Michigan's Missing Link: School Social Workers and Firearm-Access Screening

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Abstract: School Social Workers (SSWs) support non-academic barriers to student learning by providing assessment, intervention, and prevention services related to social and material needs. This case study examines 3,725 Michigan SSWs' methods for identifying, screening, and supporting students' needs. It analyzes referral types, frequencies, and SSWs' perceptions regarding the importance, feasibility, and readiness to screen and support students' social and material needs. Responses exhibited variability, highlighting the need for an established screening protocol. The most surprising finding was that firearm access was the least discussed topic with students; 21.4% of SSWs almost never inquired and only 25.5% sometimes asked. The majority of referrals (73.9%) addressed students' material needs, while only 10.5% targeted social needs, including mental health services, revealing a significant gap. Notably, 15.6% of students received no referrals at all. The findings on referrals for social needs, including biopsychosocial factors such as mental health, coupled with the perceived lack of preparedness among SSWs to screen for challenges like firearm access, underscore the pivotal role SSWs can play in violence prevention. This emphasizes an urgent call to action for training, further research, dedicated policies, and resources to maximize the impact of SSW practice in schools, homes, and communities.

Keywords: Gun violence, service delivery, school social work, practice model, Michigan

In the complex landscape of education, School Social Workers (SSWs) play a pivotal role in providing evidence-based assessment, intervention, and prevention services (Kelly et al., 2021). School Social Work (SSW) addresses an array of biopsychosocial, emotional, and material needs that directly impact a student's academic performance (Capp et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2020a; Kelly et al., 2021). As in other states, many students in Michigan experience various social, environmental, material, and economic challenges associated with poverty, physical and mental health, social isolation, attendance, and access to equitable, essential resources (Singer, 2023). The challenges are confounded by safety issues that require more effective methods to mitigate firearm access and the prevalence of violence in schools (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013; Haddad & Kaufman, 2023).

The urgency to connect students with community intervention services and support necessitates a deeper understanding of SSWs' service delivery (Kelly et al., 2016; Kelly et

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al., 2020a). Despite the critical nature of SSW practice, there is a lack of recent studies examining Michigan SSW service delivery approaches. This study focuses on Michigan SSWs working in K-12 schools and utilizes the *School Social Work Practice Model* (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016; School Social Work Association of America [SSWAA], 2013) as a guiding framework. The study offers new insights into SSW practices with assessment, intervention, and service delivery for student biopsychosocial challenges, material necessities, and safety issues. For the purposes of this study, the term "material" encompasses students' physiological, tangible, and economic circumstances, as well as external environmental factors and elements related to their basic needs (Pichère & Cadiat, 2015). The term "social" encompasses biopsychosocial and fundamental personal needs (Engel, 1977), including the intricate interplay of biological, psychological, emotional, and social factors, such as safety concerns, that collectively impact human health and well-being.

The study found that although SSWs are charged with recognizing, assessing, and intervening in these multifaceted needs, the vast majority did not feel adequately prepared to fulfill a critical part of this service: screening for firearm access. This resulted in a surprisingly low frequency of student screenings related to firearms as a material factor impacting the safety of students and the school community.

Challenges and Opportunities in School Social Work

As providers of assessment, intervention, and prevention services, SSWs navigate ways to best address non-academic barriers to student learning. To understand the obstacles faced in screening for student's needs, the literature review focuses on six key factors relative to SSW practice: the national practice framework, a need for leadership development, consistent certification standards, the pandemic impact, the pursuit of racial equity, job satisfaction, burnout, and professional efficacy.

National School Social Work Practice Model

The *School Social Work Practice Model* is an integrated framework rooted in justice, a person-in-environment perspective, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*, and data-driven practice (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016, 2020a; SSWAA, 2013). This model provides SSWs with the knowledge to apply evidence-based interventions within their scope of services, distinguishing their role from other school mental health professionals (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2020a; SSWAA, 2013). The model aligns with NASW's (2012) *Standards for School Social Work Services* by focusing on the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to improve student success in four domains: "(1) home-school-community linkages, (2) ethical guidelines and educational policy, (3) data-based decision-making, and (4) education rights and advocacy" (Kelly et al., 2016, p. 17). These domains support three key practice goals: (1) mobilize the evidenced-based, multi-tiered systems of support to provide social services, (2) improve learning experiences, and (3) augment resource access (Kelly et al., 2016, p. 17).

Bridging the theoretical framework with practical experiences, recent research has examined the real-world application of this model, including its service ratio recommendations — typically one SSW per 250 students, reduced to 1:50 for students with complex needs (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016; NASW, 2012; SSWAA, 2013). However, Kelly et al. (2020a, 2021) surveyed 1,275 SSWs and found that in many high poverty, predominantly minority communities, most caseloads required mental health services (75.7%). Additionally, many SSWs frequently confronted extreme caseload ratios as large as 1 to 1,500 (Capp et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2020b), often servicing multiple buildings with vastly different service needs. This misalignment of workload and capacity emphasizes the need for rapid-response teams, strategic investments in low-income communities, interdisciplinary collaboration and professional development, advocacy training and a national strategy to confront structural inequities (Kelly et al. (2020b). Implementing the *School Social Work Practice Model* provides a blueprint to target appropriate services for the most urgent factors impacting students in schools, homes, and communities.

A Need for SSW Leadership

Leadership development programs tailored to SSWs are critical role for navigating complex systems, advocating for systemic solutions, and promoting social justice (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016; SSWAA, 2013). Strong SSW leadership correlates with a positive school climate, trust and cooperation among faculty, students and families, and shared goals for student success (Perry et al., 2022; SSWAA, 2013). However, many SSW practices focus on micro interventions, limiting broader systemic impact and advocacy potential due to practitioners' lack of confidence in using evidence-based practices (Kelly et al., 2016; Perry et al., 2022). Specialized training and development programs can significantly enhance SSW leadership capabilities, enabling them to effectively support marginalized groups and contribute to a more equitable educational environment. Such investment in leadership development training is vital for realizing the full potential of SSWs as change agents in education (Kelly et al., 2016; Perry et al., 2022).

Certification Requirements and Professional Standards

National certification for SSWs varies widely, with training programs and practicum requirements often deviating from best practices (Koschmann et al., 2022). This inconsistency highlights the need for uniform national SSW certification requirements, revised curricula based on current evidence and alignment with the NASW *Standards for School Social Work Services* (NASW, 2012) and the *National School Social Work Practice Model* (Koschmann et al., 2022; SSWAA, 2013). This is especially crucial given SSWs critical role in addressing non-academic barriers to student learning.

School Social Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. education system confronted unprecedented challenges that exacerbated community disparities, such as food insecurity, social

isolation, economic stress, educational interruptions, and mental health declines (Bailey et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). Capp et al. (2021) found that SSWs faced issues ranging from inequitable access to education for vulnerable students to concerns about basic needs, including food, housing, and technology. Simultaneously, many SSWs experienced professional isolation and sought guidance on how to provide remote service delivery. The pandemic's constraints underscored the need for systemic overhauls. Recommendations included a national, equitable resource distribution plan, telehealth guidance, and robust SSW support (Capp et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). Despite SSWs close work with students and families during the pandemic, their unique insights on social and material needs were often excluded from preparations for school reopening (Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Addressing Racial Equity

Racial inequities demand a bold reimagining of SSW practices. Scholars (Jones et al., 2021; Meza, 2020; Villarreal Sosa, 2021) advocate for transformative approaches, including the integration of anti-racist pedagogy, culturally responsive interventions, counterstories, and restorative justice. Central to this effort is SSWs' self-reflection on, dismantling their own complicity in perpetuating racial inequities (Jones et al., 2021; Meza, 2020; Villarreal Sosa, 2021). Addressing the white privilege embedded in SSW systems creates a more equitable foundation. Counterstories empower students of color and amplify their voices in advocacy for systemic change (Miller et al., 2020). Culturally responsive practices, emphasizing cultural humility and diverse tools, equip SSWs to better serve marginalized communities (Jones et al., 2021; Meza, 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Villarreal Sosa, 2021). Additionally, restorative justice fosters healing and trust through relationship building and accountability (Jones et al., 2021; Meza, 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Villarreal Sosa, 2021). This multifaceted approach lays the groundwork for a more just and equitable education system.

Job Satisfaction, Burnout, and Professional Efficacy

In SSW, job satisfaction and burnout are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, with professional efficacy playing a pivotal role. SSWs report higher job satisfaction when they feel valued and supported by administrators, align their work with personal values and the school's mission, and engage in meaningful work that leads to positive outcomes (Heberle et al., 2021). Burnout is often triggered by heavy workloads, high caseloads, conflicts between program philosophy and organizational structures, and inadequate resources (Heberle et al., 2021). However, SSWs with high professional efficacy report lower levels of burnout as confidence in their skills and abilities helps mitigate work-related stress (Heberle et al., 2021). Training and skill development, particularly in the context of an integrated student support model, significantly contribute to professional efficacy (Heberle et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of interventions such as skill-building workshops, supervision and mentorship programs in enhancing professional efficacy and well-being (Kryshtanovych et al., 2022; Mack, 2021, 2022; Maor & Hemi, 2021; Pittman, 2020). Additionally, meaningful work, ovation, and social support serve as

buffers against burnout (Kryshtanovych et al., 2022; Mack, 2021, 2022; Maor & Hemi, 2021; Pittman, 2020). Individual traits and positive organization climates, characterized by collaboration and shared goals, also play a crucial role in reducing burnout and enhancing job satisfaction (Kryshtanovych et al., 2022; Mack, 2021, 2022; Maor & Hemi, 2021; Pittman, 2020). Notably, following the *National School Social Work Practice Model* (Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2021) enabled SSWs to experience high levels of efficacy and perceive their work as having a broad, positive impact on students, families, and schools.

This review of SSWs roles and service delivery methods unveils their complexity, challenges, and practice opportunities, reinforcing the need for continued research, collaboration, and innovation. The literature underscores the rich potential for SSW practice to adapt, evolve, and contribute to a more just and equitable future, particularly in response to crises and unprecedented challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provides the foundation for exploring the barriers SSWs face in identifying, assessing, and implementing interventions to improve student safety while informing recommendations for removing those obstacles.

Drawing from the research of Kelly et al. (2020a, 2020b, 2021), this study examines the practice methods Michigan SSWs employ to identify, screen, and intervene in students' social and material needs. It analyzes the types and frequencies of referrals made by SSWs and their perceptions regarding the importance, feasibility, and readiness to conduct screenings and interventions that support students' social and material needs.

Methods

Guided by the *School Social Work Practice Model* as the primary driver (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; SSWAA, 2013), this study employed a survey method was employed to gather quantitative data on the service delivery practices of Michigan SSWs (n=3,725). Practicing SSWs from K-12 school settings across Michigan's seven peninsulas were invited to participate in the survey between March and September 2022. The primary recruitment channels were Twitter, LinkedIn, and META's social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger. Secondary recruitment strategies involved direct emails to individuals, professional groups, and organizations affiliated with Michigan SSWs. All digital outreach materials contained embedded links directing participants to the survey. Beyond the Institutional Review Board's approval, this research garnered support from a diverse array of stakeholders, including 15 letters of endorsement from private educational and professional entities, universities, educational service agencies, intermediate school districts, The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), NASW-Michigan, and the Office of Educator Excellence within the Michigan Department of Education.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument gathered data from Michigan SSWs about their service delivery methods and their perceptions of the feasibility and importance of screening for students' social and material needs and the readiness of SSWs to conduct the screening. The

instrument was collaboratively developed by a research team composed of four social work faculty and a staff educator from the Office of Teaching and Learning. The lead author, with over a decade of experience as a school social worker in Michigan public schools, leveraged direct-practice expertise to refine the design and content of the survey measurements. The Qualtrics online platform was used to create and disseminate the survey, which contained eight closed-ended questions divided into two primary sections: (1) service delivery and (2) student social and material needs. All responses were collected digitally, de-identified and securely stored on an encrypted server. As an incentive, survey participants had the option to enter a drawing to win a $50 gift card. The winner received the gift card after data collection was completed.

Table 1. *Survey Instrument: Service Delivery Demographics*

Questions for Section 1: Service Delivery Demographics	Response Type
What Michigan region do you work in?	Select one region: o Central Michigan (East) o Central Michigan (West) o Northwest Michigan o Northeast Michigan, o Southwest Michigan o Southeast Michigan. o Upper Peninsula o West Central Michigan (East)
How would you describe the community you work in?	o Urban o Suburban o Rural
What grade levels did you service?	Check all that apply. o K-5 Elementary o K-8 Elementary o Middle o High school
Student population served:	Check all that apply. o General education o Special education o Alternative Education o Other

Section 1, titled "Service Delivery Demographics," collected demographic information related to SSW service delivery in Michigan (see Table 1). Respondents were asked to identify their workplace region from predefined Michigan geographic areas and classify their service community as urban, suburban, or rural. The survey also captured the range of grade levels served including K-5 elementary, K-8 elementary, middle school, and high school. Additionally, it gathered data on the student populations served, allowing respondents to select from general education, special education, alternative education, or other student groups.

Table 2. *Survey Instrument: Student Social and Material Needs*

Question and Measure Type	Response Type
Service Delivery	
Do you have a process for identifying students' social and material needs, such as a screening tool that every student completes, a school needs assessment, or a teacher referral system?	Yes, No
Within the past 12 months, have you referred a student or their family to any of the following community resources?	Matrix: Yes/No o Childcare centers/providers Transportation assistance o Local food pantries/private charities o Public food assistance o Public health insurance enrollment assistance o Mental health services o Housing services o Utility assistance programs.
Social and Material Needs	
How often do you routinely ask students about the following:	Matrix: Likert Scale: o Barriers getting to/from school (i.e., reliable transportation) o Food insecurity (i.e., enough food) o Housing insecurity (i.e., safe place to live) o Utilities/heating insecurity (i.e., ability to pay for utilities) o Social support (i.e., support network of student) o Isolation (i.e., loneliness) o Depression o Stress o Violence victimization (i.e., threats or physical harm to student) o Access to firearms
How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	Matrix: Likert Scale: o It is **feasible** to screen for social and material needs routinely during contact with students. o It is **important** to screen for social and material needs routinely during contact with students. o I am well **prepared** to specifically address my students' social and material needs.

Section 2 examined how SSWs identified and addressed students' social and material needs, their views on the importance and feasibility of such screenings, and their readiness to assess and intervene (see Table 2). SSWs reported on the use of structured processes such as screening tools, school needs assessments, or teacher referral systems, with

response options of "Yes" or "No". The survey also explored whether SSWs referred students or families to community resources within the past 12 months, including childcare services, transportation assistance, local food pantries, public food assistance programs, public health insurance enrollment, mental health services, housing services, and utility assistance programs. Responses were recorded using a Likert matrix format. The frequency of screening for specific needs was measured using a Likert scale, covering transportation barriers, food insecurity, housing insecurity, utility and heating insecurity, social support, isolation and loneliness, depression, stress, violence victimization, and access to firearms. Lastly, SSWs were asked to rate their agreement with three key statements using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." These statements assessed whether they believed it was feasible to screen for social and material needs during routine student interactions, whether they considered such screenings important, and whether they felt well-prepared to conduct screenings and intervene for students' social and material needs.

Measures

The survey instrument encompassed two distinct categorical measures: (1) service delivery and (2) social and material needs. The eight closed-ended questions included dichotomous (yes/no), multiple choice, and "select all that apply" response options.

Service Delivery

SSW participants responded to two service delivery survey questions: (1) "Do you have a process for identifying students' social and material needs, such as a screening tool every student completes, a school needs assessment, or a teacher referral system?" (2) "Within the past 12 months, have you referred a student or their family to any of the following community resources?"

Social and Material Needs

The responses from SSW participants measured the connection between students' social and material needs. These needs, which informed the options for the closed-ended "multiple choice" and "all that apply" questions, were derived from biopsychosocial factors, interpersonal relationships, safety, equitable access to opportunities, and external resources and support across homes, schools, and communities. Social needs included social support, or students' support networks and mental health factors such as isolation, depression, stress, and violence victimization. Material needs encompassed unsafe housing, insurance, utilities, transportation, food insecurity, and access to firearms.

Data Analysis

The Qualtrics survey data was analyzed using SPSS 24 to examine the predominant community service referrals made by SSWs, quantify the frequency of student screenings for both social and material needs, and evaluate SSWs' perceptions of the importance and feasibility of screening for student needs as well as their readiness to do so. Descriptive statistics and frequency analyses were employed to generate and illustrate these findings.

Results

To analyze the methods Michigan SSWs employ for screening and supporting students' social and material needs, this study examined the frequency of screenings conducted for various student needs, the extent to which systematic processes were implemented to identify social and material needs, and whether referrals to families for essential community resources such as transportation, food, childcare, insurance, mental health services, housing, and utilities were offered. The study also highlighted challenges SSWs encounter in delivering social services.

Michigan SSW Demographics

Among the SSWs (n=3,725) surveyed in Michigan, 7.7% served elementary grades, 38.1% served high school grades, 0.6% served "other" grade levels, and 16.5% did not specify a grade level. Most worked in urban communities (61.5%), with fewer working in suburban (33.1%) and rural (5.4%) areas. Special education students represented the largest population served (50.1%), followed by general education students (29.3%); 16.7% reported not serving a specific student population and 0.5% served "other" student groups. The data were consistent across grade levels, suggesting that the findings are broadly applicable to schools, irrespective of the age group served.

Service Delivery Frequency

The analysis of service delivery focused on how Michigan SSWs assess and refer students based on their social and material needs. The data are organized into four categories: frequency of service delivery, screening for social needs, screening for material needs, and SSWs' opinions on the feasibility, importance, and preparedness for conducting these screenings. Material needs include barriers to school transportation, food and housing insecurity, utility and heating concerns, and access to firearms. Social needs include social support, isolation, depression, stress, and violence victimization. Material needs accounted for 73.9% of referrals, while social needs including mental health services made up 10.5%. The frequency of screening for various social and material needs was fairly consistent, although firearm access was notably the least discussed topic. Nearly half of the SSWs felt that conducting these screenings was both feasible and important, but a significant portion also expressed a lack of preparedness. These findings underscore the need for more robust screening protocols in Michigan schools to better understand and meet the diverse social and material needs of students.

Social and Material Needs Referrals

Figure 1 represents the frequency of service referrals provided by Michigan SSWs in assessing the social and material needs of students. The data emphasizes the diverse methods utilized to identify student needs. Approximately 97% of SSWs employed multiple approaches, including screening tools, school needs assessments, or teacher referral systems. The data showed that most student referrals targeted material needs,

accounting for 73.9% of cases. In contrast, only 10.5% of referrals addressed mental health services, while 15.6% of students received no referrals at all.

Figure 1. *Frequency of Service Referrals for Social and Material Needs*
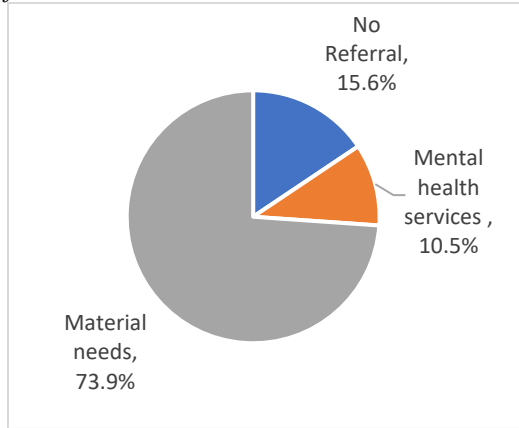
Social Needs Screening

In Table 3, the frequency of screening for social needs varied, with stress emerging as the most frequently discussed issue. When combining the "usually" and "always" response categories, SSWs reported discussing stress with 61.2% of students, followed by isolation (60.2%), social support (59.6%), violence victimization (58.8%), and depression (58.5%). The data indicate a relatively consistent approach to screening for social challenges.

Table 3. *Frequency SSW Screened for Students' Social Needs*

Screened Social Need	n (%)			
	Almost Never	**Sometimes**	**Usually**	**Always**
Violence Victimization	538 (16.8%)	784 (24.5%)	1084 (33.9%)	796 (24.9%)
Social Support	492 (15.3%)	757 (23.5%)	1164 (36.2%)	804 (25.0%)
Isolation/Loneliness	497 (15.5%)	839 (26.1%)	1052 (32.8%)	824 (25.7%)
Depression	485 (15.1%)	796 (24.7%)	1187 (34.7%)	821 (25.5%)
Stress	520 (16.1%)	780 (24.2%)	1082 (33.6%)	839 (26.0%)

Material Needs Screening

In Table 4, screening for material needs followed a similar pattern, with firearm access being the least frequently discussed issue. Only 53.1% of SSWs reported asking about firearm access "usually" or "always," while 21.4% "almost never" addressed it, and 25.5% asked about it "sometimes." Barriers with getting to and from school (e.g., reliable transportation), were the most frequently discussed material challenge. For most other material needs, more than half of SSWs indicated they "usually" or "always" discussed them with students.

Table 4. *Frequency SSW Screened for Students' Material Needs*

Screened Material Need	n (%)			
	Almost Never	**Sometimes**	**Usually**	**Always**
Barriers Getting To/From School	457 (14.3%)	743 (23.3%)	1187 (37.2%)	806 (25.2%)
Food Insecurity	802 (15.3%)	802 (25.1%)	1140 (35.7%)	761 (23.8%)
Housing	494 (15.4%)	793 (24.8%)	1153 (35.5%)	776 (24.3%)
Utilities	512 (16.0%)	796 (24.8%)	1137 (35.4%)	764 (23.8%)
Access to Firearms	690 (21.4%)	825 (25.5%)	975 (30.2%)	739 (22.9%)

Table 5. *Comparison of SSWs Service Delivery Screening Patterns and Referrals for Student Needs*

Screening (n=3,725)				Referrals (n= 3,143)*	
How often do you routinely ask?	n (%)			Within the 12 months, have you referred?	Yes
	Almost Never	Sometimes	Usually/ Always		n (%)
Material Needs				**Material Needs**	
Barriers getting to/from school	533 (14.3%)	868 (23.3%)	2324 (62.4%)	→ Childcare centers/providers	11 (0.3%)
				→ Transportation assistance	15 (0.4%)
Food insecurity	570 (15.3%)	935 (25.1%)	2216 (59.5%)	→ Local food pantries	38 (1.0%)
				→ Public Food Assistance	71 (1.9%)
Housing insecurity	574 (15.4%)	924 (24.8%)	2228 (59.8%)	→ Housing services	700 (18.8%)
Utilities	596 (16%)	924 (24.8%)	2205 (59.2%)	→ Utility assistance programs	1754 (47.1%)
Firearm access	797 (21.4%)	950 (25.5%)	1978 (53.1%)	→ *(no referral)*	
Social Needs				**Social Needs**	
Social support	570 (15.3%)	875 (23.5%)	2280 (61.2%)		
Depression	562 (15.1%)	920 (24.7%)	2242 (60.2%)	→ Mental health services	392 (10.5%)
Stress	600 (16.1%)	901 (24.2%)	2220 (59.6%)	Public health insurance	162 (4.3%)
Isolation	495 (13.3%)	972 (26.1%)	2179 (58.5%)		
Violence victimization	626 (16.8%)	913 (24.5%)	2194 (58.9%)		

*582 (15.6%) did not make any student referrals

Comparison of SSWs Service Delivery Referrals and Screening Patterns for Student Needs

In Table 5, a comparison of service delivery, referral patterns, and screening frequencies revealed a high prevalence of referrals for material needs, with mental health and stress among the leading social needs. Despite the importance of health insurance in addressing students' well-being, 162 SSWs reported making referrals for public health insurance even though there was no systematic screening process for this need. Additionally, firearm access was the least discussed material concern, with no referral category provided, highlighting a gap in how SSWs address this critical safety issue.

Student Needs Assessments: Feasibility, Importance, and Preparedness

In Table 6, SSWs provided feedback on the feasibility, importance, and preparedness for screening students' social and material needs. Nearly half (46.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that screening for social and material needs was feasible, while 29.7% disagreed, and 19.6% remained neutral. When asked about the importance of these screenings and their preparedness to conduct them, the responses were similar, with 46.9% and 46.3%, respectively, agreeing or strongly agreeing that such screenings were necessary and that they felt prepared to carry them out. However, nearly one-third of respondents felt unprepared to screen and intervene effectively.

Table 6. *Screening for Social and Material Needs: Feasibility, Importance, and Preparedness*

Aspect	n (%)				
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Feasibility	425 (13.4%)	515 (16.3%)	745 (19.6%)	898 (28.4%)	583 (18.4%)
Importance	428 (13.4%)	484 (15.2%)	778 (24.4%)	922 (29.0%)	571 (17.9%)
Prepared	422 (13.3%)	569 (17.9%)	718 (22.6%)	861 (27.1%)	612 (19.20)

Overall, the data show a spectrum of agreement levels regarding SSWs' perceptions of the feasibility and importance of screenings and their preparedness to conduct them and intervene. These findings highlight the need for a deeper understanding of social and material needs and the creation of robust screening protocols within Michigan's schools.

Perceptions of Feasibility, Importance, and Preparedness

The results also reveal a discrepancy between SSWs' perceptions of the feasibility, importance, and preparedness for conducting student screenings. While 46.8% of respondents viewed screening for social and material needs as feasible and 46.9% considered it important, nearly one-third reported feeling unprepared to conduct such screenings and intervene effectively. The gap between perceived feasibility, importance, and preparedness accentuates the pressing need for expanded training, additional resources, and a more structured screening protocol in Michigan schools to ensure that students'

diverse and urgent needs are adequately addressed (NASW, 2012, 2018)

Addressing SSWs Training Gaps: A Focus on Mental Health and Firearm Access

SSWs were least attentive to mental health and youth firearm access, exposing a critical gap in training. Addressing this issue requires a stronger focus on preparing SSWs for violence prevention (NASW, 2018). Incorporating resources such as *Tools for Social Workers to Prevent Gun Violence* could provide an entry point for firearm-related conversations (Lanyi et al., 2019). The *School Counselor's Response to School Shootings– Framework of Recommendations* offers a six-phase model designed for school mental health professionals responding to school shootings (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). Implementing such frameworks would equip SSWs with the necessary training and tools to participate in school crisis intervention teams effectively.

The findings of this study highlight the complexity of SSWs' roles and the multidimensional challenges they face. Addressing student social and material needs requires standardized screening tools, equitable community interventions, and a well-supported workforce (Koschmann et al., 2022). The observed gaps in mental health referrals, the lack of attention to firearm access, and SSWs' reported lack of preparedness to screen and intervene raise serious concerns. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the current state of SSW practice and provide a foundation for guiding policy changes, informing curriculum re-development, shaping strategic continuing education initiatives, and directing future research efforts. Ultimately, these results have broader implications for SSW practice and reinforce the importance of creating safe, nurturing, and supportive educational environments (NASW, 2012).

Limitations

The findings of this study come with several limitations that should be considered. One primary limitation is the reliance on convenience sampling, which focused exclusively on SSWs in Michigan. This geographical specificity may restrict the generalizability of the results (Hazell & Berry, 2023). Future research should replicate this study across diverse regions and contexts to enhance the broader applicability of the findings. Expanding the sample to include SSWs from various locations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of service delivery methods and student needs.

Another limitation is the potential for self-report bias, as the data primarily reflect SSWs' self-assessments. Incorporating multiple data collection methods, such as administrative records, case studies, or third-party evaluations, would improve the reliability of findings and offer a more balanced perspective. Additionally, the survey did not include open-ended questions, which limited the depth of qualitative insights. Future research should integrate qualitative components to capture a more nuanced understanding of SSWs' experiences and decision-making processes. A mixed-methods approach would provide a richer, more holistic analysis of student needs and SSWs' strategies for addressing them.

Although prior research highlights firearm access as a critical issue among K-12 students (Hilaire et al., 2023; Kolbe, 2020; Rajan et al., 2022; Reeping et al., 2022), this study included only a single question on firearm access. Given the significance of this issue, future studies should expand on this topic, incorporating more detailed measures to assess SSWs' screening practices, comfort levels, and training related to firearm access. These considerations are crucial when interpreting the study's results and should be prioritized in future research initiatives.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the practices and perceptions of Michigan SSWs, highlighting key areas for educators, policymakers, and researchers. Existing research establishes a strong link between firearm violence and mental health, psychological stress, and trauma (Bailey et al., 2021; Common Core of Data, 2019; Everytown for Gun Safety, n.d.; National Center for Education Statistics; U.S. Department of Education). The findings underscore the need for a more rigorous and consistent screening process by SSWs to address these challenges effectively.

Disturbingly, there is a well-documented correlation between firearm accessibility and increased suicide risk among adolescents (Swanson et al., 2021). The study also aligns with national trends, noting a 33.4% surge in firearm-related homicides among children and youth between 2019 and 2020 (Goldstick et al., 2022). Despite recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, many mental health clinicians do not routinely advise parents to remove firearms, even when children are in crisis situations (Swanson et al., 2021). When compared internationally, U.S. firearm homicide rates are significantly higher, in some cases seven times greater than those of other developed nations (APA, 2013). Since 1999, the U.S. has experienced 428 school shootings, disproportionately affecting youth of color (Cox et al., 2025). Among these, Black boys face the highest rates of firearm-related deaths, while Black girls also experience elevated levels of gun violence compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Katsiyannis et al., 2023).

The temporary decline in school shootings during the COVID-19 pandemic was followed by a dramatic resurgence, with 2021 marking an all-time high in school shooting fatalities (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). This increase suggests a possible link between school firearm violence and broader societal trauma, reinforcing the urgency of school-based threat assessment tools (Katsiyannis et al., 2018).

Michigan faces particularly dire challenges related to firearm violence, with a firearm-related death occurring every eight hours (Weigend Vargas et al., 2022). The state experiences an average of 14 mass shootings per year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023; Gun Violence Archive, n.d.), and between 1970 and 2022, there were 1,844 firearm incidents on K-12 school grounds, resulting in 610 fatalities and 1,727 injuries (Center for Homeland Defense and Security School Shooting Safety Compendium, 2023; Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund [Everytown], 2020). Michigan attributes

approximately 1,544 deaths annually to gun violence, with 60% classified as suicides by firearm (CDC, 2023; Center for Homeland Defense and Security School Shooting Safety Compendium, 2023; Everytown, 2020). The 2021 Oxford High School shooting and the 2023 Michigan State University shooting serve as stark reminders of the urgent need for intervention (Figueroa, 2023; Poindexter, 2023; Walker & Brown, 2023).

Beyond firearm violence, Michigan also ranks fourth highest in the U.S. for chronic absenteeism in K-12 schools, an issue that is further exacerbated by students' unmet social and material needs (Dee, 2023a, 2023b; Kummer, 2023). While prevention strategies exist (Everytown, 2022), many SSWs lack the necessary training to effectively address these concerns (Sperlich et al., 2019). This study confirms that a significant proportion of Michigan SSWs feel unprepared to conduct firearm-access screenings, further emphasizing the need for targeted professional development.

Despite historical barriers to improving school safety (Bailey et al., 2021), recent legislative measures offer some hope (The White House, 2021a, 2021b). With the right tools, resources, and training, SSWs are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in reducing firearm violence. A comprehensive, holistic approach that includes systematic screening, intervention, and remediation of students' social and material barriers in schools, homes, and communities can significantly enhance efforts to prevent firearm-related incidents. Strengthening these areas within SSW practice can also help drive meaningful policy changes aimed at making schools safer and more supportive environments for all students.

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