



**From the Editor**

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## Introduction: Social Work in a Time of Turbulence

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*Michael Lauderdale*

Social Work began in a time of tumult and cultural and economic change. At the end of the 19th century the demographic features of the United States were rural farms, ranches, and small towns. People earned their way through agricultural work including farming and raising farm animals. Then for the next fifty years, approximately from 1880 to 1930, the country's population moved from rural life to cities. Work on the farm became work in factories as families and particularly younger people left rural areas for jobs and lives in the cities. Many left the rural areas as new machines like the tractor and the combine lessened the need for labor and created widespread unemployment.

Two cities in particular, Chicago and Los Angeles, grew very rapidly from these movements of people and in many ways became the places for the cultural model of 20th century American family life. Extended families transitioned over two generations to nuclear families and were joined by millions of immigrants coming from Europe, China, and Mexico.

During these great changes of technology and demography Social Work came into being. Initially through charity and then through government funding, Social Work sought to address the problems of poverty, abandonment, abuse, neglect, crime, handicapping, and aging.

The services provided by Social Work were made possible from the wealth created by new industry, more productive agriculture, and high paying factory jobs. Initially most factory workers were men, but the shortage of men during World War II moved many women from the household to formal work sites as well. Great industrial cities developed like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. The growing wealth also made possible far higher levels of education in the population. One of the grand

achievements of the United States during the 20th century was having the highest-educated population in the world.

However, by 1970 both the level of education in the population and factory employment began a decline that continues today (Brooks, 2008; Goldin & Katz, 2010). There are many reasons for this dual decline. But the drop in the general education level is the more puzzling, as for a hundred years educational levels in the United States had risen, and by 1950 the U.S. was the educational standard of the world. Part of the decline may have been a result of public revenues being drawn off in other directions including wars (Vietnam and the Middle East), rising health care costs, and general social services care. Less acknowledged was the social subsidy for education that was provided by "stay at home" mothers. These women were active in general support of the public schools through organizations like the PTA and were available to assist with homework and focus children after school on homework and other educational activities. This critical social activity is substantially explored by persons involved in tracking declines in *social capital* (Putnam, 2001; Montana, 2008).

The explanation for the loss of jobs across the United States is less elusive and more completely documented. One central cause was a consequence of the push for "free trade." Long favored by the United States but accelerated after World War II and then in the 1980s by the presidential administrations of the Bushes and Clinton, the North American Free Trade Agreement removed a variety of restrictions and tariffs on the movement of trade across national borders.

One of the direct impacts on jobs was the rapid movement of manufacturing, agricultural processing, and other labor-intensive jobs to

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lower wage nations. The loss of jobs is most profound in those cities formerly most involved in the manufacture of autos, appliances, furniture, electronics, textiles, and clothing. In two decades, as an example, Detroit went from a city with very high wages and high median family income for blue collar jobs to one today where often nearly half the households are in arrears on city public utility bills! Even though American workers may have lower rates of error, the relative costs of manufacturing jobs that pay 30 to 50 cents an hour as compared to perhaps 20 to 50 dollars an hour gives an incomparable advantage to foreign countries, and American and other manufacturers move jobs to those countries and from the United States.

However, in the past 5 years the departure of factories from the United States is slowing. To some degree that is simply because most factories that would receive the greatest benefit from lower labor costs left long ago. But some are starting to return for some interesting reasons. One reason is that there are important advantages to being close to the market were the products are sold. Transportation distances mean time and often passing product through many hands. This can result in mistakes or product that does not meet changing market demands.

A second reason is that manufacturing or growing food at a distance creates a “supply chain” that has to be managed as well as the cost of product that sits in the chain. Product in transit generates no income while being a cost. A third reason is that for many products being made in the United States, our country is closer to the raw material source. This is true as an example for textiles where cotton is grown in the United States, and a mill that processes cotton and turns it into fabric has advantages if the mill is near the cotton growing area rather than low wage areas of Central America, the Philippines, or Asia. Lastly and more powerfully, not only today but increasingly in the future, is the use of robotics and ever more smart software that removes the need for labor, especially low skilled labor (Ford, 2013).

The return of manufacturing to the United States is reversing a fierce pattern of

deindustrialization where recently as from 2000 to 2011, an average of 17 factories closed up every day in the United States. This deindustrialization destroyed blue collar middle classes in autos, electronics, appliances, and other durable goods manufacturers. This left cities like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and St. Louis with as ruinous a central city problem as Social Work encountered in these same urban areas in the first two decades of the 20th century, which led settlement homes to address poverty, crime, and illness. The loss of manufacturing meant the loss not only of jobs but of tax revenues to fund services for those unemployed or unable to work.

However, the characteristics of factories returning to the United States are sharply different than those that left. Average work productivity is far higher. An example from a textile mill in South Carolina is instructive. The mill here produces 2.5 million pounds of yarn a week with about 140 workers. In 1980, that production level would have required more than 2,000 people (Tabuchi, 2015). This means not only fewer workers but a different type of workers employed in these new plants. First and foremost is the presence of a variety of complex machines that do the work formerly done by humans (Clifford, 2013).

In a coming Special Edition of our Journal we will examine in greater detail this shift in the content of jobs, as well as the impact on both raw material reporting nations and countries like the United States.

In this issue:

In our first article for this edition, *Social Work on the Move: Emerging Roles and New Directions*, Professor Sweifach discusses future career opportunities for social workers as presented in a national study which indicates the amount of employed social workers in interprofessional agencies such as hospitals, schools, and prisons.

In our second article, *The Challenge of Addressing Disability within Social Work Education: Reconciling Theory and Practice*,

Professor Dupre notes the importance of understanding disability studies focusing on the cohesiveness between present theoretical frameworks used to teach social work students and contemporary disability studies.

In our third article, *Research Orientation, Research Anxiety, Research Courses, and Empowerment among Social Work Students*, Professor Crews provides an empirical study of over three hundred social work students examining the relationship between their empowerment and research orientation.

*Willis, Opportunities for a New Dialogue*, suggests dialogue opportunities surrounding Title IV-E professional development and its impact on retention and turnover among public child welfare workers.

Lastly, following our discussions of how Social Work is responding to new demands and responding with professional education, Selber provides *Engaging the Next Generation of Veteran Services Providers in Professional Development through an Elective Course*, which highlights a course regarding veterans implemented at a school of social work and explores the future impact of this course on social work education.

[www.nytimes.com/2015/08/03/business/chinese-textile-mills-are-now-hiring-in-places-where-cotton-was-king.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/03/business/chinese-textile-mills-are-now-hiring-in-places-where-cotton-was-king.html)

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