

A social work licensing exam that people of color fail more often is under scrutiny in Kansas

KCUR | By **Blaise Mesa**



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Blaise Mesa / Kansas News Service

Some have called the social worker licensing exam racist because of the racial disparities seen in first-time pass rates.

White test takers are far more likely to pass the licensing exam than people of color or older test takers.

TOPEKA, Kansas — The test to become a licensed social worker is hard. It takes years of schooling, test prep — and depending on the exam — hundreds of hours of working in the field.

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prepared.

“There are questions that I thought if I could sit down with the person who wrote the questions, I could explain to them why I was right, and they were wrong,” she said

Diaz is no slouch, she won national academic scholarships and passed the test by a comfortable margin.

She isn't alone in her criticisms. The Association of Social Work Boards exam faces calls from across the country to pause the one test all social workers in the U.S. take to become licensed. It's been called flat-out racist and a barrier to getting people in social work who look more like many of their clients.

Older test takers and Kansans of color fail the test more often than white applicants. In Kansas, the test comes in three different forms for bachelor's, master's and clinical certification. In most cases, white test takers passed 20% more often on their first try when compared to people of color or older Kansans.

Bachelors level first time pass rates from 2011-2021:

White – 78.5%

Black – 55.3%

Hispanic/Latino – 46.7%

50 and older – 59.6%

Non-English speakers – 30.9%

Masters level first time pass rates from 2011-2021:

White – 88.9%

Black – 59.1%

Hispanic/Latino 70.4%

50 and older – 77.7%

Non-English speakers – 55.2%

Clinical level first time pass rates from 2011-2021:

White – 88%

Black – 56.1%

Hispanic/Latino – 75.6%

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50 and older – 72.6%

Non-English speakers – 47.1%

The test can leave even people who've been studying, training and watching pros in the field in action intimidated.

"For people who are trying to pass the exam, I would just tell them don't think about the what-ifs," Diaz said.

Test takers aren't allowed to share questions from the exam. Doing so would give other people an unfair advantage. But Diaz said some questions might ask what a social worker should do first. In reality, the answers were all things that should be done anyway, making the correct answer debatable.

The questions are multiple-choice, but she says some are better suited for short-answer responses.

Why the disparities?

The Kansas News Service spoke with multiple social work students, teachers, national and local advocacy groups. They were all puzzled by the disparities. Even though they agreed it produced problematic results – a better test would show little correlation between race, for instance, and test scores – but even the critics had a hard time identifying what would make them racist.

Humans are unique, so cultural upbringings could change how each person might answer a question. [Students of color usually perform worse on standardized testing](#), so those issues could be manifesting here. Around 47% of students say their university didn't even tell them about the licensing exam, so maybe their university didn't properly prepare them.

Kortney Carr, a doctoral student and associate professor of practice at the University of Kansas, has her own theory. She has seen, anecdotally, that Black people delay taking the test, opting to start working in the field first.

The lessons learned on the job don't square up with the answers to the test.

“It doesn’t look like the textbook,” she said. “They’ve developed their practice skill set. ... And then they take the test, the test is rooted very much in the textbook and how we teach. It just looks different at that time.”

The tests can be expensive, which could make some head into the workforce first. For the clinical exam, someone can only take the test after two years of supervision. That means paying a social worker thousands of dollars to observe them until they are eligible to test, Carr said, adding another barrier to getting licensed. The longer it takes to save money to take the test, the further removed those people are from the classwork that would prepare them.

But those are all theories and the true solution, or solutions, is still unknown. That’s why Darla Coffey, president and CEO of the Council on Social Work Education, wants every state to stop using the test until more can be learned.

Hundreds of colleges and universities have social work students, yet not every university is seeing the same issues.

At the University of Texas-Austin, for example, Hispanic/Latino and white students pass rates for the master’s exam are both above 94%. At Indiana University, multiracial students pass the master's exam more often than their white counterparts. Both schools have disparities in other areas though.

Coffey said she doesn’t want to see students continue to fail a problematic exam until the issues are addressed. She wants states to look into the data, and look at schools without disparities in pass rates, to begin finding solutions.

“We’re not opposed to licensure,” she said, which can better assure capable social workers.

“We need to understand exactly what’s going on before we can move forward,” she said. “It’s very problematic to say, ‘Well, there’s just something wrong with the takers here. You know, they should just pass the test.’ No, there’s something wrong with the test.”

Finding a fix

Stacey Hardy-Chandler, president of the Association of Social Work Boards, said the

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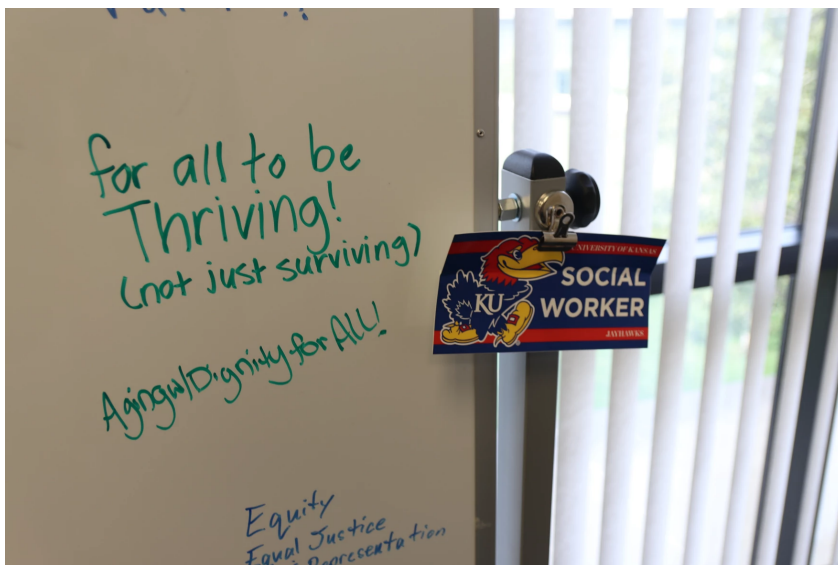
The group is offering programs to better prepare teachers, publishes a free guidebook that includes sample questions and is working to get feedback from the community about suggested changes. That includes launching the social work census, which will survey hundreds of thousands of social workers to see what they do to gauge how well the exams reflect that.

Hardy-Chandler said questions on the exam now are thoroughly vetted.

The questions are not written by ASWB. Item writers do it. Those writers then propose questions that are then reviewed by a separate team. If rejected, the question is workshopped for possible use later. If that question is approved, it will be put onto the test as a non-graded question.

Each test has 20 ungraded questions. Test takers will answer those questions, and after enough data is gathered, ASWB will see if that ungraded question has any bias. For example, if Black women are getting the question disproportionately wrong, the question is flagged and can be deleted or reworked. If it isn't flagged, then the question gets added to the test.

"We can stand by this test for the technical reasons," Hardy-Chandler told some members of the Kansas licensing board in October. "But we can also stand by this test because of the work that our subject matter experts do."



Blaise Mesa / Kansas News Service

Kansans of color have lower first-time pass rates on the social work licensing exam.

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The Kansas Behavioral Science Regulatory Board has almost zero options on how it can move forward.

State law requires Kansas social workers be licensed with a nationally syndicated test, and the ASWB's test is the only player in this game. Pausing the use of the test would mean leaving more social workers unlicensed, or breaking state law by not having a testing requirement.

But calls for change persist.

Becky Fast, executive director of the Kansas chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, said the state could have more social workers if it didn't have the current guidelines.

She says Kansas doesn't need its three levels of tests.

She said the disparities in pass results chase away qualified candidates. Students have already graduated with a degree. She argues that's proof enough of their competence.

"It's not like you haven't been passing tests for four years," Fast said.

Despite concerns, the number of social workers is growing in Kansas. The total number of people jumped with an additional 500 social workers licensed since July 2018. Kansas has just over 8,000 licensed social workers.

Social workers don't need a license to get a job, but the more desirable jobs usually require a license. Without some licenses, someone could hop over the state's western border to Colorado, which requires social workers to pass fewer licensing exams for some levels of certification.

In total, 37 states and territories have bachelor's, master's and clinical licenses like Kansas. Eight states have just a clinical and master's license. Two states have a license for just the highest level of expertise.

Carr, the doctoral student at the University of Kansas, said the tests need top-to-bottom changes. Questions could be reworked and surveys of the field could be taken, but

“We have to pass this test,” Carr said, “but it’s not necessarily an indication of your practice skill.”



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Blaise Mesa

As a criminal justice and social service reporter, it's my job to ensure the systems designed to help people are working as intended. Thousands of Kansans deal with the criminal justice or foster care systems each day. I strive to hold all agencies and departments accountable for the work they are doing. Reach me at blaise@kcur.org.

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ASWB social work licensing exam pass rate data confirm concern over racial disparities

Aug 11, 2022

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) on August 5 published data in a 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis . This disclosure stems from years of advocacy by NASW and other social work organizations, schools of social work, and individual advocates to push ASWB to post data that it has been unwilling to release for decades.

The data revealed glaring disparities in pass rates among racial groups, particularly for Black test takers. It also raised concerns about disparities in pass rates for other demographics, including social workers who are older adults.

All social work institutions - including ASWB and licensing boards, NASW and other associations, and social work higher education programs - must openly confront systemic racism within our profession. We must all commit to work to ensure reforms are made to ensure the licensing process is equitable for all, protecting the public without unnecessary gatekeeping and discrimination.

NASW through its national office and its 55 chapters is committed to working closely with partners to develop a coordinated and timely response to this issue and propose innovative solutions that reduce harm and increase diverse representation at all levels of social work practice.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in Washington, DC, is the largest membership organization of professional social workers. It promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its advocacy.

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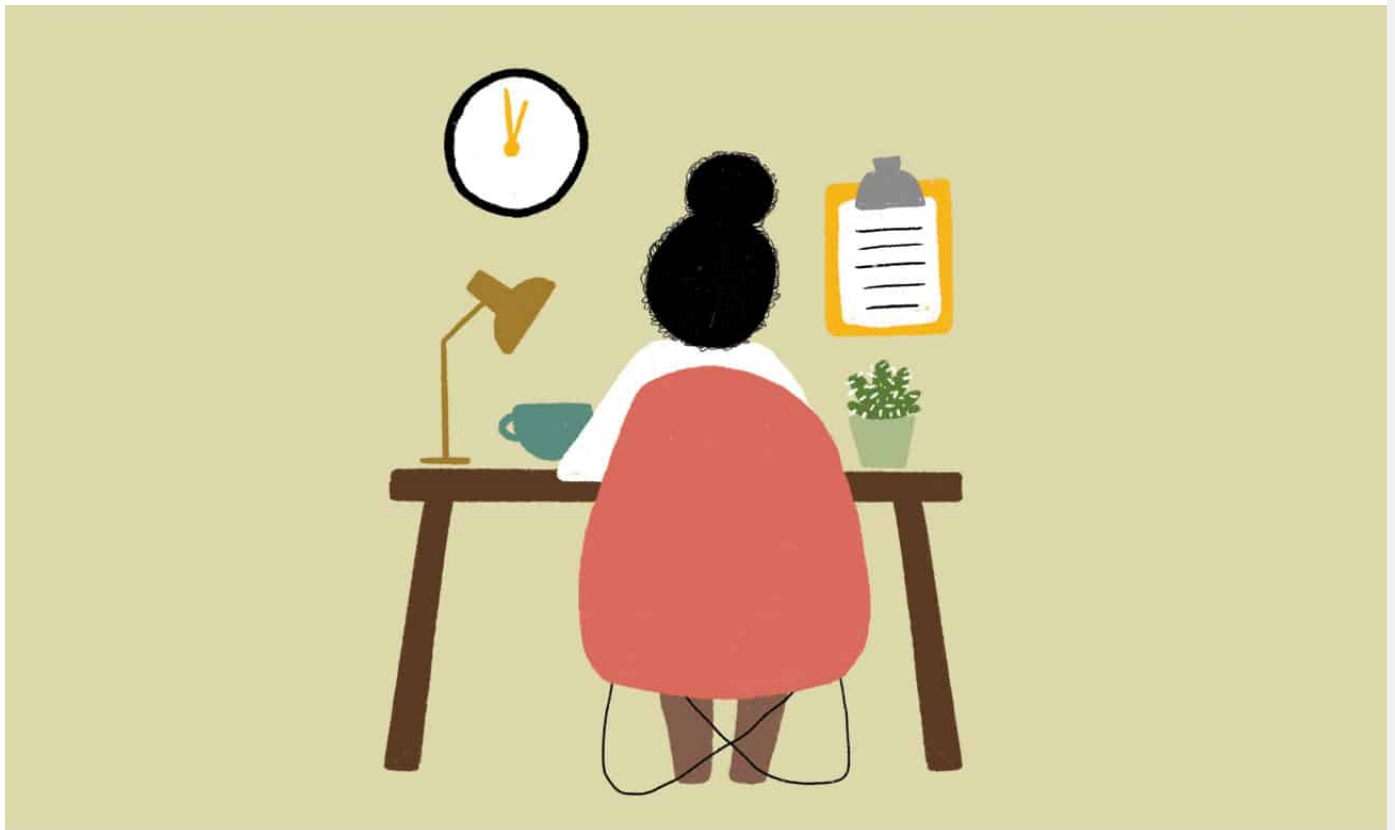
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Results in Social Worker Exams Reveal Stark Racial Disparities

BY FARRAH MINA



New data shows racial disparities in who passes the standardized test to become a licensed social worker in the U.S. Illustration by Christine Ongioco

Kathy Elisca Clermont is on the cusp of becoming a licensed clinical social worker in New Jersey. As a first-generation Haitian American, the 31-year-old has ambitions to combine her cultural beliefs with mainstream therapies, dismantling preconceived notions and stigma around mental health treatment, and making care more broadly accessible.

As desperately as her field needs her, it's been three years since Clermont completed her clinical training and earned a master's degree in social work from Fordham University. And she still can't land the job she wants.

Standing in her way is the Association of Social Work Boards' clinical social work licensing exam. The standardized test is required to obtain a social work license in most states, on top of completing supervised field hours and graduating from an accredited educational program.

Clermont has taken the licensing exam three times since 2020, yet despite months of studying each time, she has landed just shy of passing.

"It hurts you mentally, physically and emotionally," she said.

Clermont's circumstance is unfortunately not uncommon, according to a first-ever public release of data on who **passed the test** nationwide. Last month, the Association of Social Work Boards revealed that people of color are less likely to pass the licensing exam than their white counterparts. The largest disparity is between white test-takers — 84% of whom pass the exam the first time — and Black test-takers, who pass on the first try just 45% of the time.

First-time clinical social work licensure pass rates

Between 2018 and 2021, Black test-takers had the lowest pass rates.

White	83.9%
Multiracial	79.9%
Asian	72%
Hispanic/Latino	65.1%
Native American/Indigen	62.9%

The Virginia-based association responsible for administering the exam reports the same racial disparities existed among those who took the clinical exam multiple times. In those cases, 61% of white people passed, and just 55% of Black people

The licensing exams are used to determine competence to practice social work “ethically and safely.” Passing the exam helps secure employment, as well as opportunities for promotions, supervisory roles and higher wages.

“While other pass rate disparities exist, the most jarring and disappointing gap is in the rates reported for Black candidates,” Stacey Hardy-Chandler, the CEO of the Association of Social Work Boards, and the board of directors said in a joint [statement](#) last month.

Hardy-Chandler, who started her position in July, and the board said that the association firmly believes “that this revelation does not in any way reflect on the ability of Black candidates to demonstrate competence.” Rather, “it illuminates the historical burdens of racial trauma, marginalization, and social injustice to which Black candidates have been disproportionately subjected along their journey to licensure.”

The release of the test pass rates has prompted conversations large and small. In recent weeks, the Minnesota and New Jersey chapters of the National Association of Social Workers have held “virtual listening sessions” to discuss the exam data. Roughly 100 social workers joined in each state.

Attendees expressed outrage at the racial disparities, recounted their own experiences taking and re-taking the exam and brainstormed alternative tools to evaluate competency. Several called into question the necessity of a standardized test.

“There is no data that says the exams are an indication of someone’s ability to practice their skill or their knowledge,” said Karen Goodenough, executive director of the Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

As a result, test takers are left feeling unworthy, and potential clients denied the opportunity to the assistance they could provide.

“People feel stigmatized and marginalized when they cannot pass the test — as if it’s something wrong with them,” said Melissa Haley, president of the National Association of Black Social Workers. “And that’s a problem.”



Stacey Hardy-Chandler. Photo courtesy of Hardy-Chandler.

Haley added that using standardized tests to evaluate competency runs contrary to the very foundation of her profession, which focuses on a person's individual circumstances, needs and experiences. But for the workers who handle these cases, "there is only one way to get to licensure, which is to pass the exam in a very linear fashion that does not reflect the cultural differences in this country."

Still, more information is needed to determine what systemic issues are causing test result disparities, said Tawanda Hubbard, a licensed clinical social worker and associate professor of professional practice at Rutgers University School of Social Work. Hubbard said as long as there continues to be a required exam, there should be a deeper look at the scoring algorithm and the types of questions people from different backgrounds miss.

"This is not an individual problem," Hubbard said. And gathering more data will "bring about greater fairness and equity."

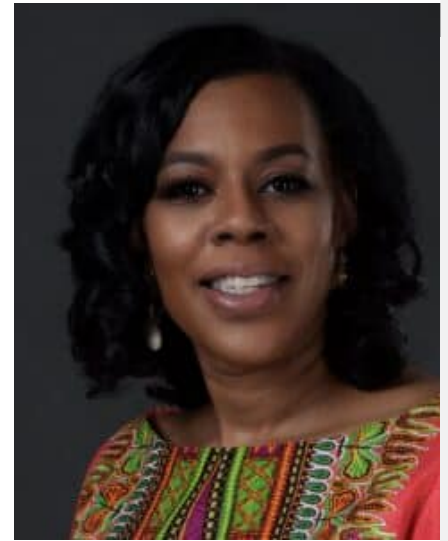
Long-awaited data, long-observed trends

Heads of professional groups representing social workers in Minnesota, Michigan and New Jersey said in interviews that they've spent years asking the national licensing body for demographic information on who passes the tests.

In a 2020 [letter](#) to social worker deans and directors Dwight Hymans, the former CEO of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), responded to the calls for test result transparency. Hymans said that the exams had come under increased scrutiny in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, but noted: "ASWB does not collect and thus does not release exam outcomes based on demographics."

By November the following year, the association's board of directors made the decision to gather, analyze and release performance data. The introduction to the "2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis" describes its findings as a demonstration of the association's "commitment to participating in data-driven conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion."

A spokesperson told The Imprint further work is underway, including an evaluation "of all



Melissa Haley. Photo courtesy of Haley.



The findings revealed so far analyzed data from the social work board’s five exams of different educational levels, over a 10-year period. Last year, the association administered almost 67,000 exams, a number that has grown steadily over the past decade. While the majority of those taking the test continue to be white people, the proportion of test takers from “historically marginalized communities” has also grown. The report defines those groups as “Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, multiracial, or Native American/Indigenous peoples.”

The highest pass rates are found among white people, women, younger test-takers and those whose first language is English.

While the report is a first, the racial disparities aren’t novel to many in the field.

“I’m completely unsurprised,” said Widian Nicola, an assistant social work professor at Seton Hall University in New Jersey and a practicing therapist.

Over the years, Nicola said she has watched many of her students, especially students of color, struggle to pass the licensing exam. High fees for tests and the resources needed to prepare contribute to the difficulty. Some told Nicola they thought about leaving the profession altogether.

“There’s been a massive need for clinicians and practitioners in the field and so if there’s delays for our practitioners to go into the field and respond to that need, it’s going to create a backlog of need for the community itself,” she said. “And guess who the community is that’s going to suffer the most? Marginalized communities.”

Because the exam is only administered in English, still others are pushed out who may be the most equipped to serve their communities. Bilingual practitioners are especially hard to come by

Widian Nicola. Photo courtesy of Nicola.

“It’s really almost impossible to find a Black therapist and then, going up the ladder, therapists who speak other languages,” said Jesselly De La Cruz, a bilingual practitioner based in New Jersey. She provides clinical mental health services in English and Spanish.

When De La Cruz took her licensing exam over 10 years ago, she said she was terribly anxious. There was a lot on the line. Her dad had suffered a stroke in her last semester of graduate school and De La Cruz was responsible for providing for her household.

“If I failed, it was essentially putting on hold my economic stability and that of my family,” she said.

A testing trend seen elsewhere

Standardized tests of all types have been found to push out people of color, including the Scholastic Aptitude Test for college admissions, bar exams for attorneys and pharmacist licensing tests. According to an [article](#) published last year by the National Education Association, standardized tests “have been instruments of racism and a biased system” with historic roots showing they were designed to prove that immigrants were intellectually inferior to white people. Because standardized tests pave the way to greater opportunities, they sideline people of color from opportunities to access higher education, careers and professional success.

Yet as with the growing movement to end standardized college entrance exams, there are now calls to end the national test for social workers.

An online [petition](#) created by 12 social workers urges state licensing boards to push for legislation to discontinue the exam and calls for alternative pathways to licensure based on degree completion and supervised clinical hours. The petition so far has more than 6,000 signatures.

Its authors call the recent report on racial disparities in test results “a reflection of trauma — of careers that have been stalled, of lost wages, of communities deprived of clinical leadership. It diminishes the integrity of social work, and demands immediate action.”

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The petition also demands financial reparations for test-takers who have had to sit multiple times for the exam, which costs more than \$200.

Not all states require a license to be employed as a social worker.

In California a license is only **required** for social workers who engage in clinical practice.

Last year in Illinois, the governor **signed** a bill into law that removed the requirement for non-clinical social workers to take the licensure test. According to the National Association of Social Workers in Illinois, the change **resulted** in almost 3,000 new licensed social workers in the first six months of 2022. During the same period in 2021, just 421 social workers became licensed.

High costs, high stakes

Clermont was devastated when she failed the exam for the third time. She was four points away from passing — the closest she had ever gotten.

The almost \$800 she had spent taking the exam three times — in addition to the cost of prep courses and books — could have gone toward her student loans or other bills. Meanwhile, without a license and expenses mounting, she struggled to find a job.

As she evaluates her next career steps, she is working as an advocate for domestic violence survivors. Part of her role is educating her clients on their legal options and helping them access mental health counseling.

Kathy Elisca Clermont. Photo courtesy of Claremont.

And while her job incorporates some elements of social work, Clermont said it's ultimately not what she went to school for. Taking the social work licensing exam a fourth time could mean putting herself through months of study and revisiting the disappointment of failure.

“I have thought about leaving the social work field,” Clermont said. “And I hate the fact that I was thinking about it because of an exam.”

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Hundreds joined meeting to complain after report confirmed their fears



2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis

FINAL REPORT

Outraged social workers say a new report on the disparities of who passes their licensing exam confirms what many have long suspected.

“When I saw this report, all the 92 pages, I was so disgusted. I was so upset,” said one licensed clinical social worker at Rutgers University in Newark.

That social worker said she knew more nonwhites and older students were failing because she constantly heard from alumni who failed the exam. One of

her students, a 55-year-old woman who is an immigrant, failed the exam five times before finally passing on her sixth attempt, the social worker said.

“I was outraged,” she said of what she read in the report.

Thursday’s virtual meeting with hundreds of registered participants follows the release earlier this month of a national report detailing large disparities in race and age among those who pass the licensing exam when taking the test for the first time.

Inherent bias

The report exposes the inherent bias within the test and shows, through data, the harm being done to the profession and marginalized communities, according to a newsletter from the New Jersey chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. Social work schools in New Jersey have been advocates in pushing for the release of the data from the Association of Social Work Boards, the New Jersey chapter said.

The [report says](#) that first-time pass rates have historically been highest for white test takers, averaging 83.9% between 2018 and 2021. In 2021, 85% of white test takers passed the clinical exam on their first attempt, while 46.2% of first-time Black test takers passed the clinical exam during the same period. The pass rate for multiracial test takers was 79.9%, while the pass rate for Asians was 72%. Hispanics passed by a rate of 65.1% and Native American and Indigenous peoples passed by 62.9% between 2018 and 2021.

“This whole ASWB exam, it’s institutional racism. It’s a fiasco,” said another social worker at the meeting who is an assistant professor of social work at Lehman College in New York.

He said he was shocked that the Association of Social Work Boards released the data because he had been involved in presentations and meetings for at

least a decade at which the board refused to display the data.

“I feel like they’ve been hiding this for years,” he said.

No longer a secret

Now public, the report confirms what has been true for years regarding the racial disparities concerning who passes the exam, said Jennifer Thompson, a social worker and the executive director of the National Association of Social Workers New Jersey chapter.

“It’s really important that our community has been sharing their stories of this experience that they can’t pass it. They have tried five, six (or) seven times. They’ve spent thousands of dollars to pass a test and they really felt a sense of ‘I’m not good enough.’ This data really highlights that it wasn’t them, it’s the test.”

More disparities are seen in the pass rates based on the age of test takers. First-time test takers between the ages of 18 and 29 had a 91% eventual pass rate between 2018 and 2021, according to the report, while test takers 50 and older had a 64.8% pass rate.

Businesses and organizations hiring social workers under the assumption that they will be licensed should also be invested in the report, said Lisa Lawson, a licensed clinical social worker and the president-elect of the New Jersey chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

There were also calls to get rid of the exam entirely.

“If New Jersey could be the leader in this, that would be wonderful to say, ‘Hey, we’re going to uphold social work values in our state,’” said the assistant professor, who holds a license to practice in New Jersey. “I’m sure there would be other states that would eventually join us, maybe not everyone, but it

would really create a necessary demonstration of support that we are an anti-racism profession.”