024) emphasize, “it remains vital for those in the social work profession and beyond to engage in advocacy efforts regarding licensure and other issues impacting both the profession, and the overall health and wellbeing of our nation” (p. 255).

To support these advocacy efforts and inform evidence-based reforms, future research should investigate the specific mechanisms through which licensure affects racial representation in the social work profession. For instance, qualitatively examining the experiences of non-White individuals navigating the licensure process and comparing their challenges to those faced by White individuals would help pinpoint the specific barriers that non-White candidates encounter. This could enable the development of targeted strategies to alleviate these obstacles.

In addition, given the recent rise of women of color to leadership roles in accrediting and regulatory bodies such as CSWE, NASW, and ASWB, future research could investigate how leaders' social identities influence institutional priorities and equity initiatives. Research in this area could examine whether and how diverse leadership translates into meaningful policy changes, such as revisions to accreditation standards, curriculum requirements, or examination content that better reflect the needs of diverse communities.

Future policy evaluation studies should also explore ways to lower barriers to entry while maintaining practice quality. For instance, recent policy changes offer natural experiments for research. Some states have eliminated licensure exams, creating opportunities to evaluate whether these reforms increase workforce diversity without compromising service quality. Rigorous evaluation of these changes would provide critical evidence for designing equity-centered reforms.

The evidence presented in this study reveals that social work licensure has been associated with declining racial diversity over seven decades. This pattern reflects systemic

barriers embedded within credentialing processes that disproportionately exclude racial minorities. Addressing these entrenched inequities will require coordinated action across policy, practice, and research to create a social work profession that truly reflects the communities it serves.

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