

Psychosocial Working Conditions, Burnout, and Work Engagement among Social Workers in Germany — A Cross-Sectional COPSOQ III Study



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OVERVIEW

This study examined burnout and work engagement among German social workers. Work privacy conflicts, hiding emotions, dissolution and emotional demands predicted burnout, while workplace attachment enhanced engagement. Social workers reported significantly higher emotional demands and burnout than other occupations, despite greater job resources like influence and development opportunities.

FINDINGS

Multivariate analyses revealed that **work privacy conflicts** ($\beta=.36$; $p<.001$), **hiding emotions** ($\beta=.14$; $p=.001$), **dissolution** ($\beta=.13$; $p=.002$), **emotional demands** ($\beta=.11$; $p=.009$), and **poor work environment/physical conditions** ($\beta=.09$; $p=.026$) significantly **predicted burnout symptoms**. Attachment to workplace significantly predicted work engagement ($\beta=.37$; $p<.001$). Social workers reported **higher emotional demands** ($d=1.24$; $p<.001$) and **burnout symptoms** ($d=0.54$; $p<.001$) than other occupations, yet also **higher job resources**, such as **influence at work** ($d=0.56$; $p<.001$) and **possibilities for development** ($d=0.47$; $p<.001$).

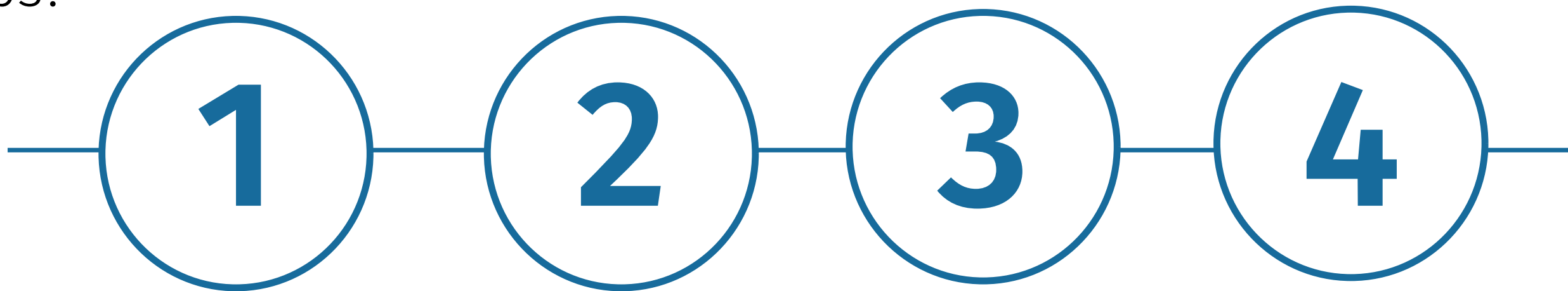
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BACKGROUND

Social workers worldwide face **challenging working conditions** (Ravalier et al., 2025). Previous research has shown that adverse working conditions are associated with strain outcomes such as **burnout** (Aronsson et al., 2017). Relying on the **Job Demands-Resources model** (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) this study analyzed the associations between psychosocial working condition and strain/motivational outcomes of German social workers, with comparison to other occupational groups. The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How are job demands associated with strain outcomes, such as burnout symptoms, among social workers?
- (2) How are job resources associated with work engagement among social workers?
- (3) Do social workers report higher levels of job demands compared to other occupational groups?
- (4) Do social workers report higher levels of strain outcomes compared to other occupational groups?



METHODS

This cross-sectional study used the validated **German COPSOQ III** (Lincke et al., 2021) to examine **job demands**, **job resources**, and **strain and motivational outcomes** among German social workers. Data were collected via an online survey between March and July 2025 through calls from professional associations and networks. A total of **N=666** participants were included after eligibility screening and data cleaning. **Multivariate analyses** were conducted to examine the associations between job demands, resources, and outcomes, while differences in mean scores were compared with a reference group of other occupations using Welch's t-test.



DISCUSSION

Social workers in Germany reported significantly **higher emotional demands and burnout symptoms** than other occupational groups, despite reporting **greater job resources** like influence and development opportunities. In line with the JD-R model, work privacy conflicts, emotional demands, and role conflicts were strong predictors of burnout, highlighting the strain of high job demands. While workplace attachment and meaningful work boosted engagement, job resources did not significantly influence burnout, suggesting that reducing demands is crucial. Supervision was not linked to lower burnout, pointing to a need for structural implementation. Findings underscore the necessity of **systemic interventions to reduce job demands** in social work.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that social workers in Germany report difficult psychosocial working conditions and frequent strain outcomes as well as resources. Measures at the level of behavioral prevention, such as burnout prevention programs, are important. However, organizational prevention measures are urgently needed to improve psychosocial working conditions to address structural problems in the social work profession. **Strengthening job resources** while **reducing excessive job demands** appears essential for promoting the **health, well-being, and long-term sustainability of the social work workforce** in Germany.

