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# Attraction and Motivation of Social Workers in Latvian Municipal Social Services

Undīne Gavriļenko<sup>1</sup>, Undīne Vēvere<sup>2</sup>, Svetlana Lanka<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Liepāja Academy of Riga Technical University, Latvia

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**Abstract.** The shortage of qualified social workers in Latvia is a persistent challenge that affects the quality, accessibility and sustainability of municipal social services. This study investigates the factors influencing attraction to the profession, motivation within it, and retention of social workers, social work students, and young people considering entering the profession. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys of 58 social work students and 197 municipal social workers, two expert interviews, and a focus group of tenth-grade students. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, t-tests, ANOVA and Spearman's correlations, while the qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The results suggest that intrinsic motivation is high across all groups, but that extrinsic challenges such as low salaries, emotional strain, burnout and a lack of career progression impede long-term retention. Generational differences were evident, with Generation Z prioritising flexibility and development opportunities more than older cohorts (Chillakuri, 2020; Kirchmayer, 2018). The profession's feminised public image and lack of awareness among young people further hinder recruitment, which is consistent with findings in other European countries (Galley, 2024; Hanlon, 2022). The study concludes with policy and organisational recommendations targeted at municipalities, national authorities and educational institutions, with the aim of improving workforce sustainability. These include salary reform, structured onboarding, enhanced psychological support, leadership development, targeted campaigns to attract men, and strengthened collaboration between schools and social service providers.

**Keywords:** social work, municipal services, motivation, recruitment, burnout, human resources.

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## Introduction

Social workers play a crucial role in ensuring social protection, reducing inequalities and promoting well-being among different population groups. In Latvia, municipal social services are the foundation of the national social welfare system, providing direct support to individuals and families. Despite the high societal relevance of these services, municipalities are experiencing a chronic shortage of qualified social workers (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2023). Many local governments have reported difficulties filling vacancies, resorting to

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Corresponding author Undīne Vēvere E-mail: [undine.vevere@rtu.lv](mailto:undine.vevere@rtu.lv)

ORCID

Undīne Gavriļenko <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0619-8453>

Undīne Vēvere <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9213-8351>

Svetlana Lanka <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8067-2127>

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employing staff without professional qualifications or hiring students early in their academic studies.

As of May 2025, approximately 300 social worker positions in municipal institutions remained vacant, while only 176 students were enrolled in accredited social work programmes (Dārziņa, 2025). This mismatch between supply and demand creates systemic instability and increases workload pressures on existing professionals. According to the Latvia's Employment Agency, the social work labour market has demonstrated a consistent shortage of qualified applicants since at least 2023 (Jurjāne, 2024a; Jurjāne, 2024b).

This situation is not unique to Latvia. Many European welfare systems are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain social workers due to rising caseloads, complex administrative demands and emotional burnout (Maddock, 2023; Mihai et al., 2025). Internationally, the profession is also undergoing a demographic shift, with an ageing workforce and declining interest from young people (Tham, 2018). Furthermore, low prestige, limited opportunities for advancement and challenging working conditions are frequently cited as barriers to recruitment (Hussein et al., 2019).

Thus, the scientific problem can be defined as follows: there is insufficient empirical evidence about the factors influencing attraction, motivation, and retention in municipal social work in Latvia. This limits the ability of institutions to design effective recruitment and human resource development strategies. The research aims to identify the key factors that influence attraction, motivation and retention among social work students, practitioners and young people, and to make recommendations for improving the sustainability of the workforce. The research task was to analyse theoretical and international perspectives on motivation and recruitment in social work. The aim was to identify motivational factors and barriers among social work students and municipal social workers. The research also explores perceptions and awareness of social work among young people. The research compares generational and group-based differences in motivation. The aim was to formulate evidence-based recommendations for municipalities, policymakers and educational institutions.

This research makes several original contributions. For example, it integrates three perspectives — students, practitioners and young people — allowing comparison across the professional pipeline. A mixed-methods approach is applied, triangulating quantitative trends with qualitative depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study situates Latvia's challenges within a broader international context by drawing on research from Europe, North America and Asia. It explicitly examines the expectations of Generation Z and the impact of gender imbalance, both of which are under-explored areas in Latvian scholarship. Finally, it offers concrete, implementable recommendations for recruitment, motivation and retention strategies in municipal social services.

## **Theoretical Approaches to Motivation in Social Work**

The motivation of social workers is shaped by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In order to understand what attracts individuals to the profession and what keeps them in it, it is helpful to examine several foundational theories of human motivation (Table 1).

*Table 1 Theoretical Approaches to Motivation in Social Work (by authors)*

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)	This theory posits that human motivation progresses through a hierarchy of needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs, and culminating in self-actualisation. In the context of social work, this means that, although many social workers are driven by altruistic and self-actualising motivations, they cannot perform effectively if their basic needs, such as an adequate income and manageable stress levels, are not met. This aligns with empirical findings showing that burnout and financial insecurity are major threats to professional retention (Mihai et al., 2025).
Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1968)	Herzberg's (1968) motivation-hygiene theory distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g. salary, working conditions, security) and motivators (e.g. achievement, recognition, personal growth). For social workers, intrinsic motivators are often strong, but poor hygiene factors, such as low pay, a high workload and insufficient organisational support, lead to dissatisfaction and staff turnover. This distinction is often referenced in studies investigating why social workers leave their roles, even when they value their work (Hussein et al., 2019).
Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Self-determination theory emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as being essential for intrinsic motivation. Social workers require autonomy to make professional decisions, competence to feel effective in complex situations, and supportive relationships to mitigate emotional strain. Research shows that strong team support and high-quality supervision can significantly boost motivation and job satisfaction.
Generational motivation theories (Chillakuri, 2020; Kirchmayer, 2018; Shinde & Surve, 2025)	Newer cohorts in the workforce, especially Generation Z, exhibit distinct motivational patterns. Studies indicate that they value meaningful work, flexible schedules, the integration of technology, ethical organisational cultures and rapid professional development. While these expectations partly align with the mission of social work, they contradict the rigid, resource-limited conditions of many municipal organisations in Latvia.

Application to the social work profession - taken together, these theories suggest that, while social workers are often driven by intrinsic motivations to enter the profession, they only remain in it when extrinsic conditions support their well-being. This tension is reflected in the profession's high global turnover rate (Tham, 2018), which persists in Latvia's municipal sector.

Conversely, countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia and Canada have introduced integrated strategies to enhance professional sustainability. These strategies include mentoring programmes, protected supervision time, competency-based career progression and targeted recruitment campaigns (Tham, 2018; Hussein et al., 2019). These international experiences demonstrate that attraction and retention require systemic interventions that address financial, organisational and professional identity factors.

Although public debates in Latvia frequently highlight the low salaries, lack of prestige and burnout experienced by social workers, empirical research on the interaction of these factors, especially from the perspective of different groups such as students, practitioners and young people, remains limited. Furthermore, little is known about the influence of generational changes on motivation and career expectations within the profession. While international research indicates that Generation Z values autonomy, meaningful work and flexibility (Chillakuri, 2020; Shinde & Surve, 2025), no comprehensive study has examined these trends within Latvian municipal social services.

## **International Challenges in Motivating and Retaining Social Workers**

A substantial body of international research documents the difficulties that countries encounter when trying to maintain a stable social work workforce. One of the most consistently reported problems is burnout (Mihai et al., 2025; Maddock, 2023). Emotional labour, which is defined as the effort required to manage personal emotions during client work, is an inherent part of social work. It is often compounded by heavy workloads, traumatic cases and systemic constraints. Research across Europe and North America shows: High caseloads predict emotional exhaustion (Maddock, 2023). Administrative burdens undermine intrinsic motivation (Hussein et al., 2019). A lack of psychological support increases turnover intention (Mihai et al., 2025).

Low salaries and financial instability are also common issues. Many welfare systems struggle to offer social workers competitive salaries. While Nordic countries perform better (Tham, 2018), nations such as the UK, Ireland and the USA report wage stagnation and high regional disparities (Hussein et al., 2019). Financial insecurity undermines retention, especially among younger workers. Furthermore, there is an ageing workforce and declining enrolment. Several studies highlight ageing demographics and a shortage of new entrants to social work education programmes (Tham, 2018). This situation is mirrored in Latvia, where the number of graduates does not meet labour market demand (Dārziņa, 2025).

Organisational culture and leadership: Leadership shapes motivation directly. Supportive managers who provide recognition, feedback and autonomy promote job satisfaction and reduce burnout (Hussein et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, poor leadership can lead to emotional distress and staff turnover. In summary, social workers across countries demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation, yet face systemic extrinsic barriers that undermine long-term retention. Latvia's municipal sector reflects these global patterns, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms.

Another review of domestic and international approaches sheds light on effective strategies for improving recruitment and retention. For example, financial incentives. In Latvia, municipalities have introduced tuition fee reimbursement, housing assistance and post-graduation employment-linked stipends (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2023). Internationally, particularly in Australia and Canada, competitive wages, relocation bonuses, and rural service incentives have been used (Chillakuri, 2020). Professional development and career pathways are also important. In the UK, for instance, well-defined promotion pathways and specialisation tracks (e.g. in mental health or child protection) have elevated the prestige of the profession and supported retention (Tham, 2018). In Latvia, however, career progression remains limited, which contributes to mobility towards non-municipal sectors.

When motivating employees, workplace culture and psychological support are important. Peer support, team cohesion and managerial competence can greatly enhance motivation (Maddock, 2023). Latvia's municipalities are increasingly adopting team-building, mentorship and supervision activities, but implementation is uneven (Ābeltiņa, 2023). However, Generation Z values flexibility, remote working options and autonomy (Chillakuri, 2020; Shinde & Surve, 2025), so flexible working arrangements are becoming more common. Nordic countries are leading the way in integrating flexible schedules to help attract young professionals.

Public awareness and professional image play a significant role because low prestige is a universal barrier. Campaigns in Ireland, the UK and Canada highlight the societal value of social work and showcase role models to counteract stereotypes (Galley, 2024; Hanlon, 2022). Latvian research shows similar needs (Bela & Rasnača, 2023). An integrated, multi-factor strategy is an important key. Studies emphasise that the most successful recruitment systems combine competitive pay, career pathways, supportive leadership, public recognition and early

exposure through internships and educational partnerships (Hussein et al., 2019; Tham, 2018). Isolated interventions (e.g. salary increases alone) are insufficient.

Another important fact to emphasise is that the social work profession is feminised worldwide, with men making up just 10–15% of the workforce in many countries (Galley, 2024). In Latvia, this imbalance is even more pronounced, with over 90% of municipal social workers being women (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2023). The implications of this gender imbalance are significant. Research shows that male social workers can offer distinct advantages in certain situations, such as when working with boys and young men, supporting clients who prefer male staff, and enhancing team diversity and problem-solving (Delfino, 2021). They can also provide visible role models for gender diversity in care professions (Hanlon, 2022). However, there are barriers preventing men from entering the profession.

These barriers include gender stereotypes that categorise social work as 'women's work', a low salary relative to gendered income expectations and the misperception that the profession is limited to child protection (Galley, 2024). However, strategies exist to attract men, including public campaigns that highlight the success of male social workers, targeted scholarships for male students, collaboration with institutions that are predominantly attended by young men (e.g. sports schools and military service exit programmes) and an emphasis on leadership, community engagement and crisis intervention roles (Delfino, 2021; Hanlon, 2022).

## **Methodology**

A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus groups. This approach enables methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the study's validity by integrating numerical patterns and contextual insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Mixed methods are particularly well-suited to the study of workforce motivation, where both subjective experiences and measurable trends must be considered (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The design incorporated quantitative research in the form of surveys with social work students ( $n = 58$ ) and municipal social workers ( $n = 197$ ). Qualitative research took the form of semi-structured expert interviews ( $n = 2$ ) and a focus group with 10th-grade students ( $n = 9$ ). This approach enabled comparison across the different stages of the profession.

### ***Quantitative component***

The quantitative component involved participants and sampling. Two groups of participants were included: social work students ( $n = 58$ ), who were recruited from RTU Liepaja Academy, Riga Stradiņš University and the University of Latvia; and students from the Rēzekne Academy of Technologies. The sampling method used was voluntary convenience sampling, which is commonly used in studies of student motivation (Kirchmayer, 2018). Data collection took place from April to November 2024. Municipal social workers ( $n = 197$ ) were recruited from all regions of Latvia: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Latgale and Riga (the capital city). The sampling method was convenience sampling combined with snowball sampling via municipal contacts and professional networks. This method is appropriate for 'hard-to-reach' professional groups (Hussein et al., 2019). Data collection took place from 14–30 April 2025. Although non-probability sampling limits generalisability, the diversity of the sample in terms of age, gender, region and experience supports the reliability of the observed trends.

The study used a structured survey instrument consisting of four sections. The questionnaire included four thematic sections: demographics (age, gender, region, study stage or work experience), motivational factors (12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. These were informed by Herzberg's (1968) motivator–hygiene framework and Maslow's needs theory (1943), workplace barriers (10 items related to burnout, stress, emotional strain, workload, salary and organisational culture (Mihai et al., 2025; Maddock, 2023). It also covered career intentions and perceptions of the profession. For example, respondents were asked to agree or

disagree with the statement, “My work is meaningful to me.” “My supervisor provides sufficient support.” “I plan to work in municipal social services after graduation.” “I feel emotionally exhausted at work.” Content validity was reviewed by two senior social work researchers.

Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies and percentages) were used to analyse quantitative data, and chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests were used to examine associations between categorical variables (e.g. cohort and motivation type). Independent samples t-tests were used to compare students and practitioners, one-way ANOVA was used to analyse differences by region or age, and Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to analyse relationships between ordinal constructs (e.g. leadership support and motivation). The significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ . These methods adhere to standard analytical practices in workforce motivation research (Sawicki, 2016; Hussein et al., 2019).

### ***Qualitative component***

Two semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with highly experienced social work professionals, each with more than 15 years' experience in municipal services. The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, focused on recruitment challenges, motivational systems, organisational culture, workload, and burnout issues, as well as sector development needs. This method is widely used to deepen understanding of the professional context (Hanlon, 2022).

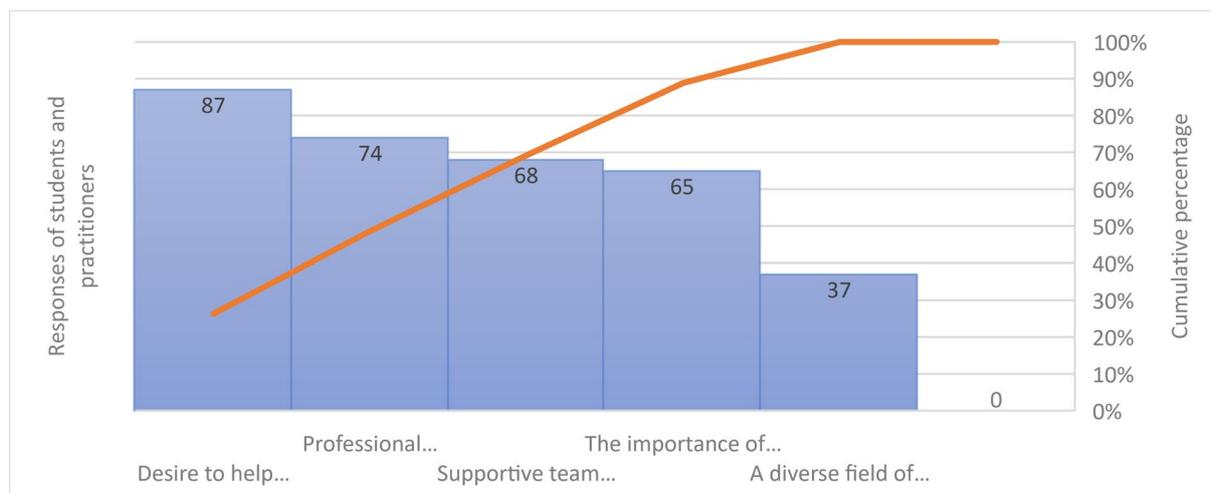
A focus group comprising nine tenth-grade students from Ogres State Gymnasium was conducted in May 2025. Adolescents aged 15–17 were chosen because this is a critical stage in career exploration (Chillakuri, 2020). The 60-minute session explored awareness of social work as a career, perceptions of its prestige and difficulty, and attitudes towards helping professions. The responses provided insight into the early formation of professional interests. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis according to the six-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarising ourselves with the data, coding it, generating initial themes, reviewing these, defining and naming them, and producing the report. Themes were developed inductively, drawing on theoretical constructs such as burnout (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and professional identity (Galley, 2024). Coding was reviewed collaboratively by the research team to ensure consistency and credibility.

Ethical considerations: the study adhered to the ethical guidelines for social science research. Key principles included voluntary participation, informed consent (with parental consent for minors), anonymity and confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Data were stored securely. Formal ethics committee approval was not required under current Latvian regulations for non-interventional research (under Latvian regulations, non-interventional survey research without sensitive data does not require formal ethics committee approval), but the procedures aligned with international ethical norms (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Maddock, 2023).

## **Results**

The quantitative results revealed the most important motivational factors. Across the entire sample of students and practitioners, the most frequently selected motivators were the desire to help others (87%), job stability (74%) and a supportive team environment (68%). These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating the high level of intrinsic motivation among social workers (Hussein et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, significant differences emerged between the two groups: salary was a primary motivator for 65% of practitioners compared to 42% of students ( $\chi^2 = 7.84$ ,  $p = .005$ ). This suggests that exposure to workplace realities alters motivational patterns, which is consistent with Herzberg's (1968) theory that hygiene factors become more salient when unmet. A Pareto analysis showed

that four motivators — helping others, stability, team support and salary — constituted 80% of all responses (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1** Cumulative percentages of responses from students and practitioners regarding motivational factors (by authors)

The results revealed the barriers to recruitment and retention. Respondents identified the following as the top barriers: low salary (82%), emotional strain (69%), burnout (58%), lack of recognition (40%) and high caseloads (37%). These findings are consistent with extensive international research on burnout and emotional labour in social work (Mihai et al., 2025; Maddock, 2023). Regional differences were also significant, with burnout levels being highest in Riga and Latgale (ANOVA:  $F = 3.27, p = .032$ ). Participants from these regions reported higher caseloads

Also, significant generational differences emerged: for example, Generation Z respondents placed greater value on flexible schedules ( $p < .01$ ), career development opportunities ( $p < .01$ ) and organisational ethics and values ( $p < .05$ ). Meanwhile, older respondents emphasised job security and pension benefits. These findings are consistent with previous research on generational differences (Chillakuri, 2020; Maddock, 2023); Kirchmayer, 2018). There was a strong correlation between leadership support and job satisfaction (Spearman's  $\rho = 0.47, p < 0.001$ ). Correlation between recognition and motivation ( $\rho = .42, p < .001$ ). These results are consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated the centrality of supportive supervision to professional well-being (Hussein et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). But only 54% of students intended to work in municipal social services after graduation. The reasons for this were low prestige and salary, a lack of career progression and a perceived risk of emotional exhaustion, as well as the profession's feminised image (Galley, 2024). This discrepancy between student motivations and workplace realities reflects trends observed internationally (Tham, 2018).

Four themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of expert interviews:

1. Structural challenges: experts highlighted salary disparities across institutions, insufficient workload standards and a high administrative burden. These issues reflect those documented in European research (Hussein et al., 2019).

2. Organisational culture: leadership was described as highly variable. Negative managerial practices reduced motivation, which is consistent with the findings of Maddock (2023).

3. Professional identity: experts emphasised low public prestige and weak identity formation, similar to the observations of authors Bela and Rasnača (2023).

4. Recommendations and solutions included health insurance, mentoring and supervision of new employees, structured onboarding and promotional campaigns.

Meanwhile, in a focus group analysis of 10th-grade students, social work was primarily associated with child protection, confirming stereotypical and narrow perceptions, and highlighting low awareness (Galley, 2024). Participants perceived the profession as having low prestige, believing it to be emotionally demanding, underpaid and insufficiently recognised. These beliefs align with national reports (Dārziņa, 2025). To attract young people, students recommended social media content about real career stories, opportunities to shadow social workers, and presentations by practitioners in schools (Table 2).

*Table 2 Suggestions for Encouraging Young People to Enter Social Work (by authors)*

<b>Suggestion</b>	<b>Summary</b>
<b>Increase visibility</b>	Organise school visits by practising social workers, share success stories in media.
<b>Practical experience</b>	Offer internships, volunteering, and job-shadowing opportunities during secondary school.
<b>Career prospects</b>	Present clear career progression paths and opportunities for specialisation.
<b>Financial incentives</b>	Provide scholarships, tuition fee reductions, and municipal stipends tied to work commitments.
<b>Positive image</b>	Promote the profession as meaningful, impactful, and socially respected.

This qualitative evidence reinforces the survey findings by demonstrating that long-term recruitment strategies must address the profession's image and provide young people with early exposure to its diverse roles. Also these strategies are in line with international best practice for youth recruitment (Chillakuri, 2020).

## **Discussion**

The synthesis of the findings shows that intrinsic motivation is strong but insufficient. The study confirms that Latvian social workers exhibit strong intrinsic motivation, which is consistent with international findings (Hussein et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The desire to help others (87%) and a sense of meaningful work are prominent motivators across all groups. However, intrinsic motivation alone is insufficient for long-term retention if extrinsic conditions such as salary, workload and recognition remain inadequate, which is consistent with Maslow's (1943) and Herzberg's (1968) theories. The most significant barrier identified was low salary (82%), which aligns with research from the UK, Ireland and the United States (Tham, 2018; Hussein et al., 2019). Emotional strain (69%) and burnout (58%) were also significant issues, reflecting global trends in the social work workforce (Mihai et al., 2025; Maddock, 2023). The findings indicate that generational differences matter. Generation Z respondents placed significantly more value on flexibility, growth opportunities, ethical leadership and a supportive organisational culture. These findings are consistent with broader generational literature (Chillakuri, 2020; Kirchmayer, 2018; Shinde & Surve, 2025). This indicates the need for tailored human resources strategies in municipal services.

Leadership plays a critical role because it emerged as a strong predictor of motivation and job satisfaction ( $\rho = .47$ ). This finding echoes the emphasis on relatedness and autonomy in authors work (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and is consistent with research indicating that supportive supervision reduces burnout (Maddock, 2023). Low prestige and limited awareness discourage new entrants: both students and practitioners identified low professional prestige as a barrier, and focus group results showed that tenth-graders had a limited understanding of the scope of

the profession. These findings are consistent with Bela and Rasnača's (2023) observation of weak public recognition of social work in Latvia. But the qualitative data confirmed the persistent gender imbalance, revealing that the sector's highly feminised nature discourages male applicants. This finding is consistent with research by Galley (2024) and Hanlon (2022). Recruitment campaigns and scholarships targeting men could help to address this imbalance.

The study shows that Latvia's challenges are not unique in an international context. Many welfare states report shortages of social workers, high staff turnover and burnout (Tham, 2018; Maddock, 2023). However, several factors appear more severe in Latvia. For example, salaries are less competitive compared to those in Nordic countries. There are also limited career pathways, whereas countries like the UK have multi-tiered professional tracks (Tham, 2018). Latvia also has a weak public image, whereas countries like Ireland have invested in professional branding. There is also less systematic psychological support than in countries such as Australia or the Netherlands. Latvia also shares similarities with Central and Eastern European countries that are experiencing demographic decline and reduced interest in the social sciences. If current trends continue, the implications for the municipal workforce may be severe: burnout rates could increase, recruitment gaps may widen and service quality may deteriorate as experienced professionals migrate to higher-paying sectors. However, if reforms are implemented, recruitment could stabilise, burnout could decrease through better supervision, career progression could improve retention, and the public perception of the profession could strengthen. The study suggests that achieving workforce sustainability requires integrated action at multiple levels, including municipalities, the national government and educational institutions.

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. For example, non-probability sampling limits the generalisability of the results, but this approach was necessary due to practical constraints and the limited accessibility of the professional population. The qualitative sample size (experts and students) was small, but sufficient for thematic saturation. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causality. Focus group participants were from a single school, which limits the representativeness of youth perceptions. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach strengthens the validity of the findings through triangulation.

## **Conclusion**

The research yielded the following conclusions: for example, intrinsic motivation is strong among social work students and professionals, but extrinsic factors such as salary, workload and recognition significantly influence retention. Low prestige and public misunderstanding hinder recruitment, particularly of young people. Burnout is widespread and varies across regions, requiring targeted interventions and improved supervision (Maddock, 2023). Generational differences show that younger workers expect flexibility, rapid career progression and ethical leadership (Chillakuri, 2020; Shinde & Surve, 2025). Leadership quality is a strong predictor of job satisfaction and motivation, but gender imbalance remains a significant challenge, requiring targeted interventions to encourage male recruitment (Galley, 2024; Hanlon, 2022). However, only 54% of students intend to work in municipal social services, indicating an urgent need to strengthen attraction to the profession and support for early-career professionals. Overall, Latvia's situation mirrors international trends, but these are exacerbated by lower salaries, inadequate systemic support and weak professional recognition.

## **Recommendations**

The study results provide concrete recommendations, which are categorised by the relevant institutions to ensure practical implementation. For municipalities, these

recommendations include improving salaries, aligning municipal social worker salaries with national average income levels and introducing experience-based wage increments. Social workers must be provided with health and psychological support, such as health insurance packages, and access to regular supervision and counselling must be ensured. Work environment improvements are needed, such as implementing mentoring systems for newcomers, encouraging peer support groups, and reducing administrative workloads through digital tools.

Leadership development is also important, involving the strengthening of managers' communication, feedback, recognition and conflict management skills. National policymakers should increase funding for municipal social services, standardise caseload norms across municipalities, and support salary harmonisation. Targeted recruitment initiatives are welcomed, such as introducing scholarships (Galley, 2024), and organising national promotional campaigns that showcase diverse social work roles.

Young social workers need more practical experience, which can be achieved by expanding internships, job shadowing and real-life simulations. Experience development can start with student support, such as offering mentoring and supervision to those experiencing emotional strain, and providing clearer information on career pathways.

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