



## SOCIAL WORKER IN THE FIELD OF MILITARY SOCIAL WORK IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Tomáš PLANKA – Mária ČULENOVÁ – Monika MAČKINOVÁ – Simona BABENSKÁ

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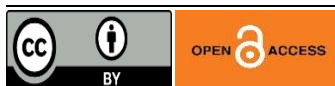
### ABSTRACT

*The present study is devoted to a specific area of social work, which in the conditions of the Slovak Republic does not have sufficient theoretical definition and practical representation. It is military social work, the primary purpose of which is to assist war veterans and their families.*

*For academic purposes, we present the elaboration of the theoretical issues of military social work in general terms, as well as the work of the military social workers themselves with the clients of military social work - veterans and their families.*

### KEYWORDS

*Military social work, Social work in the army, Military veterans, Military family*



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### INTRODUCTION

As a helping profession, social work is used to assist people in situations where social intervention is required. Between wide spectrum areas in which social work acts, we also include military social work which on the territory Slovak of the Republic is not theoretically sufficient and professionally developed, but also not practically developed. For the general public, this phrase is relatively unknown despite the fact that military social work according to NASW (National Association of Social Workers) was practiced already in World War I and World War II when social workers they helped The American Red Cross. According to Schavel and Goliáš (2003), the United States serves as an example of military social work across the board which contributes to and enriches the functioning of military social work in other countries.

Wooten (2015) discusses that military social work represents a specific area of practice which distinguishes it from the ordinary practice with civilians because military staff, veterans and their families live, work and have access to health care and social advantages in hierarchical, socio-political context within structured military organizations.

However, military social work can be carried out with the family of an individual serving in the military as well as with the individual. On this basis, several terminological notions emerge that we are familiar with in the performance of social work in the army, which we will explore and clarify to gain a better understanding of the subject of military social work and the military social worker's role.

## 1 MILITARY SOCIAL WORK

Social work as a profession that involves working with people also finds its utilization in the army. Schavel and Goliáš (2003) claim that in this sphere it can develop and apply a wide spectrum of their own methods, theories and procedures. For some people, the term military may immediately evoke concepts such as politics, political influence, political ambition or war, but over time social work has adapted and is constantly adapting to different realities. Social work has reacted to and still addresses contemporary issues related to globalization, economics, politics, and civilization.

*"Basically what it does military social work specialized area practice, are high performance expectations, personal requirements, standards order and discipline, work risks and organizational culture and climate, which they differentiate military service from civilians professions. In addition, it has ministry defense several contradictory roles in life members services and their families, between which ones belongs to also employer, provider medical care, housing and livelihood. In addition, military on business risks in voluntary or military service in own the country they can lead to conscious victims of life for the love of country or comrades." (Wooten, 2015, p. 8)*

Military service and deployments present different risks for the military staff and their families that differ from those encountered by civilians. Those different risks include transfers, prioritizing professions above family responsibilities, hard business conditions, and potential traumatic occurrences, such as training accidents or military sexual trauma. Deployment may cause disputes, risk of drug abuse, mental and physical impairments and disruption of family ties and responsibilities.

According to Schavel and Goliáš (2003), some may consider the connection between social work and the army as incompatible. However, this synergy is beneficial and important for both parties - both for the army and also for social work. A historical perspective on this connection indicates its meaningfulness and usefulness. The incompatibility of those two areas may stem from the so-called grey areas - ignorance in given field and overall unexplored, possibly terminological absences. This also occurs in Slovak conditions.

Valigurská and Levická (2021) point at the absence of domestic literature and thus also on the absence of terminological background. During the analysis of professional and scientific literature written in English, we encounter different terms and concepts associated with this discipline. Considering the lack of literature dealing with the challenges in social

work in the context of the army we consider it relevant to devote attention also to the use of exact professional terminology..

In Slovak terminology, we encounter concepts such as military social work, social work in the army and social work with veterans. All of these terms fall under the umbrella of military social work. However, they differ from specific of social work groups.

- **Military social work** : Military social work represents an area of specialized practice that differs from the general social work with civilians in that it operates with military staff, veterans and their families they live, work, and receive health care and social benefits in the hierarchical socio-political context within a structured military organizations. (Wooten, 2015)

Military and social workers that work in this field focus on providing social assistance to military personnel and their families. This statement is also supported by Valigurská and Levická (2021, p. 4), "*Military social worki includes not only social work with troops and civilian employees of the army, but also assistance in resolving difficult issues in their families.*"

When a military social worker works with the family of a military member, we talk about the military family. Thus, in a strict definition, a social worker works with civilians within a military family. Matis (2016, p. 120) defines military family from a broader perspective as a "*group of people consisting of relatives living in the given family, while at least one of them is a professional soldier. Because the family includes several generations (parents, grandparents parents, uncles, aunts and cousins), we may define it as a multigenerational military family.*" From a narrower perspective, a military family consists of a man, woman and their children, with one of the parents working as a professional soldier (Matis, 2016). It is widely acknowledged that the family is the foundation unit of society and that full-fledged functioning is required to meet the demands and functions that can disrupt a professional's or soldier's career.

- **Social work in the army**: The most significant difference between military social work and social work in the military lies in the target group. Army social work groups under one umbrella the overall work of the social worker with members of the military and their families, as well as with veterans. Social work in the military is already more narrowly specified. The social worker works primarily with members of the military. Schavel and Goliáš (2003) discuss Army social workers in frameworks whose scope includes military combat units, mental health departments, Army mental health programs, hospitals, community agencies, research institutes, and command components in most military camps. Their role is to implement programs, including those focused on child and family well-being, mental health and abuse treatment, research, government programs, and policy formulation programs. Social workers in the army provide emotional support, advice and coordination services to help members of military units and formations to manage challenges associated with the military life. Their work also includes prevention of alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence

and more. The mutually beneficial connection between social work and the military promotes the overall well-being and performance of the military.

- **Social work with veterans:** As the name implies, this area of social work is primarily dedicated to war veterans and provides social counselling and other services to war pensioners. The purpose of social work with veterans is to provide them with the necessary support and resources in order to successfully adapt to their new life after the end of service in the army and to achieve overall comfort and quality of life they deserve.

*"Service members who have returned from deployment often face numerous challenges in the field of physical and mental health when incorporating back into the family life. Social workers who provide assistance to service members and veterans must be competent and knowledgeable about military culture and informed about best practices."* (Dick, 2014, p. 6)

An important role fulfilled by social workers is to provide counselling and support to veterans who are facing challenges associated with reintegrating into society or dealing with mental, emotional and family issues they may be experiencing as a result of their past work experiences. (Rubin, Weis, Coll, 2012)

*"When working with service members, veterans, and their families in any capacity, social workers must function by the ethical principles and standards of the profession as outlined in the NASW. Social workers who work with this population must recognize the complexity of this work and be vigilant and prepared to address potential ethical dilemmas and value conflicts when they arise. Social workers must demonstrate recognition of basic human rights, including the right of service members, veterans, and their families to an optimal level of social work services."* (NASW, 2012)

National Association of Social Workers highlights the importance of the ethical code for social workers and compliance and care of these principles. Of particular importance is the ethical treatment and adherence to ethical principles in military social work. This sphere of social work is a specific area in which value conflicts, but also dilemmas within the psyche and the contradictions of ethics, can very often arise.

### 1.1 Micro-military social work

*"At work with the military population must social workers understand how they can physical symptoms and psychiatric diagnosis to affect military career, security background checks, military medical reviews, evaluations capabilities on the power services, disability and compensation assessments, and military separation services. Necessary They are also knowledge and training in interventions established on the evidence for individuals diagnosed with Post-Traumatic stress disorder, mood, and others anxious malfunctions."* (Wooten, 2015, p. 9)

Micromilitary social work deals with providing individual support and services to military members and their families on the personal level. This type of social work seeks to address the specific needs and obstacles that troops and their families encounter. This may include the provision of emotional support, advice and solutions for personal and family problems, management of stress and anxiety associated with military life, and help in navigating the medical care system and social services.

### **1.2 Mezzo-military social work**

Mezzo-military social work seeks to provide support and services to military members and their families at the group or community levels. This work focuses on providing support for military families, improving communication skills, and collaborating with local organizations to offer specialized services to the military and community.

Wooten (2015) defines mezzo-level military practice as understanding individual members' services, family systems, and military units, as well as relationships with these systems. Military missions prioritize family requirements, distinguishing them from work-family conflicts in civilian houses and jobs.

### **1.3 Macro-military social work**

Macro-military social work is concerned with broader systemic changes and policies that affect the military community as a whole. This type of work focuses on identifying structural problems and injustices that affect soldiers and their families, and on creating and implementing programs and policies that improve their situation and quality of life.

On the macro level social workers, who work in the military context, must effectively evaluate, defend and intervene in favour of military staff and their families within high structured hierarchical organization which employs, provides stability (e.g. housing, health care) and trains military professionals.

## **2 ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKER IN MILITARY SOCIAL WORK**

As we have already mentioned, this kind of social work is not fully developed in Slovakia. Therefore, it is necessary that tasks that fall under social work are covered by other workers from related helping professions, which can be e.g. psychologists or clergymen. A Social worker in their complexity should be able to use their skills in military social work, in which they can perform, for example, social work with the soldier/veteran themselves but also with their family, provide social counselling and other forms of assistance. What is important is the experience and knowledge that the social worker has. The acquired knowledge can then be further reflected on another target group, which in our case can be

military family, war veterans and soldiers. However, social work worldwide has only one goal, which every social worker tries to achieve, which is to solve, help or improve the client's situation or the situation in the client's surroundings. Forgey and Green-Hurdle (2023, p. 1) argue that *"although the mission of each state's military may vary, in general, key functions include the protection and defence of the state and its interests through the use of controllable force, the provision of support to the security activities of other states, and the response to humanitarian crises or natural disasters."* Military social work has a wide range of areas that can be covered. Social Work License Map (2020) defines the following fields:

- medical mental care,
- family and individual counseling,
- support access to finances and other resources,
- crisis intervention,
- integrated support for veterans,
- veteran defense.

Depending on these areas, Social Work License Map (2020) distinguishes the following types of military social workers:

- **Military social workers in active services:** These social workers live with other personnel on the base, and there is a possibility that they may be ordered to undergo military training. Their job may include providing medical care, counselling services including emotional support. Active-duty social workers sometimes accompany units on their missions or work in medical facilities that serve multiple units. Their primary goal is to help military personnel maintain optimal health so they can function effectively in their profession.
- **Civilian military social workers:** They can be defined as social workers working in military support centres that provide assistance to military personnel in their transition to civilian life. Military social workers provide various forms of counselling, e.g. family counselling, individual counselling, career counselling, etc., taking into account the interests of their clients.
- **Military social workers for the war veterans:** This field conveys a large number of military social workers. Their main task is to provide support and counselling to veterans and their families.
- **Private military social workers:** This field includes social workers who work separately. They work with veterans, active duty military personnel as well as those who have returned from deployments.

The division of social workers within military social work finds its relevance in various dimensions. One of the dimensions is the knowledge orientation of the social worker and their hands-on experience with the target group since each of these target groups needs specific care and is in a different situation that requires a different kind of assistance.

Military social workers play a key role in working with military personnel, but also their families.

According to Goliáš and Schavel (2003, p. 114) the work tasks and their meaning are different. *"Social workers in the military address the problems of military conscripts, work as mental health counselors, work in rehabilitation centers and military hospitals, and conduct group programs to correct psychopathological phenomena caused by the military environment and war. They are also tasked with mental health care and other services to residents, staff and family members. They are also involved in social programs for military veterans, the legislative and legal processes of adopting children, and dealing with children who have become orphans because their parents were in the military."*

According to the Social Work License Map (2020), social workers are an integral part of social work in the military. They contribute their work in the following sectors:

- **Services for veterans and their families:** Social workers provide assistance with resources that can be used to support them e.g. access to treatment.
- **Transition from military to civilian life:** Social workers assist with the transition from the military environment to the home environment - civilian life. Assistance may be in the form of discharge planning, for example.
- **Community environment:** social workers support veterans in communities who suffer from mental disorders and provide services to prevent homelessness and more.
- **Therapy:** Therapy includes therapeutic support for veterans who may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or substance use.
- **Programs for veterans:** Assistance with suicide prevention programs, injury rehabilitation and more.

According to Garber and McNelis (1995, In Goliáš and Schavel, 2003) social workers in the military encounter the following clients:

- hostages in the process repatriation,
- people who are members of humanitarian military actions,
- individuals who have been affected by a natural disaster or other misfortune,
- clients undergoing treatment in treatment facilities or hospitals,
- mentally or emotionally disturbed individuals,
- clients whose treatment process requires cooperation with others experts,
- soldiers or their family members who need help or prevention against post-traumatic stressful disorders and others.

To provide comprehensive assistance to soldiers, veterans and their families, the collaboration of multiple professionals is essential. A multi-disciplinary team can provide more comprehensive care on multiple levels - social, psychological, legal, educational, economic and other assistance.



Based on our assertions, in this article we present data from research conducted in Slovakia by the Department of Psychological and Sociological Activities of the Personnel Office, which focused on the social, financial and health security of professional soldiers. According to the surveys conducted, soldiers have long experienced the least tension in terms of income and job security. In contrast, in recent years we have seen an increase in tensions in the areas of social security and opportunities for up-skilling. Respondents chose from a menu of 31 elements of social security aspects, including a mix of existing and non-existent measures for soldiers. Respondents' answers were ranked in order of priority - from highest (1) to lowest (5) for each measure. (Czirák, 2010)

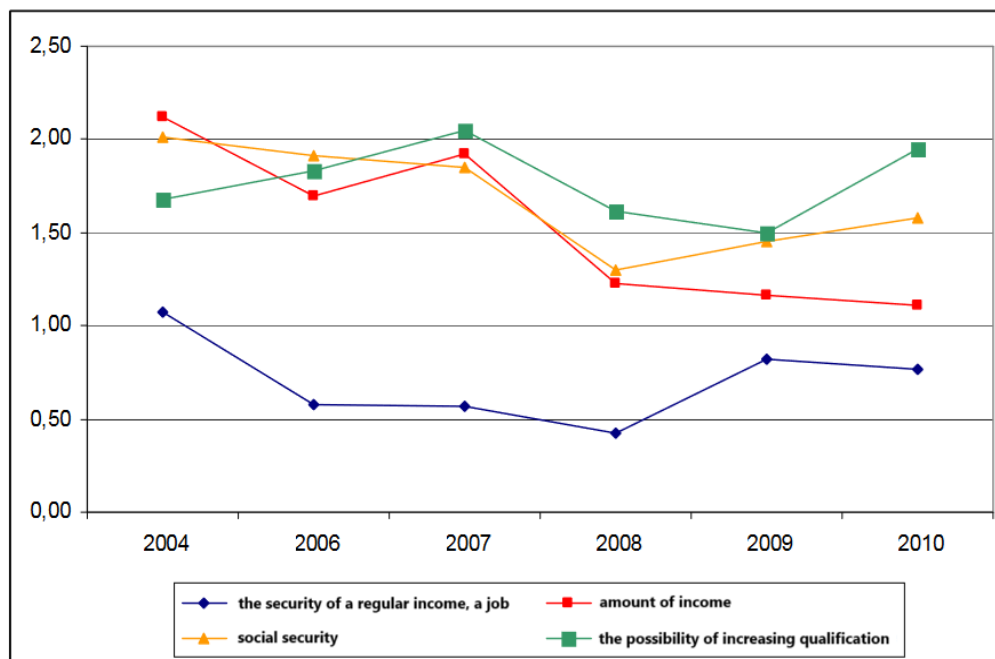


Figure 1 Voltage evolution of selected elements of job satisfaction

Source: Czirák, 2010, 43

Of the measures not currently included in the soldiers' welfare scheme, employer-sponsored super-standard health care was the most popular. Another appealing alternative was to provide specific vocational training, as well as preferential treatment for former professional soldiers when applying for jobs in the police, fire department, jail and judicial guard, or public and civil service. These measures primarily concern leaving the armed forces and preparing for the civilian labour market. The possibility of transferring to other armed forces is most attractive for soldiers with up to 6 years' service and its attractiveness gradually decreases with increasing length of service. Therefore, this measure is particularly interesting for those who are at the end of their first contract in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. The measures are presented in Table 1.



Table 1 Selecting the most attractive elements of social security

	<b>Elements of social security - Compensatory measures the psychological and physical demands of the military occupation</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>High priority (%)</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
1.	Entitlement to a retirement pension after 15 years	1,58	84,05	1,04
2.	Housing allowance	1,69	81,02	1,11
3.	Entitlement to retirement allowance after 5 years	2,26	65,00	1,39
4.	Entitlement to severance pay after 5 years	2,33	63,05	1,36
5.	Extra health services that will be covered by the employer	2,41	60,01	1,36
6.	Reimbursement of travel expenses to visit family	2,43	58,00	1,41
7.	Anti-risk security (invalidity, widow's/widower's, orphan's pension)	2,56	55,7	1,33
8.	Support for vocational training of your choice (courses, conferences,...)	2,68	46,6	1,30
9.	6 weeks annual leave / 7 weeks RD after 20 years' service (i.e. 1 more week of annual leave compared to the Labour Code)	2,69	49,00	1,32
10.	Contributions to accident, life insurance, supplementary pension savings	2,69	49,04	1,31
11.	Allowances for holidays in military recreational establishments	2,75	44,07	1,19
12.	Prioritisation of former professional soldiers in their interest to join the service to police, firefighters, prison and judicial guards, public and civil service posts	2,76	48,03	1,34

Source: Czirák, 2010, 44

As Czirák (2010, p. 47) said, “the soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic of all categories place high demands on their health, physical or mental fitness, specific training and training. Professional soldiers of our armed forces must be mobile not only within Slovakia and the European Union (the whole of Europe) but also within the world and according to current national interests, to be able to implement and enforce them. As a rule, the armed forces carry out their mission (function) in difficult conditions threatening the life and health of soldiers.”

Therefore, in this context, social policy in the MOD is not understood as a system in which soldiers receive high salaries and pensions without effort or responsibility. On the contrary, it is about fair compensation for the demands and hardships of military service. This compensation is not self-serving; rather, its primary goal is to remove the obstacles and challenges that affect the actions of the armed forces, thereby contributing to their quality and effectiveness.

As we can see from the conducted research and the results, there is an increasing tendency in the Slovak military system within the social work in terms of financial, social, health and psychological dissatisfaction. In this particular case, theoretical and actual study overlap, emphasizing the importance of practical reflection on reflection. Table 1 below links directly to the results achieved, reflecting the most valued and desired benefits.

A survey conducted within the army during the period under study (2004-2010) showed that satisfaction with social security among professional soldiers has a decreasing

tendency. Since the need for social security - as we can see from Table 1 - is very important in the means of satisfaction of professional soldiers, it was necessary to draw attention to this issue. For this reason, the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic has reflected the needs of professional soldiers also in the form of an amendment to Act No. 328/2008 Coll. On the matter of Social Security of Police Officers and Soldiers and Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts - the last amendment was made on 1 July 2024.

The changes of the 2024 amendment are contained in the publication Termination of State Service of Professional Soldiers, which was issued by the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic. Specific elements of social security for professional soldiers are, for example:

- retirement security,
- transport and equipment allowances,
- benefit for retired military personnel,
- a benefit for war veterans,
- post-employment benefits.

One of the 4 factors examined that influence the satisfaction of professional soldiers was the Opportunity to Upskill (see Figure.1). Of the total number of professional soldiers involved in the research, just under half - namely 46.6% - identified the possibility of upgrading their qualifications as one of their priorities. This requirement was addressed by the Ministry of Defense and the following options were provided. "In order to improve the possibility of employment in the civilian labour market, it is advisable to follow the offer of training activities of the office of Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. Training activities can be attended not only by jobseekers (registered at the Labour Office) but also by unregistered jobseekers." (Termination of State Service of Professional Soldiers, 2024, p. 17) In the event of retirement to civilian life, professional soldiers were provided with the possibility of taking advantage of professional psychological counselling. "Members of the psychological service in the Slovak Armed Forces provide professional soldiers whose dismissal has been finally decided with preparation for further employment. The educational activity is aimed at developing skills for finding a new job. Interested parties may contact the unit psychologist." (Termination of State Service of Professional Soldiers, 2024, p. 18)

Another element of social security is Spa Care - this element was also identified as a priority. The publication Termination of State Service of Professional Soldiers (2024, p. 12) states that "A retired serviceman who has reached the age of 55 years or whose service has lasted at least 30 years may, upon the suggestion of the attending physician, be provided with gratuitous spa care at natural health spas and health resorts designated by the Military Social Security Office."

Social security for professional soldiers is one of the aspects that influences and motivates future soldiers when deciding to join the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic.

This aspect may constitute a certain motivation to join the professional soldier's profession. In the context of social security in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic, military social work is an essential component. Military social workers are qualified assisting professionals who can provide assistance and expert advice to professional soldiers in the field of social security.

We conclude that the need for military social work in the conditions of the Slovak Republic is urgent, as empirical research also points to this need in practice. In the particular case presented by us, there is a direct empirical confirmation of the theoretical summaries, while the synergy of different helping professions within the military and the adoption of social work in the army for this purpose is necessary to meet individual needs.

## CONCLUSION

Industry military social work is relatively new, but it is inseparable to traditional social work, which was gradually integrated into the social systems of all countries. As much as the necessary help for veterans and soldiers is forgotten, these individuals, too, under the weight of experiences and adverse life situations, need to be assured of help and support from the state. This assistance can be mainly in the form of social and psychological - therapeutic, but also economic, medical and rehabilitation. There are a number of alternatives to provide assistance to military personnel and their family members.

The military social worker works at the micro-military, meso-military, and macro-military social levels. In the field of military social work, the social worker plays an integral role that enables the social worker to achieve the set goals with the help of intervention.

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**Mgr. Tomáš PLANKA**

Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Education, Department of Social Work  
Šoltésovej 4, 811 08 Bratislava  
planka3@uniba.sk

**Mgr. Mária ČULENOVÁ**

Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Education, Department of Social Work  
Šoltésovej 4, 811 08 Bratislava  
culenova21@uniba.sk

**Dr.h.c. prof. PhDr. Monika MAČKINOVÁ, PhD.**

Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Education, Department of Social Work  
Šoltésovej 4, 811 08 Bratislava  
mackinova@fedu.uniba.sk

**Mgr. Simona BABENSKÁ**

Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language, Literature and Didactics  
Šoltésovej 4, 811 08 Bratislava  
ryskova8@uniba.sk