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Mapping the Evolving Landscape of Social Work Research: A Global Perspective (2020–2025)

Sosyal Hizmet Araştırmalarının Gelişen Panoramasının Haritalandırılması: Küresel Bir Bakış (2020–2025)

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Abstract: This study provides a bibliometric overview of global social work research published between 2020 and 2025. The Web of Science Core Collection data analyzed 4,673 English-language journal articles with the Bibliometrix R package following the PRISMA 2020 protocol. Quantitative indicators, co-authorship networks, and co-word analyses were used to trace productivity, collaboration, and thematic evolution patterns. Results show a 7.5 percent annual growth rate in publications, with research output concentrated in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, and a modest international collaboration rate of 15.4 percent. Thematic mapping identified enduring interests in social work education, welfare, and mental health, alongside emerging clusters on digital practice, simulation-based learning, and green social work. These developments reflect the profession's increasing engagement with sustainability, technology, and resilience after COVID-19. Despite rapid expansion, global inequalities in knowledge production remain evident. The study offers an empirical foundation for understanding the changing intellectual structure of social work. It underscores the need for more inclusive, ecologically aware, and technologically adaptive scholarship in the coming decade.

Keywords: Social work; bibliometric analysis; sustainability; digital transformation; global collaboration.

Öz: Bu çalışma, 2020 ve 2025 yılları arasında yayınlanan küresel sosyal hizmet araştırmalarının bibliyometrik bir genel bakışını sunmaktadır. Web of Science Core Collection verileri kullanılarak, 4.673 İngilizce dergi makalesi, PRISMA 2020 protokolünü takiben Bibliometrix R paketi ile analiz edilmiştir. Üretkenliği, iş birliğini ve tematik evrim modellerini izlemek için nicel göstergeler, ortak yazarlık ağları ve ortak kelime analizleri kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, yayınlarda yıllık %7,5 büyüme oranı, araştırma çıktısının Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Birleşik Krallık ve Avustralya'da yoğunlaşması ve %15,4'lük mütevazı bir uluslararası iş birliği oranı göstermektedir. Tematik haritalama, dijital uygulama, simülasyon tabanlı öğrenme ve yeşil sosyal hizmet konularında ortaya çıkan kümelerin yanı sıra sosyal hizmet eğitimi, refah ve ruh sağlığı alanlarında kalıcı ilgi alanları belirlemiştir. Bu gelişmeler, mesleğin COVID-19'dan sonra sürdürülebilirlik, teknoloji ve dayanıklılıkla artan etkileşimini yansıtmaktadır. Hızlı genişlemeye rağmen, bilgi üretimindeki küresel eşitsizlikler belirginliğini korumaktadır. Çalışma, sosyal hizmetin değişen entelektüel yapısını anlamak için ampirik bir temel sunmakta ve önümüzdeki on yılda daha kapsayıcı, ekolojik farkındalığa sahip ve teknolojik olarak uyarlanabilir bir akademik çalışmaya duyulan ihtiyacın altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal hizmet; bibliyometrik analiz; sürdürülebilirlik; dijital dönüşüm; küresel işbirliği.

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INTRODUCTION

As an academic and practical discipline, social work has long been engaged with social justice, welfare, social resilience, and the complexities of vulnerable populations. The field is being reinterpreted and expanded in the face of accelerating global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, digital transformation, and inequality. Mapping how social work research has evolved is critical to understanding where academic energy is concentrated and which gaps persist.

The post-2020 period is a turning point for social work. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted social systems and welfare provision, accelerating the adoption of remote and hybrid care models, crisis interventions, and mental health support (Banks et al., 2020; Duru, 2025). Against this backdrop of rapid professional and organizational change, researchers have increasingly turned to bibliometric approaches to systematically capture how the social work knowledge base has responded to the pandemic. Bibliometric studies focusing specifically on social work's response to COVID-19 have emerged; for example, one study mapped 1,233 social work articles published during the pandemic to examine trends in authorship, keywords, and journal distribution (Chen et al., 2021). The broader social sciences have also recorded increases in pandemic-centered bibliometric outputs and heightened concerns about "covidization" effects—disproportionately large interest and citation effects related to COVID-19 topics (Sjögårde, 2022) (Banks et al., 2020). Parallel to the impact of the pandemic, the sustainability agenda and environmental justice concerns have reshaped thematic priorities. Green social work has gained importance by attempting to combine ecological justice and social welfare. Breen et al. (2023) illustrate how green social work frameworks are taught and incorporated in disaster and climate contexts and argue for their stronger integration into social work curricula. Social work scholars are also increasingly researching how climate change, environmental vulnerability, and ecological breakdown intersect with inequality (Winzen & Haupt, 2024). A recent review examined 1,435 social work articles on COVID-19 published between 2019 and 2024. The results indicated that *International Social Work* was the most prolific journal in the field, while the University of Texas System emerged as the leading institutional contributor. At the country level, the United States of America produced the highest number of publications and received the greatest number of citations. The analysis also showed that social work journals demonstrated strong interdisciplinary connections, particularly with the fields of public health, medicine, and psychiatry (Duru, 2025). However, empirical, large-scale mapping of social work's relationship with environmental concerns remains rare.

Another growing area is digital social work, which uses technology, telepractice, artificial intelligence, and digital tools in service delivery. Social work educators and practitioners have experimented with simulation, virtual supervision, and hybrid service delivery to ensure continuity during lockdowns and beyond (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). At the same time, the profession faces challenges related to ethics, access, and digital equity. Combining technological innovation with traditionally relational, context-heavy practice creates opportunities and dilemmas. In light of these changes, bibliometric analysis offers a robust methodology for mapping social work research's evolving intellectual structure and trajectories. Bibliographic matching, co-word mapping, and thematic evolution techniques provide a systematic, data-driven approach to revealing which ideas are central, emerging, or marginalized (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Particularly in social sciences and social work, such approaches help move beyond anecdotal or disciplinary islands of knowledge, revealing patterns in publication, collaboration, and conceptual emphasis. However, despite a few field-specific bibliometric studies (e.g., social work education, social work and COVID-19), no recent global bibliometric map captures the field in this transformative phase. Such a map would identify key authors, institutions, countries, and emerging research fronts; reveal collaboration networks and thematic shifts; and provide a foundation for strategic planning in research, funding, and pedagogy. Accordingly, this study conducts a comprehensive bibliometric investigation of global social work research published between 2020 and 2025 using the Web of Science database and PRISMA-compliant selection procedures. The objectives are to identify publication trends, determine influential actors and institutions, map thematic clusters, and track the evolution of ideas such as sustainability, digital application, and mental health. The findings aim to inform academic understanding and practical orientation of social work research in the changing global landscape.

Research Questions

To systematically examine these developments and provide a structured account of recent changes in the field, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In line with these objectives, this study addresses the following questions:
2. What are the social work research publication and citation trends from 2020 to 2025?
3. Who are the leading authors, institutions, and countries shaping the field?
4. What are the dominant and emerging thematic clusters in social work?
5. How have co-authorship and international collaboration networks evolved during this period?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bibliometric analysis has become an increasingly recognized method for assessing social work's intellectual and structural development as an academic field. Early examples, such as Manthorpe's (2006) *Bibliometrics in Social Work*, laid out the theoretical foundations and practical applications of citation analysis in assessing academic impact. The authors noted that bibliometric indicators provide a "quantitative mirror" of the field's maturity, but are limited by the slow accumulation of citations in the social sciences and incomplete database coverage. Similar methodological considerations emerged in the *Journal of Social Work*, where researchers emphasized that bibliometric metrics alone cannot capture the qualitative or contextual dimensions of social impact (Gao et al., 2025). National-level analyses have further demonstrated how bibliometric mapping can chart the developmental trajectories of social work. For example, Kara and Kutlu (2025) conducted a large-scale bibliometric mapping of the Turkish social work literature. She identified distinct waves of growth corresponding to policy reforms and university expansion. These studies confirm that bibliometric methods have evolved from narrow assessment tools to a fundamental methodology for evidence-based evaluation of academic productivity and thematic trends.

Traditional research themes in social work have historically focused on welfare systems, social justice, family and child protection, and mental health. Manthorpe (2006) defined these enduring domains as the structural underpinnings of the social work subject. In recent years, the mental health dimension has expanded significantly by integrating discussions of resilience, burnout, and well-being among clients and practitioners. In a bibliometric analysis of the compassion fatigue and resilience literature, observed that social workers and nurses appear as central populations within the broader landscape of psychological and health sciences (Yi et al., 2022). Such studies demonstrate how social work's research agenda increasingly aligns with interdisciplinary concerns surrounding psychosocial well-being and professional sustainability.

The ecological transformation in green social work represents one of the most recent and significant conceptual shifts. Dominelli and Ku (2017) framed green social work as a global response to interconnected crises such as climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality. His argument positions environmental justice as inseparable from the profession's ethical obligations. Building on this framework, Breen et al. (2023) examined how disaster contexts accelerate sustainability and resilience-based curriculum and practice innovations.

Winzen and Haupt (2024) conducted a discourse analysis of how environmental themes entered professional social work associations' mission statements and conference proceedings, demonstrating the gradual but steady institutionalization of ecological ethics. Similarly, Banks et al. (2024) explored how social work values are redefined within the emerging "eco-social world" and advocated for a systemic engagement with planetary well-being. Recent systematic reviews confirm the rising trajectory of climate-related social work research and underscore the integration of environmental awareness into practice, education, and policy (Rambaree, 2020). Collectively, these studies establish environmental and ecological concerns as a distinct thematic axis within contemporary social work literature.

Parallel to ecological consciousness, the digital transformation of social work has created a new research frontier—digital social work. The pandemic has intensified this trajectory by necessitating remote service delivery, online supervision, and simulation-based training. Kourgiantakis et al. (2020) conducted a scoping review demonstrating how simulation and virtual learning environments reshape pedagogical practices in social work education. Similarly, Gao et al. (2025) applied bibliometric methods to analyze Chinese social work research and found that digitalization, data-driven policy, and urban social governance were emerging high-frequency keywords. These findings show that social work is adapting to technological change and actively redefining its professional identity in digital and hybrid environments. Despite the diversification of research topics, structural inequalities in global knowledge production persist. The academic impact of social work continues to be concentrated in English-speaking countries—particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—while contributions from the Global South remain underrepresented. Urhan and Aslan (2024) confirmed this imbalance in their bibliometric analysis of social work education from 1970 to 2024 and found limited international collaboration outside high-income regions.

China's academic growth demonstrates both progress and challenges: Gao et al. (2025) noted that despite rapid expansion in publication volume, global visibility remains relatively low due to language barriers and database inclusion biases. These inequalities echo broader bibliometric assessment critiques, who warn that citation-based metrics can inadvertently reinforce systematic hierarchies across disciplines, languages, and genders (Dion et al., 2018). Similarly, Sheble and Chen (2014) examined the diffusion of research synthesis methods and showed that methodological adoption patterns are shaped by institutional access and cultural norms rather than scientific merit alone. These studies underscore the need for bibliometric approaches that are critically aware of epistemic inequalities within the global academy.

In the social sciences, bibliometrics must balance statistical precision with contextual interpretation. Gauffriau et al. (2007) provided an overview of counting methods, such as whole, fractional, and weighted counts, and emphasized transparency in selecting and reporting metrics. Similarly, Aria and Cuccurullo (2017) developed Bibliometrix, an open-source R package that standardizes bibliometric workflows and enables co-word, co-citation, and thematic evolution analyses. Zupic and Čater (2015) synthesized best practices for science mapping, advocating for integrating network analysis and visualization to enhance interpretability. Beyond technical methods, recent research has emphasized mixed-method integration. Lim et al. (2024) demonstrated how combining bibliometric mapping with systematic review techniques yields richer interpretive insights. These hybrid approaches are increasingly recommended to mitigate the reductionism inherent in purely quantitative analyses. Collectively, methodological advances have positioned bibliometrics as a rigorous yet flexible tool for capturing the structural, thematic, and collaborative dynamics of disciplines such as social work.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative bibliometric research design to systematically map the global evolution of the social work field between 2020 and 2025. Bibliometric methods are increasingly used in the social sciences because they allow for the objective and repeatable assessment of academic output, thematic development, and collaborative structures. They provide a quantitative lens through which the intellectual architecture of a field can be examined, revealing how disciplines evolve through publication, citation, and co-authorship patterns (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Within this framework, science mapping techniques were used to visualize the conceptual and social relationships between authors, institutions, and thematic clusters, thereby providing both descriptive and structural insights into the discipline's trajectory (Cobo et al., 2011; Van Eck & Waltman, 2014).

Data set and search

The bibliographic dataset was derived from the Web of Science Core Collection (WoSCC), a widely recognized database known for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences and consistent indexing (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). The database was queried in June 2025 using the topic search term "social work." Publications were restricted to the years 2020 to June 2025,

and the language and document type were filtered to "Article" in English¹. This strategy yielded 6,411 records. Non-article materials such as book reviews, editorials, and conference proceedings were excluded to ensure data consistency, leaving 4,673 articles from 573 academic journals. These records formed the final compilation for bibliometric analysis. The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles because they represent the most standard and comparable academic output (Broadus, 1987).

PRISMA Flow Diagram for Data Selection

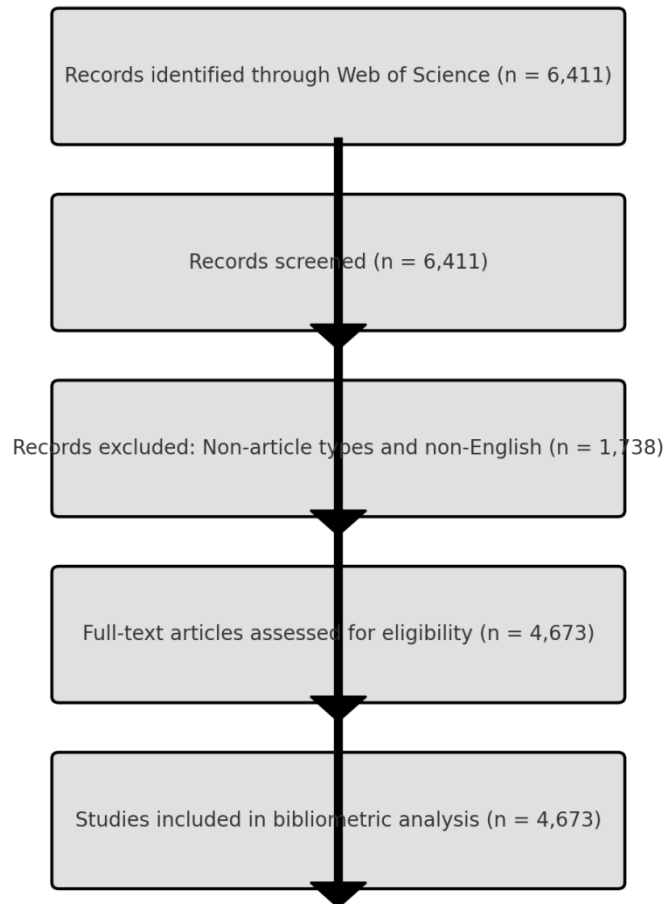


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing the selection process for social work research articles (2020-June 2025) from the Web of Science database.

The selection and filtering process was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guideline principles (Page et al., 2021). This framework ensured transparency in identifying, screening, and including studies. The process began by identifying all records containing the term "social work" in the title, abstract, or keywords. Duplicate entries were removed, and the remaining records were screened for relevance and format. During the eligibility phase, only peer-reviewed journal articles were retained, while non-academic or non-English studies were excluded. The final inclusion stage resulted in a consolidated dataset of 4,673 articles. A PRISMA flow diagram was used to illustrate this filtering process and clearly show the inclusion and exclusion of records at each stage.

¹ Filtering of article was made on WoS and records with multiple Bibliometric tagging such as article/chapter/review etc were else kept in the data set.

After data collection, metadata were exported in BibTeX format and processed using the open-source Bibliometrix package for R (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This package enables comprehensive analysis of bibliographic data, including author productivity, citation patterns, and keyword co-occurrence networks. Data preprocessing involved several standardization steps. Author names were merged through a manual disambiguation process that combined variant spellings (e.g., "E. Lee" and "Lee, E."), and journal titles were converted to their standard forms. Institutional affiliations and country names were normalized for consistency, and keywords were harmonized through stemming and synonym merging to prevent conceptual fragmentation—for example, terms such as "COVID-19," "Coronavirus," and "Pandemic" were merged under a single standardized keyword (Cobo et al., 2011). These simplification procedures minimized redundancy and spelling inconsistencies, thereby increasing the reliability of subsequent analyses.

Data Analysis

Data analysis combined performance analysis and science mapping techniques. Performance indicators such as annual publication output, citation averages, and author productivity were calculated to capture the overall dynamics of research activity in the field (Donthu et al., 2021). Subsequently, co-author analysis was performed to explore the social dimension of knowledge production. Collaboration networks between authors, institutions, and countries were visualized, and network metrics such as density, degree centrality, and collaboration index were calculated using the *igraph* package in R (Hicks et al., 2015). The scope of international collaboration was further quantified through the International Collaboration Ratio (ICR), thereby providing insight into the global connectedness of social work research.

The conceptual structure of the field was examined through co-word analysis, which identified clusters of co-occurring keywords and revealed underlying thematic patterns (Callon et al., 1983). Using Bibliometrix's Biblioshiny interface, thematic maps were created to classify these clusters into four quadrants—driving, fundamental, niche, and emerging themes—based on their density and centrality (Cobo et al., 2011). Longitudinal analysis was conducted to track how these themes evolved over the 2020-2025 period. Additional visualizations, such as co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence graphs, and thematic evolution plots, were created using VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2014) and cross-checked for consistency. Attention to validity and reliability was maintained throughout the analysis. Bibliometric studies are inherently limited by the scope of the database and the quality of the metadata it contains (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). To address these limitations, multiple validation strategies were applied. These included manual verification of high-frequency author names and thematic clusters, and triangulation of findings across various analytical methods such as performance, co-word, and co-authorship analyses. The study also adhered to the recommendations outlined in Research Metrics for the Leiden Manifesto, which advocates for the transparent, contextual, and responsible use of bibliometric indicators (Hicks et al., 2015).

This methodological design provided a comprehensive and transparent mapping of global social work research. The combination of standard database searches, systematic filtering under PRISMA, and triangulated bibliometric analyses ensured reliability and interpretive depth. By integrating performance metrics with conceptual and collaborative mapping, this study aimed to describe the quantitative growth of the social work field and the structural and thematic dynamics shaping its evolution in the early 2020s.

This methodology integrates quantitative rigor with conceptual depth to map the intellectual and thematic evolution of social work research over the past five years. The combination of performance analysis and science mapping within the Bibliometrix environment provides a comprehensive and replicable framework for understanding how the field of social work has developed globally during a period marked by health crises, digital transformation, and renewed social justice movements. The following section presents the results of this analysis, highlighting the publication dynamics, thematic structures, and collaborative models that define the current state of the field.

FINDINGS

The bibliometric dataset analyzed in this study covers 2020 to 2025 and consists of publications from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. After applying the inclusion criteria—peer-reviewed, article-type documents, and English language—the final compilation contained 4,673 documents drawn from 573 different publication sources. These sources included major disciplinary journals such as *International Social Work*, *British Journal of Social Work*, *Social Work*, and *Research on Social Work Practice*, as well as interdisciplinary publications in the social sciences and health fields. Therefore, the compilation represents a comprehensive and high-quality overview of the global social work discourse in the early 2020s.

Table 1. Overview of the Data

Category	Indicator	Value
Basic Data Information	Time Period	2020–2025
	Sources (Journals, Books, etc.)	573
	Documents	4,673
	Annual Growth Rate (%)	7.51
	Average Document Age	2.25
	Average Number of Citations per Document	4.13
	Total Number of References	151,501
Document Contents	Keyword Plus (ID)	3,034
	Author Keywords (DE)	9,255
Authors	Total Number of Authors	9,044
	Authors of Single-Author Documents	1,007
Author Collaboration	Single-Authored Documents	1,277
	Number of Co-Authors per Document	2.81
	International Co-authorships (%)	15.45
Document Type	Articles	3,706
	Article; Book Chapter	289
	Article; Early Access	500
	Article; Conference Proceedings	1
	Review	171
	Review; Early Access	6

Table 1 presents the fundamental descriptive indicators of the dataset. The annual growth rate of 7.51% indicates a consistent expansion in academic output in social work over the observed period, likely reflecting increased research engagement in response to global social challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and sustainable development agendas. The average document age of 2.25 years and the average citation rate per article of 4.13 indicate that most recent studies are still gaining academic impact. The total of 151,501 citation references demonstrates the field's extensive intertextual connectivity and reliance on interdisciplinary knowledge bases.

In terms of content, the dataset contains 3,034 Keywords Plus (keywords obtained through analysis) and 9,255 keywords provided by authors, reflecting a rich conceptual diversity covering traditional social work concerns (e.g., welfare, society, and social justice) as well as emerging areas such as digital application, sustainability, and resilience. Author analysis revealed that 9,044 individual academics contributed, with 1,007 identified as sole authors. While 1,277 (27.3%) of total publications were single-authored, multi-authored works, with an average of 2.81 co-authors per article, confirm a moderate but growing culture of collaboration. Notably, 15.45% of all documents stemmed from international co-authorship, highlighting the increasingly transnational character of social work research. However, it remains lower than in neighboring fields such as public health or psychology.

The distribution of document types shows the dominance of journal articles ($n = 3,706$), complemented by 289 book chapter articles, 500 open-access early articles, and 171 review articles, with a negligible number of conference papers ($n = 1$). This distribution reinforces the field's reliance on journal-based dissemination and its orientation toward empirical and conceptual work rather than conference outputs. These indicators describe a dynamic, maturing research field connected to global

networks, which has been steadily expanding in productivity, collaboration, and thematic diversity since 2020.

Annual Scientific Production and Citation Trends

The publication trajectory between 2020 and 2025 shows a steady upward trend, reflecting the growing importance of social work as a research-intensive profession. The average annual growth rate of 7.51% confirms sustainable expansion rather than a temporary increase. 2020-2022 marked an initial surge in publications coinciding with the global academic mobilization around the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous articles addressed crisis intervention, the restructuring of social care, and the adaptation of digital services, resulting in a temporary publication surge in 2021. Following this period, publication rates stabilized and maintained consistent annual increases as the field diversified toward post-pandemic recovery, digital social services, and sustainable community development.

Citations have accumulated steadily, with a noticeable delay observed for studies published after 2023, averaging 4.13 citations per article. This is expected, given the necessary citation window for publications to demonstrate novelty and measurable impact. The overall pattern indicates that the compilation is current and continues to gain academic interest.

Key Sources and Authors

Among the 573 publication sources in the compilation, publishing activity is clearly concentrated in a small group of flagship journals. Social Work Education leads the field with 563 articles, followed by the British Journal of Social Work with 439 articles and International Social Work with 228 articles. Education-focused titles stand out: Alongside Social Work Education, the Journal of Social Work Education (189 articles) and the Journal of Teaching in Social Work (130 articles) point to a strong emphasis on pedagogy, curriculum, internship redesign, and digital delivery in post-2020 professional preparation.

Practice and method-focused publications maintain a significant presence—Qualitative Social Work (121) reflects the field's methodological depth, while Research on Social Work Practice (107) is grounded in evidence-based intervention research. Generalist titles such as the Journal of Social Work (110) and the regionally based European Journal of Social Work (143) complete the leading cluster. These nine journals publish 2,030 of the 4,673 articles in the dataset—43.44% of the total output—pointing to a moderately concentrated resource structure alongside specialized and interdisciplinary outlets with long tails. The coexistence of education, practice, and global-comparative journals among the most productive sources suggests that the 2020–2025 period will see the simultaneous consolidation of the professional education field and the sustainable development of practice evidence and international perspectives.

Table 2. Leading journals publishing social work research (2020–2025, WoS)

Rank	Journal	Article	Share (%)
1	Social Work Education	563	12.05
2	British Journal of Social Work	439	9.39
3	International Social Work	228	4.88
4	Journal of Social Work Education	189	4.04
5	European Journal of Social Work	143	3.06
6	Journal of Social Work Education	130	2.78
7	Qualitative Social Work	121	2.59
8	Journal of Social Work	110	2.35
9	Research on Social Service Applications	107	2.29

Author productivity analysis has identified a small group of academics who consistently produced high research output between 2020 and 2025, along with a highly diverse range of contributors. As shown in Figure 2, Lee E emerged as the most productive author with 34 publications, followed by Kourgiantakis T (25) and Beddoe L (21). Other notable contributors include Gray M and Roose R (18 each), Garrett P. M. (17), and McFadden P., Morley C., and Wang Y. (16 each). Amadasun S completes the top ten most productive authors with fifteen publications.

This distribution reflects a moderately skewed authorship pattern characteristic of the social sciences, where a small, highly active core of researchers coexists with a much larger group of occasional contributors. The top ten authors, accounting for a significant share of the total output, underscore their influence in shaping contemporary research directions in social work. The diversity of institutional affiliations represented among these authors—spanning North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa—also highlights the field's increasingly global participation.

Table 3. Top 10 Most Productive Authors in Social Work Research (2020-2025)

Rank	Author	Publications (n)	Primary Research Topic
1	Lee, E.	34	Digital and simulation-based learning in social work education
2	Kourgiantakis, T.	25	Experiential and technology-supported pedagogy
3	Beddoe, L.	21	Professional identity and supervision
4	Gray, M.	18	Social work theory and global practice models
5	Roose, R.	18	Child welfare and social policy
6	Garrett, P. M.	17	Critical theory and political economy in social work
7	McFadden, P.	16	Practitioners' Professional Stress and Resilience
8	Morley, C.	16	Ethics and social justice education
9	Wang, Y.	16	Comparative social work and cross-cultural studies
10	Amadasun, S.	15	Social work development and policy in Africa

In terms of thematic focus, these prolific authors have made comprehensive contributions to studies on digital social work, education and supervision, the well-being of social workers, and post-pandemic resilience. For example, Lee E. and Kourgiantakis T. are known for their work on simulation-based learning and technology in social work education. In contrast, Beddoe L. and Gray M. have produced a series of essential publications on professional identity, reflective practice, and policy frameworks. The prominence of these themes aligns with the general shift observed in the compilation toward integrating technology, sustainability, and practitioner well-being into the social work discourse.

Institutional and Country Contributions

The institutional distribution of publications is concentrated among research-intensive universities in North America and the Asia-Pacific region. As shown in Table 4, the University of Toronto leads with 168 publications, followed by the University of Michigan with 124 publications and the Queensland University of Technology with 97 publications. Other high-performing institutions include the University of Calgary (94), the University of the Sunshine Coast (91), and the University of Nigeria (90), one of the most active institutions from the Global South. Mid-level contributions come from Australian universities such as Charles Sturt University (84), Monash University (81), Deakin University (79), and Griffith University (79).

These results reveal a clear model of institutional leadership linked to national investment in social work education and research infrastructure. Canadian and Australian universities demonstrate high productivity, reflecting their strong professional education systems and longstanding commitment to evidence-based practice. The presence of the University of Nigeria among the top ten institutions underscores Africa's increasing participation in global research networks—signaling a notable shift toward a more inclusive disciplinary landscape.

Table 4. Top 10 Most Productive Institutions in Social Work Research (2020-2025)

Rank	Institution	Publications (n)	Country
1	University of Toronto	168	Canada
2	University of Michigan	124	USA
3	Queensland University of Technology	97	Australia
4	University of Calgary	94	Canada
5	University of the Sunshine Coast	91	Australia

Rank	Institution	Publications (n)	Country
6	University of Nigeria	90	Nigeria
7	Charles Sturt University	84	Australia
8	Monash University	81	Australia
9	Deakin University	79	Australia
10	Griffith University	79	Australia

Publication activity at the country level is largely dominated by the United States, which accounts for 4,784 records, representing more than one-third of all indexed social work articles during this period. The United Kingdom (1,506) and Australia (1,465) follow at a considerable distance, reflecting the importance of English-speaking research traditions and well-established academic programs in social work. Canada (932) ranks fourth, followed by China (627), indicating Asia's growing visibility in international social work research. Spain (514) and Sweden (420) lead the European representation, while Israel (429) and Ireland (403) also make notable contributions, particularly in the areas of social resilience, migration, and education reform. With 315 publications, South Africa is a leading contributor from the Global South, highlighting its regional expertise in post-colonial social welfare and social justice research.

Country Collaboration Map

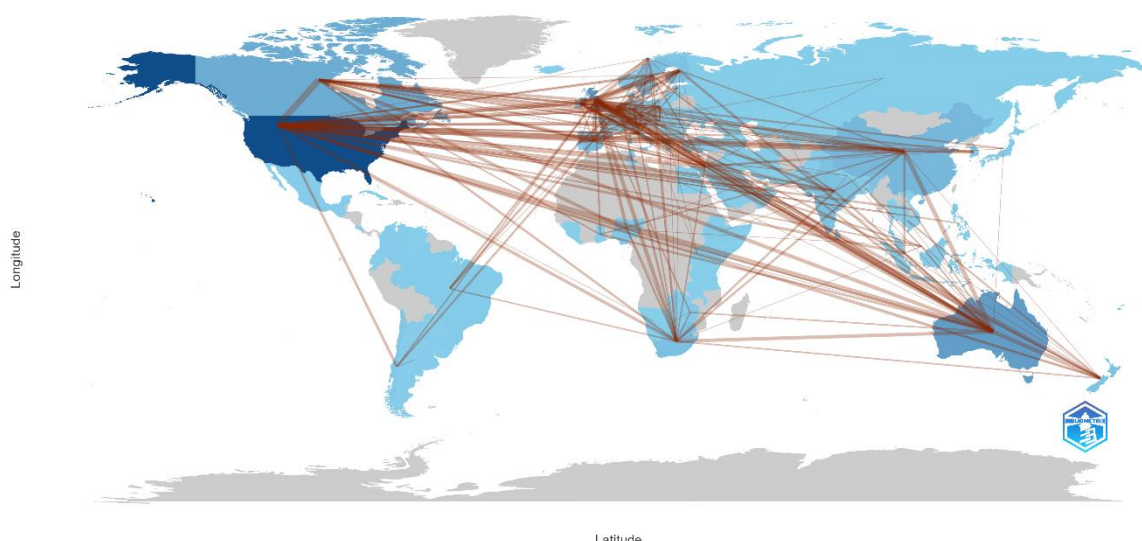


Figure 2. Country-Based Collaboration Map (2020-2025)

Taken together, these ten countries produce the vast majority of indexed output, demonstrating the highly unequal global distribution of research power. However, the inclusion of countries such as China, Israel, and South Africa indicates a diversification of epistemic centers and the gradual internationalization of the social work field. These findings confirm the enduring hegemony of English-speaking countries—particularly the United States and the United Kingdom—in global social work research. Nevertheless, the data also reveal an expanding geography of the field, with increasing participation from Asia and Africa. The growth in output from universities in Nigeria, China, and South Africa exemplifies how local contexts are beginning to contribute different perspectives to global social work discussions. Concurrently, the clustering of Australian and Canadian institutions among the most productive points to a strong alignment between professional education systems and research productivity. Collectively, these institutional and national trends underscore the concentration of knowledge production and the gradual diversification of the field in the post-2020 period.

Thematic Structure and Keyword Analysis

The co-occurrence map (Figure 3) reveals the structure of the thematic clusters in the compilation. Three interconnected clusters dominate the conceptual landscape. The first cluster, located in the upper right quadrant, represents education and student experiences—the clustering of keywords such as education, students, program, supervision, competency, and faculty indicates a research focus

on pedagogical reform and learning experiences in social work education. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated interest in technology-mediated and experiential learning, as evidenced by the increased co-occurrence of the words digital learning, simulation, and preparation for practice.

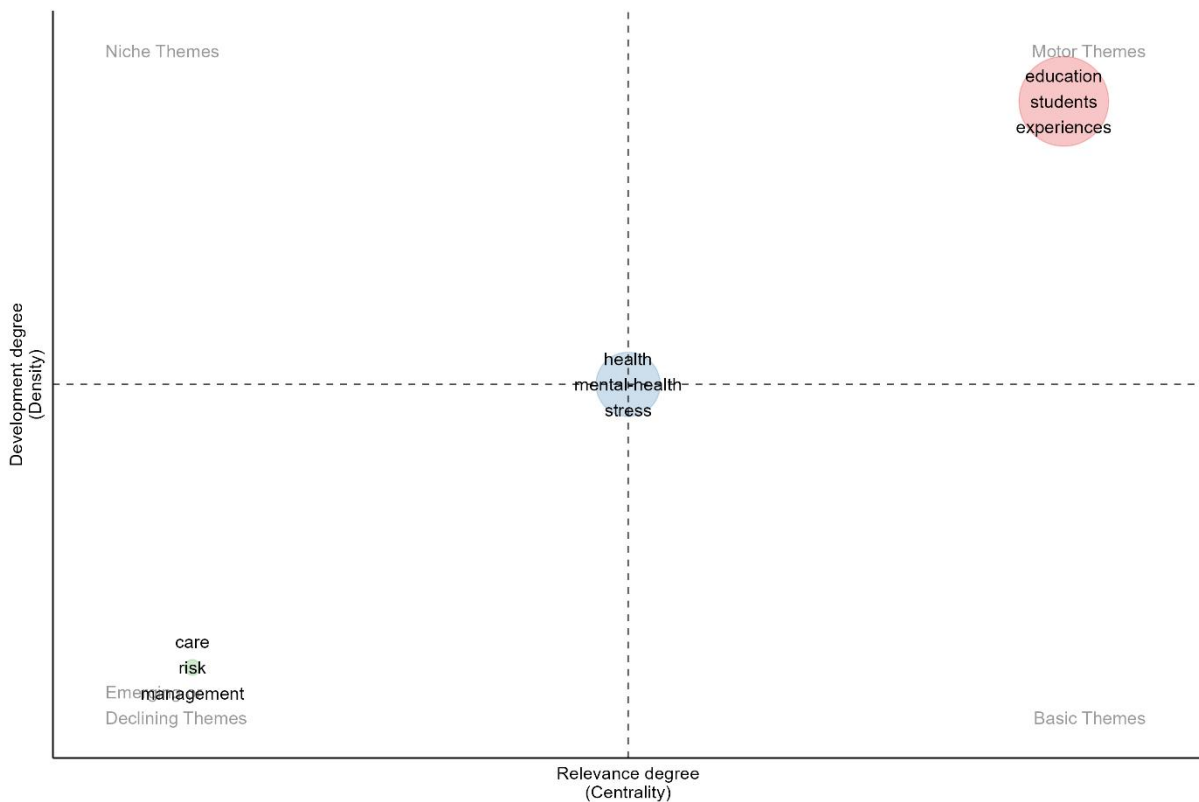


Figure 3. Conceptual Structure Map of Keywords in Social Work Research (2020-2025)

The second cluster is positioned around the center and revolves around mental health, resilience, and practitioner well-being. High-frequency keywords such as mental health, stress, burnout, resilience, and support indicate that the psychosocial dimensions of social work practice remain at the center of the discipline's academic activity. Research during this period has frequently integrated mental health and professional identity frameworks, highlighting the emotional labor and moral distress experienced by social workers in crisis conditions.

The third cluster, scattered across the lower left quadrant, captures themes focused on social justice, policy, and welfare. Terms such as policy, neoliberalism, child welfare, gender, race, and inequality reflect an enduring commitment to structural and rights-based approaches within the profession. While less central than the education cluster, this cluster contributes to the field's critical orientation and theoretical depth, linking practice to macro-level sociopolitical issues.

A trend topic analysis (Figure 4) was conducted to track the temporal dynamics of key research areas. Trend lines show the gradual emergence, consolidation, and transformation of major themes over five years. Early research in 2020-2021 emphasized migration, victimization, climate, and borders, echoing concerns about social displacement, ecological crises, and the ethical limits of professional practice during a period of global instability.

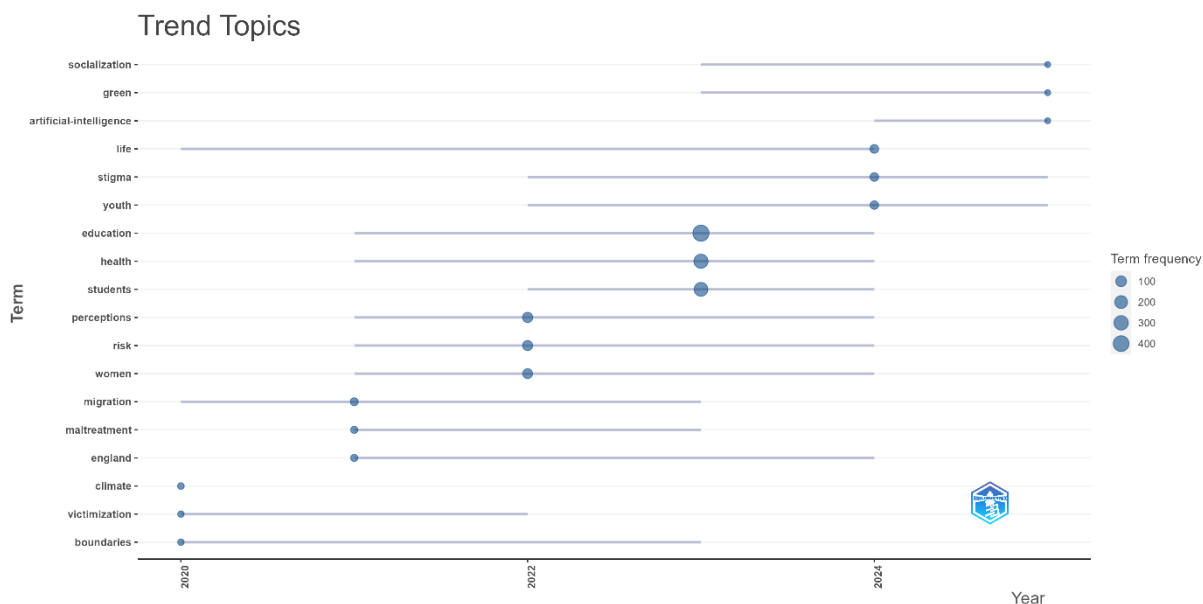


Figure 4. Trending Topics in Social Work Research (2020-2025)

Between 2022-2023, thematic interest shifted to education, students, health, and youth, influenced by the post-pandemic pedagogical adaptation and increased focus on mental health outcomes among practitioners and service users. By 2024-2025, emerging topics included artificial intelligence, green social work, and socialization, signaling the beginning of a new research frontier that points to the integration of digital ethics, sustainability, and socio-technological adaptation into the social work discourse.

The thematic evolution of the 2020-2025 period reveals a discipline undergoing conceptual modernization and diversification. While traditional pillars such as health, welfare, and education remain central, new interdisciplinary orientations have gained importance. The inclusion of artificial intelligence and green social work shows increasing alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the digital transformation of human services. Furthermore, the persistence of mental health, stress, and resilience themes suggests that the social work research community continues to address not only the external needs of service users but also the internal well-being of the profession. Thematic data underscores that contemporary social work is characterized by a dual focus: strengthening professional competence in digital change and maintaining ethical engagement with global justice, inclusivity, and sustainability.

DISCUSSION

The results of this bibliometric mapping confirm that the social work field is undergoing a dynamic restructuring phase between 2020 and 2025. The acceleration in publication volume reflects broader post-pandemic academic trends, while the shift in thematic emphasis highlights evolving professional priorities.

One of the most prominent patterns is the increasing integration of ecological and sustainability concerns. Green social work in emerging clusters aligns with Dominelli and Ku's (Dominelli & Ku, 2017) earlier theoretical calls for embedding environmental justice within social work frameworks and empirical case studies in disaster and climate contexts (Breen et al., 2023). Thematic mapping suggests that ecological issues are no longer merely environmental but have infiltrated the core discourse. This movement is corroborated by recent empirical syntheses of social work responses to climate change (Banks et al., 2024), which call for the discipline to embrace sustainability as a central concern. At the same time, the recovery and mental health field remains central. Bibliometric analyses in related health fields have documented increases in mental health research during COVID-19, particularly around public health, medicine, and psychiatry (Duru, 2025; Yi et al., 2022). In social work practice, this trend is echoed by increased attention to practitioner resilience, client trauma, and adaptive service delivery

models. The persistence of mental health as a "core theme" in our maps reflects its foundational role in the profession's mission.

The digital shift observed in thematic evolution—towards simulation, tele-practice, and digital ethics—mirrors education and public health trends. Social work educators have increasingly incorporated digital simulation methods, consistent with the scope review of simulation in social work education (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). The convergence of digital and ecological themes suggests a new hybrid field where climate-compatible technologies and digital service delivery intersect: eco-digital social work. Regarding collaboration and global inequality, the distribution of authorship and institutional productivity reflects structural hierarchies. The dominance of institutions in North America and Australia is consistent with previous mappings of social work globalization (Urhan & Aslan, 2024). The relatively low rate of international co-authorship observed in your data suggests that research networks, particularly those related to global health or education, remain somewhat insular. This limited cross-border collaboration constrains the dissemination of context-specific knowledge—for example, from the Global South—into the mainstream discourse.

These findings carry important implications for the future of social work research and practice. First, curricula should evolve to teach ecological literacy, climate-regenerative practice, and digital ethics alongside traditional social justice content. Second, funders and publishers should encourage cross-regional collaborations to bridge epistemic divides. Third, practitioners should be supported in adopting sustainable, technology-integrated interventions. Fourth, future bibliometric studies should incorporate alternative metrics, policy impact measures, and qualitative validation to account for non-citation impact. In summary, bibliometric maps describe a field expanding its scope while maintaining its fundamental commitments to well-being and social justice. The emerging orientation toward green-digital resilience points to a promising path for social work to make meaningful contributions to global transformations.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive view of the global evolution of social work research between 2020 and 2025, revealing a discipline undergoing consolidation and transformation. Based on 4,673 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, reviews etc indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection, the study shows that publication activity has accelerated significantly, with an annual growth rate of approximately 7.5%. The results underscore that the social work field is grounded in its enduring commitments to social justice, education, and mental health, but is increasingly defined by its response to global challenges such as the climate crisis, digital transformation, and post-pandemic reconstruction.

Thematic mapping highlights the emergence of green social work (Dominelli & Ku, 2017; Rambaree, 2020) and digital social work (Gao et al., 2025; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020) as central areas of innovation. These developments signal a paradigm shift: social work is moving beyond a reactive model of service delivery toward proactive engagement with sustainability, technology, and systemic resilience. However, the global distribution of the topic remains highly unequal. Despite expanding international collaboration, academic production continues to be concentrated in English-speaking countries, primarily the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, reflecting the structural asymmetries documented in previous analyses (Urhan & Aslan, 2024). While increasing contributions from China, Nigeria, and South Africa signal the beginnings of diversity, a visibility gap persists for non-English and regionally indexed research.

The findings have several implications for research, policy, and education. First, the increasing visibility of green social work requires the systematic integration of ecological literacy into professional education and accreditation standards. As environmental crises exacerbate social inequalities, future practitioners must be equipped to address both the social and ecological dimensions of vulnerability (Breen et al., 2023; Dominelli & Ku, 2017). Universities and accreditation bodies can respond by incorporating sustainability modules into curricula and promoting interdisciplinary research that links social work with environmental sciences and urban policy. Second, the increased emphasis on digital transformation calls for renewed attention to the ethical and practical dimensions of online service delivery. Social work professionals should be trained to navigate issues of digital access, privacy, and

algorithmic bias (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Institutions should expand simulation-based and hybrid learning models to develop digital literacy and reflective practice. Third, policymakers and research funders should address global inequalities in knowledge production by promoting international collaboration and supporting multilingual open-access publishing. Such measures can help bridge epistemic divides and foster inclusive global knowledge networks.

The methodological implications extend beyond the discipline itself. Combining co-word mapping, collaboration analysis, and thematic evolution demonstrates that bibliometric tools—when applied critically—can serve as reliable instruments for strategic research planning. However, integrating bibliometrics into institutional evaluation systems must be done ethically and contextually, in line with the principles outlined in the Leiden Manifesto (Hicks et al., 2015). Despite its comprehensive design, this study is subject to several limitations inherent in bibliometric methodology. Reliance on the Web of Science Core Collection limits its scope primarily to high-impact, English-language journals and underrepresents regional and non-English coverage. While ensuring data standardization, it also introduces linguistic and cultural bias (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Future studies could mitigate this by including data from Scopus, Dimensions, and regional databases to achieve a more inclusive global view. Another limitation concerns keywords and metadata, which depend on the consistency of authors and indexers. Variations in terminology (e.g., "eco-social work" and "green social work") can fragment thematic networks. Even if keyword standardization has been achieved, residual inconsistencies may persist. Future research could address this by combining bibliometric mapping with content analysis or topic modeling using natural language processing techniques to capture latent conceptual relationships.

Finally, while illuminating, the study's focus on quantitative indicators fails to fully capture the qualitative depth and contextual richness of social work research. Bibliometric indicators provide structural overviews but do not assess theoretical innovation, policy impact, or community engagement. Future research may adopt mixed-method designs triangulating bibliometric findings with expert interviews or case studies of high-impact research programs. This study provides a replicable and transparent empirical foundation for understanding contemporary social work. Combining bibliometric mapping with critical commentary charts the field's expansion and underscores the urgent need for equitable, interdisciplinary, and socially responsive knowledge production in the coming years.

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