The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has created unprecedented impacts on our schools and society, requiring school social workers (SSWs) to attend to layered and cascading effects for students and their families. This study presents rich qualitative data from a national survey of SSWs about their personal and professional roles supporting students, families, and staff members as schools shifted to remote instruction. Findings indicate that SSWs are highly concerned about a lack of basic needs resources, including food, housing, and mental health support for students and families. SSWs highlighted the unequal effects of school closures for families without technology and Internet access as well as the difficulties providing services during the pandemic. Recovery policies should target resources to schools with the highest needs while prioritizing food, housing, mental health, and access to tools for online learning. SSWs also need additional and refined professional support to overcome their isolated roles in schools and bolster their ability to deliver online services effectively.

KEY WORDS: basic needs; COVID-19; national policy recommendations; school social worker role

To date, there is little historical research documenting the school social work role during a pandemic. The school safety and crisis literatures are rife with accounts of social workers providing interventions and support during hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, war, and other traumatic events (for example, Knox & Roberts, 2005). Given that social workers are one of many professionals who provide social support, social–emotional learning, crisis intervention, and mental health services to students and families in schools, it is important to document the unique perspectives social workers offer during a pandemic. Social work also has a historically distinctive focus on serving vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed populations and emphasizes understanding individuals in their environmental contexts (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). This viewpoint is particularly important because the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on populations in poverty who have little access to health care (Shadmi et al., 2020).

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE DURING COVID-19

The March 2020 U.S. novel coronavirus (COVID-19) school closures and transfer to remote instruction offered a unique opportunity to understand the experiences of school social workers (SSWs) during a global pandemic, including the student and family needs they recognized; their personal and professional experiences, including adaptations to service provision; and how they believed roles and professional needs would continue to evolve. Findings from a recent survey of SSWs practicing during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated a range of concerns. For example, SSWs indicated that, in the majority of their schools, at least half of the families needed mental health services, 62 percent needed food, and 43 percent needed housing (Kelly, Astor, Benbenishty, Capp, & Watson, 2020b). Furthermore, poverty, mental health, and access to food were noted as factors compounding the pandemic for students and families (Kelly et al., 2020b). In addition, SSWs noted difficulties connecting with their families and...
engaging them in clinical services; they also reported increased stress levels for practitioners (Kelly et al., 2020b).

To better understand the stark concerns of SSWs regarding their work and personal well-being, this study presents findings voiced directly by SSWs struggling with the complexity of problems facing schools as they shut down and switched to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also describes SSWs’ efforts to meet the diverse needs of students and families despite unprecedented global events. This study was guided by the following questions: What observations and recommendations do SSWs offer during COVID-19? What lessons can be gleaned for a national recovery policy based on a school social work perspective?

METHOD

Data for this qualitative study came from a larger national survey of SSWs about their experiences providing services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). Participants were recruited with requests to complete the survey through national, state, and other social work organizations (for example, School Social Work Network, NASW, School Social Work Association of America, American Council for School Social Work, Society for Social Work and Research). The survey link was e-mailed or distributed via multiple social media outlets, including Twitter and Facebook. Approximately 1,275 SSWs and other school and district personnel completed the survey within a one-month period during June 2020. Consequently, data were gathered as schools were finishing one school year and trying to prepare for the next school year with the restrictions of COVID-19.

Participants in the national survey were given multiple options to offer in-depth qualitative feedback about particular aspects of their experiences. Approximately 35 percent (n = 450 SSWs) responded to the open-ended questions, providing substantive and rich qualitative data surrounding their roles, experiences, and recommendations. This study presents findings from two open-ended questions included in the quantitative survey (Kelly et al., 2020b): (1) We will appreciate receiving any comments, suggestions, and thoughts from you that will help us learn about SSWs and practices so that we can share this knowledge with all social workers, professional leaders, and relevant policymakers; and (2) Based on your experiences so far, what recommendations for reopening the education system do you have for your district (for example, policies, procedures)?

Participant responses were imported into NVivo (Version 12) (QSR International, 2018) for analysis using a combined approach of deductive and inductive coding. Quantitative results from this survey along with the structure of the open-ended questions provided an initial coding scheme for the qualitative data. Two researchers then coded a selection of responses to identify additional themes in the data. The qualitative replies had much richer data and descriptions than the multiple choice answers and therefore had themes not detectable in quantitative data. Themes were discussed with a third senior researcher, and a final codebook was established for coding the remaining responses. Interrater agreement on the major themes and sub-themes ranged from 86 percent to 98 percent, depending on the code. This combined inductive and deductive qualitative process was appropriate for this study given the goals to explore SSW responses (Kohlbacher, 2006).

Strategies for rigor (Padgett, 2011) included regular peer debriefing during coding and analysis to discuss preliminary findings and the development of codes. All members of the research team are either current faculty or doctoral students in social work programs, and four members of the team have experience working in schools. One focus of research meetings was to debrief and monitor positionality and researcher bias in our analysis. Qualitative results from our survey also provided a source of triangulation throughout analysis.

RESULTS

Participants who responded to the qualitative questions and provided demographic information (see Table 1) primarily self-identified as female (91.6 percent). Participants self-identifying as White accounted for 73.8 percent of responses; as Black, 12.2 percent; Hispanic or Latinx, 10.4 percent; and others, 3.6 percent. Most respondents were clientserving SSWs (90.9 percent). Overall, participants were very experienced: More than 30 percent had 20 or more years of service. An additional 31.8 percent had 11 to 20 years of service. In their schools, SSWs reported that, on average, 60.5 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, 50.2
percent were minorities (Black and Latinx), 14.2 percent dropped out, and 56.0 percent entered college. Participants from 43 states responded to the survey; the most were from Illinois (n = 119), Connecticut (n = 81), Michigan (n = 77), and California (n = 40).

Qualitative data suggested many unmet needs for the students and families served in their schools. If unaddressed, these needs could hamper academic progress, regardless of whether students attend school in-person or online.

### Lack of Basic Needs of Food, Health Care, Housing, and Crisis Mental Health

Comments from SSWs indicated a pervasive concern about basic needs for the students and families in their schools (see Table 2). Food and housing were frequent concerns along with access to physical and mental health services. One SSW directly invoked Abraham Maslow, suggesting that schools “deal with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs first.” Another said, “My main focus was getting my families food and connecting them to resources. Many of them lost their income and jobs because of COVID-19.” As they talked about students and families, other SSWs included mental health concerns. These comments demonstrated the interconnectedness of problems exacerbated by the pandemic and showed that SSWs felt strongly that academic and social-emotional needs of students could not be fulfilled without a widespread and ongoing effort to address basic needs, such as hunger, health, housing, or severe mental health issues.

#### Inconsistent Access to Technology, High-Quality Internet, and Online Resources

One particular basic need deemed necessary for engaging with school was access to technology. SSWs raised concerns about Internet access for students and families as well as the availability of devices needed to use Zoom, Google Classroom, or other platforms for virtual engagement with schools, including SSW services and academic classes (see Table 2). One SSW said that “access to technology and Internet was a huge barrier for our students to receive academic instruction and social work and other services….” A fundamental need for technology was evident. Especially during the pandemic, SSWs indicated that appropriate hardware and Internet hot spots were necessary for families to access education and supportive services.

#### Barriers to Serving Special Education and Students with Disabilities

Many participants were involved in supporting students in special education. Difficulties for these students included behavioral issues, learning difficulties, emotion regulation, anxiety, and other issues (see Table 2). Many SSWs were particularly concerned about how these students would engage with online services and how they (the SSWs) would be able to properly assess student progress. One SSW described
## Table 2: School Social Workers’ Qualitative Responses, Grouped by Identified Themes

| Theme                          | Characteristic Responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Basic needs of families       | “In my 10 years of practice as [an SSW], I have witness[ed] the lack of basic needs as a primary barrier to students’ success.”  
“Financial hardship, transportation, and food insecurities have hit our families hard at this time.”  
“When I was able to reach my families, they were more concerned with immediate needs, such as food and other resources, than working on student’s IEP goals.”  
“One of the most helpful things I’ve done for families (based on their feedback) is have resources on the ready. As information came out from state government, I could put it in user-friendly terms and would make sure to send it to people who would be impacted by it (for example, a supplemental food program just for the summer). I also found that the majority of my time was spent focused on basic needs, even more than during the school year. Students weren’t reaching out to me as much, but I had far more parent contact than ever before.”  
“It feels like this pandemic has uncovered the large amount of social service support that schools provide directly to students and families. It is very challenging to provide these services with no resources and remotely. We had to add in-person [social work], nursing, and educational services to our meal distribution because families really needed it. People need intensive basic needs services right now. We need more funding, social service support, staffing, and in-person services to succeed in this work.” |
| Technology needs              | “Access to technology and the Internet was a huge barrier for our students to receive academic instruction and social work and other services. I would like to see policy address the inequities in access to Internet and technology, especially in light of the predictions about a second wave of the virus coming in fall. The students least likely to have access come from areas of greater poverty, are more likely to be minority students, and many are recent immigrants or undocumented. Many of these families and students already face many barriers and have been affected by job loss and financial strain as well as being more likely to have family members sick with or dying from COVID-19. And now they are even further behind their peers in school. This is why people are protesting in the streets because our systems are stacked against our students and families. It needs to change!”  
“Access to technology has been the key; however, many of our families are lacking that and afraid to come forward. I have found the bilingual community to be the hardest hit.”  
“I have found that the biggest hurdle for online learning is our families and their access to the appropriate technology (laptop, Chromebooks, Internet services). It’s also difficult for many of our families to help their students get online and help them with their assignments, because most of our families have jobs that are essential or have multiple jobs in order to keep their families in their housing and food for their bellies.”  
“I’m having trouble accessing some families who are highly mobile/changing phone numbers and/or don’t have Internet or computers. Families are having difficulty with technology and supporting their students with doing online schoolwork.”  
“Policymakers need to make access to Internet and tech a ‘human right’ initiative.” |
| Needs of students with disabilities | “Many students are overwhelmed with virtual learning due to their disabilities. Those who have emotional issues and/or autism ... have seemed to deteriorate and struggle the most.”  
“It has been very difficult to provide special education services from a distance. Many of my students need concrete, in-person assistance, and they have really struggled to make progress academically. The academic pressure and social isolation [have] really negatively affected their mental health. But I’m also concerned that if school reopens, these students won’t wear masks or abide by social distancing regulations, partly due to their sensory and mental health issues.”  
“After 27 years in the profession, this was the most trying time I have ever experienced. I have 80-plus [special education] students on my caseload, primarily with social–emotional problems. This was specifically difficult for our students with [autism spectrum disorder]. Remote learning was not ideal for any of them. However, it was evident that every effort I made to stay connected with these students and available to them was greatly appreciated by their families.”  
“I believe that special education [SSWs] were ‘left behind’ when it came to planning and including roles and responsibilities. I am expected by my special education team to be available at all hours without...” |
| Theme | Characteristic Responses |
|-------|--------------------------|
| Systemic inequality | “The pandemic has shown a spotlight on the areas of strain for families: social, emotional, financial. Work is needed to strengthen the social safety net, services, and resources for poor and immigrant families as well as those with mental illness or significant special needs.” |
| | “Inequity in public education is seriously compromising both educational progress and social–emotional support for students. Programs and services in rural settings are nearly nonexistent.” |
| | “The need for [SSWs] will increase significantly while [districts] are looking more deeply into systemic racism. The school system will be unable to operate as it does currently if it is to address the needs of Black and minority students. Punitive measures, which replicate the same approach as our police departments (crime and punishment all at the discretion of the authority) will need to be replaced with opportunities to learn and repair while maintaining positive self-image and relationships with staff and peers.” |
| Engagement of students | “Better funding is needed to address the REAL needs of the students and their families. Ask families and students what they need. Don’t assume you know what funding is most beneficial to them!” |
| | “It is difficult to maintain appropriate contact with the most vulnerable of the students, and these are the ones I worry most about—even when school was in session.” |
| | “Our district made the commitment to reach out to students who were not engaging at all, to check on their basic safety and well-being and let them know their school cared for them. Parents and extended family were overwhelmingly very grateful for this outreach.” |
| | “I do not feel that our administration and or teachers were prepared for the number of students and families who did not participate in academics or did very little. As a social worker (and our counselor, too), we spent a great deal of time explaining to [administrators] and staff about what a pandemic/ community trauma does to our brain and how we should not expect school and academics to be business as usual.” |
| Capacity to meet needs | “I [have] worked for years to address and manage school reluctance/refusal cases and fully expect that this will be a huge area of need when children and families return to the structure and expectations of a formal school environment and academics again in person.” |
| | “Some of my students on my caseload I have not been able to connect with since the school closure, and I am very worried, but I have exhausted all modes of communication and feel stuck about how to reach or support them. I am worried that students are not accessing the mental health services that we are making available but am unsure of how to make them more accessible to families. It has been a huge struggle for me to feel effective in this role during this time.” |
| | “[SSWs] remained on the frontlines throughout the crisis. Once schools transitioned to a virtual platform, SSWs began delivering meals to families. They also began advocating for them to secure technology in order for students to meet the academic requirements for promotion and graduation. Despite the uncertainty that COVID-19 presented, SSWs continued to provide support to families.” |
| | “My district has me spread thin overseeing 750-plus students at the [high school] level. Our district was already reeling from eight losses (majority suicides of students) in the past two years right before the shutdown. We just don’t have enough social–emotional support personnel to address all the needs between staff and students in our building.” |
| | “I am one social worker for 1,500 students (165 staff, too!), and it is just too much. I often feel stretched so thin I am [ineffective].” |
| | “Schools need more social workers. I am one of two for 4,500 students. This is unrealistic and not equitable for our students.” |
| | “[We need] more social workers. Currently there are eight of us for 5,000 students.” |
| | “As job stress increases and finances decrease, our district may be looking at eliminating [SSWs] and replacing them with lesser paid teacher case managers. This shift comes at a time when well-trained professionals are needed to meet the increased needs of staff, families, and students. The stress of this (Continued)
Table 2: School Social Workers’ Qualitative Responses, Grouped by Identified Themes (Continued)

| Theme                          | Characteristic Responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Isolation and professional needs | “I think it is important to be advocates for individuals in communities impacted by COVID-19. I feel that there are a lot of things we can be doing as professionals to help support our communities. We are agents of change and serve as links to many resources. Unfortunately, [SSWs] feel boxed in by their districts, which can hinder the support for communities.” |
|                               | “Collaborating with other mental health staff in the district has been immensely helpful in sharing resources, teaching each other about technology, brainstorming issues.”                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                               | “I feel as though I need more guidance as to how to provide effective service in this type of remote learning setting. I feel as though we, as colleagues, have banded together, watched webinars, and have shared information, but we are the ‘blind leading the blind.’ I think overall, we are doing a good job, but I think we could be doing better if we had some structures and systems developed/in place. There has been no time to develop them but should be looked into for future purposes.” |
|                               | “I personally need training on how to provide services remotely, what are best practices, and how to engage with families and students remotely.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                               | “It has been difficult to transition to online SSW services due to changing directions and lack of consistency regarding messages in service delivery.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                               | “Resources that address compassion fatigue, burnout, maintaining boundaries would all be beneficial. It is quite draining to live in uncertainty for such a long period of time. Uncertainty about health, the pandemic, frequently changing time lines on reopening the state and what that looks like, slow-moving school board/district that has been hesitant to comment on reopening plans, uncertainty about funding and job security, how to balance personal needs and boundaries while still advocating for social justice.” |
|                               | “Our district highly values [SSWs]; however, there’s little to no knowledge of school social work roles. This creates barriers in bringing community resources into schools, getting procedures approved, implementing new crisis protocols, and modifying current social emotional/mental health procedures. Our school district is not streamlined in program forms, crisis procedure response, or suicide assessments because there’s no direct contact at the district level.” |
| SSWs’ personal experiences and needs | “I don’t have a great space to go where it is quiet, and, sometimes, that causes friction with my family when they have to go somewhere else so I can work and take calls.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                               | “On a personal level, one of the hardest parts is working from home without child care. My infant does not care that I have an IEP meeting or am doing teletherapy. He needs to be fed, to play, to sleep. My spouse works 12-hour shifts with COVID patients—we don’t know what sort of germs he is bringing home, so we don’t dare try and get grandma to babysit or for me to go into my office to work. But schools still expect you to work within that school-hour time frame regardless of caregiving needs. I can work tirelessly from midnight to 4 A.M. on materials because that’s when my baby sleeps, but if I can’t be present at a 1 P.M. meeting for 20 minutes because my child is breastfeeding, then I’m expected to take personal time off.” |
|                               | “There has been no dialogue about secondary trauma or caregiver fatigue among those of us in the district who work in mental health. We are ALL dealing with COVID, but senior leadership seems to view their staff as impervious to it and that we are simply worker bees expected to show up and do the work as if we aren’t dealing with this pandemic just like everyone else.” |
|                               | “I have a lot of support in my district as far as my job goes but have been quarantined myself—because of a sickness other than COVID–19—and stressed/in bad health. Working from home has been also very stressful—like learning a completely new job without training and then thrown to the wolves.” |
|                               | “The experience of dealing with this situation has a negative impact on my overall well-being for it has increased my anxiety level, raised my blood pressure/sugar on a daily basis. . . . I am worried about whether or not I am going to have a job next school year.”                                                                                                                                                              |

Notes: COVID-19 = novel coronavirus; IEP = individualized education program; SSW = school social worker.
their concern this way: “It has been very difficult to provide special education services from a distance. Many of my students need concrete, in-person assistance, and they have really struggled to make progress academically.” Although the concerns about special education students mirror concerns for all students, the intensive levels of service required to meet complicated learning and behavioral goals did not translate well to online learning and were again compounded by families’ other needs.

Systemic Inequity due to Community Poverty and Structural Funding Patterns. SSWs also reported being deeply concerned about access to resources, including technology, basic needs, and the availability of support at home for student engagement in school (see Table 2). Many SSWs indicated that the pandemic was exacerbating existing inequity for students of color and low-income families. One said, “Inequity in public education is seriously compromising both educational progress and social–emotional support for students . . . Internet availability compromises service!” SSWs know that structural inequity has long affected their schools and communities and that COVID-19 has intensified the resulting problems and increased visibility of unequal access to education.

Engagement of Lost Students. SSWs were concerned about students who did not, or could not, engage in school and SSW activities during COVID-19 online learning. One said, “It is difficult to maintain appropriate contact with the most vulnerable of the students, and these are the ones I worry most about—even when school was in session.” Sometimes, difficulty engaging was related to basic needs and to technology access; sometimes, it was related to other factors. Another respondent said, “The inequity of access to food, to reliable and adequate Internet service, to devices has been very problematic.” Concerns about missing students reflected a tension between the need to create protocols and materials to serve students and families and the need to reach out to students who, for myriad reasons, may not have responded to SSWs or any other educators from their schools (see Table 2).

SSWs’ Capacity to Meet Needs. SSWs often struggled to meet the needs of students and families given the complications of COVID-19 and the restrictions placed on their typical, in-person modes of service delivery (see Table 2). One SSW explained, “As a school social worker for many years, the COVID virus brought into perspective how important our position is to be in person.” Many social workers were also singularly responsible for large numbers of students and schools. As a result, SSWs encountered problems and frustrations while serving their school communities. Some examples showed this as a problem of numbers; one respondent reported being the only SSW for 1,500 students. Others described difficulties that arose from expectations of other staff and school leaders that were either unclear, unrealistic, or represented a departure from what SSWs knew they should be doing. One participant said, “The primary barrier to practice is the lack of understanding from school administrators about school social work practice and the nature of our job.” These comments suggested that it is not individual SSW ability that requires intervention; rather, it is the capacity of schools and districts that needs reform. Moreover, a substantive shift in resources is needed to ensure that students and families are supported. Although our findings show that SSWs are resourceful and diligent, their ability to meet the needs of their school communities was compromised by system-level factors.

Professional Isolation and Disconnection. Social workers also indicated an isolation inherent in their positions as a sole social worker in their schools and sometimes in their districts (see Table 2). One said, “As the only social worker, I am without a department. Therefore, I felt lost and on an island with information being distributed.” Many participants articulated the need for professional support and supervision, especially as they pivoted to online programming and interaction with students. SSWs also indicated a need for best practices, including interventions for social–emotional learning and mental health for online or virtual delivery. One said, “I personally need training on how to provide services remotely, what are best practices, and how to engage with families and students remotely.” These findings exemplified SSW needs for adequate supervision to support their efforts in a dynamic, changing environment in which their roles, sometimes already unclear, were further confounded by district and school guidance that was imprecise, improvisational, or unclear.

SSWs’ Personal Experiences and Concerns
SSWs were also affected by the nature of working remotely. In some cases, SSWs highlighted the
loistical difficulties of working from home related to maintaining confidentiality for clients and disruptions related to technology. Additional stress arose from burdens of working while caring for their own families and struggling with issues around health and safety. One simply explained, “Being a ‘good’ school social worker is impossible working from home with a one- and three-year-old.” Comments from SSWs about their personal struggles and concerns reflected the universality of COVID-19’s impact on communities and demonstrated a strong commitment to serving their school communities (see Table 2).

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study aimed to explore SSW experiences as schools were shut down and then began to reopen, often remotely, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight many complex challenges related to the needs of students and families, the capacity of schools to respond to the situation, and the clinical and personal implications of radical shifts in the way SSWs are able to deliver services. In addition, our findings demonstrate that SSWs are committed to delivering ethical and high-quality services to their schools, students, and communities even as resources and capacity have not kept pace with the evolving needs driven by the pandemic. Based on the responses from SSWs across the nation, we highlight several areas in which shifts in policy and practice are recommended to further support SSWs and the field of school social work.

**Targeted Support for Food, Housing, and Mental Health in Schools with the Greatest Need**

Findings from this study demonstrate a startling need for basic needs. SSWs clearly identified the lack of support for food, housing, and mental health as critical issues for students and families. Students are unable to make progress with academic or social-emotional skills if they are hungry and do not have a place to live (Kelly et al., 2020a). Quantitative findings also indicated basic needs as a critical area: SSWs reported that up to 75 percent of their students and families have a need in this area (Kelly et al., 2020b). Furthermore, not all schools or SSWs need the same things. For instance, although many SSWs struggled to make contact with families, some were able to provide asynchronous units and to reach out to students in need. This contrast does not suggest that some social workers are working harder than others; rather, the communities being served need different things. Supports must therefore be strategic, and SSW knowledge about their schools, communities, and families should be considered in the decision making. Blanket policies to increase resources risk leaving schools with high concentrations of minority students and high levels of poverty without sufficient resources; such policies also perpetuate the already pervasive inequality in educational opportunities.

**Provision of Sufficient Equipment to Access Internet and Engage in School Work**

Findings from this study and from quantitative work with this sample (Kelly et al., 2020b) suggest that schools and districts will have to contend with the large numbers of families who do not have Internet access and computers or tablets with which to engage in virtual schooling and virtual social work services. Although some SSWs were able to connect with students and families via phone, the current reliance on videoconferencing and learning management systems as primary vehicles of instruction and interaction creates a significant disadvantage for those without technological resources. Furthermore, quantitative data (Kelly et al., 2020b) and qualitative data from this study suggest that technology needs likely accompany other structural indicators of unequal opportunity. SSW responses show that, despite the technological barriers being outside of their control and purview, they persisted in their efforts to engage students and families.

**Expansion and Reallocation of Professionals to Schools with Highest Needs**

Many SSWs in this study indicated that their difficulties engaging students and families and providing support were related to issues of capacity and the understanding of social workers’ role in schools. These findings are echoed by quantitative results indicating that SSWs are stressed, overwhelmed, and stretched too thin (Kelly et al., 2020b). SSWs also reported large caseloads and large populations of students they were sometimes singularly responsible for. Even as researchers forecasted workforce shortages before the pandemic (Lin, Lin, & Zhang,
current findings show the urgency of increased capacity to meet basic needs and mental health needs as well as to provide other supports for school communities as the pandemic continues to disrupt business as usual. That this is a global phenomenon further bolsters calls for a national plan to overhaul how resources are distributed to students and families (Kelly et al., 2020a) in a way that reflects the urgency of such resources and personnel. Without structural and systemic support, the experiences of SSWs in this study are likely to continue: At an individual level, SSWs will find ways to support students and families; at other levels, there will be little change to support SSWs. Therefore, questions facing the social work and education communities include: Do our theoretical priorities match our budget priorities? Do we believe that a 1 to 1,200 SSW to student ratio is appropriate?

In addition, many SSWs expressed frustration related to misunderstanding of the social work role, or the inability of administrators within schools and districts to support their roles. These concerns likely existed before COVID but were exacerbated by a lack of guidance and support as well as the absence of structural professional supports. Not only do schools need more professionals trained to meet student and family needs, better supervision models and policies from social work organizations are needed to help these individuals be successful and to streamline interdisciplinary interventions. SSWs should be involved in planning school and district responses to COVID-19.

**Protocols for Best Practices and Professional Development**

Bolstering the capacity of SSWs and schools to support students is not merely an issue of staffing. Findings suggest that many SSWs wanted guidance as they shifted to online services for a variety of issues, including gathering consent for treatment, using telehealth, and creating materials and a curriculum for students. SSWs invoked feelings of “reinventing the wheel” as they struggled to find resources. Our data suggest that these needs are related to supervisors who are not social workers, being the sole SSW at school sites, and misunderstandings about social work roles and responsibilities. The implications for professional, national, and state social work organizations include providing protocols and professional development to guide SSW services as the pandemic continues to shape their experiences (Kelly et al., 2020a). Universities need to similarly include new and flexible methods (for example, telehealth) in their curricula so that SSWs are prepared for the immediate future and the beginning of the school year as well as for future disruptions to “normal” service delivery (Kelly et al., 2020a).

**Support for SSWs Needs to Be Responsive to Changing Circumstances**

Finally, findings from this study also indicate a need for dynamic supervision that provides instrumental and social-emotional support for SSWs. Although this is a typical function of supervision (Milne, Aylott, Fitzpatrick, & Ellis, 2008), SSWs practicing during the pandemic indicated that they did not have the support they needed to meet professional and personal needs. Furthermore, the necessary expansion of SSW services and workforce to meet COVID-19 created needs that will require a corresponding increase in the profession’s capacity to supervise and develop an efficient, nimble, and healthy workforce.

These findings should be understood in the context of their strengths and limitations. This study is unique in that we were able to gather substantive qualitative feedback from practicing SSWs in the midst of the COVID-19 school disruptions. The qualitative nature of our study limits generalizability despite the nationwide sample. Future research is needed to more broadly understand the impacts of school social work practice during a pandemic and how education systems and professional social work organizations can contribute to positive reform. Future research is also needed to examine the process of reopening schools that includes issues of equity and safety for students and staff members.

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