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The Social Media, Online and Digital Abuse and Harassment of Social Workers, Probation Officers and Social Work Students in Ireland: A National Survey

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Abstract

An estimated five billion people use social media globally. The digital world enables networking and community-building beyond geographical and jurisdictional boundaries, it can facilitate information-sharing and knowledge development, and facilitates speedy access and communications links. On the other hand, digital and social media platforms can also be sources and purveyors of hurt, discrimination, defamation, hatred, abuse, cyberbullying and disinformation. Their increased usage within professional practice has become a nascent area for scholarly debate and research. Our scoping literature search indicated that there are very few studies examining this issue within the profession. This article seeks to address a considerable gap in the research by reporting the findings from an exploratory study in Ireland focusing on social workers, probation officers and social work students. Three hundred seventy-nine participants completed an online survey on their experiences of using social media, with eighty-three (21.9 per cent) participants indicating that they had experienced online

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and digital abuse and harassment. Facebook, Twitter (now X), and email were the top three sources of abuse and harassment by platform.

Keywords: cyberbullying, digital social work, online abuse and harassment, probation, social media, workplace violence

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Introduction

Social media apps and platforms have much to offer in terms of creating and sharing knowledge, fostering communities of interest, expediting communication, as platforms for debate, and as reservoirs of community, political and sporting activities. The most popular social media platforms have been with us for twenty years and have thrived at a considerable distance from the regulation of nation-states, accruing considerable user bases. In 2023, an estimated 4.9 billion people use social media, with Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and WeChat, respectively, being the top social media platforms ranked by active monthly users (Wong and Bottorff, 2023). However, light government regulation and limited accountability have resulted in social media platforms also being sources of hate speech, public shaming, violence, trolling, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, exploitation, defamation, vitriol, misogyny, misinformation, disinformation and doxxing (Polak and Trottier, 2020; Council of Europe, 2023).

Citizens and communities are increasingly questioning the harmful costs of social media platforms structured on advertising-driven business models (Griffin, 2022). A growing body of research highlights the negative impact of social media on users' mental health (see, e.g. Tandoc and Goh, 2023). However, a recent meta-analysis of studies found that its impact depends on how we use social media; it can both enhance or diminish our well-being (Kross et al., 2021). The Pew Research Center (2021, p. 1) found that '41% of Americans have personally experienced some form of online harassment [and] ... there is evidence that online harassment has intensified'. Davidson et al. (2019, p. 34) report that '[s]ocial media platforms are the most common media for online harassment'. Some states and the European Commission have sought to update their laws and policies to respond to such abuse, harassment and cyberbullying. Similarly, employers have an enhanced duty of care as a result of online and digital abuse and harassment of employees, in addition to their existing commitments to staff associated with 'traditional' forms of violence, harassment and abuse.

This article examines social workers', probation officers' and social work students' experiences in Ireland of online and digital abuse and

harassment, especially through social media platforms. This article seeks to address a considerable gap in research on this topic in the profession through an exploratory study. The research questions for this article are: (i) How prevalent is online and digital abuse and harassment amongst social workers, probation officers and social work students in the Republic of Ireland? (ii) How much of this abuse and harassment relates to their work in the profession? (iii) Which sectors of the profession are most affected? (iv) What types of abuse and harassment behaviours do study participants experience online and on social media?

Definitions and the legal framework in Ireland and Europe

Davidson *et al.* (2019, p. 1) state that whilst there ‘are no universally accepted terms for online harassment in the current research literature’, online harassment encompasses ‘various negative experiences online, for example: offensive name-calling, purposeful embarrassment, physical threats, sustained harassment, stalking and sexual harassment’. Much of the literature in this area uses cyberbullying to describe this set of behaviours, but our reading of the literature indicated that this term is definitionally and conceptually problematic. In this article, we use ‘online and digital abuse and harassment’. By using this term we mean a set of behaviours and practices, whether single or multiple events, by individuals or groups using digital technologies and devices, social media platforms, and/or the Internet to send or post direct or implicit messages that are abusive, threatening, or stalking or harassing behaviours of a person. The intention is to cause upset, distress, harm, shame, reputational harm or to exert pressure to get a desired outcome. It is not confined to a physical workplace, it is generally publicly visible, it can impact more than the intended recipient, and posts are sometimes without attribution. Social media also provides a direct way for service users to be critical of service providers and professionals. Social media and online platforms can contribute to democratic participation and accountability for individuals, groups and families, especially when there is a large power differential in the provision of statutory services in contexts like probation, safeguarding and child protection. The complexities associated with defining the line between legitimate criticism and abuse/harassment are the focus of the next qualitative phase of this study and are not reported here.

Nation states and the European Union (EU) are seeking to address this issue through legal remedies. In Ireland, several pieces of legislation address abuse and harassment perpetrated online, including the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act, 1997 (hereinafter, ‘the Act of 1997’). The relevant subsections of section 10 of the Act of 1997,

which was amended by section 10 of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (otherwise known as ‘Coco’s Law’), provide for the offence of harassment which include digital and online communication. The recently enacted Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 widens the definition of harassment and creates a new standalone offence of stalking with a focus on addressing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Section 10 of the Act of 1997 was utilised in the case of *DPP v Doolin* [2020] IECA 231, for example, in circumstances where it was found that there was online harassment, including harassment through social media platforms. Similarly, in the Supreme Court case of *DPP v Doherty* [2020] IESC 45, section 10 of the Act of 1997 was also relied on where there was harassment via email, including indirect harassment communicated about a person to someone else. The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 contains provisions criminalising the sharing of intimate images without consent and threatening to do so, as well as offences regarding distributing, publishing and sending ‘threatening or grossly offensive communication’. Legislative provisions were further enhanced by the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, which places responsibilities on online service providers to address and minimise the availability of ‘harmful on-line content’.

The new Digital Services Act 2022 (DSA) came into effect in October 2022 in Europe, although full implementation won’t will not be completed until late 2024. The new Act will exist alongside the eCommerce Directive which is the legal framework regulating online commerce and cross-border trade in the EU. [Denneny \(2022\)](#) argues that a limitation of the eCommerce Directive is that does not focus on the users of these online services. The DSA addresses this shortcoming by focusing on user rights, the creation of ‘a safer digital space’, and the creation of rules to regulate digital platforms. In particular, organisations that are subject to the DSA are required to have clear procedures for handling takedown requests, and they are required to monitor disinformation and hate speech content. Through the DSA, the EU is seeking to establish a clearer set of standards and protections for citizens.

Who is affected and what are the impacts?

Online and digital abuse and harassment, especially through social media, is an issue of wide interest, and affects academics ([Veletsianos et al., 2018](#); [Oksanen et al., 2022](#)), journalists ([Davis Kempton and Connolly-Ahern, 2022](#)), lawyers ([Santos, 2019](#)), politicians ([Al-Rawi et al., 2021](#); [Phillips et al., 2023](#)), social media influencers ([Adams, 2021](#)), scientists ([Nogrady, 2022](#)), post-primary teachers ([Challenor, 2018](#)), sportspersons

(Kavanagh *et al.*, 2016; Kilvington and Price, 2019; McCarthy, 2022) and female sports commentators (Burch *et al.*, 2023). Of particular note in recent years, physicians and biomedical scientists have been subjected to harassment on social media in relation to the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic (Royan *et al.*, 2023), and climate scientists have experienced death threats, trolling and sexist attacks (Vidal Valero, 2023). There are very few studies with data on prevalence rates in social work or probation. Twelve per cent of members in the Israeli social workers' union had experienced client violence carried out online (Goldman, 2016 cited in Alfandari, 2019, p. 60). Around 5.4 per cent of child welfare workers in a Norwegian study reported at least one incident of 'cyber harassment' in the previous six months (Nielsen *et al.*, 2023). Three per cent of nearly 3,000 social workers who responded to a UNISON (2022) survey of members in the UK reported experiencing 'online abuse' during January and February 2022. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in Ireland has reported that child protection social workers are increasingly being subjected to social media abuse and online harassment, but no published data are available.

Social media and online abuse and harassment can impact stress levels, actual or perceived levels of safety, and cause reputational damage (Pew Research Center, 2017). Research examining the impact of social media abuse and harassment on academics found that they can experience,

various negative emotions, physical signs of stress, sleep problems, difficulty concentrating, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and long-lasting mental health effects such as anxiety and depression ... a loss of productivity and self-confidence, thoughts of quitting one's job, and lowered job satisfaction. (Oksanen *et al.*, 2022, p. 544)

The Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) (2021, p. 9) has documented that 'gender-based violence against women perpetrated in the digital sphere has a serious impact on women's and girls' lives, including psychological and physical health, their livelihoods, their physical safety and their reputation', and that women may 'withdraw from participating online'. Several researchers have argued that abusive and harassing behaviours lead women to adopt preventative strategies in anticipation of these behaviours and that gendered cyberhate limits women's participation online (Jane, 2018; Davis Kempton and Connolly-Ahern, 2022). These points are particularly salient in social work where a high proportion of practitioners are female.

Social media has become an important part of professional life for many, assisting with career development, public engagement and peer support (Boddy and Dominelli, 2017; Veletsianos *et al.*, 2018;

Davis Kempton and Connolly-Ahern, 2022). For social workers, social media can facilitate ‘the opportunity to network, gain access to professional knowledge and to participate in debate and activism’ as well as ‘direct work with clients’ (Stanfield, 2019, p. 36). Whilst it is well documented that engaging with social media platforms for professional purposes can raise ‘complex challenges around ethics, privacy and other professional issues’ (p. 36), less acknowledged is the reality that it can also expose social workers and probation officers to abuse and harassment. To better understand the experiences of social workers, probation officers and social work students, this paper presents data from an Irish exploratory survey and a comprehensive search of the literature.

Social work, social work students and probation research on cyberbullying and social media abuse

A comprehensive search of 432 peer-reviewed research databases through our university library (ExLibris Summons) was undertaken in November 2023. The inclusion criteria were any study design type published in the English language in the last decade exclusively examining the experiences of social workers, social work students, and probation officers, of ‘cyberbullying’, ‘social media abuse’, ‘social media harassment’, ‘online harassment’ and ‘digital abuse’. Studies on these groups’ use of social media as a part of their routine work or studies examining interventions and assessments relating to cyberbullying of service users, service users’ social media usage—for example, in a school social work context, intimate partner violence or foster care youth—were excluded. Literature reviews and commentaries were also excluded. The search results yielded 4,175 entries for examination and all titles were screened; where it was unclear if a paper met the inclusion criteria, the abstract was reviewed. A preliminary sample of six papers was assessed for eligibility in the final review (Kagan *et al.*, 2018; Stang, 2018, 2020; Alfandari, 2019; Nielsen *et al.*, 2023; Parveen *et al.*, 2023). One additional paper for consideration was identified through personal correspondence (Alfandari *et al.*, 2022). It is outside of the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive analysis of these papers.

One study met the inclusion criteria of having a *dedicated* focus on examining this issue (Kagan *et al.*, 2018). This Israeli study examined ‘verbal aggression in cyberbullying’ against social workers (p. 778) using claims-making theory by examining eleven weblogs, five Facebook pages and two YouTube channels. The paper examined verbal aggression in cyberbullying and found that,

Anti-social workers’ cyberbullies construct their discursive identity as popular activists, who join forces in order to reveal and fight a

systematic abuse of power by welfare services in general and social workers in particular. (p. 790)

A related, wide-ranging study by [Stang \(2018\)](#) of Facebook groups that protest against child welfare services in Norway was initially included. However, the wide lens focus of this article on ‘child-centring as the analytical perspective’ (p. 273) meant that while the paper noted evidence of doxxing, severe harassment and death threats against social workers in these Facebook groups, beyond noting this fact, no data were presented.

There were a small number of studies identified that reported data on online abuse or harassment as one smaller component of a study. It is possible that we missed similar papers as it is challenging to identify papers where online and social media abuse and harassment are not the primary focus. Two papers from the ‘Oslo Workplace Aggression Survey’ in Norway are of interest. In a paper on client-perpetrated violence in child welfare, a limitation of the study noted by the researchers was that they did not capture any data relating to workers’ exposure to online harassment ([Parveen et al., 2023](#)). A related paper from this study examined workplace aggression and insomnia in child welfare workers in Norway: no link was found between exposure to cyber harassment and insomnia ([Nielsen et al., 2023](#)). Finally, an Israeli study of health outcomes (posttraumatic stress symptoms and somatic symptoms) for social workers in social service departments examined cyberbullying as one part of their study. The study found that ‘indirect acts such as threats and aggressive behaviour via electronic media had no relationship to outcomes’ ([Alfandari et al., 2022](#), p. 3996). Overall, this is a very small range of studies on this topic and our study seeks to address a significant gap in this literature.

Method

This article reports on phase one of a national study of social media use in social work and probation. The inclusion criteria for the study were that participants had to be a social worker, probation officer or social work student in the Republic of Ireland at the time of completing the survey, and aged eighteen plus years. Probation officers are included in the sample as to become a probation officer in Ireland you must be a CORU-registered social worker (CORU is the state regulator for health and social care professionals in Ireland). A link to an online survey using Microsoft Forms was distributed through large employers, social media, university mailing lists, and the Irish Association of Social Workers from September to December 2022. The data-set has 387 responses, but eight were removed as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. There is no definitive register with population sizes and contact details to cover all

potential participants in Ireland; however, an informed guesstimate of the total population size is 5,600. This would suggest a response rate of approximately 7 per cent for this exploratory study. It is unlikely that all practitioners in Ireland received the invitation to participate due to a lack of a central register. The survey was designed to be comprehensive which is likely to have influenced the response rate. An informed consent form and a comprehensive information sheet were included at the start of the survey. ‘Valid percent’ in the tables below refers to the participants who answered each question and therefore not considering the missing data.

The total sample of eligible participants were asked basic demographic questions and questions about their social media use. The survey was designed to present extra questions to anyone who answered yes ($n=83$) if they had experienced social media/online/digital abuse as part of their work or in their personal life. Data from this sample of $n=83$ are the focus of this article. Around 312 (82.32 per cent) of the full sample of participants ($n=379$) were female, 16.36 per cent were male ($n=62$), with the remaining selecting non-binary ($n=1$, 0.26 per cent) or prefer not to say ($n=4$, 1.05 per cent). The study used the [Central Statistics Office \(2023\)](#) census categories (used with permission) for ethnic group/background, and these data are presented in [Table 1](#).

A breakdown of practice experience by years for both samples is presented in [Table 2](#), with 50 per cent of the full sample having eleven plus years of practice experience:

There was a very good spread of age ranges in the full sample ([Table 3](#)). As expected, the largest number of participants were aged between twenty-five and forty-four years.

[Table 4](#) describes the participation rates by area of practice. Participation rates broadly match the relative size of employment by area. Due to the sensitive nature of many of the survey questions, most questions were set to optional completion. This means that not all data and tables below will have a total response rate of $n=83$.

Table 1. Ethnic group/background.

	Frequency	Valid percent
Asian or Asian Irish—Chinese	1	0.3
Any other Asian background	1	0.3
Black	1	0.3
Black Caribbean	1	0.3
Black or Black Irish—African	6	1.6
Black or Black Irish—Any other Black background	1	0.3
White Irish	343	90.5
White Roma	1	0.3
White traveller	1	0.3
Any other white background	22	5.8
Prefer not to say	1	0.3
Total	379	100.0

Table 2. Practice experience.

Practice experience (years)	Full sample frequency	Valid percent	Social media abuse Sample frequency	Valid percent
Social work student	42	11.3	10	12
0–5	92	24.7	13	15.7
6–10	56	15	15	18.1
11–20	105	28.1	21	25.3
21+	78	21	24	28.9
Missing	6	–	–	–
Total	379	100	83	100

Table 3. Age ranges.

Age ranges (years)	Sample (all)	Valid percent	Social media abuse Sample only	Valid percent
18–24	18	4.7	2	2.4
25–34	102	26.9	20	24.1
35–44	113	29.8	21	25.3
45–54	91	24	26	31.3
55–64	45	11.9	12	14.5
65 and over	10	2.6	2	2.4
Total	379	100	83	100

Table 4. Have you experienced online/social media abuse and harassment?

	Frequency	Frequency	Valid percent
Yes, only related to my work as a social worker/probation officer/student social worker	47		12.4
Yes, in my private life, unrelated to my work	25		6.6
Yes, related to both my work and in my private life	11		2.9
Sub-total = yes		83	
No		276	72.8
Never use social media		20	5.3
Total		379	100

SPSS29 was used to undertake descriptive statistical analysis. Ethical approvals were provided by the researchers' university, the Probation Service, and the Child and Family Agency.

Results

Participants were asked to indicate if they had an experience of online/social media abuse and harassment (see Table 3). Participants in each category are unique; they could only select one of these four options.

Of the eighty-three participants (21.9 per cent) who had an experience of social media, online or digital abuse, 81.9 per cent were female, 16.9 per cent male and 1.2 per cent non-binary. Fifty-eight (15.3 per cent) participants had an experience related to their work. The age ranges of those who had an experience of abuse or harassment (see Table 3) highlight that this can happen to practitioners and students at any stage of their professional careers. Seven of the participants (7/83, 8 per cent) were not users of social media or online platforms, yet they still experienced this abuse or harassment through other peoples' accounts. Nearly all of the participants were 'white Irish', 'white Roma' or 'any other white background' ($n = 81$, 97.6 per cent).

Platforms

The sources for the social media, online or digital abuse and harassment experienced by participants are described in Table 5. Fifty-six participants answered this question and the total number is greater than fifty-six as some participants indicated more than one source: thirty-seven indicated one source, fifteen indicated two sources, three identified three sources, and one person identified four sources.

Email is included in the analyses in Table 5 and Figure 1 as it was identified in the initial literature review as a significant source of online abuse for women (eSafety Commissioner, 2022). A detailed breakdown of the platforms identified as the sources of abuse or harassment by all participants is presented in Figure 1 (the total of $n = 113$ is greater than the fifty-six that answered this question as some participants selected more than one platform):

Table 5. Sources of social media, online or digital abuse and harassment.

	All	Work-based only
My personal social media account(s)	19	15
Work social media account(s)	19	15
Online discussion boards	12	9
Social media account(s) of colleagues	7	4
Email	7	7
Social media account(s) of a service user	4	4
Social media account(s) of family members/friends	3	1
Service user created a fake profile pretending to be the social worker	1	1
WhatsApp	1	0
Other	3	3
Total	76 ^a	59

^aFifty-six participants answered this question; some participants selected more than one option.

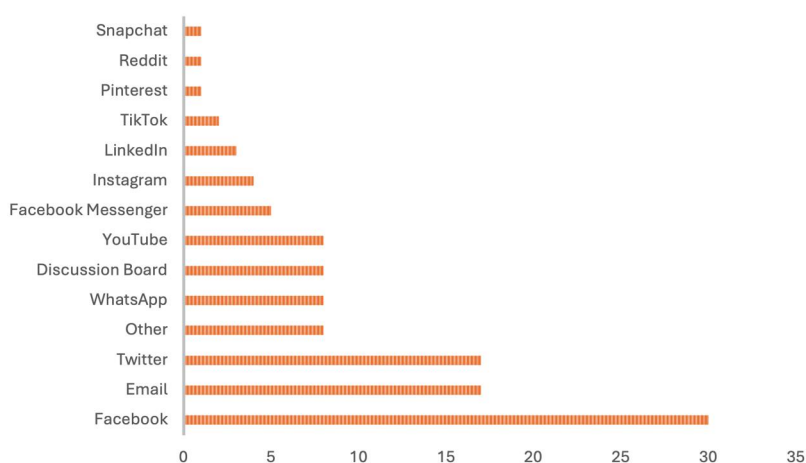


Figure 1. Abuse and harassment by platform.

Of those who experience abuse and harassment related to their work/profession, it was predominately current or former service users, or family members of current or former service users who engaged in these behaviours.

Four-fifths of survey respondents (47/58, 81 per cent) who experienced abuse and harassment did not engage with the instigator. This strategy is consistent with advice not to engage with or answer negative comments (Science Media Centre, 2019), which can help to avoid escalation or damage to one's professional reputation (Table 6).

Types of abuse and harassment

Participants were asked what types of work-related abuse and harassment they experienced and were asked to provide a brief description. These indicative qualitative quotes provide a flavour of some of what participants experienced:

Pictures of work event and targeted abuse about work in general and families. Abuse from a father via email when previously working with children in care, negative comments about work practice, personal insults etc Unsolicited videos while undertaking work which were later posted online. (community-based social worker)

Threats made not using my name but saying the SW [social worker] that took your child into care, know where they live, put a tracker on their car, know when they get up and got to bed etc. (child protection social worker)

Fake profile set up in my name including my photo and phone number describing me as available for a good time or words to that effect along

Table 6. Who instigated the abuse or harassment because of your work/profession?

	Frequency	Valid percent
Adult service user (current or former)	41	48.8
Family member of service user (current or former)	23	27.4
Other	8	9.5
Child/young person service user (current or former)	4	4.8
A staff member from another organisation	4	4.8
Student	2	2.4
Colleague	1	1.2
Manager/supervisor	1	1.2
Total	84 ^a	100

^aFifty-seven participants answered this question; some participants selected more than one option.

with photos of men in underwear. (probation officer, CORU registered social worker)

[A] family whose children had been removed into care, message requested me online making threats, homophobic slurs about me and my husband and general ill wishes about my life and future. (safeguarding social worker)

Fifty-four (54/83, 65 per cent) of the participants who experienced on-line and digital abuse and harassment completed two detailed behavioural inventories with a five-point Likert scale about the exact nature and frequency of the abuse and harassment they experienced. Participants were asked to complete the Likert scale for each entry on the inventory, but not all categories in Table 7 equal $n = 54$ as some participants did not make a selection for all items. The behavioural examples in Table 7 were developed by the researchers based on conversations with front line practitioners and managers, and in consultation with our advisory group. We provided a detailed list of examples as online/social media abuse and harassment can be imprecise terms, and the behavioural categories are a helpful way to prompt participants' memories. We did not set a time limitation (e.g. exposure in the last six months) as we were interested in practitioners' experiences across their working lives. We grouped 'rarely' and 'sometimes' into one category, and 'often' and 'very frequently' into another category. Table 7 is sorted by frequency with the most frequent at the top (all combined):

Whilst it is positive that most participants 'never' had an experience of many of the behaviours in Table 7, there is still much to be concerned about. It is also positive that many of these behaviours are not 'often' or 'very frequently' experienced by practitioners; however, what is an 'acceptable' level? Eighty-seven per cent of the practitioners in this sample ($n = 47/54$) had experienced negative comments on social media or online about their practice. Fifty per cent ($n = 25/50$) had a threat of physical violence made against them on social media or online. The

Table 7. Types of abuse and harassment related to work/profession-related activities.

	Never	Rarely/sometimes	Often/very frequently	Totals
Negative comments about your practice	7	40	7	54
Threats of physical violence towards you	25	23	2	50
Unsolicited friend/follow requests on social media platforms from service users	31	18	4	53
Online/social media messages to pressure you to make a certain decision	33	16	4	53
Threat to breach the privacy of a vulnerable service user by posting information online/social media	32	16	4	52
Posting of photos online/social media of you with negative comments	32	18	2	52
Digital/cyber stalking	34	15	3	52
Threats to post personal information about you online/social media unless you did something that the person wanted or secured them access to a service	33	14	4	51
Negative comments about your appearance	34	13	4	51
Death threats	38	14	1	53
Targeted by an 'anti' or 'hate' group	37	11	3	51
Audio/video of your practice has been posted online/social media without your consent	41	9	3	53
Requests for people to turn up outside of your home to protest	43	7	2	52
Threats of physical violence towards members of your family	38	8	1	47
Sharing of personal/family photos on social media/online without your consent	42	8	1	51
Posting your home address/personal phone number online/social media	46	5	1	52
Sharing of photos of your home on social media/online	45	5	1	51
Threats of sexual violence towards you	45	4	1	50
LGBTQI+ abuse	45	3	2	50
Impersonated/had a fake account set up in your name	49	2	1	52
Threats of sexual violence towards members of your family	45	2	1	48
Racist abuse	49	1	1	51
Abuse related to you living with a disability	49	1	1	51

^aFifty-four participants answered this question; some participants selected more than one option.

prevalence of death threats on social media and online for this sample stands out in the data-set with 28.3 per cent having some frequency of such a threat ($n=15/53$). One in three ($n=18/52$) indicated that they had a digital or cyber-stalking experience. There were forty-one incidents whereby participants had been doxxed, meaning their private,

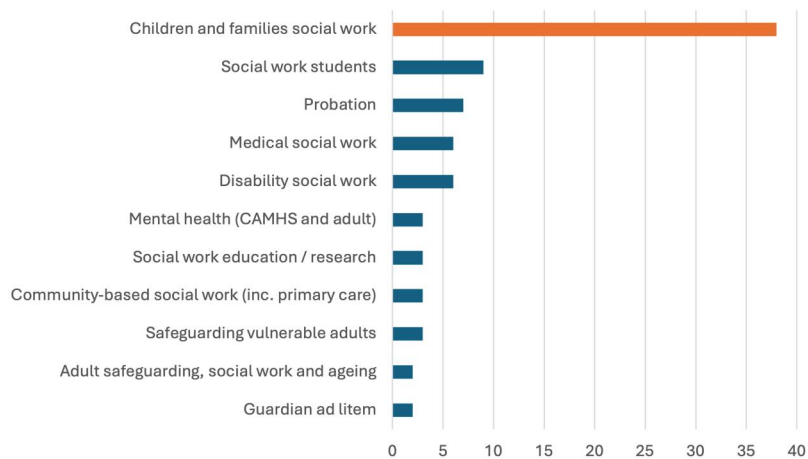


Figure 2. Abuse and harassment all ($n = 83$).

personal information was revealed online or on social media with either their phone number, personal or family photos or home address posted. Furthermore, 35.3 per cent ($n = 18/51$) had been threatened that they would be doxxed as leverage to pressure the practitioner to take some form of action/decision. In addition to the impact of being doxxed on family members, there were also twelve incidents of threats of a physical or sexual nature towards family members. Some of the participants experienced multiple concerning behaviours. It is important not to extrapolate from the data in Table 7 to the wider profession in Ireland as this data-set is not representative.

Abuse and harassment by area

Around 34.3 per cent ($n = 130$) of the participants in the national study worked in children and families social work (mostly, child protection and welfare work). By children and families social work we mean all types of roles in child protection and welfare, adoption, fostering, after-care and related professional activities. Practitioners in this part of the profession had the most experiences of social media, online or digital abuse or harassment ($n = 38$, 45.8 per cent) (see Figure 2) in this sample when all experiences were included (personal unrelated to work, related to work only, or both work and personal).

Around 91.6 per cent ($n = 76$) of those who have had an experience of social media, online or digital abuse continue to use social media, with only seven indicating that do not use social media anymore. Table 8 provides a comprehensive breakdown of who experienced this abuse and

Table 8. Social media, online and digital abuse and harassment by area.

Practice area	Survey participants	Abuse and harassment (all): work only, + work and personal, + private only (% of total practice area)	Related to work only	Both work and personal	Private life only, unrelated to work
Children and families social work	130	38 (29.2%)	24	5	9
Probation	53	7 (13.2%)	5	1	1
Mental health (CAMHS and adult)	41	3 (7.3%)	1	–	2
Social work students	36	9 (25%)	1	1	7
Medical social work	30	6 (20%)	4	1	1
Disability social work	18	6 (33.3%)	3	1	2
Community-based social work (inc. primary care)	14	3 (21.4%)	3	–	–
Adult safeguarding, social work and ageing	13	5 (38.4%)	2	1	2
Social work education/research	8	4 (50%)	3	–	1
Guardian ad litem	7	2 (28.5%)	1	1	–
Other	29	–	–	–	–
Totals	379	83 (21.9%)	47	11	25

harassment by practice area and whether it was related to work, or unrelated to work, or both. As noted above, participants in each column are unique in that they could only select one of the pre-defined categories:

The number of participants in each category is not representative of the profession in Ireland. A further breakdown by gender is not provided due to the small sample size by field of practice (Figure 2).

Discussion

This study was interested in exploring prevalence rates and the experiences of participants drawn from across the social work profession in Ireland. Most of the participants in the study (296, 78.1 per cent) had no experience of social media or online abuse and harassment either in their personal or professional lives. Most of the abuse or harassment was related to work, or both work and personal life. Whilst the largest category of those who experienced abuse or harassment were working in children and families social work, they were also the largest contributors to the survey representing one in three of all participants. Twenty-five per cent of students in this sample had an experience of abuse or harassment, but the majority of these experiences were in their private lives, unrelated to social work education or fieldwork placements. The low level of abuse and harassment towards probation officers was unexpected. Senior managers in the Probation Service postulated that the courts may provide insulation and protection to probation officers who are ‘officers of the court’. If someone is before the courts for a presentence hearing, then it would be unwise to abuse or harass a probation officer who will be presenting a sentencing report with recommendations to the court.

It was surprising that there were so few research studies in the profession on this topic. There were no studies identified in English published in the last decade of a qualitative nature with social workers and probation officers, and no dedicated surveys. Our exploratory results suggest that the profession would benefit from further research.

Employers have a duty of care to workers to identify and assess risks in the workplace. Employers also have a responsibility to prevent and address harassment, and to protect staff from violence and assault in the workplace. Such responsibilities and protections need to be extended to the digital sphere, and employers need to have a social media policy, operational guidelines on the management of incidents, and provide dedicated training for staff and managers to expand traditional face-to-face workplace violence and abuse training. Where digital or cyber-abuse and harassment relate to the work of the employee for an organisation, even if the threats were indirect and not made in the direct ambit of the employers’ physical workplaces, employers have a responsibility to

respond, provide support and facilitate access to relevant protections (e.g. legal support to issue a ‘takedown’ request to a social media company). [Veletsianos et al. \(2018, p. 4702\)](#) in their study of how women scholars cope with online harassment and abuse argue that ‘higher education institutions must ... take steps to prepare scholars to face unsavoury audiences’. This advice is apposite for both employers and providers of social work education.

We need quality data, both from researchers and through workplace reporting of incidents, to better understand these issues and how they impact workers’ physical and mental health, and to prepare effective interventions. Where online abuse and harassment occur, those affected ought to receive an appropriate response from employers and law enforcement personnel alike. The implementation phase of the EU’s Digital Services Act 2022 and new legislation by countries to provide citizens with greater protections, is ongoing. It is hoped that these will provide clearer rights and pathways to remedies and protections. However, it may be a challenging and long-term project to hold social media companies to account for the behaviours of users on their platforms. Furthermore, this should not preclude good faith and genuine criticisms of professional practice and service provision that service users and members of the public legitimately share on social media.

Study limitations

Whilst our study brings important insights regarding social media abuse of social workers, probation officers and social work students in Ireland, there are several limitations that might impact its depth. First, this study does not intend to generalize the results for the entire population of social workers in Ireland; therefore, the results should be limited to our data. However, it is also important to highlight that from an estimated population of 5,600 social workers, probation officers and students in the country, we got a survey response rate of 7 per cent, with our sample mirroring population characteristics (e.g. gender and age rates). Still, 96.9 per cent of survey participants identified as white Irish or any other white background, whereas 87 per cent of people living in Ireland identified with these backgrounds in a recent census ([Central Statistics Office, 2023](#)) and 90 per cent identified as white in an Irish Association of Social Workers (412 responses from 1,300 members) survey of members ([Maguire, 2020](#)). Secondly, while our study is exploratory and provides novel insights into this issue in Ireland, another limitation is the lack of a validated psychosocial questionnaire that could strengthen our findings and allow the performance of inferential statistics. Examples for future studies include using the Cyberbullying Experiences Survey ([Doane et al., 2013](#)) and the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL).

Future studies could, for instance, assess how the multiple cyberbullying facets could end up influencing the professional quality of life of our sample in Ireland. Thirdly, we did not explore the views, experiences and motivations of those engaged in behaviours that practitioners identified as problematic. Finally, it is essential to highlight this survey's lack of control for social desirability, prevalent in studies on sensitive, personal or potentially stigmatising topics. Future studies would benefit from including a validated psychosocial questionnaire to address this bias.

Concluding comments

This is a challenging issue for practitioners to negotiate. They are working in contexts where inequalities are growing for the people they work with, and in some countries, welfare states and service provision are being eroded year-on-year. Social media and online platforms provide a mechanism to criticise and express frustration with growing inequalities, the consequences of such inequalities, and to advocate for political accountability. The survey data suggested that practitioners find these experiences difficult to manage and negotiate. The data suggest that what practitioners in this study experienced is concerning and well beyond the line in terms of acceptability or criticism (see Table 7). Unlike the more 'traditional' face-to-face forms of violence, harassment and abuse, defining what digital abuse and harassment are in day-to-day workplaces can be challenging, both for the practitioner to articulate how the social media/online post impacts their welfare, safety and reputation, and for the employer to respond.

Employers are required to provide a certain standard of working conditions for employees; for example, a workplace free of threats and violence, and employers have a duty of care to their staff. Professionals also have a right to their good name. Social media platforms need to receive a clear message from employers that the abuse and harassment of staff on their platforms is unacceptable. In our view, the benefits of having social workers, students and probation officers, both in their personal and professional capacities, participating, engaging and being members of social media and online platforms, outweigh the potential negatives.

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