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Review article

## FINANCIAL INCOME OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND SELF-CARE OPTIONS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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### Abstract

This article deals with the relationship between social workers' self-care and financial income, which seems necessary for self-care. Self-care is typically considered an essential part of social work abroad. In social work, the importance of self-care is emphasised because it affects not only the quality of life of social workers but also their ability to perform their profession. Self-care is often mentioned as an essential part of social work, to which social workers are entitled and obliged to practice. This review is a secondary analysis of available data (financial and guaranteed income, cost of living, etc.). Suppose there is pressure on social workers to practice self-care. In that case, it is also necessary to address the prerequisites that enable or prevent it, and the financial aspect is the area that seems the most neglected – it may be the biggest and most challenging obstacle to overcome. This article proposes adjustments to ensure the financial possibilities of social workers' self-care. Insufficient self-care carries many risks, the most serious of which is burnout, which is also associated with a significant decrease in performance.

**Keywords:** *Dignified life; Financial income; Quality of life; Self-care; Social work; Social worker*

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### INTRODUCTION

The topic of self-care is not only relevant in the context of social work. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or the energy crisis, self-care is an essential part of everyday life. In social work, the importance of self-care is even more amplified since its practice is associated not only with the quality of life of social workers but with the performance of their profession.

This article focuses on the relationship between the self-care of social workers in the Czech Republic and their financial income, which seems to be a prerequisite for self-care. The analysis was conducted in 2023, and this topic has not received much attention in professional and scientific publications in the Czech Republic. Searching available sources via Google Scholar with a limitation to the Czech Republic showed 1,120 results. How-

ever, these were primarily final student theses or general texts unrelated to the article's main topic. The Scopus database did not offer more relevant results related to the presented topic. This topic is covered in foreign literature concerning the calculations of the minimum living wage and the financial income of social workers in the Czech Republic; these foreign sources were irrelevant to our study. The primary available survey was the work of Hubíková (2019).

Self-care is “*the ability to care for oneself through awareness, self-control, and self-reliance to achieve, maintain, or promote optimal health and well-being*” (Martínez et al., 2021). The social work profession is very demanding, as social workers regularly face challenging situations that impact their well-being (Griffiths et al., 2019). If, given the demands of the social work profession, social workers should practice self-care, it is also

necessary to assume there are situations to enable or prevent them from doing so. The financial aspect is the area that seems to be the most neglected in this context, even though it may be the biggest and most challenging obstacle to overcome.

Self-care is often mentioned as an essential part of social work, to which social workers are entitled and have an obligation to practice (Hubíková, 2019). One could assume that if social workers are required to perform a specific activity, they can perform it. However, this may not be the case. This has been noticed, for example, by Olga Hubíková, who came up with a study of self-care among social workers. In this study, Hubíková (2019) addresses the obstacles that limit or completely prevent social workers from practising self-care. However, this study does not focus on the fundamental prerequisite for self-care – the financial situation of social workers. Taking care of oneself does not include only basic mental hygiene. It is not just about practising meditation, yoga, finding time to relax, etc. A person needs to have a place to live, not be stressed, not go into debt, pay for utilities, eat a balanced diet, sleep long enough, and much more. Money is necessary for self-care. Low income is a prevalent topic in social work, and in connection with the requirement of self-care, it seems even more pressing than before.

### **Obligation of self-care for social workers**

As mentioned in the introduction, self-care in social work is being increasingly discussed abroad. However, as Hubíková (2019) notes in her study ‘Self-care in Social Workers as Part of the Professional Performance of Social Work’, self-care still receives insufficient attention in the Czech Republic. The importance of self-care is described by one of the experts featured in Hubíková’s research (2019: 12): *“If a worker does not take care of themselves, they primarily endanger themselves (their health) and their loved ones (they do not have time for them, the nature of their relationships is unsatisfactory), but also their clients (the help may not be professional), their colleagues (they have to do their work, relationships in the workplace may deteriorate), their employer (the employee does not adequately fulfil their role), they can damage the image of the profession*

*in the eyes of the public (which is spread by clients and their loved ones) and also harm society (which expects workers to contribute to eliminating negative social phenomena in society).”* According to Stock (2010), the risks of insufficient self-care are most pronounced in burnout syndrome. Workers suffering from burnout syndrome are exhausted, apathetic towards their surroundings and work, or lose confidence in their abilities. As a result of these symptoms, the social worker experiences a significant decrease in performance, which affects the quality of their work. Stock (2010) further states that the overall quantity of work performed may also suffer, as in some instances, the burned-out worker may have no other option than to leave the current position. Self-care is essential in preventing burnout (Venglářová et al., 2011).

Unsurprisingly, the necessity of self-care is also emphasised in various social work ethical documents – in which self-care is considered a social worker’s right and duty. The obligation of self-care is mentioned in the Slovak Code of Ethics of Social Workers and Social Work Assistants of the Slovak Republic (2015), the American Code of Ethics of Social Workers (Code of Ethics: As approved by the ACA Governing Council, 2014), and the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles in Social Work from the International Federation of Social Workers (Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, 2018). However, self-care is missing from the Code of Ethics of Social Workers and Members of the Professional Union of Social Workers in Social Services ASSP CZR. Instead, social workers must take care of their health and mental hygiene. However, the obligation to care for health and mental hygiene should express the exact requirement as the obligation to self-care (Code of Ethics for Social Workers and Members of the Professional Union of Social Workers in Social Services of the Association of Social Service Providers of the Czech Republic, 2017).

Health is defined by the WHO (© 2024) as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.

Mental health can be understood as a state of well-being that allows individuals to cope with everyday stressful situations and effectively fulfil their roles in their personal and professional lives (Fusar-Poli et al., 2020).

However, as Kaczor (2019) states, it is not enough for social workers to practise only basic mental hygiene techniques; dealing with “superstructure” mental hygiene tools is necessary. Kaczor (2019) calls these tools ‘self-actualisation’, because through them the social worker can aim at the highest level of Maslow’s pyramid of needs: self-actualisation. Thus, caring for health and mental hygiene describes the multidimensional concept of caring for the whole being and all its needs.

It is precisely the focus on holistic self-care and the orientation towards satisfying the needs of the individual that includes the term self-care. In 2019, Lisa D. Butler and her collaborators published the article *Six Domains of Self-care: Attending to the Whole Person*, in which self-care is structured into six dimensions. The authors defined these dimensions based on Maslow’s pyramid of needs. Butler et al. (2019) defined self-care dimensions as physical, work, relational, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. The ethical obligation of social workers in the Czech Republic to take care of their health and mental hygiene should, therefore, play the same role as the moral obligation of self-care, which is mentioned in international ethical documents of social work.

Based on the above, it seems understandable that there is a requirement for social workers to perform self-care. If such a requirement is to be relevant, social workers must be able to fulfil it. But are social workers even able to perform self-care?

In her study, Hubíková (2019) divided the obstacles that can stand in the way of social workers’ own self-care into two categories:

1. Obstacles on the part of the social workers themselves.
2. Obstacles on the part of the employer/workplace and working conditions.

Among the obstacles on the part of social workers, Hubíková (2019) included underestimating prevention, the effort to take care of the needs of others and the subsequent neglect of one’s own needs, and insufficient awareness of the importance of self-care. Interestingly, among the obstacles dependent on the social worker, Hubíková also included the reluctance of social workers to overcome the barriers from the employer and take responsibility for their well-being. Hubíková (2019) adds that it is questionable to what extent it

is possible to practise self-care if working conditions are unfavourable in the long term. However, the opinion of a group of experts who consider self-care to be mainly the social worker’s responsibility without the worker having the conditions adapted to it nicely demonstrates the issue of the current setting. Transferring responsibility for self-care solely to social workers is only possible if social workers can practise self-care. Otherwise, it would only be a call to change professions.

Among the obstacles that depend on the employer/workplace and working conditions, experts included inappropriate workplace management, inflexible working hours, disrespect for free time by the employer, lack of support for workers’ self-care, absence of supervision and intervention, and insufficient ongoing training (Hubíková, 2019). None of these points addressed the level of financial income of social workers. This topic is only mentioned in the recommendation to employers as fair financial compensation, which would compensate for the importance and burden of social work. In this study (Hubíková, 2019), financial compensation is associated primarily with the motivation of social workers to perform their profession. However, insufficient financial compensation not only affects the level of motivation for performing social work but can also be an insurmountable obstacle to self-care.

### **Calculating the costs necessary for practising self-care**

To compare the current financial compensation of social workers with the minimum costs of self-care, it is necessary to quantify these costs. This is possible based on the concept of a living wage. The living wage amount should be able to cover the costs of ensuring a dignified and socially acceptable standard of living. Eurofound (the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) has described this concept in detail. Eurofound states that people should be able to satisfy their basic needs with a living wage. Due to the specific forms of higher needs, the living wage does not want nor can accurately quantify the costs necessary to meet all needs. Still, it offers a decent basic framework for quantifying the demands of basic needs that must be satisfied to practise self-care (Hurley et al., 2018).

In the Czech Republic, the idea of a living wage was investigated by a group of experts from various fields (e.g., social workers, politicians, economists, sociologists, etc.) who created the project Minimum Decent Wage (MDM, 2022). They defined this project as follows:

*“A minimum decent wage is a reward for work for standard working hours that provides workers and their households with sufficient financial means to live, which is perceived by most of society as a certain basic standard... It is intended to enable people to live an ordinary but materially decent life and feel like full members of society”* (MDM, 2022).

According to the Minimum Decent Wage (2022) study, the minimum living wage should ensure that people have a basic material standard in the Czech Republic. This basic material standard means that a working person can cover all necessary expenses to meet basic needs. The resulting amount of the minimum living wage also includes care for one other person (e.g., a child or a senior citizen), but the authors of this project point out that all items contained in the MDM represent only minimum amounts for current expenses. The resulting MDM amount is based on official methodologies, expert recommendations, and current prices, determined based on available data. The MDM includes housing, food, clothing and footwear, health and hygiene, leisure and education, transport, telecommunications, and savings. Regarding housing, the authors of the MDM (2022) project assume that the included amount is underestimated, as official statistics probably do not correspond to the current situation. According to the MDM project (2022), the minimum living wage for 2022 was calculated to be CZK 40,912 for the entire Czech Republic, except for Prague, where the minimum living wage was calculated to be CZK 42,776. Therefore, if a social worker living in the Czech Republic outside Prague relied only on their resources to ensure their self-care, they would have to receive a gross monthly income of at least CZK 40,912. Let's compare this amount with the income of social workers in 2022.

### **Financial income of social workers**

Social workers employed in non-governmental organizations have a non-fixed salary.

However, the state guarantees at least a secure salary. According to Government Regulation No. 567/2006 Coll., the secure salary amount depends on the work group's classification. Social workers should be included in the 5th to 7th work group, and the secure salary for social workers should be between CZK 24,100 and CZK 29,400 (Government Regulation No. 567/2006 Coll.). Social workers in the state sector are compensated based on salary categories by Government Regulation No. 222/2010 Coll. Not all social workers fall into the same salary category, and even within the salary category social workers may fall into different salary classes. A social worker with up to one year of experience should receive a minimum of CZK 21,260 – 10th salary grade in salary grade No. 1 and a maximum of CZK 34,360 – 13th salary grade in salary grade No. 2 (Government regulation No. 222/2010 Coll.).

Hana Pavezková, a member of the Professional Association of Social Workers (2023), commented on the significant income differences between individual departments: *“The current system is unbalanced and disadvantages certain departments and non-state providers of social services. For several years now, there have been significant disparities in the classification of social workers in salary grades and their classification according to salary grades.”*

This disparity is also noticeable when looking at the statistics of average earnings. According to the CZ-ISCO occupational classification, the average earnings of workers classified in category 3412 – Social workers in the wage sectors of CZK 37,400 and CZK 41,007 in 2022 (CZ-ISCO. 3412 – Social workers). For workers classified in category 2635 – Social workers, the average monthly income was CZK 39,175 and CZK 41,635 – see CZ-ISCO 2635. Social workers.

These statistics indicate that many social workers cannot afford to practice self-care solely based on their income. In the non-state sector, the average salary of social workers does not reach the minimum living wage. In the state sector, depending on the organization's focus, the average salary of social workers is close to the minimum living wage. This issue may concern many social workers. Social workers who do not have sufficient income to cover basic needs must neglect their self-care,

rely on the help of those around them, and find other additional income, which should not be another obstacle to the social worker's self-care, or change jobs. So, what is a possible solution?

### Proposal for modifications to ensure self-care

If all social workers are to be able to practise self-care, their income must be at least equal to the amount calculated by the MDM. The minimum living wage covers only basic needs, so the amount needed for self-care will probably be even higher, depending on specific needs that cannot be universally quantified. Non-governmental organizations could argue for the MDM when applying for subsidies. However, the state needs to set an example in the financial evaluation of social workers. As Opatrný and Flidrová (2017: 22) state: *"It is primarily the state that directly or indirectly employs social workers through the system of social services and their financing."*

We will try to propose an adjustment of the salary scales according to which social workers in the state sphere are compensated. As mentioned, social workers can fall into

different salary classes and grades. Pavezková (2023) sees the unification of salary scales for all social workers as essential. Since the right and obligation of self-care apply to every social worker, this unification seems to be a suitable solution. We will use the amount of 40,910 CZK as the social worker's lowest financial compensation. This amount is the MDM in the Czech Republic (excluding Prague). Considering self-care, the question arises whether salary scales should be adjusted differently based on the costs in a given location. For Prague, this table could be adjusted using the same procedure; instead of the initial amount of 41,910 CZK, 42,780 CZK would be used.

A social worker can be classified from the 10th to the 13th salary grade. Therefore, we will only present the proposed salary scale in this range (Government regulation No. 222/2010 Coll.). The shifts between individual salary grades and classes are not uniform but move within a minimum range. Therefore, in the proposed salary scale, we will use a shift of 3.5% between individual salary grades and 8% between individual salary grades for simplification (Table 1). The resulting amounts are rounded to tens of crowns (Stráský, 2023).

**Table 1 – Salary table based on MDM for 2022 in the Czech Republic excluding Prague**

Salary grade	Years of experience	Salary group			
		10.	11.	12.	13.
1.	up to 1 year	40,910	44,180	47,720	51,540
2.	up to 2 years	42,340	45,730	49,390	53,340
3.	up to 4 years	43,820	47,330	51,120	55,210
4.	up to 6 years	45,350	48,990	52,910	57,140
5.	up to 9 years	46,940	50,700	54 760	59,140
6.	up to 12 years	48,580	52,470	56,680	61,210
7.	up to 15 years	50,280	54,310	58,660	63,350
8.	up to 19 years	52,040	56,210	60,710	65,570
9.	up to 23 years	53,860	58,180	62,830	67,860
10.	up to 27 years	55,750	60,220	65,030	70,240
11.	up to 32 years	57,700	62,330	67,310	72,700
12.	over 32 years	59,720	64,510	69,670	75,240

A salary scale set in this way would respect percentage shifts, reflecting more extended experience and the varying demands of the

work performed. According to this scale, the income would allow even novice social workers to satisfy their basic needs.



## CONCLUSION

Self-care is often considered essential to professional social work, and social workers must care for themselves. Insufficient self-care practice carries many risks. The most serious is burnout, associated with a significant decrease in performance. Unfortunately, not all social workers can practise self-care. The current financial compensation of social workers, covering basic needs costs, proves insufficient for self-care. This problem is more widespread in non-governmental organisations. Still, it is also present in state organisations, especially in public administration in social and other benefits, where the average income of social workers is the lowest. Setting the financial compensation in state organisations appears to be more problematic since the state, through funding, usually employs social workers in non-governmental organizations. The non-state employers can argue with specific and up-to-date data when applying for subsidies, thanks to the quantified MDM. These employers should explain the influence of the income level on the quality and quantity of the services provided, understanding that the salary of social workers should not be lower than the MDM. Unified salary tables could

be established for all social workers in state organisations. The minimum amount a social worker is compensated should be brought up to the MDM level. As a result of insufficient self-care, there is a risk of a decrease in the quality of the work performed and its quantity. Social workers may leave their profession for ethical reasons (according to the code of ethics, they must practise self-care, but they are not allowed to do so, which leads to an ethical dilemma), the impossibility of ensuring basic needs, or burnout. If the current situation regarding the financial compensation of social workers does not change, there is a risk of a decrease in the number of social workers and a reduction in the quality of the services provided.

## Note

This review is the output of a diploma thesis, “Financial Evaluation of Social Workers and Its Influence on the Possibilities of a Dignified Life and Self-care” (author of the thesis: Marek Stráský, supervisor: David Urban).

## Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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