

Uniquely Biased: How ASWB Exams Violate Psychometric Best Practices

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Abstract: *After publication of the 2022 Pass Rate Analysis demonstrating that minoritized social workers pass at less than half the rate of white social workers, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Examination Guidebook (ASWB, 2023a), revised its psychometric reporting of exam fairness from “statistically free from race and gender bias” (ASWB, 2022a, p. 3) to “differences in exam performance for...different demographic groups...is influenced by many factors external to the exam,” upstream of the examination in the workforce pipeline (ASWB, 2023a, p. 9). Focusing only on factors external to the exam ignores the possibility that the internal properties of the exam may be invalid, unreliable, and unfair. Race, class, culture, and other structural factors have not impacted ASWB exams the same over time, with ASWB’s 2022 Exam Pass Rate Analysis reporting 10-13% reductions in bachelor’s and master’s examination pass rates after introducing the 2018 exam blueprint. Using extensive references to ASWB’s public statements, this article will demonstrate how ASWB elided evidence of examination flaws and presented external factors as the only possible explanation for disparities in pass rates. Beginning with the policy paradox created by national organizational disagreement on the cause and next steps on exam score inequities, this article will demonstrate how bias is encoded in the language and theories underlying the examination, as well as review the extant empirical evidence on psychometrics addressing shortcomings in ASWB’s exam validation process, which converge to create a uniquely biased exam.*

Keywords: *Association of Social Work Boards, licensure, exams, ethics, psychometrics, regulation*

The 2022 ASWB Exam Pass Rate Analysis: Final Report (Exam Pass Rate Analysis) produced by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB, 2022b) represents the first publicly available assessment of equity in social work exam scores using data from real-world ASWB examinations. Until 2022, ASWB both publicly denied collecting the relevant equity data and stated they were unwilling to make such data available (Hymans, 2020; NASW, 2020). Specifically, the data revealed lower pass rates for Black, Latine, and older test takers and those for whom English is a second language. Despite committing to “investing in a robust analysis of examination pass rate data” in the *Examination Guidebook* (ASWB, 2023a, p. 9), the 2022 *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* (ASWB, 2022b) contained no hypotheses or statistical tests. The last documented procedure for how ASWB engaged in exam validation was in 2011 (Marson et al., 2010). After release of the data, no third-party researchers were contracted to confirm the validity and reliability of the exams themselves.

The release of the *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* (ASWB, 2022b) inspired the president of the National Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work (NADD) to declare

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ASWB exams part of “Jim Crow Licensing because we don’t know what’s in the test” (DeCarlo, 2022a, 20:35). Indeed, ASWB has never published a study demonstrating the validity of their examinations and given the centrality of fairness to the psychometric definition of validity (Bean, 2022; Gómez-Benito et al., 2018), the *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* (ASWB, 2022b) provides important evidence the examinations may be invalid and unreliable. This article seeks to excavate the political and methodological causes of the exam disparity. It interrogates the rhetoric used by ASWB to prioritize exogenous causes of exam pass score disparities and recommends greater adherence to established psychometric standards, a values commitment to data democracy, and a re-centering of the empirical and lived experiences of those taking the exam in the early-career workforce.

Exam Pass Rate Disparities

To date, ASWB has not made public raw statistical outputs for its validity and fairness tests, nor the underlying methodology used to assess their exams. In 2010, Marson and colleagues (2010) briefly addressed fairness by reporting that less than 1% of ASWB test bank questions (i.e., items) were removed due to biased functioning across racial and gender groups. Ten years later, ASWB’s item developmental consultant, Stacey Owens (2021), provided another brief report on fairness, demonstrating that “less than 5%” of all ASWB items per year were removed due to biased functioning (para. 3) –a 5x increase over 11 years. These figures are a rough one-line summary in the report and do not provide a comprehensive view of the functioning of ASWB exams. As this paper will detail later, this cursory reporting directly violates gold standards governing adequate testing documentation (American Educational Research Association [AERA] et al., 2014).

Because of this “information suppression” (Woodcock, 2015, p. 225), researchers have attempted to address concerns about exam equity and validity through indirect means. For example, Senreich and Dale (2021) matched data from the City University of New York student database with licensure records in New York State. Table 1 compares the percentage of those attaining master’s-level licensure in New York with the national pass rates for the master’s exam reported by ASWB.

Table 1. *Concordance of MSW Exam Pass Rates and Licensure Rates*

Social Worker Demographic Group	US MSW Exam Pass Rate*	NY MSW Licensure Rate**
Race (any age)		
White	86%	78%
Black	45%	48%
Latine	64%	60%
Older		
Black	30%	31%
Latine	45%	39%
MSWs (any race)	65%	50%

Notes: *Exam pass rates as reported by ASWB (2022b) in the 2022 Exam Pass Rate Analysis Report. **MSW licensure rates as reported by Senreich & Dale (2021) using NY social work board and public college records.

Table 1 demonstrates a pattern of exclusion for aspiring social workers from oppressed racial and ethnic groups, and those disparities increase substantially with age. Older social work aspirants are both less likely to pass examinations and become licensed, but only for minority races and ethnicities. Whereas 91% of white test takers eventually pass the Licensed Master Social Work (LMSW) exam, only 52% of Black test takers and 63% of people whose first language is not English eventually pass the exam (ASWB, 2022b). This pattern is mirrored in the undergraduate social work practice exam, in which 82% of White test takers eventually pass the Licensed Bachelor Social Work (LBSW) exam, while only 38% of Black test takers and 50% of test takers whose first language is not English pass the exam eventually.

ASWB: External Factors Cause Exam Disparities

Upon release of the *Exam Pass Rate Analysis*, and in anticipation of it, ASWB (2022b) maintained a strange truth for an exam developer: that all standardized tests are unfair. Then-CEO Dwight Hymans stated in a 2020 roundtable, “what we do know about standardized testing is that generally speaking, across any exam, whether it is a licensing exam or a college entrance exam... it is fairly common knowledge that there are disparities in outcomes” across demographic groups (NASW, 2020, 18:01). He elaborated “ASWB has a very extensive system internally” to ensure examination items are not biased. ASWB’s (2023a) *Examination Guidebook* states that it follows the “nationally recognized testing industry standards set by the Joint Commission on Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, the American Psychological Association [APA], the American Educational Research Association [AERA], and the National Council on Measurement in Education [NCME]” (hereafter, *Joint Standards*) to “ensure validity, reliability, and fairness” (p. 6). According to the present CEO, the *Joint Standards* require “robust antibias measures with extensive psychometric tools” which ASWB employs while “working with a diverse group of practicing social workers at every stage of development and eliminating any question that shows signs of bias” (Hardy-Chandler, 2023, p. 224).

“Despite those efforts,” Dr. Hardy Chandler states, “disparities persist” (Hardy-Chandler, 2023, p. 224). Because of the integrity and psychometric rigor of their exam development process, ASWB confidently tells test takers in their guidebook that although “there may be differences in exam performance outcomes for members of different demographic groups” it is only “because exam performance is influenced by many factors external to the exams” (ASWB, 2023a, p. 12). In the *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* (ASWB, 2022b), ASWB lists professions that measured equity data prior to social work—nursing, pharmacy, and law—and found similar disparities in exam scores. ASWB interprets this data as indicating systems of domination cause unfair scores across the entire standardized testing sector, not just ASWB exams. ASWB seems to be arguing that unfair pass rate disparities are the price of rigorous, objective measurement in an unfair world.

National Organizations: ASWB Tests Violate Industry Standards

Despite the contentions of ASWB, all other major national social work organizations, including the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD), the Council on Social

Work Education (CSWE), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), have publicly dismissed the psychometric integrity of the examinations. For example, CSWE sent a letter to every social work jurisdictional board urging them to “suspend the use of the ASWB exam” for bachelor’s-level licensure (LBSW) and master’s-level licensure (LMSW), citing 2022 Illinois legislation. They also demanded that ASWB conduct “further analysis of the descriptive data” (Caldwell, 2022, para. 2) before continuing with the use of the clinical-level (LCSW) examination because, as CSWE concluded in a separate statement, “we believe the descriptive data released by ASWB to be incomplete and contains flaws” (CSWE, 2022, para. 2). NADD (2022) called for the suspension of testing fees, immediate rebate of fees, and reparations for test takers from the most impacted demographics. NASW argued against the inclusion of examinations in the social work licensing compact because “the current exam does not conform with industry testing standards” (Butts & Goodenough, 2022, p. 7).

This conflict in positions leaves social workers in the unenviable position of divining truth based on ASWB’s assurances about the “rigorous exam development protocols that ASWB meets and exceeds” (ASWB, 2022c, para. 4). Although leading social work organizations disagree, psychometric testing standards and measurement equivalence literature is not a commonly understood part of social work practice, making it difficult to assess and intervene appropriately.

Industry Standards for Licensing Exams

ASWB maintains its exams “meet or exceed” psychometric standards and “reflect the highest standards of validity and reliability” (ASWB, 2022b, p. 66). For this reason, ASWB cites the *Joint Standards* (AERA et al., 2014), which are open access and available for any social worker to examine. The Standards were published in 2014, and their purpose

...is to provide criteria for the development and evaluation of tests and testing practices and to provide guidelines for assessing the validity of interpretations of test scores for the intended test uses... the *Standards* provide a frame of reference to ensure that relevant issues are addressed. All professional test developers, sponsors, publishers, and users should make reasonable efforts to satisfy and follow the *Standards* and should encourage others to do so. All applicable standards should be met by all tests and in all test uses unless a sound professional reason is available to show. (p. 1)

When ASWB examinations conflict with the *Joint Standards*, they must provide a sound professional reason. Although there is no enforcement body for the *Joint Standards*,

It has been repeatedly recognized by regulatory authorities and courts as setting forth the generally accepted professional standards that developers and users of tests and other selection procedures follow. Compliance or noncompliance with the *Standards* may be used as relevant evidence of legal liability in judicial and regulatory proceedings. (AERA et al., 2014, p. 2)

For example, a recent federal court decision found New York City teacher examinations to be unlawful, in part, due to a lack of compliance with the *Joint Standards*, resulting in \$1.2 billion in payouts (New York City Comptroller, 2023).

Why Some Groups Perform Worse on ASWB Exams

The central claim of exam critics is that ASWB exam scores are impacted by factors unrelated to social work competence. This is called construct-irrelevant variance, or “the degree to which test scores are affected by processes that are extraneous to the test’s intended purpose” (AERA et al., 2014, p. 12), which “may give an unfair advantage or disadvantage to one or more subgroups” (p. 24). ASWB (2023a) admits that its examination scores are impacted by things other than social work competency in its examination guidebook: “there may be differences in exam performance outcomes for members of different demographic groups because exam performance is influenced by many factors external to the exams” (p. 9). Thus, ASWB agrees construct-irrelevant invariance is present and may contribute to systematic bias in passing scores, but it disagrees that internal exam factors can cause these biases, and instead focuses its empirical study entirely on factors external to the examination (ASWB, 2023d; Kim & Joo, 2024).

Social Privilege and Guessing Correctly

Construct-irrelevant variance is a threat to validity because, as Albright and Thyer’s (2010) study of the ASWB exam noted, if an answer is “readily guessable, then the validity of the practice examination—and by implication, that of the actual examinations—as a legitimate measure of the professional knowledge needed to practice social work competently and safely is called into question” (p. 231). Their 2010 experiment demonstrated MSW students could guess 52% of answers correctly without “even knowing what the question was” because the correct answer options on the clinical exam were “exceedingly transparent” (p. 231). In a replication using generative artificial intelligence, Victor and colleagues (2023b) found that ChatGPT could correctly guess the answer to an ASWB practice exam question 73% of the time without looking at the question, likely enough to pass the clinical licensing exam. These findings suggest ChatGPT and Albright and Thyer’s (2010) MSW students were able to pick up on “cues and patterns within the answer choices themselves” and intuit the correct answer (Victor et al., 2023b, p. 217). This intuition is not shared equally among all demographic groups, encoding bias through invalid and unreliable test items.

Parochial Practice Theories

ASWB questions are uniquely worded and rely on practice theories not all social workers use. Some questions have multiple correct answers. They ask the respondent to follow ASWB’s theoretical model on what a social worker should do “first” or “next,” as well as the “best” or “most likely” answer (ASWB, 2023a, pp. 24-26). As Victor and colleagues (2023a) note, this leads to ambiguities. In a practice exam question about reducing the concern of a domestic violence survivor that the social worker will judge her

for returning to an abusive partner, ASWB scored the correct response as “encourage the client to further discuss their decision” while ChatGPT selected the incorrect response “allow the client to continue guiding the conversation,” explaining in its reasoning that it was important for the social worker to “demonstrate acceptance of the client’s choice,” remove “further barriers to the client’s engagement,” and “build trust and rapport” (Victor et al., 2023a, pp. 514-515). ASWB cites self-determination as the rationale for their correct answer choice, though it appears to be consistent with ChatGPT’s, as well.

Ignore Practice Wisdom

Other ASWB exam questions reify practices social workers might find objectionable. In a practice question in their examination guidebook, ASWB claims telling “an adolescent client who expresses remorse about engaging in sexual activity while drunk...may indicate alcohol use disorder” is education, not confrontation (ASWB, 2023a, p. 34). The clinician’s actions may require confrontation and providing education on alcohol use when a sexual assault may have occurred could be considered inappropriate, if not unethical.

ASWB has included this example question in its exam documentation for years, demonstrating how it aligns with their thinking over time. The test-taker must ignore their practice wisdom and substitute ASWB’s practice theories to glean the “correct” test answer. For this reason, Tip #1 in test preparation handbooks advise that “when selecting an answer, you should base it upon the content that you studied from this guide and what you learned in the classroom,” not “how we might act in practice based upon practice wisdom and clinical judgements” (Apgar, 2022, p. 12). The gaps between examination and practice will continue to widen as ASWB examinations test clinical social workers on an outdated version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) until 2026 (ASWB, 2023e).

Although the test preparation advice to “review clinical vignettes to understand the thought process of the test (train yourself to think like the test does)” appears culturally neutral (Shersher, n.d., para. 7), a test-taker’s cultural or linguistic background may make it difficult to intuit the correct answer according to ASWB’s parochial theories of practice. A large language model like ChatGPT, on the other hand, can use linguistic cues to guess the correct answer without looking at the question (Victor et al., 2023a). A test taker’s ability to comprehend and apply the content outline for ASWB exams can be the determinative, rather than the latent trait the examinations are meant to measure—first-day competence. Test takers who find that content outline and its implementation counterintuitive, foreign, and irrelevant to practice may agree with Woodcock (2014b) that,

ASWB translated real-life tasks from the survey [of practitioners] into the chaos of the Content Outline and...ASWB then translates parts of the Content Outline back into real-life situations constituting exam questions...the Content Outline complicates the process without adding coherence or rigor. (para. 100)

Woodcock (2015) further noted that “exam-takers sharing the worldviews of ASWB question-writers might enjoy particular advantages, for purposes of guessing which answers those writers might prefer” (p. 229).

Cultural Incompetence

More troubling than ignoring one's practice wisdom is the embodied epistemic erasure that emerges by privileging specific theories, models, and buzzwords within licensing exams. When exam questions ask test takers to inform authorities—including supervisors, the criminal legal system, and the family policing system—a person with lived experience in these systems may have an embodied reaction to the ASWB's correct answer because they know it might endanger a client's life or violate their practice wisdom and community lens. Thus, the burden of ignoring one's personal and professional context is not spread equally across all test takers.

Although invalidity and unreliability impacts all test takers, “construct-irrelevant variance may result from” test questions that do not match the experiences of “examinees from diverse racial/ethnic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds;” for example, a test taker “may be poorly assessed by a vocational interest inventory whose questions disproportionately ask about competencies, activities, and interests that are stereotypically associated with particular subgroups” (AERA et al., 2014, p. 55). In classifying the examinations as “Jim Crow Licensing,” Dr. Teasley stated “people shouldn't have to second-guess the knowledge of their community...what about critical race theory, what about African-American perspectives, what about Afrocentric theory?” (DeCarlo, 2022a, 20:35). Some practice theories are central to the exam, while others are marginalized. Test-takers surveyed by Torres et al. (2024) linked social privilege with being “highly trained in how to tell the dominant culture exactly what it wants to hear,” (p. 190) and that the most effective test preparation advice was to “think like a middle-aged White woman” (p. 191). Similarly, Castex et al. (2019) found racial microaggressions in their study of ASWB exam practice questions.

In assessing exam validity and fairness, according to the *Joint Standards* (AERA, 2014), it is important to ascertain the consistency of a concept's meaning across demographic and cultural groups because:

evaluation of the underlying construct and properties of the test within one country or culture may not generalize across borders or cultures. This can lead to invalid test score interpretations. Careful attention to bias in score interpretations should be practiced in such contexts. (p. 52)

Because of the lack of adequate psychometric documentation about ASWB exams, their empirical validity, reliability, and fairness are generally a matter of faith rather than evidence-informed workforce policy. According to Woodcock (2014a), ASWB examinations are a matter of convenience, as “ASWB had discovered that everyone was willing to treat its several different exams as though they did have distinct and important purposes, despite the reality of an inordinately unfocused profession, its practitioners scattered among myriad careers” (para. 31). Furthermore, “given the organization's refusal to share its testing data, stakeholders (including test-takers, licensing agencies, clients, and the public) have been forced to accept ASWB's assurances,” an asymmetry that persists a decade later (Woodcock, 2014b, para. 165).

2018 Blueprint Exams: Lower Pass Rates

ASWB's (2022b) *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* noted that pass scores declined after the 2018 blueprint was introduced, regardless of race. The bachelor's examination first-time pass rate for all social workers went from 77.5% in 2011 to 68.7% in 2021. A comparable reduction was noted in first-time pass rates for the master's exam from 82.5% to 73.0% across the 11 years reported. Despite marketing all examinations as comparable across years, ASWB (2022b) directly attributes the 10-13% drop in exam pass rates "between 2017 and 2018...most likely occurred because of the introduction of a new exam blueprint" (p. 8).

The 2018 blueprint differs from the previous exam iteration in many ways. One potential reason is that the 2015-2016 job task analysis survey, upon which modern exams were built, may not represent all social workers. More than 22% of new social workers are Black and 14% are Hispanic or Latino (Salsberg et al., 2020); however, the ASWB's practice analysis sample included only 13% Black and 7% Hispanic or Latino respondents, halving their representation (ASWB, 2017b). Deficiencies in the racial and ethnic representativeness in the sample of the job analysis for teacher examinations in New York City was a crucial factor demonstrating the test was invalid and discriminatory in federal court (Croft, 2017).

To date, ASWB has not provided any research or public statements to explain the global reduction in social worker competence after release of the 2018 blueprint. ASWB's *Examination Guidebook* (2023a), *Request for Research Proposals* (2023c), and *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* (2022b) all maintain that systematic biases in exam scores are the result of "external factors," but these "pipeline" factors like education, "early childhood experiences," and others would not have magically appeared in 2018 to create systematic measurement error in pass scores. The most logical explanation is that construct-irrelevant variance (i.e., invalidity, unreliability) was substantially worse in the 2018 blueprint, whose introduction ASWB (2022b) attributes to causing a global reduction in test scores.

In its *Exam Pass Rate Analysis*, ASWB (2022b) does not report data prior to 2017 because "the introduction of a new exam blueprint can result in slight changes to exam content. Focusing on test-takers between 2018 and 2021 allows for more direct comparisons across similar testing experiences" (p. 3). This explanation is confounding, as scores on 2017 and 2018 examinations are required to be directly comparable according to ASWB's *Examination Guidebook*, which states that "no test-taker receives an advantage or disadvantage because of the version of exam received" (ASWB, 2023a, p. 26).

While the omission of 2011-2017 data is unfortunate, we can compare demographic pass rates with the mean. With a 12.5% reduction in global exam scores, White Multiracial test-takers reported higher than average pass rates on both the bachelor's exam (Figure 1) and master's exam (Figure 2). A similar pattern is evident for language, as test-takers whose primary language is English maintained above-average test scores. Consequently, only minoritized social workers were impacted by the construct-irrelevant variance introduced by the 2018 blueprint.

Similar patterns were not observed in the clinical test scores, likely due to survivorship bias. Social workers who cannot pass the required examinations for their LBSW and LMSW can never take the clinical examination.

Figure 1. *Impact of 2018 Blueprint on Bachelor's Exam Pass Rates by Demographic*

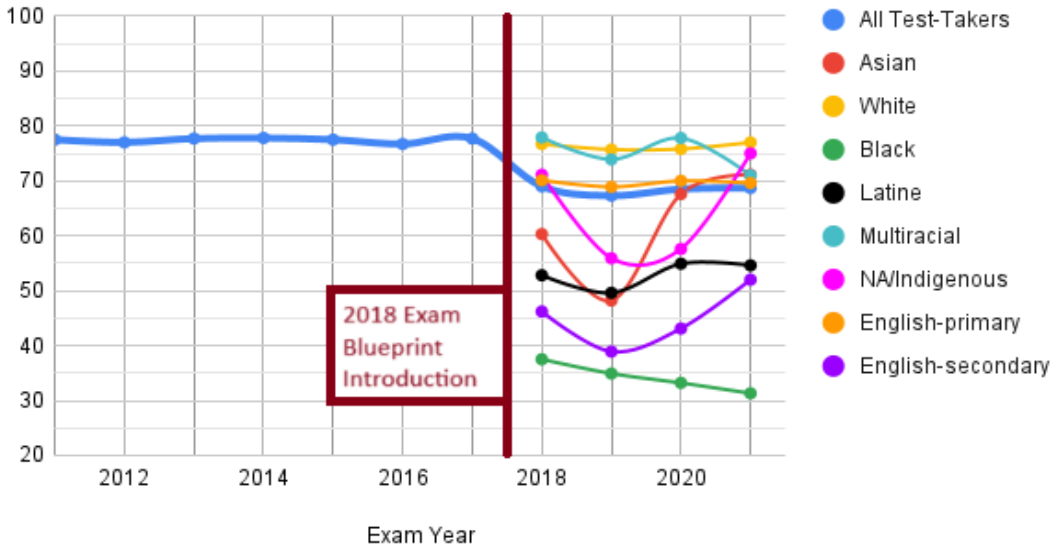


Figure 2. *Impact of 2018 Blueprint on Master's Exam Pass Rates by Demographic*

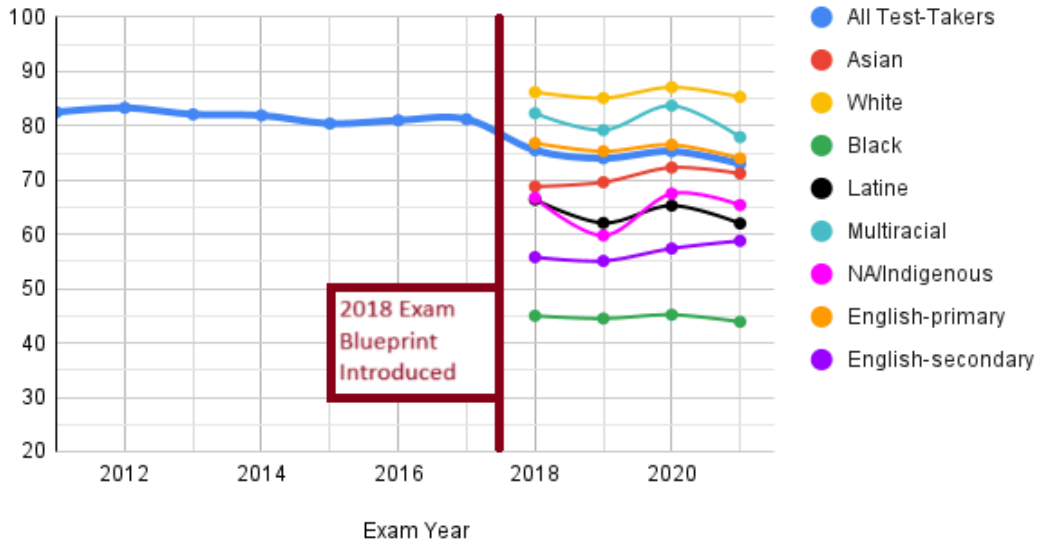


Table 2. *First-time and Repeat Test-Takers*

Test-Takers	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
LCSW 1st	9,100	9,604	10,879	12,217	13,044	14,007	16,095	16,022	17,207	16,801	20,657
LMSW 1st	11,260	12,732	13,110	14,184	15,214	15,496	16,884	16,812	18,231	16,716	21,650
LBSW 1st	3,164	3,251	3,595	3,873	4,083	4,113	4,462	3,711	3,583	2,709	3,494
Repeat	No data	No data	No data	No data	11,457*	11,127*	12,617*	13,478*	19,526*	15,521*	20,720

To calculate repeat test-takers, researchers subtracted first-time test-takers reported in ASWB's 2022 *Exam Pass Rate Analysis* from the total test-takers in ASWB's *Annual Report* from the corresponding year.

*Because 2021 was the only year that ASWB reported the number of first-time test-takers for the Advanced Generalist and Associate social work exams, it is the only year for which repeat test-taker figures are based on the exact reporting from ASWB. For other years listed, the number of test-takers for Associates and Advanced Generalist from 2021 was imputed in place of the missing data.

Table 3. *ASWB Revenue, Assets, and Profit*

ASWB	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Revenue											
Publishing	--	--	--	--	\$1,686,190	\$1,489,956	\$1,562,915	\$1,704,718	\$1,751,079	\$1,684,234	\$2,123,620
Exam	--	--	--	--	\$11,345,503	\$11,689,451	\$12,996,484	\$13,277,694	\$14,410,319	\$13,735,930	\$17,659,247
Total	\$9,461,425	\$10,279,908	\$11,492,614	\$12,692,553	\$13,964,190	\$13,767,709	\$15,565,636	\$16,344,808	\$17,595,886	\$16,234,758	\$24,599,963
Net Assets	\$8,995,137	\$10,612,898	\$13,079,412	\$15,680,159	\$17,750,104	\$19,693,116	\$23,289,150	\$24,046,614	\$28,831,413	\$33,841,553	\$40,273,169
Profit Margin	10.61%	14.57%	20.64%	22.26%	19.47%	8.45%	14.85%	16.52%	15.56%	18.46%	29.08%

Note: Financial information is reported from ASWB's tax returns, as published in the ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer.

Educated but Excluded Population Grows Based on ASWB Financial Interests

Testing license-seeking social workers is a booming business. In 2015, there were 44,278 examinations delivered (ASWB, 2015). By 2021, that number was 67,001—an increase of 51%. Of those examinees, 30% were repeat test takers. By subtracting the total number of test takers in ASWB’s 2015 annual report from the first-time test takers in the Exam Pass Rate Analysis (ASWB, 2022b), Table 2 provides the first national estimates of the “educated but excluded” subgroup of repeat test takers. The number of repeat test takers has nearly doubled since 2015, from 11,457 to 20,720 (+86%)—twice the rate of overall growth in test-takers (+43%)—indicating a growing pool of educated yet excluded social workers. In 2019 and 2021, the number of repeat test takers eclipsed the number of first-time LCSW test takers, as shown in Table 2.

ASWB’s Financial Self-Interest

Joseph (2024) highlights that ASWB operates according to “a business-oriented approach incompatible with the...integrity of its licensing exams” (p. 400). ASWB is a peculiar kind of business, a national testing monopoly whose product is purchased by its own members. Although funded by licensees and license-seekers, they have no oversight of the ASWB examination program. ASWB negotiates with itself and adopts closed, monopolistic data practices (Woodcock, 2015).

As a result, ASWB is best understood as a self-interested market actor. ASWB’s 2021 exam revenue was \$17.6 million, from which they extracted a 29% profit margin, and paid over \$1 million in executive compensation, according to their 2021 tax report (ProPublica, n.d.). In addition to compensation, ASWB holds a \$30 million portfolio of stocks and bonds managed by Morgan Stanley (ASWB, 2018). Table 3 reveals ASWB has been extracting profits from social workers for a long time. Since Albright and Thyer wrote in 2010 “the multimillion dollar testing industry is big business [requiring] greater transparency and accountability with respect to [the exam’s] legitimacy,” ASWB assets have increased by 450% (p. 229). This windfall is sustained by an industry-shattering 17% average profit margin across the examined period (ProPublica, n.d.).

ASWB’s profitability, as a nonprofit, is assured well into the future (ProPublica, n.d.). Indeed, \$10 million is dedicated to an examination defense fund (ASWB, 2019), sustained by three revenue sources: examination administration, by far the most lucrative, publication of examination resources, and their portfolio of stocks and bonds. In Illinois, ASWB’s financial resources allowed them to direct lobbying support for state-level coalitions, again introducing a conflict of interest which put supposedly independent organizations into a position of dependency and therefore more readily aligned with the specific policy agendas being supported by ASWB (Social Work Activist Collective, 2023).

ASWB Ignores Inconvenient Data

ASWB funds robust social science but does not act on the clear inequities in the data. Kim (2022) used the Current Population Survey data to analyze what factors predicted licensure across racial groups. Her analysis revealed the Black-White licensure disparity for LBSWs was explained by “*none of those external factors*: [emphasis in original] variations in state regulations, the field of practice [i.e. specialty], the type of employers, and social workers’ demographic vulnerability” (Kim, 2022, p. 382). According to Kim’s analysis, Black social workers were 43% less likely than white social workers to hold a license, and 56% less likely to hold a license required by their employer or state regulations.

Although Kim did not find similar results at the master’s level or for Latine practitioners, the study of New York licensees, cited previously, did find significant disparities among these groups (Senreich & Dale, 2021). Unexplored in Kim’s analysis is the abysmal performance of the LBSW examination, and the inequitable barriers it imposes on minority groups. Although 75-81% of White test takers pass it on their first time, less than 40% of Black test takers under 30 pass the LBSW examination on their first attempt, and only 22% of Black test takers over 50 pass the LBSW examination on their first attempt (ASWB, 2022b). Kim and Joo’s (2024) report used ASWB’s proprietary data, funding, and publishing. It found that Black social workers are 6x less likely to pass the clinical exam than White social workers; moreover, Asian and Latine social workers were 2x and 3x less likely to pass the clinical exam.

No policy or research actions were taken as a result of these findings. The *Examination Guidebook* continues to advise test takers that external factors cause biased scores (ASWB, 2023a), despite ASWB funding multiple research studies finding external factors were a small part of why minoritized social workers’ competence is not assessed accurately by examinations.

States Remove Exams Without Public Protection Issues

ASWB maintains that its examinations measure competence associated with safe and effective practice. Much like its external factors research, ASWB has not integrated empirical outcomes from state policy experiments like Minnesota, in which English-language learners and immigrants who failed the examination were provided an exception and monitored over time. Dr. Karen Goodenough, NASW-Minnesota executive director, describes in an interview why an exception to the ASWB examination was required after:

Several years ago, we had a significant influx of Hmong refugees, and not enough Hmong-speaking practitioners to meet their needs, as the exams were proving to be a barrier to obtaining licensure. This prompted us to explore alternate pathways to licensure for Hmong practitioners. Our state developed a provisional licensure option for all trained social workers who speak English as a second language and are foreign born who have failed an ASWB exam once. Rather than having to take the exam multiple times, they are able to apply for provisional licensure and receive supervised practice hours, which, once complete, allow them to hold a regular license. There is no indication these practitioners are any less skilled or

ethical than those who have passed the exams in our state. (Skeen & Goodenough, 2023, para. 14)

After a successful pilot, the alternative pathway was opened to all social workers, regardless of language or country of origin, without the requirement of failing the examination first. Minnesota, therefore, became the first state to no longer require taking the ASWB examination for clinical licensure. Alternative pathways are also available in Illinois, although one must fail the examination prior to starting the additional period of supervision used in lieu of testing. NASW-Illinois grounded their policymaking in prior focus groups with “marginalized communities throughout the state” who identified “the ASWB exam [as] the single greatest barrier to existing social work graduates” entering the profession of social work (NASW-Illinois, 2023, para. 10).

Currently, 10 states do not require bachelor’s examinations for their licenses, 5 states do not require master’s examinations for licenses, and 2 states allow alternative pathways to clinical licensure via additional supervision. Many states have never used bachelor’s or master’s exams, and no studies demonstrate practitioners are less ethical or more likely to endanger public protection. When the Illinois Department of Financial & Professional Regulation consulted with NASW-Illinois about exam removal, they benchmarked states like California, which had never required the master’s exam, and determined that the public safety risk for generalist practitioners was low (Singer, 2023). Whether states stop using examinations or never adopted them for licensure, ASWB exams have no documented empirical impact on public protection.

Changes to Reliability Tests and Reasoning

State boards contracting with ASWB for competency examinations receive very little public documentation on the psychometric properties of the exam. At present, ASWB’s contract with the California Board of Behavioral Sciences (BBS) stipulates only that “ASWB will provide... the number of exams administered; the total number of items on the examination; the range of scores (lowest to highest); the mean and standard deviation taken from the annual technical report; and the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (K-R-20) Reliability Coefficient” (California BBS, 2021, p. 6). The use of classical test theory is surprising because, prior to 2018, ASWB’s psychometricians used far more sophisticated approaches to measuring reliability of examinations than current exams.

ASWB’s psychometricians, Marson and colleagues (2010), stated ASWB “preferred [their] advanced IRT model (decision consistency in pass/fail decisions)” to “the less relevant classical standards (K-R-20)” (p. 89). ASWB’s exam reliability tests now assume reliability of its examination does not vary based on the test-taker’s ability level; whereas, previous IRT-based approaches measured conditional reliability. ASWB changed their reliability procedure for the 2018 blueprint introduction, accompanying a 10% decrease in master’s and bachelor’s exam scores across all groups (ASWB, 2022b), although white test-taker scores remained above average.

Inadequate Documentation

It is difficult to find information about the psychometric properties of ASWB examinations. The same summary is reprinted in many locations with different wording, for example, the examinations “continue to meet the highest standards of validity and reliability” (ASWB, 2022a, p. 66). However, no procedure or empirical results are reported. If boards want more information than the range, mean, standard deviation, and internal consistency reliability, they are unable to request it. According to ASWB’s contract, board members with concerns are only entitled to “an overview of the examination development and administrative processes to familiarize the board with the defensibility and validity issues of the examination program” (California BBS, 2021, p. 12). By the plain language of the *Joint Standards*, this constitutes inadequate documentation:

The reporting of indices of reliability/precision alone— with little detail regarding the methods used to estimate the indices reported, the nature of the group from which the data were derived, and the conditions under which the data were obtained— constitutes inadequate documentation. General statements to the effect that a test is “reliable” or that it is “sufficiently reliable to permit interpretations of individual scores” are rarely, if ever, acceptable...test constructors and publishers are obligated to provide sufficient data to make informed judgments possible. (AERA et al., 2014, p. 41)

In 2023, ASWB held a webinar on psychometrics, but it provided very little information on ASWB examinations. Figure 3 is a screenshot of the only slide that addressed the statistical properties of ASWB exams, providing a top-line summary of Cronbach’s alpha and the percentage of items flagged for differential functioning (ASWB, 2023b, 45:37).

Figure 3. *Most Recent and Comprehensive Psychometric Data on ASWB Exams*

The image is a screenshot of a presentation slide. At the top left, there is a small red icon and the word "Recording". The slide has a blue header with the title "ASWB and psychometrics" in white text. Below the header, the text reads: "All ASWB exams are developed in accordance with the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. (AERA/APA/NCME, 2014)". This is followed by a bulleted list: "HumRRO has provided third-party psychometric oversight and recommendations since 2014". Below this, there are three sub-sections: "Reliability", "DIF analysis", and "DIF analysis". Each sub-section has a bulleted list of points.

Recording

ASWB and psychometrics

All ASWB exams are developed in accordance with the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. (AERA/APA/NCME, 2014)

- HumRRO has provided third-party psychometric oversight and recommendations since 2014

Reliability

- ASWB uses Cronbach’s alpha to estimate reliability.
- Reliability estimates are consistently very high ($\alpha = .85 - .91$).

DIF analysis

- ASWB runs DIF analyses on all items.
- Items exhibiting statistically significant DIF are flagged, regardless of direction (typically < 5% of items), deleted, and reviewed.
- ASWB will explore the use of DTF analyses to identify additional information that may help explain pass rate differences.

Reading the *Joint Standards*, this is in plain violation of documentation standard 2.19, which requires ASWB to report “each method of quantifying the reliability/precision of scores... expressed in terms of statistics appropriate to the method...the sampling procedures used to select test takers for reliability/precision analyses and the descriptive statistics on these samples” (AERA et al., 2014, p. 47). The comment elucidates:

Because there are many ways of estimating reliability/precision, and each is influenced by different sources of measurement error, it is unacceptable to say simply, “The reliability/precision of scores on test X is .90.” A better statement would be, “The reliability coefficient of .90 reported for scores on test X was obtained by correlating scores from forms A and B, administered on successive days. The data were based on a sample of 400 10th-grade students from five middle-class suburban schools in New York State. The demographic breakdown of this group was as follows: . . .” (AERA et al., 2014, p. 47)

ASWB does not follow the *Joint Standards* template for sharing psychometric data. For example, in addition to reliability, ASWB does not publish the sample size they use to assess the validity and fairness of their examination, which can impact both item and test-level analysis (AERA et al., 2014). In the 2022 report, the only intersectional analysis performed was age-by-race, which itself was limited to only four of the ten years analyzed (ASWB, 2022a). ASWB’s procedure for DIF is not described in detail, and they do not share data on the slopes and intercepts of the regressions used to calculate DIF. Thus, in addition to suppressing negative information about examinations, the psychometric properties and methodology remain a scientific lacuna.

Implications for Social Work: Seize the means of regulating our profession

Social workers lacking competency in psychometrics and item response theory may instinctively trust ASWB’s assurances of exam quality and fairness. However, a thorough analysis of ASWB’s public statements and empirical studies of the examination reveals an examination whose biases are empirically evident and unaddressed. The United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2000) clearly spells out how social work boards must assure exam equity:

When tests are used as part of decision-making that has high-stakes consequences for students, evidence of mean score differences between relevant subgroups should be examined, where feasible. When mean differences are found between subgroups, investigations should be undertaken to determine that such differences are not attributable to construct underrepresentation or construct irrelevant error. (p. 32)

ASWB’s mantle of positivism seems to gloss over the invalidity, unreliability, and monoculturality of their examination program. When they finally publish data showing deep cultural, linguistic, racial, and age bias (e.g., ASWB, 2022a; Kim & Joo, 2024), they adopt the posture “that significant racial and ethnic disparities exist across many professions, including medicine, nursing, and psychology, suggesting that outcomes reflect broader

societal challenges” (ASWB, 2024, para. 9) while ignoring mandated and best psychometric practices assessing and minimizing measurement bias.

Historically, the social work profession supported the ASWB examination program because it was implemented to protect public safety and was expected to align with psychometric best practices. Unfortunately, stakeholders in the profession never checked whether exams were based on sound science and promoted equitable outcomes for all groups. Now, no regulatory power can require ASWB to adequately document its psychometric procedures or update them to mitigate bias. For nearly 40 years, the social work profession has treated ASWB as trustworthy scientific communicators and practitioners about exam psychometrics. However, a reading of relevant *Joint Standards* cited by ASWB reveals glaringly obvious gaps in compliance. These unexamined test properties need to be investigated for their role in the vast disparities in test scores.

The unfairness, invalidity, and unreliability of exams deters members of historically and presently excluded groups from entering the profession. It erodes the ability of the workforce as a macrosystem to perform evidence-based and culturally responsive practice. It is no longer tenable—and indeed it was never tenable – for social workers to rely on ASWB to self-report the fairness of its examinations. In addition to immediately publishing an updated and complete set of psychometric specifications consistent with the *Joint Standards*, ASWB should provide unconflicted psychometricians access to study exam data. The results of these studies must be published openly and honestly, so that any test user (i.e., board, employer) and test taker can view them—as the *Joint Standards* require. Open practices can start to undo the harm caused by one of social work’s darkest open secrets.

The question remains whether the profession will continue to support an exam it knows is biased and lacking compelling evidence that it can accurately assess competency and protect the public. The profession of social work is at a crossroads and requires new and innovative thinking in order to move forward. The work of some states to remove exam requirements or provide alternative pathways to licensure, without subsequent rises in ethical complaints, is one area that will require future attention and research. Watching other professions navigate similar issues in their licensure processes may also be instructive to future efforts. The profession should also consider the legal and financial risks for social work employers who use examinations to make employment decisions, given that large financial awards for teacher examinations were not imposed on the test-maker but rather the test-user, the New York City Department of Education (Croft, 2017).

While this article has focused primarily on the institutional level, it is critical to acknowledge the individual and community costs of the exam. The direct impact, financially, professionally, and emotionally on individuals not able to pass the exam has not been a focus of social work regulatory research. Qualitative studies such as Torres and colleagues (2024) and NASW-Illinois (2023) echo the stories of social workers testifying in favor of licensure reform bills, such as those in Maryland, many of whom reported spending thousands of dollars on preparation materials, courses, and re-examinations (e.g., Testimony in favor of SB0871 and SB0872, 2023). Epistemic justice calls social work researchers to establish more generalizable truths about occupational closure.

Using secondary data, ASWB-funded research (Kim et al., 2021) estimated a 10.6% earnings premium for licensed practitioners, and Kim subsequently noted:

being excluded from these license-related earnings premiums may mean a substantial loss in expected lifetime earnings for non-licensed social workers (Kim et al., 2021). This indicates that a racial disparity in licensing rates should be interpreted as an economic equity issue; those with more privileged backgrounds are more likely to benefit from earnings premiums associated with license-holding, whereas the less privileged are not. (Kim, 2023, p. 115)

Thus, there is clear evidence that deleterious impacts accrue to aspiring social workers excluded from the profession by licensing examinations, but empirical trends have not been investigated in detail. ASWB contends that occupational closure is the price of objective measurement in an unfair world, and it is correct that licensure exams and other standardized tests are generally known to be systematically biased (NASW, 2020). However, ASWB's test validation methodology violates psychometric best practices, rendering its examinations *uniquely* biased.

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