



# Moving from Darkness to Light: Social Work Students' Reflections on COVID-19 in Practice and the Future of the Profession

*Author(s)*

Jill L. Russett, PhD  
Christopher Newport University

Diane Griffiths, PhD  
Christopher Newport University

*Author's note: The term COVID-19 as used in this manuscript refers to Coronavirus disease 2019; the term pandemic refers to the disease outbreak caused by COVID-19 as determined by the World Health Organization. These two terms are used interchangeably.*

## **Abstract**

Social workers continue to feel the ramifications of COVID-19 on professional and personal development in almost all domains – in the classroom, in field practice, and as future practitioners. In this qualitative study, researchers illuminate undergraduate social work students' perceptions of how COVID-19 has impacted their field education and social work practice, and in turn sheds light on the implications for future social work education. The study explores students' unique perspectives through content analysis of personal reflective writing. Results highlight how students continue to experience collective trauma, and how, as newly emerging social worker professionals, they perceive the new landscape of service delivery. Results also highlight the need to integrate new teaching practices, especially around the use of technology.

*Keywords:* BSW students; COVID-19; field education; collective trauma

For the past several years, the social work field has grappled with COVID-19 and its effects on student engagement, teaching modalities, field education, and the profession. Recent years have been filled with changes in safety regulations, shifts

to online service delivery, and the “great resignation,” which has resulted in staff turnover and career changes not seen since World War II (Thompson, 2021). It is imperative to explore the enormity of these changes and learn how to adapt to meet emerging needs. BSW students begin to formulate their identities as social workers during their field placements, and this qualitative study seeks to shed light on the impact of COVID-19 in three areas: students’ personal development, professional development, and perceptions of future social work practice. A framework of collective trauma is utilized to elucidate the effects of COVID-19 as an ongoing traumatic event that continues to deliver fear and uncertainty (Tosone et al., 2021). This study gives voice to students immersed in field practice and illustrates how COVID-19 has deeply affected their views on the needs of clients, the profession, and their capacity as human beings.

## Literature Review

### Trauma and Collective Trauma

Trauma has been widely understood as a reaction to a sudden and severe event that can impact an individual physically, psychologically, and emotionally, often with lasting effects (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). This definition has evolved to take into account the collective experience of trauma encapsulating the experiences of a large group of people, with impacts on an entire culture or society. According to Hirschberger, *collective trauma* “refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact...the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people” (Hirschberger, 2018). Compared to an individual trauma, which is experienced and understood by one person or a small group, collective trauma involves an experience shared by an entire community, a shared memory of and meaning attributed to the traumatic event, and a shared understanding of the causes of the trauma (Bologna, 2021).

The concept of collective trauma has been widely associated with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Berger, 2022; Silver et al., 2021). Losses in all areas of life – including economic/employment, socialization, education, and health and mental health – and the sheer magnitude of the death rate globally have altered our world view, a hallmark of any collective trauma (Hirschberger, 2018).

Researchers have acknowledged that, for some groups, the pandemic has represented more of a collective *stressor* while, for others, the experience of living through the pandemic rises to the level of trauma (Kaysen, n.d.). For example, marginalized groups, such as people of color and those with heightened social and physical vulnerabilities, are at greater risk of broader negative impacts due to compounding

and intersecting risk factors as well as previous trauma exposures (Kaysen, n.d.; Snowden & Snowden, 2021; Watson et al., 2020).

### **Impact of COVID-19 on College Students**

College students have been uniquely affected by the pandemic and its associated impact of collective trauma (Ruberman, 2014). COVID-19 disrupted the very rhythms of student life, from classroom interactions to personal and social gatherings (Tasso et al., 2021). The college environment should provide stability and structure, and a safe and predictable environment in which to learn and grow; instead, the pandemic upended these expectations.

Emerging literature illustrates how the mental and physical health challenges of college students were exacerbated due to COVID-19 (Krupnick, 2022; Scofield & Locke, 2022) with increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2022; Jones et al., 2022). College attrition rates rose by over 3%, with 26% of freshmen failing to return (Krupnick, 2022) and with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those in the community college system most likely to discontinue their education (Krupnick, 2022). This brief picture shows the magnitude of the untimely challenges faced by students already in a critical life transition (Isselbacher & Su, 2020).

Even within a seemingly homogenous college student population, research shows that some students were especially impacted by the impacts of trauma or a collective traumatic event. For example, Correia et al. (2022) found that women, gender-expressive students, students of color, and college students from urban areas experienced significantly higher levels of stress, worry, and food insecurity during the pandemic. Molock and Parcham (2022) found similar results in their study of college students of color, who experienced significant disruptions in finances, living situations, academic performance, and career plans, as well as stress, anxiety, and depression. These differences suggest that the pandemic exacerbated preexisting structural and individual challenges faced by marginalized groups in college.

### **The Impacts of Trauma/Vicarious Trauma on Social Work Students**

Social workers are at particular risk for experiencing and responding to trauma as they support members of the community who are most impacted (Clemans, 2004; Miller & Grise-Owens, 2022). *Vicarious trauma* is an example of this risk, and refers to “the cumulative effects of working with survivors of traumatic life events, such as rape, incest, child abuse, or domestic violence...[and the subsequent] emotional, physical, or spiritual transformations experienced by those who work with traumatized populations” (Clemans, 2004; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

Little research is available regarding the impacts of vicarious trauma on social work students. In situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, where social workers themselves are experiencing the same traumatic event as their clients (albeit in potentially different ways), vicarious trauma may be compounded and broadened to represent a more collective experience; hence, collective trauma. Before the pandemic, studies identified collective traumatic phenomena among social work students in response to events such as Hurricane Katrina and 9/11. Following these events, social work students were found to have experienced trauma symptoms, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and experiencing intrusive thoughts (Lemieux, et al., 2010; Matthieu et al., 2007; Tosone et al., 2003). More recently, in her research on collective (or shared) trauma among social work students, Tosone writes, "The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that we are all connected as individuals and as communities and that the reactions and emotions [social work students] see in clients may be reflected in ourselves" (Tosone et al., 2021, p. 352).

## **Impact of COVID-19 on the Field of Human Services**

### *Labor Market Changes*

COVID-19 brought with it large-scale layoffs, shifts in the economy at large, and completely altered models of service delivery (Parker et al., 2020). From 2020 to 2022 the United States experienced "The Great Resignation": millions of Americans went searching for new job or career opportunities, while others left the workforce entirely (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Further, the pandemic brought a demand for mental health workers that was the highest in decades (Dunne & Henderson, 2022). As a result, social service systems experienced increased workloads and across the country reached a "breaking point," reporting staff vacancy rates as high as 60% (Johnston, 2021; Pho, 2022).

### *Shifts to Virtual Platforms and Remote Work*

The pandemic magnified the need to be flexible and creative in order to meet client needs, particularly in the area of remote work. Many services, such as assessments, support groups, family meetings, and benefits counseling, were moved online, often with mixed success given that clients were also trying to access and navigate the new online world themselves (Pascoe, 2022).

As a precursor of what was to come, in 2015 the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) added technology-related outcomes to the competencies (CSWE, 2015). A 2018 report elucidated the challenges and tasks associated with meeting these competency requirements (Hitchcock et al., 2018). Though the accelerated use of technology was

required, significant (pre-pandemic) gaps existed in the education and training of social workers on effective and ethical use of virtual service delivery (Ramsey & Montgomery, 2014).

Questions of ethical practice also arose, such as the use of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, boundaries and dual relationships, and professional competence (Reamer, 2013). Concerns emerged around social workers' ability to gather complex information by telephone and/or video and the ability to form a therapeutic relationship without being able to pick up on nonverbal cues (Ashcroft et al., 2022; Reamer, 2013). Most organizations and institutions were ill-prepared to make the transition to remote service delivery in an effective and evidence-based manner (Schweitzer, 2020). Child and family service workers struggled to meet growing client needs (Daftary et al., 2021). The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) reported that, while COVID-19 led to enhanced opportunities for remote services (in the Social Security Administration, for example), vulnerable populations were still not able to benefit due to limited access to the internet and technology overall (GAO, 2022). These challenges and concerns in human services trickle down to the needs of students entering the social work discipline, particularly in the area of field education, where practice skills are first developed.

### **COVID-19 and Social Work Education/Field Education**

The CSWE reported in the spring of 2021 that 36.5% of traditionally in-person programs moved entirely online (Bradshaw, 2021) and 55% of baccalaureate social work programs had partial online course delivery (CSWE, 2020b). COVID-19 had particular implications for field work. By the spring of 2021, over 70% of programs were reporting difficulty in finding appropriate placements, more than three quarters of programs (77.4%) offered remote field placement settings, 60.4% modified the number of field hours, and 28.3% reported substituting simulations for field hours (Bradshaw, 2021). Even before the pandemic, faculty reported that online learning was less effective than in-person learning (Levin et al., 2018).

While the academic year 2021-2022 brought more normalcy, agencies were still taking fewer student interns or none at all (Bradshaw, 2021). The Omicron variant emerging in January 2022 brought renewed uncertainty and, according to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the majority of social work education programs continued to provide some level of online instruction (Bradshaw, 2021). CSWE lowered its field education hours requirements for the second year in a row and approved simulated field experience (CSWE, 2020a). Notably, in the *Member Pulse Survey Results* (Bradshaw, 2021), faculty reported "we are concerned that field placement agencies will continue to utilize remote services for the foreseeable future—this is not a sustainable model for supervision for our students; we have to steer clear

of settings that primarily provide remote services..." (p. 11).

Given the broad changes introduced by the pandemic, social work educators have come to understand the importance of supporting students' mental health needs in the face of this collective trauma. The *Member Pulse Survey* identified that many students (63.4%) were reporting mental health challenges (Bradshaw, 2021). The ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic introduces a more chronic form of collective trauma, with its continued uncertainty, underlying consequences, and consistent reintroduction of the initial trauma, which can trigger repeated stress responses. When viewed through the lens of social work education, it is important to consider the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on field education and how students are managing their emerging roles as beginning social workers. It is not sufficient to approach our understanding of student needs through a one-time glimpse at coping and well-being; rather, a true trauma-informed perspective requires providing students with ongoing opportunities for reflection (Sanders, 2021). Further, while the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in what many refer to as a collective trauma, any exploration of the impacts should also account for differential or disproportionate impacts on those students who were most vulnerable before the pandemic.

## Methods

### Study Design and Context

With approval from the university Institutional Review Board, the two researchers embarked on an exploratory study using the reflective writings of undergraduate students in social work field practice class. The study investigated the question of what impact COVID-19 had on students as developing professionals and how they perceived their future professional career as a result. Researchers utilized content analysis for understanding written documentation. As an empirically grounded method, content analysis has been described by Krippendorff (2019) as "a research technique for making inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18) and in this study was the primary methodology used to explore the underlying meanings of written content. In this instance, conceptual analysis was used to examine three guided writing prompts. This approach allowed the researchers to examine preliminary insights into the professional development of students in a subjective but scientific manner. A set of systematic procedures was used to collect and analyze the data as identified by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), providing guidance for the researchers from the beginning preparation of data all the way to drawing conclusions. These steps are laid out in the subsequent sections and help to support the validity and reliability of the study.

## Setting and Context

The study took place in a moderate-sized southeast public university with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 4,400 students in the spring of 2022, at the same time the world was navigating a second year of living through a pandemic. Classes at the university were fully in-person, and students were predominantly practicing at in-person field placements. For this study, students used terms such as “remote work” and “virtual work” interchangeably to describe engaging with clients in spaces other than the agency and providing services through the use of technology (cell phones, laptops) or the use of virtual platforms such as Zoom.

## Participants

Twenty-two undergraduate social work majors enrolled in their senior field practice class served as the participants. Each student completed three separate writing prompts over the course of six weeks. Of the 22 students, 20 identified as women and two identified as men; they were an average age of 22 and predominately white, though some diversity existed, with students identifying as Lebanese, Filipino, African American, and LGBTQ. They represented 20 unique field placements servicing a multitude of diverse populations and unique service needs, including the court system, law enforcement, medical care, veterans' services, after-school programs, nursing care homes, and domestic violence agencies, to name a few.

## Data Collection

Content analysis begins with acquiring written text. In this instance, firsthand knowledge of students' experiences was gained through reflective writing assignments in the field practice class. Students received details of the study through an informed consent process, and while writing assignments were graded, students could choose to opt out of sharing their responses without penalty, and data was not reviewed until the end of the semester. The following three writing prompts were designed by the researchers to elucidate the impact of COVID-19 on developing professionals.

1. How has COVID-19 impacted you personally? What stands out to you related to COVID-19 over the past academic year? What are your thoughts about the health and wellness restrictions lifting and moving toward a more “pre-pandemic” world? How have you coped with challenges and uncertainty introduced by COVID-19?
2. Reflect on your experience with COVID-19 as it relates professionally to field; you may consider how this has impacted your clients, yourself, and/or your learning experience.
3. In what way do you think COVID-19 may impact the future of social work practice and your own work opportunities, in particular related to working in

a remote and/or hybrid environment? How do you feel about the prospect of working remotely?

## Data Analysis

Data analysis consists of the systematic examination of the materials collected by first, understanding the information; next, organizing ideas; and finally, interpreting findings. The review of the data was facilitated in a way that best supported internal validity: each researcher conducted independent reviews; narratives were analyzed after the semester was complete and grades were finalized; and personal identifiers (name and course section) were removed from responses. The process of analysis begins with the researcher becoming intimately knowledgeable about the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003 ). Each researcher became familiar with the written narratives by immersing themselves in the documentation and reading and rereading the information. Narratives were stored in a shared drive accessible only by the two researchers and will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Next, a conceptual content analysis of 66 written narratives responding to the three research questions, each about a page long, was completed independently by each researcher, who assessed explicit and implicit terminology. Individual themes based on single words, sentences, or longer paragraphs assessing expressions of ideas were identified. Through this process, researchers defined emerging ideas and color-coded them to identify independent thoughts. Following this, the researchers came together weekly to discuss findings and to group ideas into appropriate themes. As consistency within the interpretation of the data emerged between the researchers, themes developed into patterns and patterns into categories. This iterative process of reviewing the data independently and collectively increases the reliability of findings.

Continued categorical strategies were used to identify similarities and differences in data through the process of coding, or formal representation of analytic thinking. This process provides a means of linking data to conceptual issues (Rossman & Rallis, 2003 ). Once this process was complete, categories and coding schemes were developed using descriptive language and inductive content analysis, a bottom-up approach in which codes emerge through the process. This approach is particularly useful when little or no other information exists on the topic being analyzed, as is the case with COVID-19. As a final step in this process, inferences among findings and reconstruction of meaning from the data was developed. Patterns that emerged were used to develop descriptive conclusions, which are discussed in the results section.



## Results

### Results Related to RQ1: Personal Impacts – Emotional, Academic, and Social

Students experienced significant social and emotional events during the pandemic. Student A explained, "I started wondering how I was going to remain healthy and still see friends, go to school, and live life as a 20-year-old." Student B summed up the academic experience by stating, "I never could have imagined that, three years later, I would be graduating college never getting to see most of my classmates' faces in person without a mask on."

Students expressed concern about following the rules as well as about their own health and safety and the safety of friends and family. Student C shared, "I was scared that if I did something wrong (forgot my mask, didn't get boosted) I would be yelled at and ostracized." According to another student, "I live with dread and anxiety everyday with getting it, even with being vaccinated and boosted, because of the possible repercussions that are still yet unknown of the virus" (Student D).

Perspective taking and personal growth was also evident. According to Student E, "I learned self-love, confidence, an appreciation for my own existence, and the necessity of emotional intelligence." Student F shared, "Self-care was something I never really paid attention to before the pandemic but now I realize it is important to care for myself and my well-being since COVID-19 has really affected my life."

### Results Related to RQ 2: Impacts on Professional Development in Field Education

Students reported challenges engaging in field practice. For example, Student G shared, "this year I tested positive for COVID-19 and had to isolate at home for 10 days, missing two days of field... additionally, we went online the first two weeks of the spring semester, taking away a week of field."

#### *Agency Protocols Related to COVID-19*

Agencies established safety protocols, as shared by Student C: "The rules for wearing a mask, social distancing, vaccination, exposures, and quarantining are constantly changing, and it is difficult enough to keep up when I am also worried about myself." Safety precautions had the potential to limit clients' access to services. For example, Student B said, "To avoid overcrowding in the office, no one is allowed to enter the lobby without an appointment... [clients are] required to check their temperature in the lobby and wash their hands before receiving any services." Student J shared challenges in working with clients with cognitive impairment, stating "they had trouble with making sure to wash their hands, maintaining physical boundaries, not

sharing drinks/food, etc.” Student K shared the challenges her clients faced when required to test negative for COVID-19 before receiving services: “While you may be thinking, ‘Oh just go to the rapid testing clinic,’ etc., this is not so easy for a patient that is actively dying.” Regardless of the safety precautions, one student expressed feeling inevitably exposed to risk:

Doing my field placement at the height of a worldwide pandemic was intensely terrifying... I could either go to the court where I would come in contact with up to 100 people or enter the home of someone who has taken no COVID-19 precautions. When doing home visits, we had no right to ask clients to wear a mask in their own homes...I was constantly subjected to unmasked and possibly contagious clients (Student E).

The virus introduced new complexities with practice decisions, creating ethical dilemmas. Student L frames the issue in terms of work-culture differences: “For instance, [my field placement] has not required its workers to wear a mask since I got there...and 95% of their workers have not worn one.” In another setting, referring to staffing shortages impacting patient care, another student shared,

Family members of residents were not able to see their loved ones, resulting in feelings of isolation as well as loneliness among the residents...there was even a three-day period where I was the only social worker who could enter the facility...which, although it was a great learning experience, caused me a great deal of stress and anxiety (Student M).

Another student in a hospice setting shared, “We work with an extremely vulnerable population...no matter what my personal beliefs are related to mask mandates or other guidelines, I find it is my duty to these patients and as a social worker, to protect their health” (Student K).

### *Impacts on Professional Development and Service Delivery*

Students discussed how the pandemic caused them to have increased anxiety and fear. Student B stated, “When preparing to enter field, I experienced heightened anxiety... since the pandemic brought about so much uncertainty, I felt myself clinging to any sense of direction for the school year.” According to another student, “I have difficulty speaking to how COVID-19 has affected my own field experience because I do not know anything outside of what I have experienced” (Student N).

COVID-19 resulted in shifts in the work environment. “People were already on their way to experiencing burnout...no one was willing to admit it because it wasn’t ‘normalized’.... If you were feeling burned out before COVID-19 happened, you looked as if you couldn’t handle your job” (Student L). Exposure to the virus often resulted in the absence of supervisors and colleagues, compounding missed learning opportunities. On one hand, Student O said, “I’m often not allowed to sit in the courtroom unless it is one of my cases or my supervisor’s cases.” At the same time,

they also shared, "I have had to fill in for staff members who are sick...which has given me more experience and made me more competent in the victim advocate role" (Student O).

Students described situations where demand has outpaced agency resources, creating a gap in service delivery. Student D noted, "Some community partners have lost resources of their own ...some partners have been so overloaded with other patients and their own clients that they have to push some people away or create a long waitlist." They were also aware that COVID-19 has affected the prevalence of problems like domestic violence. One student shared,

I believe COVID-19 has allowed for domestic violence and human trafficking especially to increase, although there was a decrease in reports since no one was in public to witness the crimes, as well as those in need not having the opportunity to reach out for help because their abusive partner was always in the home with them (Student O).

### *Engaging with Clients in Person and Virtually*

Protocols around managing COVID-19 impacted students' abilities to engage one-on-one with clients, most noticeably regarding difficulties with mask requirements. Student P, who was working in early childhood intervention, discussed the importance of being able to see an individual's face during home visits: "If a client is working on improving their speech, they often will have to look at the mouths of the provider in order to help them see how to form the words with their own mouth." Student I shared, "COVID-19 has definitely impacted my ability to interact with my clients... the masks have made it extremely difficult to see facial expressions...I have to rely heavily on body language and verbal cues when dealing with clients." Finally, Student B shared that wearing masks and the inability to read body language was challenging for learning engagement skills, saying, "Especially when leading a psychosocial rehabilitation group, it has been difficult for me to judge what lessons and discussion questions yield the most engagement."

Many agencies placed restrictions on services, moving some or all services online. In doing so, students gained a unique opportunity to develop skills specific to online and remote service delivery; however, they were still faced with the challenge of developing authentic relationships and establishing rapport in online spaces. As Student Q said, "Case management, when you have never met the client face to face, is more complicated." Some students found practicing in hybrid settings to be less intimidating: "Many of the interactions I have with veterans are over the phone which is easier for them as well" (Student F). In addition, they saw how some populations were able to benefit: "It will also be helpful for when an individual gets sick...or goes out of town... [and] having the option for virtual will improve attendance for all

services offered" (Student R).

### *Impacts on Social Work Practice*

Self-determination was evident, as not all clients were receptive to being vaccinated and, for those with decreased capacity, others made these decisions for them: "Many clients [were] resistant to getting vaccinated which has impacted their employment. For some this was a personal choice, for others (especially young adults) their parents or legal guardians influenced that decision" (Student I). Likewise, Student O shared, "It is important to meet with clients in an environment where they are comfortable, and some clients may not want strangers entering their home, especially during seasons where the cases of COVID-19 are heightened."

One student noted the challenge of working in a supervised visitation setting where noncustodial parents have limited opportunity to meet and engage with their children:

Not only have they had to wear masks when seeing their child in person, they have also had to go through the struggles of being virtual as well. This means they were not able to hug their child, they were not able to play certain games with their child, they were not able to do much of anything with their child except talk. Some parents were not even able to see their child because they were too young to be able to sit and talk on a computer. This creates even more distance between the parent and child (Student R).

Some clients had a hard time acquiring and navigating technology and the basic foundations of practice, such as informed consent and confidentiality. According to Student R, "For some it may be difficult to find a private location within their home." Student S said, "I didn't realize how much the clients were impacted by COVID-19... whether this was not having the money to pay for classes, accessing technology online, or being able to leave a voicemail due to the phone bill not being paid."

### **Results Related to RQ 3: Perspectives on the Future**

Student B said, "While the pandemic has been a prevalent barrier for client and employee experiences, I would make the assumption that COVID-19 will have lasting effects on all aspects of society and the profession of social work."

### *The Importance of Social Workers, Adaptability, and Mental Health*

Greater awareness developed around mental health concerns and the acceptability of seeking professional help. As Student G said, "It has become more clear during the pandemic to people who would normally not ask for help, that help is desperately needed." According to Student L, "No longer are people afraid to admit they are struggling with mental health or they just need a break...COVID-19 has made mental

health talk more realistic, and that is a great way to connect on a deeper level.”

### *Finding a Place in the New World of Social Work*

Every student in practice during 2021-2022 used technology to provide service delivery in some capacity, and many experienced a hybrid schedule for all or part of the year. Expressing concern regarding developing necessary practice skills with online technologies, Student N reported, “I believe online interactions provide more ease for people to mask what is actually going on. I know a core value I hold is authenticity, making it difficult for me to maintain the level of connection that online formats foster.”

Students expressed challenges with specific tasks in the planned change process, especially assessment and intervention. According to one student,

For a full comprehensive assessment of total wellness you need to see it for yourself. It is very important to actually enter the home and check that they have hot water, or proper materials to care for kids, check for bed bugs [etc.].... I feel social work can utilize remote work into their current model but in person is still a requirement for assessment (Student Q).

Student K shared, “Social work practice is founded on building human relationships, showing empathy and compassion.” They related this to the interdisciplinary team with which they worked, providing not only physical care to patients “but emotional as well...some patients have minimal social support and the [agency] is all they have to guide them through this hard journey ...to take that physical presence away from them is unimaginable to me” (Student K).

Students shared the desire to be in a supportive work environment where they could learn from their colleagues and have direct supervision. Student O said, “I would struggle to work remotely because one aspect I enjoy about working is creating relationships with coworkers. I feel that it would be hard to create those relationships if I began working at a job that is completely remote.”

On the other hand, some liked the idea of the flexibility hybrid work offered, such as “having days where I can...decompress from the intense stressors of any work, while also being productive” (Student O). Student T said, “I’ve noticed that when our classes were hybrid it was great being able to change my environment...due to this, I would likely search for hybrid and in-person jobs since I would be able to work more efficiently.” Student P echoed these sentiments, stating, “I would personally say that working hybrid is the best option...you still have the ability to have face-to-face interactions with your clients and coworkers, but you also have a chance to be completely alone.”

Students' opinions on future remote work were mixed. As an example, Student M, who did not want to work remotely, said, "I do not plan on applying for any positions that require me to do more than a few hours of virtual work per week, if any at all." Whereas, Student E, who is interested in advocacy work, felt macro work would be more suitable for doing from home, stating "making these connections involves a lot of cold calling, sending emails, mailing letters, and speaking to representatives...as this work can be done over the phone and computer...I would be totally okay working from home doing advocacy work."

Another student sums up in this way:

I like the idea of working remotely. I am very much an introvert and an independent worker, so being able to work from the comfort of my own home sounds nice. On the other hand, a fully remote job could become isolating over time, so I think I would prefer some kind of hybrid (Student I).

## Discussion

Three key takeaways were identified in this study: First, it is imperative that social work educators continue to develop students' ability to manage their own personal well-being, including approaching this work from a trauma-informed perspective (Rinfrette et al., 2021; Sanders, 2021). Second, the new modalities of service provision, specifically virtual and hybrid environments, highlight the need for enhanced attention to micro practice, and to be cognizant of what emerging professionals are experiencing as they enter the workforce. This includes helping students to acquire additional knowledge and skills to be able to successfully navigate their future practice. Third, social work programs need to be aware of the lasting impacts the pandemic will have on ethical practice and social justice issues at the macro level.

Research question one, personal impact on emotional, academic and social domains, was evident as students openly reflected on the challenges they faced in dealing with their (or their family's) health concerns, struggles with staying engaged academically, and difficulties and disappointments related to their inability to connect socially with their peers. Their feedback highlighted the continued need to focus on student mental health and self-care. As has been reported in the literature (Ashcroft, et al., 2022), this study also revealed that such shared experiences increase the potential for students to have a greater understanding of clients' needs and to be able to have more empathic responses. Students expressed that COVID-19 forced them to take self-care more seriously, and how it has helped them develop a new understanding of emotional intelligence, including having more patience for others.

Students' reflections highlight the need for social work educators to teach students how to help their clients build healthy coping skills and to build and retain those

skills themselves. According to Clary and Hernandez (2022), global events such as pandemics reinforce the importance of social work educators teaching and modeling positive self-care behaviors and work-life integration, incorporating activities directly into the classroom. Tosone, et al.'s (2021) notion of collective/shared trauma most certainly applies to today's global public health crisis. Now, more than ever, social work educators need to integrate an evidence-based, trauma-informed framework for teaching students (Sanders, 2021; Watson et al., 2022).

Without a doubt, research question two, impact on professional development in field education, had the greatest implications. This cohort of social work students experienced field education and practice in ways that only a handful of students will ever be able to understand, and the future landscape has been forever changed. Students were trained during a time of tremendous health restrictions, massive staff shortages, and high turnover, as well as greater development of remote work and virtual modalities of service delivery. Students reported leaving their field practicum feeling ill-prepared in micro-level skills and questioning their future ability to engage in practice. This suggests that gaps in student learning may have accumulated during this time, and new practitioners may need additional supervision and support when starting off.

Having spent a significant portion of time receiving in-person training, students watched agencies make constant adjustments to safety protocols and respond to serious staff transitions and vacancies. Many students had difficulties connecting with their clients and coworkers because of full PPE but also because many agency operations had moved online. Likewise, students felt the direct impacts of staffing shortages when they felt supervisors were overwhelmed and could not provide the in-depth experiences needed. Students who had to conduct assessments or run groups online reported difficulty with seeing the whole person or family; some reported that accessing clients online was challenging due to client limitations with accessing internet technology. Finally, students gained a new perspective on equity and access to services as they observed how innovations in technology and remote service delivery can benefit some but alienate others.

Research question three explored what the future of social work would be like. While remote modalities were not always seen as optimal, students acknowledged this would be prominent in future work. Some students embraced this opportunity and conceded that remote work would fit their needs and possibly work better for certain areas of social work (macro, for example). Others felt strongly that remote service delivery was not the best modality for new social workers and does not allow for needed supervision or building rapport with clients and colleagues. In general, most students were comfortable with the idea of a hybrid model that would allow for personal time at home for more administrative tasks.

Given the transitions in the field that have resulted from COVID-19, it is clear there are major challenges that lie ahead for the social work profession. Educators will need to be progressive in teaching as the shift of a once ancillary use of technology becomes a primary modality of practice. Education surrounding the use of technology before and during field will require renewed attention. There is the need for evidence-based research to address not only the most effective approaches to remote service delivery (by population and context) but also evidence-based approaches to teaching this content. Identifying and responding to populations at risk (students and clients) who may have difficulty accessing new technologies and resources should also be included. Further, students may need exposure to learning independent time management skills and strategies for accessing quality supervision remotely.

Reflections from this research suggest that helping students to navigate some of the novel ethical challenges introduced by the pandemic would also be of benefit. For example, how should students respond to staffing shortages that result in substandard services to clients? How can they balance their own health and safety with that of clients or coworkers, especially when values and standards may be in conflict? The International Federation of Social Workers began to address some of these questions in their 2020 report, and suggested that more research and overall guidelines are needed (Banks et al., 2020).

At the same time, the pandemic presents a unique opportunity in social work education to teach about the ripple effects that result in systemic inequities. Students' reflections demonstrate they were able to see, in real time, how an "event" such as COVID-19 can have disparate impacts on populations and how those impacts can exacerbate preexisting vulnerabilities. Like similar global events such as the Great Depression, it is likely COVID-19 will present these kinds of teachable opportunities for decades to come.

Overall, students retained a positive outlook on the future of social work (and their role in it) with the understanding that they have learned how to be adaptable during the pandemic and have gained lessons that will serve them well into their future careers. Students seemed excited and hopeful by their observations of the destigmatization of mental health (among clients and workers) and by the subsequent emphasis on (and demand for) social workers. If anything, this introduced an overall feeling of job security. However, in order to attract and retain a mentally healthy and diverse workforce of social workers, more attention must be paid to student mental health needs early on.



## Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this study involves the participants, both with regard to the limited number and diversity, and to how constructs were perceived within a very specific segment of time. The content analysis was limited to three specific reflective writings; having additional input, such as interviews of focus groups, would add to the depth of the data. The data analysis and outcomes of this study were likely influenced by researcher bias and potential errors in coding and defining meaning. While the results of this study contribute to the overall body of knowledge in this field, generalizations to all social work students cannot be made. In particular, our sample was made up of mostly white, female students, and we had limited knowledge of other demographic information such as socioeconomic status. Since the impacts of traumatic events can be exacerbated among individuals with past trauma and those experiencing systemic inequities, future research should target and include more diverse samples.

Along with including more diverse samples, future studies should consider expanding the number of participants, including the addition of quantitative data points such as standardized measures of trauma and coping. Further exploration is needed to understand the impacts of the pandemic (and, more specifically, remote education) on areas such as development of a professional sense of self, mentorship, supervisory relationships, rate of skill-building, self-care maintenance, and practice skills, including client engagement, assessment, and intervention.

## Conclusion

Social workers serve as essential workers during times of war, natural disaster, famine, and, as experienced recently, global pandemics. With this comes the ethical and professional responsibility to adapt to changing modalities of service delivery, especially related to technology, to meet the needs of the individuals and communities being served, and to provide the necessary education and training to support future workers. In doing so, the profession needs to be cognizant of workers' mental health and to continue to nurture these basic needs, while also continuing to learn how changes in practice delivery impact new professionals.

## References

- Ashcroft, R., Sur, D., Greenblatt, A., & Donahue, P. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social workers at the frontline: A survey of Canadian social workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52(3), 1724–1746.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab158>

- Banks, S., Cai, T., de Jonge, E., Shears, J., Shum, M., Sobočan, A. M., Strom, K., Truell, R., Úriz, M. J., & Weinberg, M. (2020). *Ethical challenges for social workers during Covid-19: A global perspective*. International Federation of Social Workers. <https://www.ifsw.org/ethical-challenges-for-social-workers-during-covid-19-a-global-perspective/>
- Berger, E. (2022, August 27). "A collective trauma": Covid keeps its grip on mental health of many patients. *The Guardian*. <https://tinyurl.com/5b38ssuv>
- Bologna (2021, April 9). *How is collective trauma different from individual trauma?* HuffPost. <https://tinyurl.com/52fahh5n>
- Bradshaw, R. (2021, Spring). *CSWE member pulse survey results: Impact on social work education for spring 2021*. Council on Social Work Education. <https://tinyurl.com/zv7jdbyr>
- Center for Collegiate Mental Health. (2022). *2021 annual report*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED617358>
- Clary, K., & Hernandez, L. M. (2022). Dear social work educators, teach and model self-care. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, 28(1), 7–20. <https://tinyurl.com/mumyt65z>
- Clemans, S. E. (2004). Understanding vicarious traumatization—Strategies for social workers. *Social Work Today*, 4(2), 13. <https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/0204p13.shtml>
- Correia, K. M., Bierma, S. R., Houston, S. D., Nelson, M. T., Pannu, K. S., Tirman, C. M., Cannon, R. L., Clance, L. R., Canterbury, D. N., Google, A. N., Morrison, B. M., & Henning, J. A. (2022). Education racial and gender disparities in COVID-19: Worry, stress, and food insecurities across undergraduate biology students at a Southeastern University. *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education*, 23(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.00224-21>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *2015 Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and masters social work programs*. <https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/23a35a39-78c7-453f-b805-b67f1dca2ee5/2015-epas-and-glossary.pdf>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2020a). *CSWE alters field education hours required for social work students*. <https://tinyurl.com/4jpbwnwy7>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2020b). *Fall 2020 CSWE member pulse survey results: Impact on social work education*. <https://tinyurl.com/4tw3td5y>
- Daftary, A.-M. H., Sugrue, E. P., Gustman, B. D., & Lechuga-Peña, S. (2021). Pivoting during a pandemic: School social work practice with families during COVID-19. *Children and Schools*, 43(2), 71–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab005>
- Dunne, L., & Henderson, J. (2022, March 9). *Two years into the pandemic social workers are in critical demand*. Healthy Debate. <https://healthydebate.ca/2022/03/topic/now-more-than-ever-social-workers-are-in-critical-demand/>

- General Accounting Office. (2022). *Remote service delivery increased during COVID-19, but more could be done to assist vulnerable populations*. U.S. Social Security Administration. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-104650.pdf>
- Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective trauma and the social construction of meaning. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>
- Hitchcock, L. I., Sage, M., & Smyth, N. J. (Eds.). (2018). *Technology in social work education: Educators' perspectives on the NASW technology standards for social work education and supervision*. University at Buffalo School of Social Work, State University of New York.
- Isselbacher, J., & Su, A. (2020, October 15). Nearly 10% of students report losing a family member or personal contact from COVID-19. *The Harvard Crimson*. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/10/15/crimson-survey-personal-economic-loss-coronavirus/>
- Johnston, K. (2021, October 2). Human services agencies face staffing crisis, delaying services for those in need. *Boston Globe*. <https://tinyurl.com/mtfjkcu>
- Jones, S. E., Ethier, K. A., Hertz, M., DeGue, S., Le, V. D., Thornton, J., Lim, C., Dittus, P. J., & Geda, S. (2022). *Mental health suicidality and connectedness among high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Adolescent behaviors and experiences survey, United States, January–June 2021*. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 71(3)*, 16–21. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7103a3.htm>
- Kaysen, D. (n.d.). *COVID-19 Q&A: Dr. Debra Kaysen on individual and collective stress and grief*. Stanford Medicine Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. <https://med.stanford.edu/psychiatry/about/covid19/stress.html>
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Krupnick, M. (2022, February 10). *More students are dropping out of college during Covid – and it could get worse*. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/more-students-are-dropping-out-of-college-during-covid-and-it-could-get-worse/>
- Lemieux, C. M., Plummer, C. A., Richardson, R., Simon, C. E., & Ai, A. L. (2010). Mental health, substance use, and adaptive coping among social work students in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and Rita. *Journal of Social Work Education, 46(3)*, 391–410. <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900004>
- Levin, S., Fulginiti A., & Moore B. (2018). The perceived effectiveness of online social work education: Insights from a national survey of social work educators. *Social Work Education, 37(6)*, 775–789. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2018.1482864>
- Matthieu, M., Lewis, S. J., Ivanoff, A., & Conroy, K. (2007). School of social work disaster response following the world trade center disaster: MSW student and field instructor perspectives. *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention, 7(2)*, 115–126. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1093/brief-treatment/mhm003>

- McCann, I., & Pearlman, L. (1990). Vicarious trauma: A framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 3*, 131–149. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00975140>
- Miller, J. J., & Grise-Owens, E. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on social workers: An assessment of peritraumatic stress. *Journal of Social Work, 22*(3), 674–691. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173211013243>
- Molock, S., & Parchem, B. (2022, Nov-Dec). The impact of COVID-19 on college students from communities of color. *Journal American College Health, 70*(8), 2399–2405. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07448481.2020.1865380>
- Parker, K., & Horowitz, J. M. (2022). *Majority of workers who quit a job in 2021 cite low pay, no opportunities for advancement, feeling disrespected*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/>
- Parker, K., Minkin, R., & Bennett, J. (2020, September 24). *Economic fall-out from COVID-19 continues to hit lower-income Americans the hardest*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/09/24/economic-fallout-from-covid-19-continues-to-hit-lower-income-americans-the-hardest/>
- Pascoe, K. (2022). Remote service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic: Questioning the impact of technology on relationship-based social work practice. *The British Journal of Social Work, 52*(6), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab242>
- Pho, B. (2022, January 28). “Breaking point:” OC’s family social workers decry overwhelming caseloads, understaffing. Voice of OC. <https://voiceofoc.org/2022/01/breaking-point-ocs-family-social-workers-decry-overwhelming-caseloads-understaffing/>
- Ramsey, A., & Montgomery, K. (2014). Technology-based interventions in social work practice: A systematic review of mental health interventions. *Social Work in Health Care, 53*(9), 883–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00981389.2014.925531>
- Reamer, F. G. (2013). Social work in a digital age: Ethical and risk management challenges. *Social Work, 58*(2), 163–73. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swt003>
- Rinfrette, E. S., Rine, C. M., Pugh, D. N., Zaleski, K., Araque, J. C., & Hedges, J. (2021). Preparing students for trauma exposure in field education settings. *Field Educator, 11*(1). <https://tinyurl.com/4y867t34>
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Ruberman, L. (2014). Challenges in the transition to college: The perspective of the therapist back home. *The American Journal of Psychotherapy, 68*(1), 103–115. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.2014.68.1.103>

- Sanders, J. E. (2021). Teaching note – Trauma-informed teaching in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(1), 197–204.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1661923>
- Schweitzer, A. (2020). *The COVID “pivot”: How programs to address social drivers of health are responding to and learning from the COVID crises*. RISE.  
<https://www.risehealth.org/insights-articles/the-covid-pivot-how-programs-to-address-social-drivers-of-health-are-responding-to-and-learning-from-the-covid-crisis/>
- Scofield, B. E., & Locke, B. (2022, February 17). What campus data tell us about student mental health and COVID-19. *Higher Education Today*.  
<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2022/02/17/what-campus-data-tell-us-about-student-mental-health-and-covid-19/>
- Silver, R. C., Holman, E. A., & Garfin, D. R. (2021). Coping with cascading collective traumas in the United States. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5, 4–6.  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-00981-x>
- Snowden, L., & Snowden, J. (2021, March). Coronavirus trauma and African Americans' mental health: Seizing opportunities for transformational change. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(7), 1–10.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18073568>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, July). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*.  
<https://tinyurl.com/2j2zj88e>
- Tasso, A., Hisli, S., & San Roman, G. (2021, January). COVID-19 disruption on college students: Academic and socioemotional implications. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 13(1), 9–15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000996>
- Thomson, D. (2021, October 15). The great resignation is accelerating. *The Atlantic*.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/great-resignation-accelerating/620382/>
- Tosone, C., Lee, M., Bialkin, L., Martinez, A., Campbell, M., Martinez, M. M., Charters, M., Milich, J., Gieri, K., Riofrio, A., Gross, S., Rosenblatt, L., Grounds, C., Sandler, J., Johnson, K., Scali, M., Kitson, D., Spiro, M., Lanzo, S., & Stefan, A. (2003). Shared Trauma: Group reflections on the September 11th disaster. *Psychoanalytic Social Work*, 10(1), 57–77. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J032v10n01\\_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/J032v10n01_06)
- Tosone, C., Solomon, E., Barry, R., Beinart, E., Bellas, K. K., Blaker, C., Capasse, N., Colby, M. D., Corcoran, M., Delaney, A., Doyle, K., Elfo, S., Gilzene, T-A. P., Kadriovski, A., Kim, R., Lavoie, M., Lempel, R., Linn, C. I., Liu, C. Y. H., ... Wei, Z. (2021). Shared trauma: Group reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic. In C. Tosone (Ed.), *Shared trauma, shared resilience during a pandemic: Social work in the time of COVID-19*. (pp. 347–353). Springer.  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-61442-3\\_36](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-61442-3_36)

- Watson, K., Capp, G., Astor, R., Kelly, M., & Benbenishty, R. (2022, February). "We need to address the trauma": School social workers' views about student and staff mental health during COVID-19. *School Mental Health, 14*, 902–917.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-022-09512-7>
- Watson, M. F., Bacigalupe, G., Daneshpour, M., Han, W., & Parra-Cardona, R. (2020, September). COVID-19 interconnectedness: Health inequity, the climate crisis, and collective trauma. *Family Process, 59*(3), 832–846.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12572>
- Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. In B. Wildemuth (Ed.), *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (pp. 308–319). Libraries Unlimited.