



# **Social Workers Registration Board**

**Kāhui Whakamana Tauwhiro**

## **Demand for Social Workers**

An insight into the number of vacant social work positions across Aotearoa

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## Contents

Headlines .....	3
Introduction.....	4
Methodology and results .....	4
Participant demographics .....	5
Impact of COVID-19 .....	7
Number of social workers .....	7
Number of vacancies.....	7
Time to fill a social work role .....	8
Barriers to filling vacancies.....	8
Extra social workers needed.....	9
Impacts of a social work shortage.....	10
Limitations .....	11
Conclusion.....	11

## Headlines

- This inaugural Social Worker Demand Survey aims to explore the extent of the shortage of social workers and provide insights to inform future social worker workforce planning.
- There were 165 participants that completed the survey, due to the small sample size the results of the survey are only indicative.
- The number of social worker vacancies reported by survey participants for their place of employment ranged from no vacancies to more than 30.
- On average, survey participants reported having three vacant positions in their place of employment.
- The time taken to fill a vacant social worker position varied from one month to a maximum time of over a year.
- On average, it took an estimated three and a half months to fill a vacant social work position.
- If there were no resource constraints and all current vacancies were filled, survey participants indicated an outstanding demand for an average of five additional social workers within their organisation.
- Survey participants that worked in non-governmental organisations indicated that they struggled to fill social worker positions due to a skill shortage and the inability to compete with the salaries offered by government organisations.
- Survey participants suggested that the shortage of social workers within their organisations caused work stress, high workloads, and high staff turnover.
- Some survey participants indicated that because of the difficulty in recruiting social workers they were changing job titles to no longer require “social workers”.

## Introduction

A shortage of social workers is causing concern throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. This shortage alongside other issues is leading to difficulties for organisations in recruiting and retaining social work staff. However, the scope of this shortage is not known and much of our knowledge is based on anecdotal reporting of concerns. This inaugural Social Worker Demand Survey aims to explore the shortage in more depth and provide insights to inform future social worker workforce planning.

## Methodology and results

The survey was advertised in the monthly Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) OnBoard newsletter which was published on the website and emailed to registered social workers, employers and other SWRB contacts (more than 13,000 in total) on 29 October 2021. The survey was created using SurveyMonkey and remained open for three weeks, closing on the 22 November 2021.

The survey was created to gain insight into a number of areas:

1. to establish where survey participants worked, including geographical location, and setting (for example, government vs non-government)
2. the number of vacancies survey participants had in the organisations where they were employed, how long vacancies took to fill, and what barriers participants faced trying to fill these roles
3. how many social workers would be needed in an ideal world with no restrictions on funding to meet the demand for social work services in the survey participant's place of employment
4. the impacts that a shortage of social workers is having on the social work sector.

### **Caveat on the use of averages throughout the report**

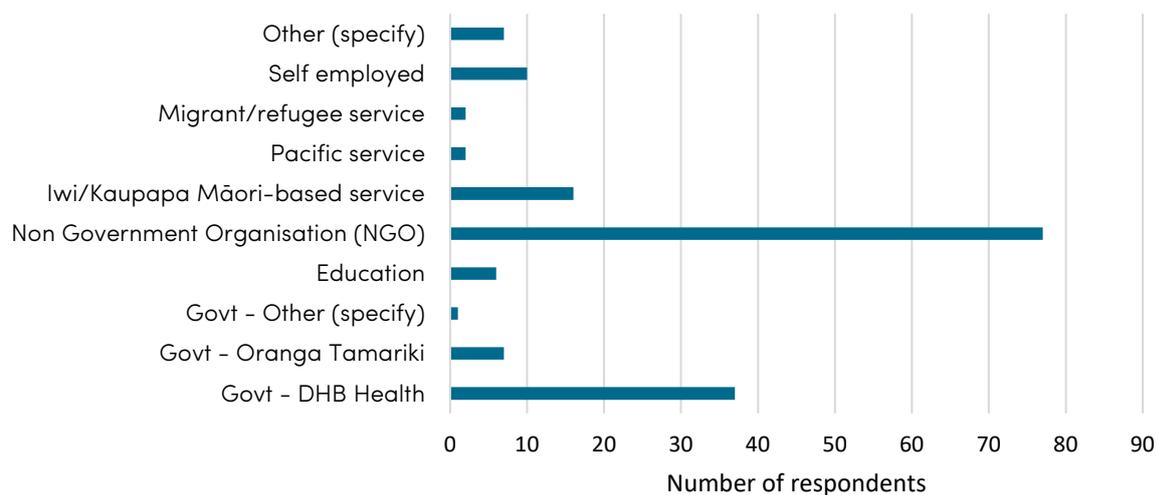
Two rules were followed to keep consistency across responses when calculating averages in this report.

1. Some responses gave a range of numbers as an answer. If this was the case, the lowest number was used in the calculation. For example, if the range was given as 3-5, the number 3 was used in the calculation.
2. Other responses gave a non-numerical response to questions - for example, a response stating "we need many social workers" rather than providing a specific number. These answers were removed from the calculation as quantifying written responses was not possible. Due to the reasons outlined above it is important to note that the averages and numbers supplied in this report are only an estimate of vacancies.

## Participant demographics

The survey was completed by **165 survey participants**.

Figure 1 below shows that the largest group of participants in the survey worked in Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) (77 participants, 47% of total). This was followed by people working for DHBs (37 participants, 22%).



**Figure 1. Participants work setting**

Nearly 30% of survey participants reported that they worked in Auckland.

Similar numbers of survey participants worked in Wellington, Bay of Plenty and Canterbury (at around 10–12% for each region).

**Table 1. Region where participants worked**

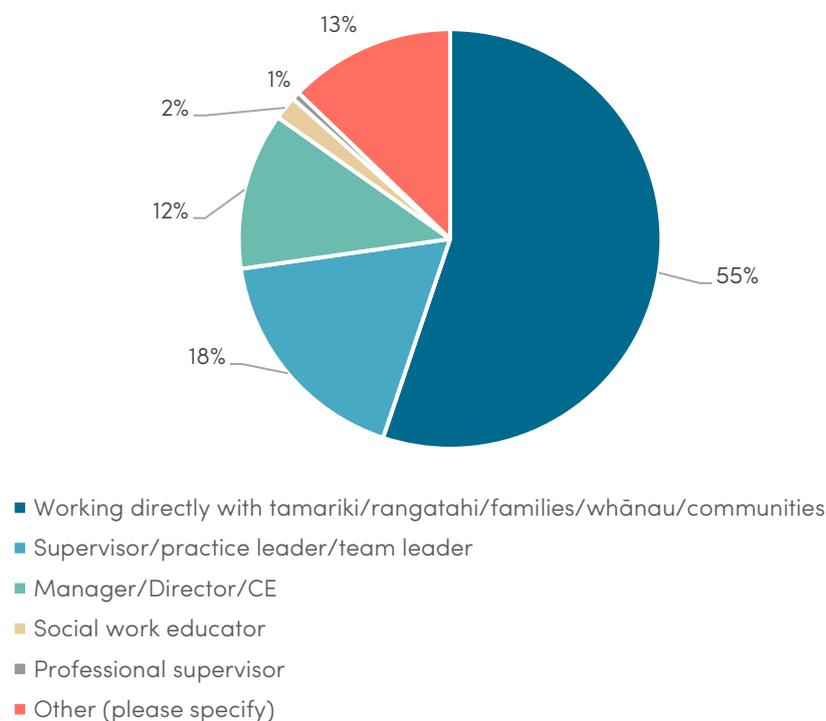
Region	Number of participants	Percentage
Northland	9	5.6%
Auckland	46	28.4%
Waikato	13	8.0%
Bay of Plenty	17	10.5%
Gisborne	2	1.2%
Hawkes Bay	8	4.9%
Taranaki	7	4.3%
Manawatu-Whanganui	9	5.6%
Wellington	19	11.7%
Tasman/Nelson	3	1.8%
Marlborough	1	0.6%
West Coast	2	1.2%
Canterbury	17	10.5%
Otago	6	3.7%
Southland	3	1.8%

Most survey participants reported that they worked in an urban setting, this was followed by individuals from provincial areas.

**Table 2. Area that social workers were based**

Setting	Number of responses
Urban	120
Rural	7
Provincial (small town)	26
National	12

The majority of survey participants reported that their main role was working directly with whānau and communities. The figure below displays a breakdown of how survey participants described their role in their organisations.

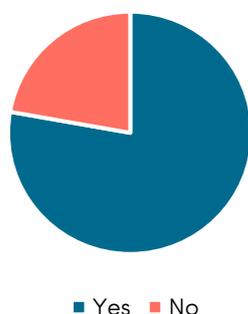


**Figure 2. Participants' descriptions of their roles**

Due to low numbers of participants in the survey, statistical comparisons between variables are not possible. For example, it is of interest to see if organisations in a rural setting have statistically more vacancies than those in an urban setting. However, there were only 7 responders from rural settings and as such it is not possible to make these comparisons accurately. This is because we cannot be certain that 7 individuals are representative of the population of individuals in a rural setting.

## Impact of COVID-19

The majority of participants (78%) indicated that COVID-19 has increased the demand for the social work services delivered by their organisations.



*Figure 3. COVID-19 resulting in an increase in services*

## Number of social workers

Survey participants were asked to indicate how many full-time social workers they had in their place of employment. On average, survey participants reported that they had around 24 social workers working in their place of employment.

This is an estimated figure only due to the nature of responses received. In some cases, survey participants answered the question about number of full-time workers by giving a range, for example, stating they have 50 plus social workers working with them. As such, when calculating the average, only the number given would be used. Other participants gave two figures, for example, that they had over 100 social workers nationally but only worked with 20. For these cases, the lower number given was used in the calculation.

## Number of vacancies

The survey asked participants how many full-time (30 hours+) social work positions were vacant in their place of employment. From the survey, participant responses were collated and indicated that around 410 social workers were needed to fill the available roles across their organisations.

**As such, there was an estimated average of three vacant social worker roles in each participant's organisation.**

However, this varied from no vacancies to as many as 30 plus vacancies.

## NGO vs government organisations

The differences between NGO and government organisations were also compared. This revealed a similar average number of social workers needed where government agencies required 3 extra social workers in comparison NGOs needed 2.5. However, government agencies on average employed more social workers (23) than the NGO sector (17). As such, there is more demand for social workers in the NGO sector relative to organisation size.

## Time to fill a social work role

Participants were then asked to indicate how long it took to fill social work vacancies. Although the survey asked for the length of time in days, responses were often given in months, and therefore responses in days were adjusted to fit into month categories.

### **Participants indicated that it took on average three and a half months to fill a social work vacancy in their place of employment.**

However, the length of time to fill a vacant position varied from a minimum of one month to over 12 months.

A number of people entered a description in their answer to the question about how long it took to fill a social work position. For example, one person stated that it took “a long time” or “over a year” to fill vacant positions. This created issues in trying to quantify non-numerical responses to work out an average length of time that it took to fill vacancy roles. Therefore, these responses have been removed from the calculation and treated as qualitative data which is outlined below.

Two individuals stated that they had no vacancies where they worked. These individuals indicated that their employers no longer employed “social workers” because they were too hard to find. For example, someone commented “*we have changed to not look for social workers at all – we employ youth workers now*”.

Some participants indicated that it took over a year to fill social work roles. For example, one person stated that they “*supervise someone who has been trying to fill a SW position for more than a year*”.

As such, it was clear that participants had experienced long periods of time in trying to recruit social workers to join their organisations.

## Barriers to filling vacancies

Participants were asked to identify the barriers they faced when trying to employ a registered social worker. These barriers are presented in Figure 4 below. Almost 80% of respondents indicated that there was a lack of suitable candidates/skill shortage. This suggests that there are not enough qualified social workers to fill the vacancies that these organisations have.

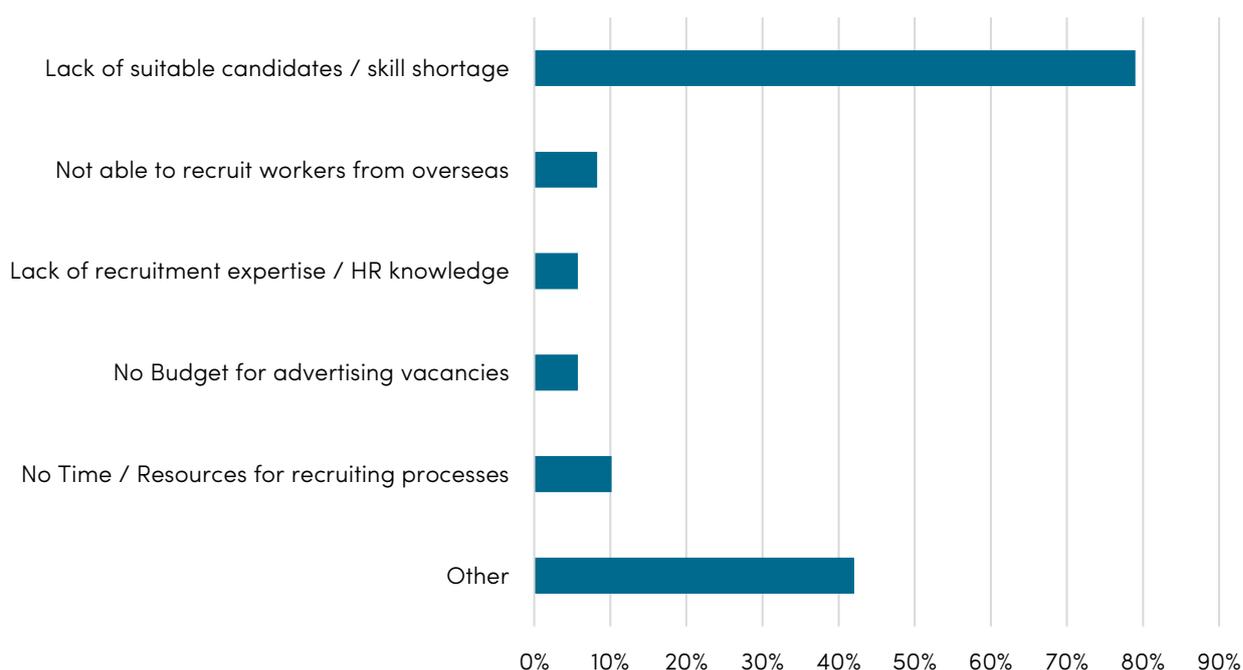
Concerningly, some responses to the other category stated that their organisations were now going to use titles such as “support workers” in their job descriptions to avoid employing “social workers”. Moreover, some comments stated that they did not have the time to recruit or train new social workers.

Consequently, there are a number of barriers employers face when trying to recruit social workers.

## NGO vs government positions

Of the survey participants that worked for NGOs who left comments about barriers to recruiting social workers, around 85% referenced a lack of funding. This comment was often made in comparison to government organisations. For example, one person stated that *“The pay is just too low and we can’t compete with govt orgs”*. Another stated that the barrier they faced was the *“pay disparity between NGO and government work. Everyone seems to go to government”*.

Comparatively, of respondents who worked for government organisations only 33% (5 out of 15) referred to low salaries being a barrier to employing social workers.



*Figure 4. Barriers to filling social work vacancies*

## Extra social workers needed

Survey participants were asked how many additional social workers they would need to meet the demand for social work services if all their vacant positions were filled, and they had the resources needed to hire more social workers.

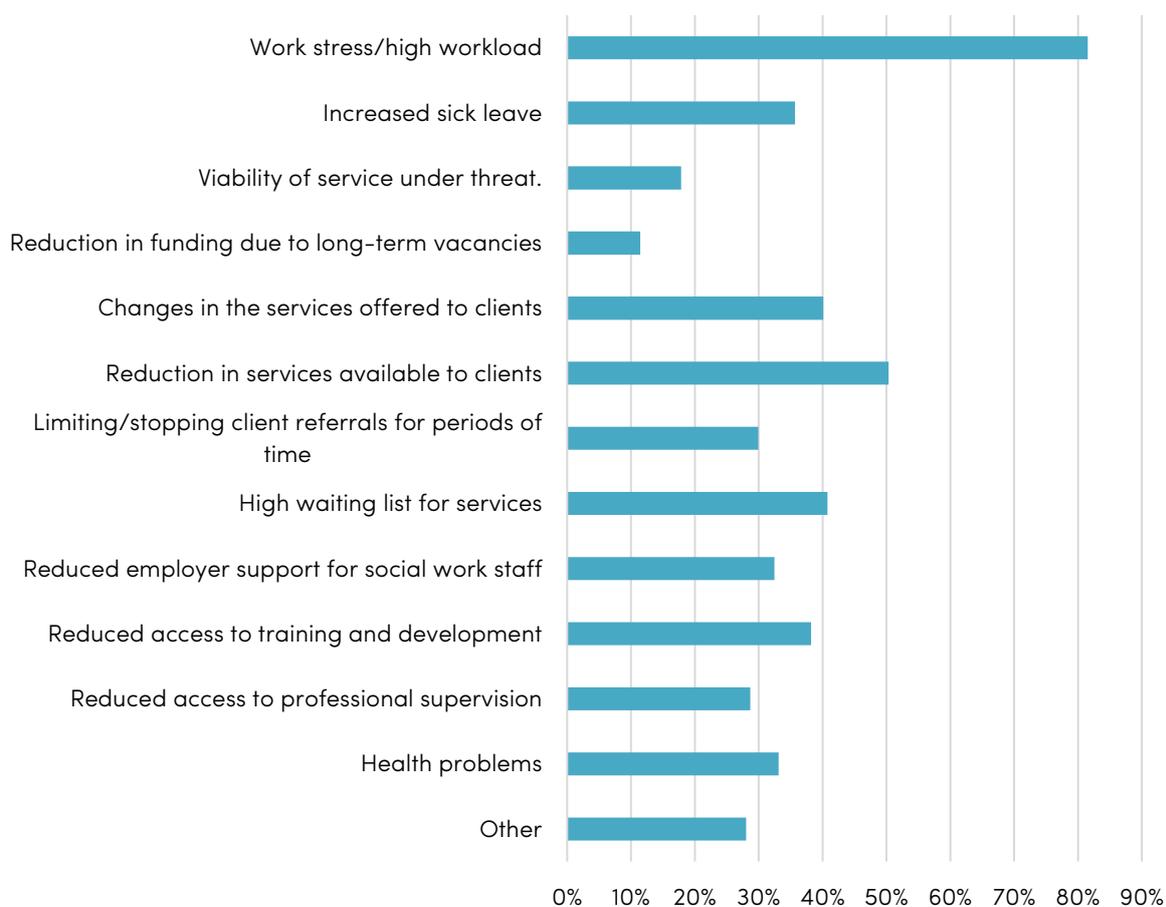
**On average, survey participants indicated they would require five more social workers in their organisation.**

By adding all the responses together, survey participants indicated that overall, they would require around 707 social workers in their place of employment if resources allowed.

## Impacts of a social work shortage

The survey asked participants to indicate the impacts that a shortage of social workers was having on them and their organisation. Participants indicated:

- they experience stress and a high workload (around 82% of participants).
- the social worker shortage resulted in a reduction in the services to clients (about 50% of participants).
- the shortage resulted in a high staff turnover (30% of participants that stated 'other'). Others also reiterated a reduction in the services that their organisations provide to clients due to the lack of staff.



*Figure 5. Impacts of a social worker shortage on social workers*

## Limitations

The number of participants that completed the survey was relatively low, in comparison with the total number of registered social workers (over 10,000). These results must be interpreted cautiously as it may not be an accurate reflection of the status of the whole sector. As such, it is important to view these results as indicative. The real status of the social work shortage may be higher or lower than what is presented here.

It is also possible that some participants came from the same organisation. If these participants both reported that they needed 30 or more participants then it may have skewed our results to be higher than they really are.

## Conclusion

The results of the survey present a shortage of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and that the impact of this shortage on the social work sector is significant.

Specifically, participants reported that on average there were three vacancies in each of their places of employment. When participant responses were collated, the survey indicated that around 410 social workers were needed to fill vacant social work roles. In addition, participants indicated that if these current vacancies were filled and they had more resources, on average they would still require an additional five social workers to meet client demand. Survey participants indicated that overall, they would require around 707 social workers in their place of employment if resources allowed.

It took around three and half months to fill a social work role on average, but some vacancies were open for more than one year. A number of barriers to employing social workers were outlined by survey participants. The most common barrier to employing a social worker was finding suitable applicants suggesting that there are not enough social workers to meet the demand. The inability of NGOs to compete with the salaries of government organisations was also highlighted as a barrier to filling vacant social work positions.

Concerningly, some participants reported that the organisations they worked for were no longer employing “social workers” to do social work due to the difficulty in recruitment. Instead, organisations either employed other health professionals or changed the job title to “youth worker” or “support worker”.

Another area of concern is that the majority of responders indicated a shortage of social workers in Aotearoa has led to work related stress and a high workload. Responders also suggested that this shortage led to a reduction in the services available to clients from their organisations.