

Causes and Effects of Child Welfare Workforce Turnover:
Current state of knowledge and future directions

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the current state of knowledge on the causes and effects of workforce turnover in child welfare. The causes of workforce turnover are abundant and have been categorized into three areas cited most often throughout the literature: individual factors, supervisory factors, and organizational factors. On the other hand, the empirical research on the effects of workforce turnover in child welfare is scant. This paper discusses the need for new empirical knowledge on the relationship between turnover and child welfare outcomes. The authors conclude with consideration of the gaps in the research and implications for social work practice and profession.

KEYWORDS: Child welfare; workforce turnover; client outcomes

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Introduction and Problem Description

Child welfare caseworkers promote the well-being of families and oversee the provision of services that aim to ensure safety and achieve permanency for children. Recently, nationwide attention has been drawn to child welfare agencies as they are experiencing a severe workforce crisis involving high staff turnover rates estimated to be between 23% to 60% (Drake & Yadama, 1996). Nationwide, the average length of employment is less than two years (US General Accounting Office, 2003), which has also been suggested as the number of years necessary to develop the skills and knowledge to work independently and effectively in the field of child welfare (Louisiana Job Force Task, 2000).

The job of caseworker is laden with disincentives that may hinder job retention; high stress, little financial reward, lack of support, and rigid regulations are just a few examples (Alwon & Reitz, 2000). Public-sector child welfare agencies must hire and train new workers to take the place of more experienced resignees (Fox, Miller & Barbee, 2003), resulting in both a fiscal cost to the agencies, as well as an emotional cost to the children in care who are in need of a consistent relationship with a caring adult (Cyphers, 2001; Graef & Hill, 2000).

New research advocating for a deeper understanding of issues regarding workforce retention in child welfare is emerging in the field of social work (Briar-Lawson & Zlotnik, 2003). A recent study by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) on child welfare workforce recruitment and retention recommended that the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) financially and technically assist child welfare agencies in addressing their recruitment and retention challenges (US General Accounting Office, 2003). Other studies converged with the

GAO report, resulting in a rise of child welfare workforce issues to the top of the research agenda in states and federal agencies across the nation (Children's Bureau, 2000; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2003).

Workforce retention in child welfare has been a chronic problem for over four decades, as evidenced by a 1960 report from the Children's Bureau calling for the states to address their recruitment and retention challenges. Efforts to respond have included federal funding for professional education in the 60's and again from the 90's to the present; task segmentation resulting in the emergence of paraprofessional roles also called *de-professionalization*; a political emphasis on opportunities for community members to move into para-professional jobs; separation of services within the public sector into those related to financial support and those providing person-related services; an emphasis on contracting services with private or not for profit agencies; conferences, papers and books describing new or re-structured strategies; and collaborations with schools of social work to prepare professional practitioners for public sector practice and to identify effective practice models (Dressel, Waters, Sweat, Clayton, & Chandler-Clayton, 1988; Gibelman, 1983; Zlotnik, 2002; Zlotnik & Cornelius, 2000).

In a study of 43 states, conducted by the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) in 2001, the average preventable turnover rate of CPS workers was 67%. APHSA defined preventable turnover as, "Workers who leave the agency for reasons other than retirement, death, marriage/parenting, returning to school, or spousal job move (p. 4)." Undesirable and desirable turnover should also be considered. Desirable turnover occurs when incompetent workers who provide poor service leave the agency. There may be a healthy level desirable turnover in child welfare agencies. Lawson et al (2005) state that, "retention alone may

not benefit the agency and the people it serves because in some agencies, it appears that the best workers leave while workers ill suited for the job remain (p. 4).”

In some states with above average rates of turnover, caseloads have been reported as high as 100 cases per worker (Cyphers, 2001); significantly higher than the CWLA standards for recommended caseload size. Although this may be an extreme situation, it does not seem unreasonable to question the quality of service delivery in systems where caseloads are high and caseworker turnover is rampant.

In addition to a lack of quality service delivery, child welfare systems are lacking sufficient resources to provide many needed services. Hiring and training costs create fiscal complexities in an already stressed social services budget (Graef & Hill, 2000). With the additional costs associated with turnover, hiring and replacement, one might ask whether or not the funds for direct services to clients are being cut leaving fewer resources for families and children being served by high turnover systems. A parallel inquiry might ask how turnover of the child welfare workforce affects child and family outcomes.

This paper presents an overview of the empirical literature on the causes and effects of child welfare workforce turnover. The causes have been categorized into three areas cited most often throughout the literature: individual factors, supervisory factors, and organizational factors. Individual factors can be defined as causes of turnover that stem from individual worker characteristics such as educational background, professional commitment, and demographics. Supervisory factors are defined as the causes of turnover that stem from insufficient supervisor support and competency. Organizational factors are those causes of turnover that stem from the organization such as caseload size, organizational climate and culture, salary, benefits, promotional opportunities, and administrative burdens. The empirical research on the effects of

workforce turnover is scant, although implied effects are presented in this paper. The authors conclude with consideration of the gaps in the research and implications for social work education and professional practice.

Causes of turnover in human services

Individual factors

Evidence from empirical studies in child welfare and other human services has attributed turnover to individual characteristics such as burnout, commitment, self efficacy, and demographic characteristics (Ellett, 2000; Koeske & Kirk, 1995; Koeske & Koeske, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). This section of the paper will discuss the impacts on workforce turnover and retention in four areas which reflect these individual factors: burnout, individual demographics, occupational commitment, and social work education.

Burnout. Turnover in child welfare and other human services has been attributed to burnout (Martin, 1991; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Burnout is described as, "...a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job and is defined by three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of inefficacy (Maslach, 2003)." There are three aspects measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI): emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Throughout the literature the only aspect of burnout that consistently predicts turnover or intention to leave is emotional exhaustion. For example, Lee & Ashforth (1993) found a strong significant direct effect between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and intention to leave a public welfare managerial position; although personal achievement was not a significant predictor. Drake and Yadama (1996) confirmed the Lee and Ashcroft finding when they found that emotional exhaustion had a direct effect on child welfare worker turnover, although

depersonalization, or an impersonal response toward clients, did not. Further, people who are actually acting out their burnout through depersonalization are not more likely to leave the field than those who are expressing feelings of emotional exhaustion, suggesting possible negative outcomes for children and families. Other studies of human service workers identified similar findings (Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Munn, Barber, & Fritz, 1996; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Demographics. When considering the effects of demographic characteristics such as age, time in the job, gender and ethnicity studies have shown that younger workers consistently present higher levels of emotional exhaustion as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Beck, 1987; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Age was found to be significantly correlated with intention to leave or turnover in some studies of human service workers (Lee & Ashforth, 1993; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Mor Barak et al., 2001), while others were unable to find a significant correlation (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Koeske & Kirk, 1995; Munn et al., 1996). Age and tenure on the job seem to be very highly correlated, suggesting that they may be measuring the same concept. If both variables were entered into an analysis it may result in non significant findings. No studies partialled out the effects of age on turnover as compared to the effect of tenure on turnover.

Only one study was found linking race or ethnicity with turnover. This study found that ethnic minorities had higher levels of retention in nursing than whites (Tai, Bame, & Robinson, 1998). Of the studies that considered demographic variables, only one was completed solely on the child welfare workforce (Jayaratne, Himle, & Chess, 1991). This study did not find a significant relationship between age and intention to leave. Thus, the relationship between demographic variables and turnover in child welfare remains tenuous.

Professional Commitment. Throughout the literature professional commitment seems to be defined as a consistency between the values of the profession and the actual needs and values of the workplace and culture. Professional commitment seems to consistently predict both turnover and intention to leave. Miriam Landsman (2001) found that professional commitment strongly related to intention to stay in the child welfare field. More specifically, commitment was found to be a significant intervening variable in the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to stay. Two other studies found that professional commitment was significantly related to intention to leave but not actual turnover (Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Mor Barak et al., 2001).

Social Work Education. Turnover in child welfare and other human service jobs has been attributed to educational degree. Scannapieco & Connell (2003) suggest that MSW and BSW trained workers are better suited to work in child welfare because the profession's values of social justice and beneficence are parallel with those needed in a child welfare job. The department of health and human services (DHHS) identified the need for a competent workforce in child welfare and as a result permitted the utilization of Title IV-E funds towards tuition stipends and training programs to enhance child welfare practice skills. The assumption behind this funding suggests that social work trained employees will produce better outcomes for families and children within the child welfare system. Further, many employees educated by accredited schools of social work with Title IV-E training programs are specifically trained to address the challenges, risks and family centered practices necessary for achieving positive outcomes for children and families within the system.

Studies on retention rates among child welfare workers whose MSW degrees were subsidized through Title IVE funds have found that between 78% and 93% stay with the agency

until the employment payback period ends, although it is unknown how long they remain after this period is completed or if this rate differs from workers with other educational degrees (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Robin & Hollister, 2002). Other studies found a relationship between being a caseworker with a social work degree and remaining in public child welfare regardless of Title IV-E funding (Russell & Hornby, 1987; Rycraft, 1994; Scannapieco & Connell, 2003).

Samantrai (1992), in a qualitative study of MSW caseworkers who had left their agency, found that the main contributors to their decision to leave were burnout, lack of transfer or promotional opportunities with the agency, and their relationship with an immediate supervisor. This study described MSW workers commitment to changing the system from within to be more responsive to client needs. Among those MSW caseworkers who remained in their jobs, professional commitment to child welfare work, salary and job security were most often cited as reasons why they chose to stay (Samantrai, 1992).

A lack of skilled professionals, defined as professionals with social work degrees, in the child welfare workforce fosters high turnover (Ellett & Ellett, 2004; Pecora, Whittaker, & Maluccio, 2000). For example, the turnover rate in states that require BSW or MSW child welfare caseworkers was found to be 15% versus 23% in state's that allow any bachelor's degree to enter the workforce (Russell & Hornby, 1987). Also, MSW caseworkers cited lack of credentialed supervisors as a reason for leaving their positions (Gansle & Ellett, 2002).

Although the studies stated above found a positive relationship between having a social work degree and employee retention in child welfare, other studies found conflictual results (Perry, 2005; Smith, 2005). Clearly part of this difference is due to the methodological variation. Many of the studies were qualitative studies and thus unable to be generalized to a larger population. By considering only the generalizable studies of the relationship between having a

social work degree and workforce retention/turnover, two found a significant association between social work degree and retention (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Robin & Hollister, 2002) while others found a significant relationship between having a social work degree and actual turnover in high turnover systems (Smith, 2005). Thus, more convincing and generalizable evidence on the influence of social work degree on turnover is necessary prior to asserting the presence of a relationship.

In sum, burnout via emotional exhaustion and professional commitment seem to consistently predict intention to leave. Yet, inconsistencies persist among the influence of age and social work degree on turnover. Some of these inconsistencies may also be attributed to methodological differences such as sampling and design issues. Further research specifically on the child welfare workforce is necessary to tease out the inconsistencies regarding the affect of individual factors on turnover.

Supervisory Factors

The following section discusses supervisory factors that influence retention and turnover. Supervisors are part of the workforce, yet are also connected to the administration; therefore they play an important role in bridging the gap between the individual worker and the organization. Supervisors may be the hub that helps connect these two entities to create better working environments and outcomes for families and children. Supervision is essential to the socialization of new workers, guidance in family centered practice, understanding of regulations and paperwork, and general education about child welfare (Conway, Shaver, Bennett, & Aldrich, 2002).

Supportive supervision. Kadushin (2002) defines a supervisor as supportive when she or he can “allay anxiety, reduce guilt, increase certainty, relieve dissatisfaction, fortify flagging

faith, affirm and reinforce the worker's assets, replenish depleted self esteem, nourish and enhance capacity for adaptation, ...comfort, bolster and refresh (p.229).” Supervisor support and caseworker training have been cited as causes of retention (Child Welfare Training Institute, 1997; Collins, 1994; Conway et al., 2002; Cyphers, 2001; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Fleischer, 1985; Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003; Gansle & Ellett, 2002; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994).

Inadequate and insufficient supervision has been cited as an important factor in a caseworker's decision to leave their child welfare job (Fleischer, 1985; Samantrai, 1992; US General Accounting Office, 2003), while perceptions of supervisory support contributed to a caseworker's decision to stay (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Rycraft, 1994). Rycraft (1994) reported that supportive supervision made the job of child welfare caseworker feasible and tolerable. Finally, the moderating effect of supportive supervision on the relationship between job satisfaction and workload has been consistently shown (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994).

Organizational Factors

Turnover in child welfare and other human services has been attributed to high caseloads (Kraus, Koenig, Levey, & Grundbert, 1999; Pecora et al., 2000), lack of perceived organizational support, low salary, administrative burdens (Eisenberger, Hutchinson, Huntington, & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shore & Shore, 1995) and poor socialization of new child welfare workers into the vacant position (Fox et al., 2003). Other studies found that organizational climate related not only to job satisfaction and intention to leave, but also to quality of services and client outcomes (Bednar, 2003; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Silver, Poulin, & Manning, 1997). This section describes factors within the locus of

control of the agency administration that explain why workers remain in or leave child welfare agencies: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, general organizational practices, caseload size and salary issues.

Job Satisfaction. Job satisfaction can be a result of individual issues such as badness of fit between the individual and the actual job demands, but it can also be related to organizational climate and conditions. There are inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover. Few studies empirically linked job satisfaction with turnover in child welfare. A meta analysis of 155 studies across multiple fields established that job satisfaction uniquely contributes to turnover regardless of individual levels of organizational commitment (Tett & Meyer, 1993). Job satisfaction predicted turnover of social workers (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Seifert & Jayaratne, 1991). Conversely, in other studies job satisfaction was not found to be a significant factor in predicting turnover or intention to leave (Fryer, Miyoshi, & Thomas, 1989; Manlove & Guzell, 1997). None of the studies reviewed considered solely a child welfare workforce.

Organizational commitment. Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) define organizational commitment as:

the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization. Conceptually, it can be characterized by at least three factors: a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization (p. 27).

Commitment to the organization consistently predicts job retention. Manlove & Guzell's study of child care workers (1997) found that organizational commitment had a greater influence on turnover than did job satisfaction. Likewise, a meta analysis of 25 articles found that organizational commitment was significantly related to both intention to leave and actual job turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Landsman (2001) also found that job satisfaction influences organizational commitment which then directly predicts intention to stay in the agency.

General organizational practices. The extent to which an organization provides opportunities consistent with a worker's professional goals, and encourages practices congruent with the agency's mission, is related to its ability to retain workers (Rycraft, 1994). In a sample of over one thousand social workers in the field of gerontology, Poulin (1994) found that organizational factors such as autonomy, influence over decisions affecting the job, flexibility, caseload size, supervision and professional development opportunities influence social workers' job satisfaction over time, although this study did not investigate turnover as a dependent variable. Similarly, a recent study of child welfare caseworkers found that intrinsic value was not associated with actual job retention, although rewards from external sources such as supervisor support or work life fit was significantly related to actual job retention (Smith, 2005). The role of extrinsic rewards is consistent with Arches (1991) statement, implicating the need for organizations to imbed external rewards into their agency functioning and climate.

Caseload and Workload. Caseloads and workloads are two distinct constructs in the literature. Throughout the literature caseload represents the actual number of cases assigned to a caseworker regardless of risk level or difficulty. *High caseload*, is not consistently defined, although most studies use the CWLA caseload standards of 12-15 children to define *average caseload* sizes. Workload takes into account the amount of time it takes to complete all tasks

related to the job functions. These tasks include direct client contact, paperwork, supervision, court, interagency collaboration, etc. The US GAO (2003) reported high caseload size as a factor in workforce turnover. Moreover, high worker turnover dictates frequent case transfers and shuffling of caseload assignments, which in turn, increases caseload size for remaining workers, while also reducing the continuity and quality of service delivery to clients (Poulin, 1994). Smith (2005) found that as caseload increased, so did the odds of actual turnover in child welfare agencies.

Workload size of child welfare workers was found to be smaller than mental health and family service agencies, although the child welfare practitioners still found their workloads to be unmanageable due to the complexities involved in each case (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). This perception led to higher levels of stress on the job and an increase in intention to leave among child welfare workers in comparison with other human service workers. Interestingly, in the same study at time 2, workload was not a significant predictor of actual turnover (Jayaratne et al., 1991). In conclusion, general workload has not been found to be a significant predictor of actual turnover for child welfare workers, although higher caseloads were found to increase the likelihood of job turnover.

Salary and promotional opportunities. The relationship between turnover in human services and salary satisfaction has been well documented. Child welfare workers make significantly lower salaries; about \$9,000 less than employees in analogous fields such as education or probation (US General Accounting Office, 2003). Yet, the demands and risks of the job are inconsistent with the salary disparities. The disparate salary and the status of the clientele may lead to a perception by child welfare workers that the work is not valued by society. Thus

caseworkers who pursue a social work degree may choose a field of practice with more status and greater pay.

Low salaries are not only linked to turnover of child welfare jobs, but also to the agency's ability to attract professionally prepared applicants and to fill the vacancies created by turnover. For example, an MSW looking for a job may be less likely to take a job in child welfare that pays \$9000 less than another job in a similar human services field.

When salary was studied as a predictor of turnover or intention to leave it was found to be significant in many instances (Gleason-Wynn, 1999; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Koeske & Koeske, 2000; Reagh, 1994; Scannapieco & Connell, 2003; Snelders & Lea, 1996; Weiner, 1980). Still some studies did not find a significant relationship between financial rewards and turnover (Jayaratne et al., 1991; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Smith, 2005). A comparison study of MSW child welfare caseworkers who remained in their jobs and those who left found that those who remained had significantly higher salaries than those who left (Dickinson & Perry, 2002). In addition, there is a high demand for master's level social workers. Because of this demand there are many opportunities for unsatisfied workers to find employment elsewhere.

Promotional opportunities can provide an incentive for a caseworker to remain at an agency, despite a low initial salary. Both Jayaratne et al (1991) and Koeske & Kirk (1995) found that promotional opportunity was a primary predictor of actual turnover among child welfare workers. Together, pay and promotion account for a significant proportion of the variance of intention to leave among child care workers (Stremmel, 1991), as well as child welfare workers (Jayaratne et al., 1991).

In summary, the previous section considered the causes of workforce turnover and retention as cited in the literature. Despite inconsistent findings, three themes emerged

indicating the individual, supervisory and organizational factors that appear to facilitate retention. First, the literature suggests that retention is improved in child welfare agencies that recruit professional, more competent, and well trained individuals who are committed to family centered practice. Second, retention is improved when agencies support supervisors in becoming well versed in best child welfare practice techniques that include providing technical and emotional support for front line caseworkers. Finally, the literature suggests that organizations can build a professional climate which values workers financial and professional needs, supports success through manageable caseloads and rewards accomplishments. The following section will consider the effects of workforce turnover.

Effects of Child Welfare Workforce Turnover

Implied effects of turnover

Although the effects of child welfare workforce turnover on services to families and children have not been empirically studied, they have been implied throughout the literature (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Child Welfare League of America, 2001; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; US General Accounting Office, 2003). The effects of workforce turnover present both an economic concern for public child welfare administrations (Graef & Hill, 2000), as well as policy compliance issues related to ASFA safety and permanency regulations. CWLA (2002) opines, “Effectiveness in child welfare comes from increasing staff expertise, building rapport, and establishing stable, trusting relationships with children, families, and communities (p.1)” High turnover rates place strain on social service agency budgets, workers and supervisors, which may lead to inconsistencies in the services provided to families due to increased workload for remaining workers (Winefield & Barlow, 1995).

According to the GAO study (2003), high turnover rates economically burden the agency with training costs and impact caseworkers who remain in the agency. Graef and Hill (2000) conducted an expense analysis of child protective service (CPS) worker turnover. In other words, they studied the cost of losing a CPS worker. Expenses were calculated in the following areas: separation of worker, replacement of the worker and training of the new worker. Both formal and informal training are invested in each new worker that enters the system. Although formal training is often calculated into the costs of rehiring, the time used for informal training is excluded from hiring calculations. A conservative estimate to replace a single CPS caseworker in the agency studied was stated to cost \$10,000 per vacancy. Thus, hiring and training costs create fiscal complexities in an already stressed social services budget. Additionally, the loss of human resources, or capital, in the form of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) further afflicts an overburdened workforce.

While precaution must be taken due to a small sample size, Gansle and Ellet (2002) found that child welfare trained BSW and MSW caseworkers who were educated in IV-E specific social work education programs had better child welfare skills and knowledge than MSW caseworkers who did not receive the specific training IV-E training. Although this was not a measure of actual outcomes, this finding suggests that the presence of MSW and BSW employees will result in more positive outcomes for families and children in the public sector child welfare system. This implication, coupled with the findings that social work trained employees are more likely to remain employed in child welfare jobs than non social workers, suggests a need for research into the moderating effects of social work trained caseworkers on the relationship between turnover and child welfare outcomes.

High turnover rates and the constant influx of new caseworkers into the workforce causes multiple challenges and risks in maintaining the safety of children within the system (US General Accounting Office, 2003). Turnover disrupts the continuity of services and delays the timeliness of investigations and placement decisions, compromising the overall effectiveness of the child welfare system. Although the GAO (2003) did establish a tentative empirical link between child welfare workforce turnover and safety and permanency outcomes, stronger empirical evidence grounded in theory needs to be established.

Discussion

Implications for the Profession

The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (National Association of Social Workers, 1999) states the following:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

Since the majority of clients served by the child welfare system are vulnerable, oppressed or living in poverty, the profession of social work has a particular responsibility to child welfare work. This responsibility has been a priority of the profession of social work since its inception. Agencies like the Charities Aide Association and the settlement house movement, beginning with Hull House, focused on services for children and mothers. The Children's Bureau was created by President Taft in 1912 to investigate and report on infant mortality, birth rates, orphanages, juvenile courts, and other social issues of that time. It was headed by a social worker, Julia Lathrop. "Since the 1935 inception of federally supported child welfare services,

the Children's Bureau encouraged states to use child welfare services funds to provide educational leave for workers to get a social work degree" (Zlotnik, 2002).

Turnover in child welfare agencies may hinder the ability for caseworkers within the agency to help clients meet their basic safety and permanency needs. Many national organizations allied with child welfare have carried out research or highlighted research on workforce turnover including the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Their new research page is designed to disseminate information on cutting edge practice and policy issues related to social work. The site features "a number of studies that identify challenges to recruitment and retention; provides research and resource information that supports the importance of professional education for child welfare practice; highlights issues related to encouraging social workers to choose child welfare as a career path; and identifies outcomes from agency/university partnerships that affect recruitment and retention difficulties" (NASW, 2006). Identifying and addressing the causes and effects of workforce turnover is clearly parallel with the mission of social work.

Social work's priority has always been on practice in the context of the larger eco-system. This focus is critical in workforce research and change efforts, as the organizational and supervisory context influence recruitment, selection, and retention of staff, and the selection and implementation of practice models. If social work is to have a place in the child welfare arena and offer leadership on workplace improvement strategies, attention should be directed at macro and mezzo-system interventions. The ability to work at both an individual and systems level is unique to professional social work. Furthermore, belief in the value of social work was the single most important variable found to contribute to job satisfaction and occupational commitment (Landsman, 2001). Thus, as child welfare agencies are able to recruit and hire professionally

trained social workers, they may be more likely to remain employed in child welfare settings and have the knowledge, skills and ability to develop a climate which attracts professional staff and provides quality services.

Implications for Social Work Education

One of the goals of social work education according to the Council on Social Work Education (2003) is to enable “students to integrate the knowledge, values, and skills of the social work profession for competent practice (p. 6).” The title IV-E training program has aided the accomplishment of this goal in the field of child welfare in many states across the nation by providing funding resources. As social work and child welfare share values about serving vulnerable and oppressed populations, it seems appropriate that university-agency partnerships continue to be supported through Title IV-E funds in order to educate students to enter the field of child welfare. But have these partnerships been successful in attending to the challenge identified by Gibelman (1983) regarding the “incongruence between public agency practice and social work skills and education”?

There is substantial evidence to suggest that many university-child welfare partnerships have developed strategies for preparing students for public agency practice which attend to the practice competencies necessary for this work and these employees are being retained. The benefits of these educational partnerships between public sector child welfare agencies and universities are exemplified in California, where workers who earned master’s degrees in social work scored higher on a test of child welfare knowledge, had a more realistic view of child welfare work and were more likely to remain employed than non-IV-E workers (Jones & Okamura, 2000). In Louisiana workers scored higher on child welfare competency exams than control groups, scored higher on supervisor evaluations, and had higher retention rates (A. J.

Ellett & Gansle, 1998). In Kentucky, workers scored better on the agency's test of core competencies and their supervisors considered them better prepared for their jobs than other new employees, and more than 80 percent remained with state agencies after their initial work obligations (Fox, Miller & Barbee, 2003). In Oklahoma, retention was significantly longer for workers with master's degrees and those who had participated in Title IV-E training (Rosenthal, McDowell, & White, 1998). In Texas, 70 percent were still employed with the agency after their contractual employment obligation expired (Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003). This developing body of evidence should be used to guide programs in other states and the research should be expanded to consider the diversity of practice settings such as rural practice.

Field education is another area for attention. When employees return to school for a social work degree, caseload and workload demands in their jobs require that schools accommodate schedules so that field requirements can be completed without compromising personal health and well being. Some states have made a commitment to paid leave for employees who return to school, but this has not been the case across the country. In rural communities in New York, worker shortages have resulted in a demand for field placement opportunities in the evening or on week ends or in work-study settings which allow the student to remain in the child welfare agency in a different unit. A lack of social work supervisors in many public child welfare settings challenge schools to identify supervisor who are former child welfare employees or have sufficient knowledge of the practice to provide relevant clinical supervision during field placements.

Research on workforce professionalization and stabilization should not be limited to Title IV-E graduates. University-agency partnerships must include research which identifies challenges and solutions for the larger mixed workforce facing ever increasing workload

challenges as staff will likely have a variety of educational backgrounds into the foreseeable future. This is the reality of child welfare practice. The research and evaluation skills of faculty can be important resources for agencies endeavoring to create a professional climate and culture and implement evidence supported and promising practices in the mixed workforce environment.

Finally, it is generally agreed that a formal education in social work is the best preparation for child welfare practice (Leiderman, 1995). Employees with social work degrees handle the complexities of child welfare practice better and provide higher quality services to families and children than those with other degrees (Ellett, 2000; Fox, Burnham, & Barbee, 2000; Hopkins, Mudrick, & Rudolph, 1999; Okamura & Jones, 1998; Olsen & Holmes, 1982). Thus, additional research needs to address how individual, supervisory and organizational variables, including salary and educational status, moderate or mediate the relationship between turnover and client outcomes in child welfare. For instance, agencies with greater *social work capital*, that is specific skills and competencies in working with children and families derived through social work curriculum, may not only have better child welfare outcomes, but also may reduce the presumably negative impact of turnover on child welfare outcomes.

Conclusion

After reviewing the literature on the causes and effects of workforce turnover in child welfare, five areas for future research are highlighted. First, the relationship between turnover and child welfare outcomes has been suggested by many (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Bernotavicz, 2000; Child Welfare League of America, 2001; Ellett & Ellett, 2004) and anecdotally investigated by the GAO (2003), but there has yet to be systematic empirical research assessing the relationship. In other words, researchers in the field of child welfare have not, in an empirical and scientific manner, answered a basic question in the process of this important

research: Does workforce turnover negatively influence safety and permanency outcomes for children? Research must be completed that specifically addresses this question prior to going any further in developing solutions for a turnover crisis that may or may not affect child welfare clients.

If a relationship between agency level turnover and agency level outcomes is empirically uncovered then social work researchers need to continue to develop organizational level interventions to ameliorate turnover. On the other hand, if no significant relationship is found, then resources currently being spent on addressing workforce retention challenges may be better spent in other areas such as direct services for clients.

Second, throughout the literature, few studies employed a theoretical framework in their investigation of the causes of turnover. Future studies may want to use a theory such as Perceived Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) to guide their empirical work. Perceived organizational support theory is based on the tested hypothesis that a worker's perception of how their organization supports them (*perceived organizational support*) is directly related to the following outcomes: organizational commitment, job related affect, job involvement, performance, strains, intention to leave, and withdrawal behavior (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001; Shore & Shore, 1995; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). According to Levinson (1965) POS may differ from actual organizational support. POS is the extent to which an organization rewards work efforts, meets emotional needs of employees, is perceived to be responsive to worker's values and needs (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Multiple studies within the organizational literature have shown the negative correlation with POS and intention to leave a given organization, although few studies have been specifically addressed child welfare agencies. By using an organizing theoretical

framework such as POS to guide future research, it will make it easier to tease out some of the inconsistencies in the findings while also providing a common language for understanding and solving the problem.

Third, this literature is dense with inconsistencies and discrepancies, possibly due to the lack of standardized instruments available for measuring the individual, supervisory and organizational causes of turnover in a consistent manner. Clear, consistent, and validated measures of individual, supervisory and organizational factors that may relate to child welfare workforce turnover could facilitate a clearer and more consistent picture of the causes of turnover, and a more coherent framework upon which organizational interventions can be built. For example measures such as the MBI and Ellett's measure of Human caring should be used instead of makeshift surveys that make it difficult to interpret findings due to the variation in operationalization of constructs.

Fourth, the literature is devoid of any consideration of local demographics (e.g. size, median income, and structure). It is feasible to believe that smaller jurisdictions face different workforce stability challenges than larger metropolitan areas, suggesting different approaches to reducing retention based on macro-level factors. Future research should consider the differences in the causes and effects of turnover between large urban child welfare agencies and small rural agencies.

Finally, the correlation between workforce stability, staff educational degrees, and client outcomes has been suggested by multiple sources (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; Lengyel, Hornung, & Heintz, 2001; Pecora et al., 2000; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; US General Accounting Office, 2003; Zlotnik & Cornelius, 2000), yet little has been done to

further investigate these assumptions in a systematic manner. Future research must address this question in an empirical and generalizable manner.

Further investigation into gaps in the research on turnover in public child welfare is needed. By doing so, the field will ensure that it does not take another forty years to understand whether or not the growing attention to addressing the workforce crisis will make a difference in the lives of families and children, or if our dollars can be better spent elsewhere.

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