

# Social work national registration myths and facts

## Myth

Social workers practise in many areas beyond health, which is sometimes used to argue that they should not be regulated by a health body such as the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.

## Fact

In 2016, the AASW requested that social work be included as a regulated health profession under NRAS, but Health Ministers rejected the request, relying on flawed advice. Social work is recognised as a health service under multiple laws, and social workers are classified as health professionals under the Australian Occupation Standard Classification (2024). Like psychology and occupational therapy – both regulated under NRAS – most social workers work in health and mental health.

## Myth

Regulation isn't necessary because social work practice is low risk and self-regulation is already working just fine.

## Fact

Social work is not a low-risk profession, with practitioners working alone and unsupervised with highly vulnerable people experiencing crisis, trauma, addiction, violence, and mental health challenges. Successive coronial reports, royal commissions, and parliamentary inquiries have documented repeated failures in social work practice. Many of these failures could be prevented through proper regulation of social work education and practice.

## Myth

Regulation isn't necessary because it's easy to identify who is a social worker, and there are nationally uniform standards already in place for social workers.

## Fact

It is often difficult to know whether someone using the title “social worker” is actually qualified, and some employers hire unqualified workers in social work roles. There are cases of individuals who should have been disqualified from practice but continue to work as social workers, as there are no enforceable legal protections or disciplinary powers without statutory registration. While the AASW has set national standards and maintains a public register, fewer than 40% of social workers are members, leaving the public without a reliable way to verify qualifications.

## Myth

Regulation isn't necessary because social workers work primarily in public sector services where governance and standards are generally strong.

## Fact

While many social workers are employed in government and not-for-profit services, growing numbers are working in private practice where oversight may be minimal. Even in public agencies, some social workers avoid accountability by changing jobs without facing sanctions, as documented in this submission. Parliamentary inquiries and royal commissions have found that limited supervision and stretched services have led to critical failures in social work practice.

## Myth

There aren't many complaints against social workers, so why is registration necessary? Isn't it overkill?

## Fact

Complaints about health practitioners act as an early warning system, but complaint data about social workers is fragmented, poorly reported, and under-represents highly vulnerable service users. AASW data shows rising complaint numbers, yet most relate to non-members beyond AASW's disciplinary reach, and other agencies often fail to record or disclose that complaints involve social workers. Serious misconduct cases, prohibition orders, and coronial inquiries show that problems exist but often remain hidden from public view.

## Myth

The AASW is only pushing statutory registration to increase the recognition and status of the profession, not to benefit service users.

## Fact

The AASW has long advocated for statutory registration of social workers, not for professional gain, but to protect the public and improve standards of practice. Misconduct and poor practice are well-documented, and statutory registration provides powers and sanctions unavailable under current self-regulation. While registration may reduce some AASW membership, the focus remains on ensuring public safety and demonstrating the value of dual membership.

## Myth

Registration will make things worse, not better, particularly with workforce shortages in rural and remote areas.

## Fact

While there is a shortage of social workers, evidence shows that introducing statutory registration does not reduce workforce supply. Registration can improve workforce planning, as governments gain access to robust data from national registration systems like Ahpra. Professions such as occupational therapy, medical radiation, and paramedicine have grown strongly under national registration, helping governments address supply and distribution challenges, including in rural and remote areas.

## Myth

Registration won't solve the problem of lack of resources – it's not a magic bullet.

## Fact

Statutory registration will not solve all social work recruitment and resourcing challenges. However, it can strengthen public trust, assure the quality and safety of services, and support better workforce planning. Registration may also attract more students to a respected and well-regulated profession.

## Myth

Why register yet another profession with Ahpra? Won't this just add to the complexity of the scheme?

## Fact

While the NRAS may appear complex, it is far simpler than the current fragmented system, which relies on multiple layers of separate agencies and individuals to monitor social work practice. The National Scheme has streamlined regulation, improved efficiency, provided consolidated data for workforce planning, and ensured profession-specific input, addressing most early challenges. Expanding NRAS to include social workers offers far greater benefits than creating separate state-based schemes or a standalone Social Worker Registration Board, which would reintroduce inefficiencies and professional silos.

## Myth

Why pursue national registration now when South Australia can pilot and test the model?

## Fact

Introducing social worker registration in South Australia alone creates significant complexities, risks, and financial burdens for the government, workforce, and community. The AASW is concerned that the state-based model may introduce unnecessary challenges around defining social work and its scope of practice. A national registration approach under the NRAS would be far more effective, avoiding the pitfalls of a piecemeal, state-by-state system.