

The Dynamic Landscape of Licensing and Credentialing in Social Work

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In 2022, for the first time in its history, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) published comprehensive pass-rate data for social work licensing exams disaggregated by race, age, and language—and the findings revealed disparities so profound that they could no longer be dismissed as statistical anomalies or individual variations in test-taking ability. Among first-time Clinical exam takers, 84% of White examinees passed, compared to 45% of Black examinees, 65% of Hispanic/Latino examinees, and 72% of Asian examinees (ASWB, 2022; Kim & Joo, 2024a). These gaps persisted even after multiple attempts. Eventual pass rates reached 91% for White examinees but only 57% for Black examinees, 74% for Indigenous examinees, and 77% for Hispanic/Latino examinees (ASWB, 2022). The data forced an uncomfortable reckoning, were these exams measuring competence, or were they measuring access to privilege?

The disparities extended beyond race. Candidates aged 18-29 achieved a 91% eventual pass rate, compared to 64.8% for those aged 50 and older (ASWB, 2022). The exam's English-only format erected additional barriers for multilingual practitioners, despite the availability of accommodations. Most critically, research demonstrates that these disparities persist even when controlling for eligibility criteria, employment type, and practice setting (Kim, 2022). This suggests that differences in educational preparation or professional experience cannot explain away the gaps. Rather, they point to something more insidious: systemic barriers embedded within the licensure process itself. The question is no longer whether disparities exist—the data are unequivocal—but whether the profession will muster the courage to confront them.

These findings arrive at a moment when the social work profession can ill afford to ignore them. The nation faces unprecedented demand for behavioral health services, workforce shortages that leave communities without adequate care, and mounting evidence that licensing barriers disproportionately exclude practitioners from the very communities most affected by these shortages. The persistence of exam disparities across multiple professions—medicine, law, teaching, nursing—suggests that the problem transcends any single credentialing organization (Kim & Joo, 2025). Yet this broader context should not absolve social work of responsibility. On the contrary, it heightens the urgency for a profession built on principles of social justice to lead the way in dismantling inequitable gatekeeping mechanisms that harm individuals, communities, and our profession. Kim and Joo (2025) emphasize that exam performance is shaped by multi-level determinants at individual (e.g., GPA, exam timing), institutional (e.g., school resources, quality of preparation), and community levels (e.g., socioeconomic status, geographic location). This ecological understanding demands equally systemic interventions. For transparency, it is

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The Licensure Exam Debate: Protecting the Public or Perpetuating Inequity?

The question of whether standardized licensing exams should remain a mandatory component of licensure has catalyzed intense debate within the profession. At stake are competing commitments to public protection, professional credibility, workforce diversity, and—most fundamentally—the ethical integrity of a profession that espouses social justice as a core value. The arguments on both sides merit serious consideration. Yet the debate itself reveals a deeper tension, between a profession's aspirational values and the exclusionary systems it has constructed in the name of quality assurance.

The Case for a Standardized Licensure Exam as a Requirement for Licensure

Proponents of licensing exams frame them as indispensable safeguards for public welfare. Their arguments rest on three pillars: protection of vulnerable clients, standardization of professional competence, and legitimization of social work as a regulated profession.

First, advocates assert that licensure exams serve as essential quality control mechanisms, ensuring that only qualified practitioners enter the field (Weinstein, 2022). In a profession entrusted with individuals and families during moments of profound vulnerability, such as child abuse investigations, addiction treatment, and suicide intervention, the stakes of incompetence are measured in damaged lives. Before licensure laws were implemented, anyone could claim the title of social worker, creating risks for those most in need of competent care (Stewart, 2023). Licensure statutes enforce both title and practice protection, legally restricting who may use the social work designation and perform certain clinical functions (Morrow, 2022). For proponents, removing exams would represent a dangerous regression, sacrificing decades of progress in safeguarding the public on the altar of expediency.

Second, standardized exams purportedly provide uniform benchmarks for assessing knowledge and skills, reducing variability across states and enabling interstate portability. This consistency is framed as increasingly vital as the profession emphasizes evidence-based practice and accountability. Portability also addresses workforce shortages by facilitating practitioners' ability to relocate without redundant credentialing processes, a critical factor in ensuring adequate service distribution across geographic regions (Beard, 2025).

Third, a licensure exam reinforces social work's professional identity and legitimacy. Without rigorous entry standards, the argument goes, social work risks being perceived as less credible than psychology, counseling, or nursing, potentially eroding public trust and diminishing the profession's influence in policy and interdisciplinary settings. Licensure exams thus function not merely as a legal requirement but as a symbolic affirmation of the profession's ethical and professional standards.

These arguments carry weight. Yet they rest on assumptions that the current exam actually achieves these goals, assumptions that the disparities data fundamentally challenge.

The Case for Abolition or Fundamental Reform

Critics argue that the purported benefits of licensure exams are undermined by their documented harms and by the absence of evidence linking exam passage to practice competence. Their critique operates on multiple levels: empirical, ethical, and practical.

Most damning is the evidence of systemic inequity. The 2022 ASWB data revealed that Black candidates achieved only a 57% eventual pass rate compared to 91% for White candidates, a 34-percentage-point gap that persisted even after multiple attempts and could not be explained by educational background or employment factors (ASWB, 2022; Kim, 2022). These disparities are not marginal differences; they represent a structural barrier that systematically excludes practitioners from historically marginalized communities. For a profession that proclaims social justice as a foundational value, this outcome is ethically indefensible. The exam does not merely fail to promote equity, it actively perpetuates racial and economic stratification within the profession.

The English-only format compounds these inequities, creating insurmountable obstacles for multilingual practitioners who may be most capable of serving linguistically diverse communities. At a time when cultural and linguistic concordance between practitioners and clients is recognized as vital to effective care, the exam's monolingual structure works directly against the profession's stated commitment to culturally responsive practice.

Beyond equity concerns, critics note a troubling absence of valid evidence. No clear empirical link exists between passing the licensing exam and demonstrating competence in practice. Multiple-choice tests assess theoretical knowledge, yet effective social work requires skills—cultural humility, relational capacity, critical thinking, and ethical discernment—that defy standardized assessment (Caldwell, 2024). Moreover, Morrow (2022) identifies a persistent misalignment between educational competencies defined by Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) and the practice-oriented content tested by ASWB exams, raising fundamental questions about whether the exam measures what practitioners actually need to know. If the exam does not validly assess practice readiness, its claimed role in public protection collapses.

The economic burden of licensure further exacerbates inequity. Exam fees (\$230–\$260), state applications (\$60–\$150), background checks (\$25–\$75), and study materials (\$100–\$300+) accumulate into substantial costs. For a social worker earning approximately \$1,241 per week, a single exam attempt represents roughly 5% of weekly income. Multiple attempts, necessary for many candidates from marginalized backgrounds, multiply these costs, creating disproportionate hardship that can delay or derail licensure entirely (ASWB, 2022). Beyond financial strain, repeated failures erode confidence, exacerbate stress, and deter otherwise capable candidates from remaining in the profession. This attrition reduces workforce capacity precisely when it is most desperately needed.

Perhaps most troublingly, licensing barriers actively restrict workforce diversity and limit access to care. According to ASWB's own data, current exams disproportionately reduce the number of licensed practitioners from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, the very communities experiencing the most severe mental health disparities and service shortages (ASWB, 2022). This creates a pernicious cycle: communities with the greatest need have the least access to practitioners who share their lived experiences and cultural contexts. The misalignment between regulation and public health needs transforms licensure from a public protection mechanism into a public safety threat.

Evidence for Change: When States Dismantled Barriers

Fortunately, reform need not proceed in the absence of evidence. Several states have already eliminated the first-tier master's exam, and their experiences challenge long-held assumptions about the relationship between licensure requirements and public protection. Rhode Island (Nimmagadda, 2025), Illinois (Mina, 2022), Utah (Ribera, 2023), and Colorado (Haubner, 2024), have witnessed significant increases in the number of licensed social workers and demonstrable gains in workforce diversity. Rhode Island has not had a corresponding increase in reported ethical violations (Nimmagadda, 2025). These natural experiments suggest that the exam may be dispensable without compromising public welfare.

The implications are profound. If elimination of the licensure exam requirement as a component of licensure can expand the workforce and enhance diversity without measurable harm to clients, then the burden of proof shifts decisively to exam proponents. They must now demonstrate that the documented benefits of current licensure systems outweigh their documented harms, a case that grows increasingly difficult to sustain in light of mounting evidence.

Scholars have begun outlining alternative pathways forward. Morrow (2022) recommends narrowing the gap between educational standards and regulatory requirements, improving transparency in exam development and validation, and creating inclusive pathways that recognize diverse forms of competence demonstration. Major professional organizations, including the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), have called for solutions that balance accountability with equity, acknowledging that the status quo serves neither value adequately (NADD, 2022; NASW, 2023).

The central challenge confronting the profession is this: How can we maintain standards that genuinely protect clients while dismantling barriers that exclude competent practitioners and perpetuate systemic inequities? More pointedly, can a profession committed to social justice continue to defend a gatekeeping system that systematically disadvantages the communities it claims to serve?

This Special Issue: Toward Justice-Oriented Licensure

This special issue brings together critical scholarship and innovative solutions that refuse to accept the false choice between rigor and equity. The assembled articles

interrogate current practices from multiple angles, examining clinical supervision as a social justice issue, the psychometric flaws embedded in standardized testing, and the financial and structural barriers that disproportionately impact marginalized candidates. Contributors explore alternative assessment approaches—including performance-based evaluations, portfolio assessment, and provisional licensure models—as well as abolitionist frameworks that call for fundamentally reimagining professional regulation. Empirical studies rigorously examine the relationship (or lack thereof) between exam content and practice readiness, while policy analyses dissect how states are navigating the complex politics of reform.

King-Jordan, Clossey, DiLauro, and Bey deploy critical race theory to interrogate the structural inequities embedded within social work licensure. Moving beyond descriptive analysis, they advance a critical framework for understanding how licensing systems reproduce racial hierarchies under the guise of professional standardization. Their intervention proposes concrete strategies for transformation: demanding ASWB accountability through transparent validity studies, developing alternative licensing pathways that recognize diverse forms of competence, and pursuing regulatory reforms that center equity as a core public protection principle. This piece challenges the profession to recognize licensing inequity not as an unfortunate side effect but as a structural feature requiring systemic intervention.

DeCarlo and Nienow deliver a psychometric critique of the ASWB examination, systematically documenting how it violates fundamental principles of fair testing. Drawing on data from 2012-2021, they expose a pattern of professional negligence, such as, persistent disparities in pass rates by race and age that ASWB has failed to adequately address, organizational self-interest that compromises validity claims, strategic omission of inconvenient data, shifting operational definitions of reliability without adequate documentation, and other practices that undermine the exam's credibility. This forensic analysis reveals that the problems with the ASWB exam are not peripheral but foundational, challenging its fitness as a gatekeeping mechanism.

In a companion piece, **DeCarlo and Nienow** expose how ASWB has constructed a self-serving narrative to deflect criticism following its 2022 release of damning disparities data. Through critical discourse analysis of ASWB publications and exam documentation, they reveal a strategic pattern. ASWB funded researchers already affiliated with the organization to produce studies that attribute exam bias exclusively to "structural factors" external to the examination itself, thereby absolving the exam, and ASWB, of responsibility. This analysis demonstrates how powerful institutions maintain legitimacy through manufactured consent, using the veneer of research to justify systems that serve their organizational interests while perpetuating harm to marginalized communities.

Heckert and Pence challenge conventional assumptions about the relationship between educational specialization and licensure outcomes. Analyzing 2022 board pass rates across Advanced Generalist and Clinical and Direct Practice specializations, they find that specialized tracks exert less influence on exam preparation than widely assumed. These findings carry profound implications: if specialization does not significantly improve exam performance, then the micro/macro divide in social work education may be

reinforcing artificial distinctions that fragment the profession without corresponding benefits. The authors advocate for re-integrating micro- and macro-based programming, streamlining exam options, and fundamentally reframing how educators discuss and promote specializations.

Whaley, Paule, and Keeney reframe licensure as a gatekeeping mechanism that systematically excludes BIPOC practitioners, directly challenging the "public protection" narrative that legitimates current systems. Their analysis exposes a troubling irony; a regulatory framework ostensibly designed to protect vulnerable clients instead restricts their access to practitioners who share their cultural contexts and lived experiences. The authors issue concrete demands for ASWB accountability, such as implementing comprehensive mentorship programs, providing financial support to reduce economic barriers, and expanding language options to reflect the multilingual realities of contemporary practice. This piece insists that equity in pass rates is not a peripheral concern but a fundamental prerequisite for legitimate professional regulation.

Tomaszewski, Cox, and Kaur call social work education back to its social justice foundations, arguing that educational institutions bear critical responsibility for addressing licensure inequities. Their intervention highlights the multifaceted role of educators, which is conveying essential knowledge, recruiting diverse students, providing equitable education, preparing candidates for licensure, and, crucially, interrogating the micro/macro dichotomy that fragments the profession. Like Heckert and Pence, they advocate for pedagogical approaches that resist artificial boundaries between practice modalities. This piece positions social work education as a site of both reproduction and resistance, challenging educators to determine whether they will perpetuate exclusionary systems or actively dismantle them.

Choi and Handy provide crucial historical context by examining how social work licensure has shaped the profession's racial composition over seven decades. Employing a quasi-experimental design with Census data from 1930 to 2000, they document how licensure requirements function as mechanisms of "social closure," professional strategies that consolidate power by restricting entry. Their longitudinal analysis reveals that licensing has systematically reinforced racial inequities in the profession, contradicting claims that standardized credentialing promotes meritocracy. This historical perspective demonstrates that contemporary disparities are not aberrations but continuations of longstanding patterns, challenging the profession to confront how its regulatory structures have perpetuated exclusion across generations.

Sejuit, Hill, and DeWitt expand the analysis beyond social work through a comparative examination of licensing and gatekeeping across helping professions. Analyzing the CSWE and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs in South Carolina, they reveal how similar gatekeeping mechanisms operate across professional boundaries. Their comparative framework illuminates both shared challenges and missed opportunities for collaboration. The authors advocate for streamlining pathways to licensure to enhance professional mobility, coordinated efforts to address disparities in exam passage rates, and fostering interprofessional collaboration that could

strengthen collective capacity to serve diverse populations. This analysis suggests that reform efforts might gain traction through cross-professional solidarity.

Farr, Wilson, Duncan, Dominguez, and Stone advance the most radical intervention in this collection: abolishing the social work exam entirely. Grounding their argument in an analysis of 2011-2021 pass rates that consistently fail Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) test takers, they reject reformist approaches as insufficient. Critically, they investigate five alternative pathways—performance assessments, oral examinations, portfolios, jurisprudence exams, and provisional licensure—concluding that even these alternatives risk further marginalizing BIPOC social workers if implemented within current power structures. Their abolitionist framework insists that the problem is not merely how we assess competence but the assumption that standardized gatekeeping serves public protection. This piece challenges readers to imagine licensure systems built on fundamentally different principles.

Tetteh and Smith examine the specific barriers confronting advanced clinical students as they navigate licensure, revealing how structural inequities compound at this critical professional juncture. Through systematic analysis of barriers and biases within the licensing exam development process, they identify key intervention points, such as developing culturally responsive exam content, mandating cultural competence training for test developers, and establishing comprehensive support systems for non-traditional candidates. Their recommendations balance pragmatic reform with transformative vision, recognizing that meaningful change requires both immediate interventions to support current candidates and structural reforms that prevent future harm. This piece demonstrates how diversity, equity, and inclusion must move from aspirational rhetoric to concrete operational practice.

Nienow, Apgar, Fink, and Quiñonez provide essential insights into the political dynamics of licensure reform through interviews with 14 state Chapter Directors of NASW. Their findings illuminate the messy realities of policy change. Success depends on navigating complex political landscapes, marshaling adequate resources, and cultivating stakeholder investment. Critically, they document variation in progress across states, revealing how context shapes reform possibilities. This analysis offers a realist perspective on change efforts, acknowledging that even when the evidence for reform is overwhelming, political will and strategic capacity determine outcomes. Their work provides a roadmap for advocates seeking to translate critique into policy transformation.

Campbell, Cullen, Vlam, and Myrick move from critique to innovation by documenting a clinical supervision program in Pennsylvania explicitly designed to address social injustice in the profession. Their pilot program provides supervision, mentorship, sustainability support, and community-building to practitioners navigating licensure barriers, with equity enhancement as its central aim. This intervention model recognizes that supporting practitioners through current systems while simultaneously working to transform those systems need not be mutually exclusive strategies. By demonstrating how clinical supervision can function as social justice praxis, they offer a concrete example of how institutions can leverage existing structures toward liberatory ends.

Davis and VanCamp center the voices often excluded from policy debates, the social workers who experience licensure exams firsthand. Through thematic analysis of practitioners' perceptions, they document deep skepticism about the exam's effects, fairness, equity, and value to the profession. These findings carry particular weight because they come from those with the most direct stake in licensure outcomes. Practitioners' critiques align remarkably with scholarly analyses, suggesting broad consensus that current systems fail to reflect social work values or practice realities. This study underscores the urgency of revising licensure processes to align with both professional ethics and practitioner experience, bridging the gap between regulatory structures and lived realities of practice.

Glassburn, Henson, Miller, Saylor, Staton, Walsh, and Wilderman provide rich qualitative insight into how new social workers experience the master's licensure exam. Interviewing 22 recent graduates, they identify five revealing themes: the exam simultaneously "means everything and nothing," functions as an "arbitrary hoops and barriers," provokes intense emotional responses, requires "learning the tricks" rather than demonstrating competence, and demands "setting aside practice wisdom." The study's title captures a profound ambivalence: new practitioners recognize the exam's high-stakes consequences while questioning its relevance to actual practice. This disconnect between education, examination, and practice exposes a fundamental misalignment at the heart of current licensure systems, validating calls for fundamental reconceptualization rather than incremental reform.

In Conclusion

Collectively, these manuscripts challenge the profession to align its regulatory systems with its core values. They offer evidence-based pathways forward that refuse to sacrifice either public protection or professional equity. Most importantly, they insist that the burden of proof now rests with those defending the status quo. In the face of overwhelming evidence of systemic harm, maintaining current practices requires affirmative justification—justification that must extend beyond tradition, convenience, or institutional inertia.

The evidence Kim and Joo (2025) present suggests that if historically marginalized groups had equal access to the opportunities and supportive environments enjoyed by White examinees, gaps in exam pass rates would decrease substantially. This insight reframes the problem: the issue is not the capacity of marginalized candidates but the structural inequities that undermine their success. Addressing licensing disparities, therefore, requires interventions that target the root causes of inadequate educational resources, economic barriers, biased assessment instruments, and exclusionary professional cultures, rather than treating symptoms through remedial exam preparation or repeated testing.

The profession stands at a crossroads. One path leads toward incremental adjustments that leave fundamental structures intact while claiming progress through modest reforms. The other path demands transformation: reimagining licensure as a system that actualizes social work's commitment to human dignity, worth, and justice. The articles in this special

issue illuminate that transformative path, demonstrating that rigor and equity need not be opposing values but can and must be mutually reinforcing principles in a licensure system worthy of the profession's ethical commitments.

The 2022 ASWB data shattered any remaining illusions about the neutrality or fairness of current licensure exams. The question is whether the profession will respond with the courage and creativity that just practice demands. The answer will determine not only who can enter the profession but what the profession ultimately stands for.

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