Needs of Children and Families during Spring 2020 COVID-19 School Closures: Findings from a National Survey

Kate R. Watson, Ron Avi Astor, Rami Benbenishty, Gordon Capp, and Michael S. Kelly

Despite extensive reports during the COVID-19 pandemic of the academic challenges facing students, and the effects of online learning on academic achievements, we have little information regarding the needs and difficulties of K–12 students and their families from a social work perspective. The present article shares findings from a nationwide survey of 1,275 school social workers (SSWs) reporting on their clients—schools, children, and families—during the spring 2020 COVID-19 school closures. SSWs indicated that the children and families they served had significant unmet basic needs, including for food, healthcare, and housing. Poverty and mental health compounded pandemic difficulties, which were associated with the sociodemographic makeup of schools. Student engagement in social work services during the closures was significantly lower than prepandemic levels, generally due to unmet material needs. Several policy and practice implications arise from these findings, including a need for additional services for students and families, a plan to address structural inequities in our schools and communities, coordinated outreach to reengage missing students, and recognition of the strong work being done by school staff coupled with a need for additional supports and resources to combat persistent inequality.

KEY WORDS: basic needs; COVID-19; inequality; schools; social work

Most of our nation’s more than 700,000 social workers serve children and families, including in school settings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Schools have become a key provider of social services for students and their families, including medical and behavioral health care, health and mental health promotion, nutritional supports, and case management (Stone, 2015). Social workers have played a central role in responding to crisis situations (Callahan, 2009). However, to date, not much is known about social workers’ experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Abrams & Dettlaff, 2020). School social workers’ (SSWs’) views and reports of the needs of students, families, and schools during this time are critical for the national response and repositioning of school social work. The global pandemic and repeated openings and closures of schools provided a unique opportunity to understand how pandemics can impact child- and community-serving systems like schools. In particular, the early phase of COVID-19 school closures and shift to virtual learning allowed an examination of how SSWs viewed the current and future needs of students, families, and staff during and after the pandemic.

School-based social workers are tasked with a variety of responsibilities, including the assessment of students’ behavioral and emotional health needs; providing individual, group, and family therapy; supporting students with Individualized Education Plans; crisis intervention and emergency response, including for suicide; helping families access needed resources; developing and teaching workshops for teachers, staff, and parents; advocating for students’ best interests; and advising on ethical and other issues (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2010). A major role for SSWs has been school attendance and the prevention of school dropout, which has been a persistent problem in U.S. schools (Rumberger, 2011), before and during the pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted inequities in both school attendance and dropout rates for vulnerable groups and low-resourced schools (Blume & Kohli, 2020; Toness, 2020).

One national practice model for school social work describes three domains of practice, including providing evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services; promoting positive school
climate and culture that foster learning and teaching; and maximizing access to school and community-based resources (Frey et al., 2016). Within these domains, SSWs are expected to work to create and maintain home–school–community linkages that support students and families, and advocate for education rights and equity (Frey et al., 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, work to support home–school linkages and support students’ engagement in school is even more important (Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). Although the social work profession has contributed to and advocated for policy reform as a field (Reisch, 2014), that has been less true among school-based social workers, who have tended to focus on interpersonal interventions (Kelly et al., 2015). As such, some researchers and practitioners have called for a refocus from the traditional clinical model to a school change model, which puts the school at the center of social work efforts and encourages social workers to coordinate with other school personnel to address organizational conditions, policies, or practices that hinder student success (Allen-Meares, 2013).

Research and history have shown that people who fare the worst during pandemics are vulnerable groups, including those who are young, are elderly, have preexisting conditions, or are of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Mamelund, 2017). This has also been true during COVID-19 (Shadmi et al., 2020), including within the U.S. educational system (California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education [CARE-ED], 2020). Because of social work’s ethical commitment to vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed populations (NASW, 2021), it is essential to understand SSWs’ views on the needs of children and schools, including their recommendations on how to address those needs. This article was guided by the following questions: (a) During COVID-19 school closures, what needs did SSWs identify among students, families, and school staff? (b) Which U.S. schools are most vulnerable?

**METHOD**

**Population and Sample**

Data for this study come from a national survey of SSWs about their experiences providing services during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). The study sample \( N = 1,275 \) was taken from a population of SSWs in the United States who are members of NASW, School Social Work Network, American Council for School Social Work, School Social Work Association of America, Society for Social Work and Research, and other state-level professional organizations. These professional organizations agreed to distribute a link to the online survey created by the research team to all of their members. The survey was administered during June 2020.

**Instrument and Analytic Plan**

Survey questions were designed by the research team to understand the challenges that SSWs and their clients faced during the pandemic. Specifically, we sought to understand the needs of social workers, schools, students, families, and communities, and the types of support required for the upcoming school year. The focus of the present article is on the schools, students, and families that SSWs serve.

The online questionnaire was anonymous and participation was voluntary. Study authors received institutional review board approval from their respective universities and each partner organization went through its own independent ethics review.

**Demographics.** The survey asked participants for basic demographic information, including their gender, race/ethnicity, professional role, and the characteristics of the schools with which they were working, specifically the grades served and percentage of students who meet the requirements for free or reduced-price lunch, who are from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups, who enter college, and who drop out.

**Families’ and Students’ Needs.** Participants were asked to assess the proportion of students and families in the school experiencing needs in each of eight areas (food, housing, health, mental health, shopping, tutoring, disability support, or crisis intervention), on a five-point scale: 1 = a few, if any; 2 = less than half of the families; 3 = about half of the families; 4 = more than half; and 5 = all or almost all families. Needs included four items pertaining to unmet basic needs such as food, housing, health services, and shopping support \( (\alpha = .87) \) and four items pertaining to unmet needs for supportive services, including mental health services, tutoring and disability support, and crisis intervention \( (\alpha = .79) \).

**Situations Compounding the Pandemic.** Participants indicated the extent to which certain situations
(e.g., poverty, mental health) were compounding the pandemic situation for students and families, on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large extent. Nine items pertained to adverse home conditions, such as exposure to domestic violence, exposure to child abuse and neglect, poverty, and poor housing conditions (α = .925). Four items focused on circumstances relevant to immigrant families such as discrimination due to undocumented status, language difficulties, and concerns about potential deportation (α = .90).

**Students’ Participation and Responsiveness to Services.** Participants compared current levels of student participation with those before the pandemic on a five-point scale of 1 = much less than before to 5 = much more than before. They responded to seven questions regarding students’ responses to remote social work services on a scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large extent. Two questions related to difficulties of students due to pressing material needs and to an increase in the severity of mental health problems. Four additional statements pertained to positive engagement (e.g., “Students enjoy receiving online services” and “Despite the current situation, students are still able to make progress toward their school social work goals”). An index of positive engagement was created as the mean of these four statements (α = .80).

**School Staff Collaboration and Performance.** We presented practitioners with 13 statements to indicate how well school staff were working together and performing on a scale of 1 = not at all to 5 = to a very large degree. Statements included “The school is showing care for ... (students, teachers, etc.)”; “The school is providing good solutions to a difficult situation”; and “Staff members are doing their best” (α = .92). We asked the participants to rate a general statement: “Overall, I am satisfied with the school’s performance these days.”

We conducted descriptive analyses of the study variables and then examined their bivariate associations with the schools’ socioeconomic and academic characteristics.

**FINDINGS**

**Background Information**

**Participants.** The majority of participants (87.9 percent) self-identified as women, 5.5 percent as men, and 0.4 percent as gender nonconforming (see Table 1). Participants could select more than one racial affiliation and they identified as White (73.9 percent), Black (10.7 percent), Hispanic/Latinx (8.7 percent), and other races (4.7 percent). Overall, participants were very experienced: 23.6 percent had 20 or more years of service and an additional 30.5 percent had 11 to 20 years of service. Only 11.6 percent had two or fewer years of experience. Most participants were client-serving social workers (94.2 percent), and a few were heads of district services (3.2 percent) or social work supervisors (2.6 percent). These demographics reflect what we know about SSWs and are similar to prior national surveys conducted (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008; Kelly et al., 2010, 2015; Salsberg et al., 2017).

Most respondents (84.2 percent) reported providing direct services during the pandemic, primarily through email (79.6 percent), phone (74.2 percent), or virtual meeting rooms (69.0 percent). One in six respondents performed socially distanced home visits (see Kelly et al., 2020a, 2021, for a full discussion of respondents’ service provision during the pandemic).

**Schools.** We asked respondents to describe the schools where they worked. The largest numbers of SSWs worked in middle and junior high schools (68.1 percent) and elementary schools (66.1 percent). A smaller number reported working in high schools (46 percent) and preschool/childcare (36.4 percent). About 15.2 percent worked in alternative schools. Overall, participants reported working in schools with lower SES. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch was 61.4 percent and schools on average were 50.7 percent minoritized populations. A more detailed analysis revealed that, in a quarter of the schools, 90 percent or more students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and more than 80 percent of students were from minoritized groups. As could be expected, these estimates were intercorrelated. For instance, the correlation between the percentage of minoritized students and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch was $r = .72, p < .001$.

At the time of the study (June 2020), most schools were reported to be in the process of planning when and how to reopen (71.5 percent) for the fall of 2020; 14.4 percent were closed with no plans to reopen; and only 2.7 percent of respondents said their school was open or planning to reopen soon. The rest (11.7 percent) had other responses or did not respond.
Family Needs
Participants were asked to focus on the school that is most representative or is the main school with which they work. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of family needs identified by the SSWs. We also examined the detailed distribution of each of the needs (not presented in the table). SSWs indicated that students and their families had significant unmet basic needs and needs for other supports during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common needs were for mental health services (75.7 percent of schools with half or more families with this need), food (62.4 percent), tutoring support for the student (62.3 percent), health services (61.6 percent), crisis intervention (42.9 percent), and housing support (42.8 percent). Other needs suggested by multiple qualitative responses included access to technology, employment services, and transportation support (also see Capp et al., 2021).

Circumstances Compounding the Pandemic
SSWs reported that several circumstances were compounding families’ pandemic situations in spring 2020. SSWs indicated that family poverty and mental health were the adverse circumstances that most impacted students’ and families’ pandemic experiences (Table 3). Additional analyses (not shown) indicated that 65 percent of SSWs thought that poverty was a compounding factor to a large or very large extent, and 60.5 percent thought the same about mental health problems. Further, 26.9 percent thought immigration-related circumstances were a compounding factor to a large or very large extent and 23.8 percent identified language problems as a key compounding factor.

We examined the associations between the school sociodemographic and academic achievement characteristics and social workers’ assessments of family needs, compounding circumstances, and staff collaboration and functioning. Table 4 indicates that families in poorer schools had more basic needs, and more affected by family adversity (r = .54, p < .001). Schools with more minoritized students were identified as having more basic needs (r = .49, p < .001) and support needs (r = .41, p < .001), and were more affected by family adversity (r = .48, p < .001) and immigration-related compounding circumstances.

### Table 1: Participant Characteristics (N = 1,275)

| Characteristic                        | n   | %   | M   | SD  |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Gender                               |     |     |     |     |
| Man                                  | 70  | 5.5 |     |     |
| Woman                                | 1,121 | 87.9 |     |     |
| Gender nonconforming                  | 5   | 0.4 |     |     |
| Other/prefer not to answer           | 79  | 6.2 |     |     |
| Race/ethnicitya                      |     |     |     |     |
| White/Caucasian                      | 942 | 73.9|     |     |
| Black/African American               | 137 | 10.7|     |     |
| Hispanic/Latinx                      | 111 | 8.7 |     |     |
| Asian American                       | 21  | 1.6 |     |     |
| Native American/Alaska Native        | 21  | 1.6 |     |     |
| Hawaii Native/Pacific Islander       | 2   | 0.2 |     |     |
| Other                                | 16  | 1.3 |     |     |
| No response                          | 82  | 6.4 |     |     |
| Role                                 |     |     |     |     |
| School social worker                 | 1,191 | 94.2|     |     |
| Social work supervisor               | 33  | 2.6 |     |     |
| Head of services in district         | 44  | 3.2 |     |     |
| Years                                |     |     |     |     |
| <1                                   | 30  | 2.5 |     |     |
| 1–2                                  | 109 | 9.1 |     |     |
| 3–5                                  | 203 | 17.0|     |     |
| 6–10                                 | 208 | 17.4|     |     |
| 11–15                                | 186 | 15.5|     |     |
| 16–20                                | 178 | 14.9|     |     |
| >20                                  | 283 | 23.6|     |     |
| Grades serveda                       |     |     |     |     |
| Preschool/childcare                  | 464 | 36.4|     |     |
| Elementary                           | 843 | 66.1|     |     |
| Middle school/junior high            | 868 | 68.1|     |     |
| High school                          | 586 | 46.0|     |     |
| Alternative                          | 194 | 15.2|     |     |
| School characteristics               |     |     |     |     |
| Students receiving free/reduced lunch| 61.39 | 29.97|     |     |
| Minoritized students                 | 50.72 | 31.37|     |     |
| Students who drop out                | 15.65 | 16.34|     |     |
| Students who enter college            | 56.90 | 24.95|     |     |

Note: Means and standard deviations in the table refer to the percentage of students reflecting each characteristic.
*Participants could indicate more than one.
High levels of student dropout were also associated with needs (e.g., $r = .40, p < .001$) and compounding circumstances (e.g., $r = .37, p < .001$). The percentage of students entering college had a similar correlation with family’s basic needs, but reversed in direction to dropout rates (e.g., $r = -.38, p < .001$).

### Student Participation

SSWs reported that levels of student participation were lower during the early phase of pandemic school closures: Only 6.4 percent of respondents indicated students were participating more or much more than before while more than 80 percent reported lower or much lower levels of participation. Beyond mere engagement in services, we also examined how SSWs described students’ responses to remote services. The most common reports were of students having trouble engaging in services due to material difficulties ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.11$) and an increase in the severity of mental health issues due to the crisis ($M = 2.99, SD = 0.92$). Table 5 presents an index of positive engagement. Similar to SSW responses regarding levels of engagement, participants indicated that few students showed increased engagement or progress during pandemic closures, and that students enjoyed online services or were engaging intentionally with services from a small to moderate extent.

We examined the correlations between the school characteristics and the students’ positive engagement as well as the problems they had taking part in services (Table 5). Difficulties in participation due to pressing material needs were positively correlated with the percentage of students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch ($r = .36, p < .001$), were from minoritized groups ($r = .28, p < .001$), or dropped out ($r = .21, p < .001$), and negatively correlated with the percentage of students who entered college ($r = -.21, p < .001$). Schools where more students entered college were more likely to have students who showed a positive response to online services during the pandemic ($r = .14, p < .001$). No associations were found between school characteristics and severity of mental health needs, perhaps indicating that the increase in mental

| Compounding Circumstance | $M$ | $SD$ |
|--------------------------|-----|------|
| Adverse family circumstances ($\alpha = .925$) | 3.13 | 0.80 |
| Poverty | 3.81 | 1.11 |
| Mental health | 3.72 | 0.91 |
| Lack of services in the community | 3.30 | 1.10 |
| Family discord | 3.20 | 0.91 |
| Poor housing conditions | 2.96 | 1.08 |
| Physical health | 2.91 | 0.98 |
| Exposure to family/domestic violence | 2.91 | 0.98 |
| Exposure to child abuse and neglect | 2.84 | 0.96 |
| Community violence | 2.50 | 1.22 |
| Immigration-related circumstances ($\alpha = .90$) | 2.59 | 1.04 |
| Discrimination due to minoritized status | 2.78 | 1.16 |
| Language difficulties | 2.69 | 1.15 |
| Discrimination due to undocumented status | 2.53 | 1.23 |
| Concerns about potential deportation | 2.37 | 1.19 |
health needs noted by SSWs was not concentrated in higher-poverty, lower-resourced schools, but is a more widespread problem across all socioeconomic levels.

**School Staff Performance**
Participants were asked to pick a school typical of their caseload and assess collaboration and functioning of staff members (see Table 6). SSWs indicated a strong belief that school staff were doing their best during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (85.3 percent said this was true to a large or to a very large extent), that their schools were making a strong effort to care for their students (80.1 percent), and that principals were working to understand and address the needs of school staff (69.2 percent). SSWs thought they were finding ways to work with school staff and support each other, and the same was true for staff supporting each other (64.7 percent and 61.8 percent, respectively). Table 4 illustrates that generally school socioeconomic and academic indicators were not associated with SSWs’ evaluations of schools’ performance; however, in schools where more students entered college, staff performance was positively associated \( r = .15, p < .001 \).

**DISCUSSION**
The purpose of this article was to present the needs that SSWs identified among their clients—schools and their students, families, and staff—during the early phase of COVID-19 disruptions. Several important findings resulted from this national study. Overall, participants were a very experienced group that appear to be representative of the profession. They tended to work in low-SES, high-need schools. Children and families in these schools had significant unmet basic needs and needs for supportive services, and their poverty and unaddressed mental health issues were believed to be compounding their difficulties during the early phase of pandemic school closures. As a result of these challenges, student engagement in social work services was significantly lower than prepa-

### Table 4: Correlations Between School Characteristics and Student Needs/Participation

| Student Situation and Participation | Free/Reduced-Price Lunch | Minoritized | Drop Out | Enter College |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------|----------|--------------|
| Family needs                       |                          |            |          |              |
| Basic needs                        | 0.63*                    | 0.49*      | 0.38*    | -0.38*       |
| Support needs                      | 0.46*                    | 0.41*      | 0.40*    | -0.29*       |
| Compounding circumstances          |                          |            |          |              |
| Family adversity                   | 0.54*                    | 0.48*      | 0.37*    | -0.34*       |
| Immigration-related                | 0.39*                    | 0.52*      | 0.26*    | -0.13        |
| Staff performance                  | -0.08                    | -0.13      | -0.13    | 0.15*        |
| Student engagement                 | -0.11                    | -0.09      | -0.05    | 0.14*        |
| Impediments to participation       |                          |            |          |              |
| Material difficulties              | 0.36*                    | 0.28*      | 0.21*    | -0.21*       |
| Mental health difficulties         | 0.03                     | 0.01       | 0.07     | -0.02        |

\*p < .001.

### Table 5: Reports of Students’ Responses to Remote School Social Work Services

| Student Response                                                        | M     | SD  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----|
| Index of positive engagement \( (\alpha = .80) \)                      | 2.28  | 0.66|
| Students enjoy receiving online services.                              | 2.54  | 0.89|
| Students are engaging intentionally with online services.              | 2.53  | 0.80|
| Despite the current situation, students are still able to make progress toward their school social work goals. | 2.22  | 0.79|
| Students are actually showing increased engagement in online services. | 1.80  | 0.82|
demic levels and the kids most in need were those most likely to be disengaged. Still, SSWs were positive about the work being done by school staff and believed that most were trying their best in the difficult circumstances.

**Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Several policy and practice implications arise from our findings, specifically in relation to the need for supportive services for students and families, a plan to address structural inequities, coordinated outreach to reengage missing students, and recognition of the strong work being done by school staff coupled with a need for additional resources. Due to the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the serious challenges faced by our nation’s schools, children, and families, SSWs should seek to partner with other helping professionals to develop plans for and implement strategies to reach these important goals. Further, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and universities that train SSWs may need to reevaluate their curricula and standards to better meet the needs of students and society during this unprecedented time.

**Schools Must Provide Comprehensive Supportive Services upon Reopening.** Although schools are a key provider of social services for children and families, SSWs reported that families in their schools have significant unmet needs for food, health and mental health services, housing support, and tutoring for students. These needs were intercorrelated such that families tended to experience multiple unmet basic needs. If schools and communities fail to reorganize to strengthen their provision of these basic human services, children and families will not receive the support they need to reengage academically. Strategies for reopening that only focus on academics and social–emotional learning will not suffice when there are large numbers of students and families that do not have food or fear the loss of their housing.

This study shows what SSWs have known for years: needs are not distributed evenly among schools. While this has arguably been an ugly manifestation of American inequality for decades, the pandemic has brought to the forefront the deep damage unmet material needs cause to poor and minoritized populations in our country (CARE-ED, 2020). It is evident that schools serving Black and Latinx students and families have significant unmet basic needs during the pandemic. Our findings show that these needs are associated with the number of low-income and minoritized students in a school, and schools with more such students have higher needs overall. Moreover, circumstances that compound these needs are closely associated with school characteristics. For instance, compounding circumstances such as discrimination due to race or undocumented status, and con-

| Table 6: Assessments of School Staff Collaboration and Functioning |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Staff Performance and Collaboration**                      | **M** | **SD** |
| Overall, I’m satisfied with the school performance these days. | 3.34  | 0.99  |
| School collaboration and functioning (α = .92)                 | 3.57  | 0.71  |
| The school is showing care for students.                       | 4.10  | 0.76  |
| The school is showing care for teachers.                       | 3.58  | 0.93  |
| The school is providing good solutions to a difficult situation.| 3.48  | 0.90  |
| Staff members are doing their best.                            | 4.23  | 0.73  |
| The principal is working to understand and address needs of school staff. | 3.87  | 1.02  |
| The PTA is doing its best to support teachers and families.    | 2.53  | 1.24  |
| The school is organized in its responses to the situation.     | 3.41  | 0.99  |
| Staff are finding ways to work together and provide support for each other. | 3.71  | 0.95  |
| My colleagues are a source of emotional support.              | 3.57  | 1.14  |
| Principal and/or teachers are a source of support for each other. | 3.52  | 1.01  |
| We are working together to deal with the challenges of the pandemic. | 3.75  | 0.95  |
| We are engaging in professional development to meet these new challenges. | 3.13  | 1.22  |
| I feel that if I need help doing my work online I have someone to turn to. | 3.48  | 1.08  |
cerns about potential deportation, are much more prevalent in schools with high numbers of minoritized students. Findings suggest that supportive efforts should be targeted to schools with higher numbers of racialized and low-income students; these schools have the highest levels of need and require the most support.

While SSWs are already engaged in providing for the basic needs of children and families, more can be done to establish and sustain linkages between the school, government, and community resources to enhance support levels. For example, schools can partner with local universities to provide pre-service internships to social work and counseling students (see Astor, Benbenishty, & Watson, 2021). SSWs could also bring together diverse stakeholders to address existing fragmented programmatic approaches to health, behavioral health, and social services to refocus on such needs from a comprehensive, holistic perspective (Adelman & Taylor, 2017).

**A National Plan Is Needed to Address Structural Inequities.** The large number of families in need, and the fact that many families have multiple needs, calls for large-scale national and regional efforts to provide resources to support families. Furthermore, it is clear that no one profession or stakeholder, particularly at the local level or even at state levels, can address all of these needs. For example, to address food insecurity, we need a federal and state-level commitment to fund structural change initiatives (Astor, 2020). All relevant professions should collaborate and coordinate their responses with our school communities, rather than the discipline-specific and siloed approaches often reported by practitioners working in schools (Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy, 2020). There is a need for shared dialogue, thinking, and decision making among educators, helping professions (e.g., social workers, psychologists, counselors, and pediatricians), public health experts, and community stakeholders and leadership. Professional associations and public officials should help facilitate these exchanges.

As previously noted, historically SSWs have tended to focus on interpersonal interventions rather than advocacy and policy reform (Kelly et al., 2015). The pandemic has strengthened the need for a profession-wide shift toward whole-school reform and cross-disciplinary coordination to address organizational conditions, policies, and practices that hinder student success (Adelman & Taylor, 2017; Astor, Benbenishty, & Watson, 2021; Astor, Noguera, et al., 2021). Included in this shift is a need to advance racial equity both among schools (Zimmerman & Astor, 2021) and within the social work profession as a whole. Our findings clearly illustrate this need. Although more than half of students in the schools our participants served were from historically marginalized groups, almost three-quarters of SSW respondents (73.9 percent) were White. Participant demographics match what we know about SSWs overall (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008; Kelly et al., 2010, 2015; Salsberg et al., 2017) and thus indicate a need for targeted recruitment of Black, Indigenous, and people of color to social work programs and the profession.

**A Coordinated Campaign to Reach and Reengage Missing Students Must Be Developed.** One of the most important shortcomings of relying mostly on remote service provision is low student participation and engagement. More than 80 percent of respondents indicated that student participation was lower than before the pandemic shutdowns, and at least some of this was due to students being preoccupied with the material needs they were facing. Lower levels of engagement were associated with very few students making progress toward their goals, while simultaneously their needs may have grown and difficulties worsened during the pandemic. First, we must ensure that all students and school staff have sufficient equipment to access the internet to engage in course work, activities, and services. Second, we need a national plan to reach out, reengage, and rebuild supports for the up to 30 percent of children who never attended school or rarely attended during the pandemic (Blume & Kohli, 2020; Toness, 2020). This is on top of serious inequities in student engagement that have existed historically (Rumberger, 2011). Without an urgent, sweeping effort, this group of newly disengaged students could turn into a lost generation. Social workers are uniquely equipped to address social–ecological barriers to student engagement and should be at the forefront of outreach to missing students.

**Schools Are Strong but Need More Support.** In terms of the performance of schools and their educational teams, our findings provided some encouraging indications. Despite the difficulties
posed by the pandemic, SSWs had high assessments that staff were doing their best during the early phase of a global pandemic and nationwide civil rights movement. SSWs also felt that schools were showing care for students. A large number of respondents thought that principals were working to understand and address the needs of school staff, and that school staff were collaborating to deal with pandemic-related challenges. In contrast to many of our other findings, the school’s socioeconomic and academic indicators were not associated with SSW evaluations of their schools’ performance. This indicates that most schools have a good and dedicated team that can provide a strong basis for dealing with the current challenges.

At the same time, schools require external supports and resources, including adequate funding and personnel, to cope. The pandemic has affected nearly every aspect of society, including public education budgets. Although experts report that cuts to education have been less severe than expected (due to the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act and reallocation of state funding), additional cuts are expected (Griffith & Berry, 2020). It is possible that some of the SSWs who were surveyed have since had their work demands expanded, hours limited, or been laid off, which will perpetuate existing inequities among under-resourced schools. Given the already serious concerns SSWs highlighted in the early phase of the pandemic (e.g., food, health, and mental health needs) and the increases expected as a result of pandemic-related job loss, health challenges, and the impending end of eviction moratoriums, significant additional funding is needed to hire SSWs and expand schools’ capacity to support students and families most in need.

Organizations that set standards for social work education (e.g., CSWE) and institutions that train SSWs (e.g., universities) can provide support by adapting their curricula to include trainings about ethical and practical considerations of remote service provision, including telehealth, and support SSWs in educating school staff about the impact of a collective traumatic event like this pandemic so that all school professionals are equipped to meet the needs of children and families as the nation continues to recover from the pandemic and schools reopen in person or in hybrid formats (see also Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b).

**Strengths and Limitations**

Study findings should be understood in the context of their strengths and limitations. The present article was the result of a rapid-response survey that solicited responses from practicing SSWs in the early phase of the COVID-19 school shutdowns. The study was based on a large number of respondents; still, we cannot be sure that our sample represents the whole population of SSWs. However, the gender and racial-ethnic composition of our sample reflects active SSWs who are members of national social work organizations in the United States (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008; Kelly et al., 2010, 2015; Salsberg et al., 2017). Because of the sample size and timeliness of data collected, findings are useful for policy discussions related to reopening schools and developing plans to reach and support students and families most in need. At the same time, our survey was not based on defined and validated instruments to evaluate social work practice during a pandemic because such tools did not exist. Instead, we relied on insights from numerous interactions and discussions with practitioners and experts in the field of school social work. As such, we were able to focus the instrument on the needs of schools, students, families, and communities during the pandemic and the types of supports SSWs thought were most needed for the upcoming school year and possible reopening of schools.

**Future Research**

Survey responses were collected in June 2020, shortly following initial school closures. Future research is therefore needed to understand longer-term effects of the pandemic on students and families, particularly among communities of color given what we now know about disproportionality in infection and mortality rates, and added threats of housing instability, food insecurity, and untreated mental health issues (Fortuna et al., 2020; Sequist, 2020). Additional research is also recommended to better understand the continued experiences of SSWs as they returned to school (e.g., how their safety was addressed by school districts, including the availability of personal protective equipment and vaccines). Our work shows student engagement will continue to be a major issue in the future. Future research should include considerations of the issues of inequality, low-resourced schools, and how to reengage students who stopped attending...
or became disengaged from school before and during the pandemic. Additional research is also needed to understand school social work practice during a pandemic; how education systems and professional social work organizations can contribute to positive reforms to benefit students and families; and to examine the process of reopening schools in a manner that includes issues of equity and safety for students and staff members.

The U.S. education system is in a state of transition as school systems continue to investigate how to reopen schools safely and balance in-person, online, and hybrid forms of instruction during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. SSWs can and should play a key role in the national, state, and local response (Astor, 2020; Kelly et al., 2020a, 2020b). We urge social work researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to collaborate and address the inequities found in this study. This national study of SSWs illustrates the severe disparities in basic needs across the United States and highlights the necessity of comprehensive, cross-disciplinary efforts to address the challenges of American schoolchildren and families. Findings further illustrate that the challenges of American schoolchildren and families are not related to a lack of experience or commitment on the part of educators; rather, they are related to a lack of comprehensive, cross-disciplinary efforts to address the inequities found in this study. This national study of SSWs illustrates the severe disparities in basic needs across the United States and highlights the necessity of comprehensive, cross-disciplinary efforts to address the challenges of American schoolchildren and families.

REFERENCES

Abrams, L. S., & Dettlaff, A. J. (2020). Voices from the frontlines: Social workers confront the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Work, 60*(5), 302–305.

Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED586985.pdf

Allen-Mearaes, P. (2013). School social work. In *Encyclopedia of social work*. NASW and Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acer/9780199975839.013.351

Arrington, P., & Whitaker, T. (2008). *Overview of survey participants*. NASW Membership Workforce Study. National Association of Social Workers.

Astor, R. A. (2020, September 14). *4 things our nation should do to feed hungry students so they can learn* [Editorial]. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/14/opinions/hungry-students-distribution-national-plan-as-tor/index.html

Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., & Watson, K. R. (2021). A conceptual and large-scale empirical examination of the Welcoming Empowerment Monitoring Approach for school safety. *Research on Social Work Practice, 31*, 454–468.

Astor, R. A., Noguera, P., Fergus, E., Gadsden, V., & Benbenishty, R. (2021). A call for the conceptual integration of opportunity structures within school safety research. *School Psychology Review, 50*, 172–190.

Blume, H., & Kohli, S. (2020, March 30). 15,000 L.A. high school students are AWOL online, 40,000 fail to check in daily amid coronavirus closures. *Los Angeles Times*. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-30/coronavirus-los-angeles-schools-15000-high-school-students-absent

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education. (2020). The shift to online education during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic: Concerns and recommendations for California. https://calsaresearch.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/calsar-2020-_0.pdf

Callahan, J. (2009). School-based crisis intervention for traumatic events. In C. Massat, R. Constable, S. McDonald, & J. Flynn (Eds.), *School social work: Practice, policy and research* (7th ed., pp. 638–661). Lyceum Books.

Capp, G., Watson, K. R., Astor, R. A., Kelly, M. S., & Benbenishty, R. (2021, April). School social worker voice during COVID-19 school disruptions: A national qualitative analysis. *Children & Schools, 43*, 79–88.

Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy. (2020, September 23). *Congressional briefing: Bringing the power of social work to schools* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET-UorIvY7k&feature=emb_err_wrt

Fortuna, L. R., Tolou-Shams, M., Robles-Ramamurthy, B., & Porche, M. V. (2020). Inequity and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 12*, 443–445.

Frey, A. J., Raines, J. C., Sabatino, C. A., Alvarez, M., Lindsey, B., McNerney, A., & Streeck, F. (2016). The national school social work practice model. In L. Villarreal Sosa, M. Alvarez, & T. Cox (Eds.), *School social work: National perspectives on practice in schools* (pp. 27–38). Oxford University Press.

Griffith, M. & Berry, W. (2020, September 24). *COVID-19 and state education budgets: The story behind the numbers*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-state-education-budgets-story-behind-numbers

Kelly, M. S., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., & Watson, K. R. (2020a). Opening schools safely in the COVID-19 era: School social workers’ experiences and recommendations [Policy brief]. UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Social Work.

Kelly, M. S., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., & Watson, K. R. (2020b). Opening schools safely in the COVID-19 era: School social workers’ experiences and recommendations: Technical report. UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Social Work.

Kelly, M. S., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., Watson, K., & Astor, R. (2021). Practice in a pandemic: School social workers’ adaptations and experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 school disruptions. *Families in Society*, 102, 400–413.

Kelly, M. S., Berzin, S. C., Frey, A., Alvarez, M., Shaffer, G., & O’Brien, K. (2010). The state of school social work: Findings from the national school social work survey. *School Mental Health, 2*, 132–141.

Kelly, M. S., Thompson, A. M., Frey, A., Klemp, H., Alvarez, M., & Berzin, S. C. (2015). The state of school social work: Revisited. *School Mental Health, 7*, 174–183.

Mamelund, S. E. (2017). Social inequality—A forgotten factor in pandemic influenza preparedness. *Tidskrift for den Norske laegeforening: Tidsskrift for praktisk medicin, sykevård og helse*, 137, 911–913.

National Association of Social Workers. (2010). *Social workers in schools (Kindergarten through 12th grade)*: Occupa-
