

SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Concept, Meaning, Purposes, Scope and Functions

1. Introduction

Social work is a profession that works with people facing serious life challenges — poverty, domestic violence, mental illness, child abuse, disability, unemployment, and social exclusion.

To address these problems scientifically and effectively, social workers cannot rely on guesswork or personal opinion alone.

They need evidence, facts, and tested knowledge. This is where Social Work Research becomes essential.

Social work research applies the tools and methods of scientific investigation to understand, measure, evaluate, and solve the problems that social workers encounter in their day-to-day practice. It is the scientific backbone of the social work profession.

2. Meaning of Research

Before understanding Social Work Research, it is important to understand what 'research' itself means.

Definition of Research - According to Neuman

Research is an organised and systematic way of finding answers to questions. It is a collection of methods and methodologies that researchers apply systematically to produce scientifically based knowledge about the social world.

The four key pillars of all research are:

- **Systematic:** It follows a definite set of procedures and steps — always done in the same order to get accurate results.
- **Organised:** It is a planned, structured procedure — not random or spontaneous. It is focused on a specific scope.
- **Finding Answers:** Research is successful when it finds answers — even if the answer is 'no', it is still an answer.
- **Questions:** Without a question, research has no focus, drive, or purpose. Good research starts with a relevant and important question.

3. Meaning of Social Work Research

In a broad sense, Social Work Research is the application of research methods to solve problems that social workers confront in the practice of social work. Social work research provides information that social workers can use before making decisions that affect their clients, programmes, or agencies — such as choosing between different intervention techniques, changing programme objectives, or modifying services for clients.

Definition

Social work research may be defined - as the study of the relationship of social workers with their clients — individuals, groups, or communities — on various levels of interaction, as well as their relationships and functioning within the organisational structure of social agencies.

Briefly, it is a systematic investigation into the problems in the field of social work.

5. Purposes of Social Work Research

As social work is a practice profession, the major purpose of social work research is to search for answers relating to interventions and practice effectiveness. The central question that social work research seeks to answer is: What interventions or treatments really help — or hinder — the attainment of social work goals?

The purposes of social work research can be explained as follows:

Purpose 1: To Establish, Identify and Measure the Need for Services

Before launching any welfare programme, social workers must first understand what the actual needs of the community are. Research helps identify who needs help, how many people need it, and how urgently.

Example: A social worker in a slum community in Aligarh conducts a needs assessment survey among 500 families. The research reveals that 68% of families lack access to clean drinking water, and 45% of children under 5 are malnourished. This data becomes the evidence base for starting a nutrition programme.

Purpose 2: To Measure the Services Rendered in Relation to Needs

Once services are running, research helps check whether the services being offered actually match the identified needs. Are the right people being reached? Is the service sufficient in scale and quality?

Example: An NGO running a free legal aid centre in rural Uttar Pradesh conducts research to find out: out of 1,000 families who needed legal help, how many actually received it? The research reveals only 210 families were served — pointing to a serious gap that must be addressed.

Purpose 3: To Examine, Measure and Evaluate the Results of Social Work Intervention

This is the most critical purpose. Social workers need to know whether their interventions are actually working. Programme evaluation research compares the situation before and after the intervention.

Example: A de-addiction centre in Delhi uses a validated addiction severity scale to measure clients' dependence levels when they enter the programme and again after 6 months of treatment. If the average score falls from 18/20 to 5/20, it is clear evidence the programme is working.

Purpose 4: To Assess the Efficacy of Specific Techniques of Offering Services

Different social work methods (casework, group work, community organisation) and different techniques (role play, group discussion, individual therapy, group therapy) are used in practice. Research helps determine which technique is most effective for which type of problem.

Example: A researcher at AMU compares two counselling approaches for adolescents with depression: one group receives individual therapy, another receives group therapy. After 3 months, the group therapy group shows greater improvement in social skills while individual therapy shows better improvement in self-esteem. This informs future counselling decisions.

Purpose 5: To Build Theory and Strengthen the Scientific Base of Social Work

Social work as a profession has three types of knowledge: tested knowledge, hypothetical knowledge, and assumptive knowledge. Research transforms hypothetical and assumptive knowledge into tested, validated knowledge — strengthening the scientific foundation of the profession.

Example: The assumption that 'poverty is a major cause of juvenile delinquency' is tested through a research study across 10 cities. If the study confirms a strong statistical relationship

between poverty levels and crime rates among youth, the assumption is upgraded to tested knowledge — and can now inform national policy.

Purpose 6: To Solve Practical Difficulties Faced by Social Work Practitioners

Social workers in the field face many daily challenges — lack of resources, community resistance, ineffective policies, high caseloads. Research identifies these obstacles, analyses their causes, and suggests workable solutions.

Example: A research study on social workers employed by the government finds that they spend **65% of their time on administrative paperwork and only 35% on direct client services**. This evidence is used to advocate for policy reform — reducing paperwork and allowing social workers to spend more time with clients.

6. Scope of Social Work Research

The scope of social work research is extremely wide. It embraces the entire gamut of the social work profession — its concepts, theories, methods, programmes, services, and the practical problems faced by social workers. The scope can be understood at two levels:

1. Individual and Family Problems

Social work research studies personal and family-level issues to understand their root causes and find effective solutions. It looks at how problems like addiction, abuse, or mental illness affect the individual and those around them. This helps social workers design better interventions for families in crisis.

Example: A research study on domestic violence victims in Delhi examining why women do not report abuse — findings help design better support systems and awareness programs.

2. Group Dynamics and Community Life

Research in this area examines how people behave and interact within groups and communities. It studies leadership styles, communication patterns, conflict resolution, and collective decision-making. This directly supports social group work and community organisation practice.

Example: A study on self-help groups (SHGs) in rural Uttar Pradesh to find out which group activities lead to women's empowerment and economic independence.

3. Social Welfare Programs and Services

Research evaluates whether government and NGO welfare programs are actually reaching the right people and producing results. It checks the quality, accessibility, and impact of services being delivered. This ensures accountability and helps improve program design.

Example: Evaluating whether the **PM Awas Yojana** (housing scheme) is benefiting homeless families or whether corruption is blocking its reach.

4. Social Legislation and Policy

Research studies existing laws and policies to check whether they are being properly implemented and whether they are achieving their intended goals. It also identifies gaps in legislation that leave certain groups unprotected. Findings are used to advocate for policy reforms.

Example: Researching whether the **Bonded Labour Abolition Act 1976** is actually being enforced in brick kilns and agricultural fields in Bihar and Rajasthan.

5. Marginalized and Vulnerable Populations

Research focuses specifically on groups that are excluded, discriminated against, or left behind by mainstream society. It studies their unique needs, barriers they face, and the kind of support they require. This ensures social work remains focused on those who need it most.

Example: A study on **transgender individuals** in Lucknow examining their access to healthcare, employment, and legal identity documents.

6. Poverty and Economic Inequality

Research explores the causes, patterns, and effects of poverty at individual, community, and structural levels. It also evaluates anti-poverty programs to see if they are making a real difference. This guides governments and organizations in better resource planning.

Example: Studying why **seasonal migrant laborers** from Odisha repeatedly fall back into poverty even after receiving government financial aid.

7. Health and Mental Health

Research in this area studies how social factors like poverty, caste, gender, and isolation affect a person's physical and mental health. It also evaluates the role of social workers in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and community health programs. This scope is growing rapidly in India due to rising mental health concerns.

Example: A research study on **depression among elderly persons** living alone in urban areas and what social support systems can reduce their isolation.

8. Child Welfare and Development

Research covers all issues related to children — their safety, education, development, and rights. It studies problems like child labor, abuse, neglect, juvenile delinquency, and the effectiveness of child protection systems. Findings help in developing better policies and programs for children.

Example: Studying **child laborers working in carpet factories** in Mirzapur to understand why families send children to work and what interventions can stop it.

9. Social Work Practice and Methods

Research examines whether the methods social workers use — casework, group work, community organisation — are actually effective. It helps in refining these methods and developing new, better approaches based on evidence. This strengthens social work as a professional discipline.

Example: A study comparing outcomes of **individual casework vs group therapy** for recovering drug addicts in a rehabilitation center in Mumbai.

10. Social Problems in Urban and Rural Settings

Research recognizes that problems in cities and villages are very different, so they must be studied separately. Urban research may focus on slums, migration, and overcrowding, while rural research covers caste discrimination, illiteracy, and lack of basic services. Context-specific research leads to more relevant and effective solutions.

Example: Comparing **access to clean drinking water** between urban slums in Moradabad and tribal villages in Jharkhand to plan targeted interventions.

11. Disaster and Crisis Situations

Research studies the social impact of natural disasters, pandemics, and conflicts on affected communities. It evaluates how relief and rehabilitation programs are working and what gaps remain. This helps prepare better disaster response plans for the future.

Example: Studying the **psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on daily wage workers and migrant laborers who lost their jobs and returned to villages.

12. Human Rights and Social Justice

Research in this area documents violations of rights, structural discrimination, and exploitation of powerless groups. It provides evidence that can be used in advocacy, legal battles, and policy reform. This is the most value-driven scope of social work research.

Example: Researching **caste-based discrimination in access to education** in government schools of rural Madhya Pradesh and using findings to push for policy changes.

Conclusion

Each area of scope shows that social work research is deeply connected to real human problems. The examples above reflect how research moves from the field to the classroom to policy — making social work a truly evidence-based and justice-oriented profession.

Exam Tip: In a 10-mark answer, you don't need all 12 points. Pick **8 strong ones**, write 2–3 sentences each, add a short example, and you will score well.

B. Scope by Research Areas

The broad areas covered by social work research include:

Social Problem Areas	Organisational and System Areas
• Community Development	• Management of Social Welfare Departments
• Community Health & Mental Health	• Disaster Management
• Child Welfare	• Industrial Social Work
• Women Welfare	• Advocacy and Networking
• Youth Welfare	• Crime and Correction
• Welfare of Elderly	• Juvenile Delinquency
• Welfare of SC & ST Groups	• Physical and Mental Disabilities
• Poverty Alleviation	• Studies in Social Work Methodology

C. Scope by Level of Research Focus

- **Individual Level:** Research on problems of individual clients — their mental health, addiction, disability, employment.
- **Family Level:** Research on family dysfunction, domestic violence, parenting, elderly care within families.
- **Group Level:** Research on effectiveness of group therapy, self-help groups, youth clubs.
- **Community Level:** Research on community needs, poverty, health, participation in development programmes.
- **Policy/System Level:** Research on the effectiveness of government welfare schemes and social legislation.

7. Functions of Social Work Research

The functions of social work research refer to the specific roles it plays in advancing social work as a profession and improving the lives of people. These functions can be grouped into the following categories:

Function 1: Descriptive Function — Describing Social Reality

Research describes the nature, extent, and characteristics of social problems. It tells us what the problem is and how widespread it is — giving us a clear picture before taking action.

Example: A research study describes the profile of domestic violence victims in rural Uttar Pradesh: 78% are married women aged 18-35, 65% belong to lower-income groups, and 80% have no formal education. This 'picture' helps design a targeted response.

Function 2: Exploratory Function — Discovering New Problems and Areas

Research explores new problems, new populations, and new territories that have not been studied before. It generates new questions and opens up new areas for future investigation.

Example: A social worker in Aligarh notices that many gig economy workers (like Swiggy and Zomato delivery workers) have no social security. Exploratory research documents their working conditions, income insecurity, and mental health problems for the first time — creating a new research area.

Function 3: Explanatory Function — Finding Causes and Relationships

Research identifies why a social problem exists by finding the causes and relationships between variables. It answers not just 'what' but 'why.'

Example: Research finds a strong relationship between school dropout rates and child labour in textile factories near Aligarh. Further analysis reveals the root cause is household debt — families send children to work to repay loans. This causal understanding guides the intervention: address the debt, and school attendance improves.

Function 4: Evaluative Function — Assessing Programme Effectiveness

One of the most important functions of social work research is evaluating whether social programmes and interventions are actually achieving their intended goals.

Example: After 2 years of running a mid-day meal scheme in tribal schools of Jharkhand, research evaluates whether child malnutrition has decreased, school attendance has improved, and learning outcomes have risen. If results are positive, the programme is scaled up. If not, it is redesigned.

Function 5: Theory-Building Function — Developing Social Work Knowledge

Research contributes to building, testing, and refining the theoretical knowledge base of social work. It turns practice wisdom into scientifically tested theory that can be taught, replicated, and improved.

Example: Social work educators at AMU conduct research on the effectiveness of the 'Strengths-Based Approach' in community development. Repeated studies across multiple communities confirm that focusing on community strengths (rather than deficits) leads to better outcomes — elevating this from a practice belief into a validated theory.

Function 6: Policy and Advocacy Function — Influencing Change

Research provides evidence to advocate for policy change at local, state, and national levels. When social workers present data-backed evidence, policymakers are more likely to respond and act.

Example: Research documenting that over 40% of women in certain districts have experienced marital violence — and that only 5% reported it to the police due to fear — becomes the basis for a high court petition demanding more women police stations and legal aid centres in those districts.

Function 7: Educational Function — Training Future Social Workers

Research is also a teaching tool. Social work students learn to think critically, observe systematically, and solve problems scientifically through research training. It develops the next generation of evidence-based practitioners.

Example: MSW students at AMU conduct field research on the problems of construction workers in Aligarh as part of their curriculum. This hands-on research teaches them to conduct interviews, analyse data, and recommend solutions — skills they carry into their professional careers.

8. Major Steps of Social Work Research

Social work research follows a systematic sequence of steps:

#	Step	Brief Meaning
---	------	---------------

1	Formulation of Research Problem	Identifying the exact question or problem to be studied
2	Review of Literature	Reading existing research to understand what is already known
3	Formulation of Hypotheses	Making testable predictions or propositions
4	Working out Research Design	Planning the overall blueprint for the study
5	Defining the Universe of Study	Deciding who or what will be studied (population)
6	Determining Sample Design	Choosing which subset of the population to study
7	Administering Data Collection Tools	Using questionnaires, interviews, observation, scales
8	Analysis of Data	Processing and interpreting the collected information
9	Testing of Hypotheses	Checking whether the data supports or refutes predictions
10	Generalisation and Interpretation	Drawing broader conclusions from the findings
11	Reporting the Research	Presenting findings in a written report or publication

9. Conclusion

Social work research is the scientific foundation on which the entire social work profession rests. It is not merely an academic exercise — it is a practical, purposeful, and powerful tool that helps social workers understand social problems, design effective interventions, evaluate their outcomes, build professional knowledge, and advocate for social justice.

Its scope covers every area of social life — from child welfare to disaster management, from mental health to poverty alleviation. Its functions — descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, evaluative, theory-building, advocacy, and educational — together ensure that social work remains relevant, effective, and accountable to the people it serves.

In a country like India, with its enormous diversity of social challenges, Social Work Research is not just useful — it is absolutely indispensable. Without research, social work would be opinion. With research, social work becomes science — science in the service of humanity.

— End of Answer —