

Integrating Environmental Justice and Sustainability in Social Work Practice: Canadian Research Findings



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Introduction

- According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) latest report (2022), the most vulnerable people and systems are disproportionately affected across sectors and regions.
- The profession of social work is founded on the principles of social justice and equity.
- In 2020, CASW issued a major statement on the role of social work in changing climates and environments (CASW, 2020).
- Despite social work professionals' shared concern about climate change and environmental sustainability, there is a need to understand how different areas of social work can integrate environmental issues, fostering change that prioritizes equity and justice.

Research Goal and Objectives

The **goal of this study** is to understand how environmental justice and sustainability can be incorporated in social work practice in Canada.

The **objectives** are:

- 1) To explore meanings and conceptualizations of environmental justice and sustainability in social work practice
- 2) To identify new opportunities and challenges at the micro, mezzo, and macro level in social work practice
- 3) To document and exchange resources, practices, and strategies that support the integration of environmental justice and sustainability in social work practice

Conceptual Considerations

- This research was informed by interdisciplinary concepts of climate justice and sustainability.
- An eco-social work lens that foregrounds relations between humans and their social, natural, physical (and built) environments (Boetto, 2017).
- This research recognized the importance of all three dimensions - environmental, social, and economic – for social work practice to achieve environmental justice and sustainability.

Methodology

The study utilized a mixed method approach to address the research objectives and questions:

Data Collection:

- **Phase I:** A Canada-wide self-administered online survey using Qualtrics software. Survey was conducted from March-May 2023.
- **Phase II:** A total of 10 focus group discussions were conducted covering the geographic regions of Canada from July-November 2023. Total FGD participants were 31.

Study Participants: Social work practitioners and social work students were recruited to participate in the study.

Data Analysis:

- A three-stage approach was taken clean survey bots (Figure 1). Total valid responses were 962. SPSS software was used to analyze survey data.
- NVivo 12 software was used to code and analyze qualitative data.

Study Findings

Survey Findings

Table 1: Perception of social justice

Environmental justice is an important consideration in social work in Canada				
	Yes	No	Missing	Total
Social Worker	325 (47.3%)	351 (51.1%)	11 (1.6%)	687 (100%)
Student	129 (46.9%)	139 (50.5%)	7 (2.5%)	275 (100%)
Total	454 (47.2%)	490 (50.9%)	18 (1.9%)	962 (100%)

Table 2: Incorporate environmental justice and sustainability in social social work practice

	Yes	No and unsure	Missing	Total
Social Worker	404 (58.8%)	210 (30.6%)	73 (10.6%)	687 (100%)
Student	148 (53.8)	109 (39.6)	18 (6.6%)	275 (100)
Total	552 (57.4%)	319 (33.1%)	91 (9.5)	962 (100%)

- More than a quarter (25.2%) of the respondents expressed unfamiliarity or uncertainty regarding their knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Over 50% of respondents identified SGD 2, 3, and 4 as relevant to social work practice.

Conclusion and Implications

- Findings indicate an urgent need to incorporate environmental justice and sustainability in social work education and practice.
- Inter/transdisciplinary scholarship on environmental justice and sustainability can greatly inform social work education and practice.

Preliminary Key Findings from Focus Group Discussions

Theme 1: The need for education and training

"There are certain tools that you need to have to be able to go out there and do this environmental justice work. And I just feel in the education at the current time, they're not providing that" (FGD 3).

Theme 2: Bringing social workers to the table to address environmental justice and sustainability

"It could be that there are these tables or like policy initiatives that take place and sometimes it's about inviting a social work perspective to a table, to bring in new perspectives and understandings. So, it could be not just social workers working in their own" (FGD 4).

Theme 3: Constraints of time, access, funding, and politics

"Social justice, environmental justice, all these things are a pillar of social work. Unfortunately, many people go out into their professional lives, and they work in agencies and in government positions where they feel their jobs are in jeopardy if they fight for social justice or environmental justice" (FGD 3).

Theme 4: Evolving the profession to meet the current reality of climate change

"While talking about justice and sustainability, social justice is mostly focused on the human services field, but environmental justice is always left behind" (FGD 2).

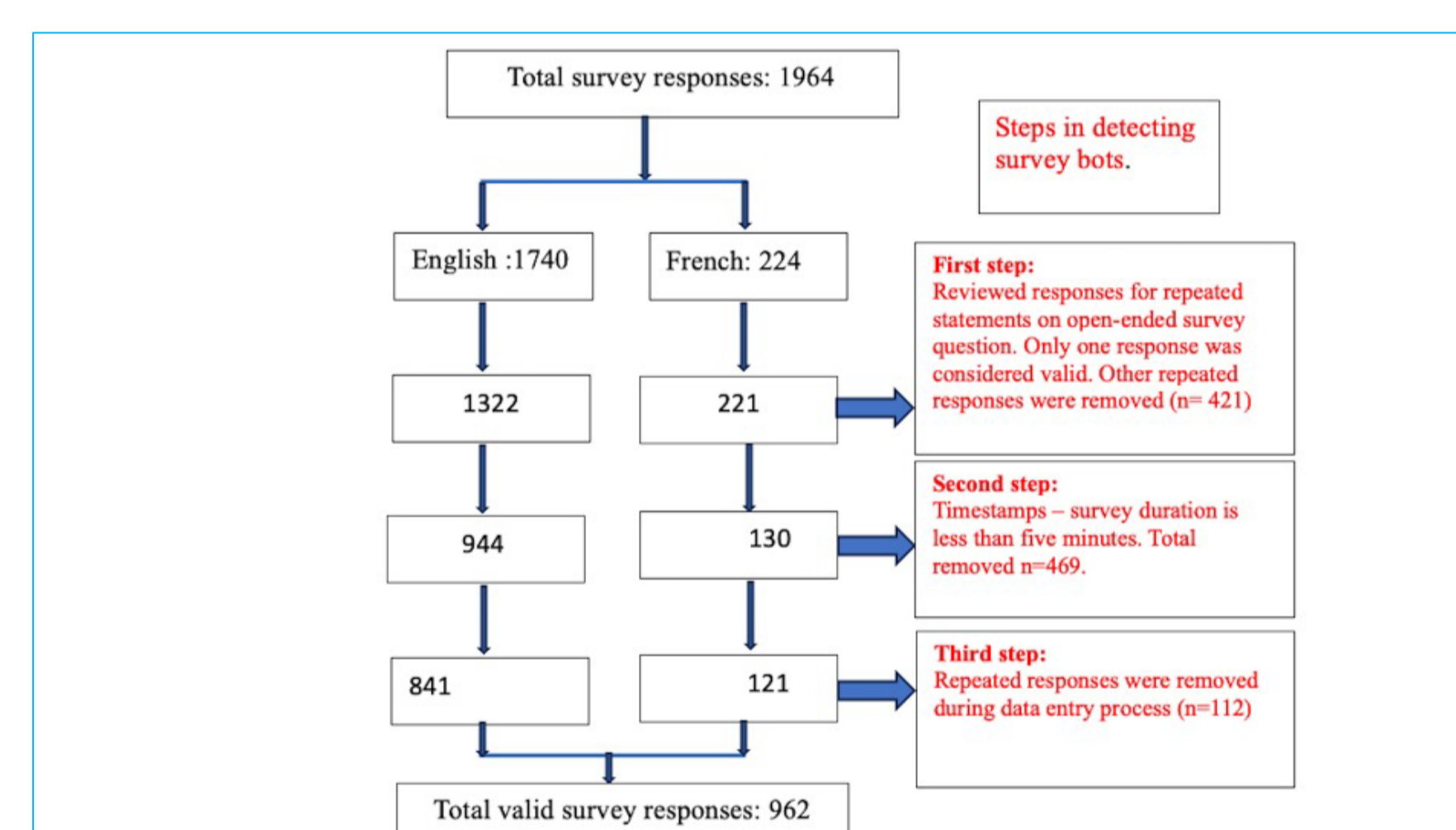


Figure 1: Steps in detecting survey bots

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project is funded in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

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