



## Retention and job satisfaction of child welfare supervisors



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### ABSTRACT

Supervisors play a vital role in workplace productivity and organizational health, and are at the forefront of improving the capacity of the child welfare workforce. Yet there is limited research about their organizational longevity and satisfaction compared with child welfare caseworkers. This study uses data from 85% of supervisors statewide in a child welfare organization to describe intent to leave, supervision provided and received, and job qualities. Questions are: (1) what are the personal and job qualities of child welfare supervisors? (2) To what extent do supervisors report receiving and providing supervision, and (3) what personal and job qualities predict intent to leave among supervisors? Using bivariate and multivariate analyses, results showed that supervisors who receive more frequent supervision report lower levels of job stress and time pressure and more positive perceptions of organization leadership. These supervisors also reported providing more supervision to caseworkers. Greater time pressure predicted intent to leave among supervisors, indicating that there is an important balance between workload and resources in efforts to maintain quality supervisors.

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### 1. Introduction

Supervisors play a vital role in workplace productivity and organizational health. In child welfare organizations, supervisors manage child welfare workers and serve as intermediaries to upper-level management, such as program administrators and agency directors. Some supervisors carry caseloads, and most provide case-specific consultation to workers regarding services for families and children, risk and safety assessment, and permanency planning. Having highly skilled supervisors is a primary focus of efforts to improve the capacity of the child welfare workforce, and is identified as one of the eight critical components to developing an effective child welfare workforce (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2014).

Yet, less is known about the job qualities and longevity of supervisors in the child welfare workforce compared with child welfare caseworkers. While research has long shown that turnover, job stress, and poor working conditions are concerns of child welfare caseworkers (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005), little parallel research exists for supervisors. Most research on supervisors focuses on styles of supervision (Bogo & McKnight, 2006; Lietz, 2009; Zinn, 2015), and the role that supervisors have in retaining caseworkers, caseworkers' job satisfaction, and addressing secondary traumatic stress among front-line staff (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Salloum, Kondrat, Johnco, & Olson, 2015; Strand & Dore, 2009; Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Angle, 2009). When supervisors are included in studies of retention and job

satisfaction, they are often grouped with caseworkers. This leads to the field having insufficient understanding of the job and personal qualities of supervisors themselves, including factors that influence their retention and stability in the workforce.

#### 1.1. Study aims

This study aims to address these gaps by providing descriptive information about supervisors' job satisfaction, feelings of self-efficacy, stress, intent to leave child welfare, and supervisory experience. Data from 111 supervisors involved in a statewide child welfare organizational change effort are used. The study further tests the relationship between supervisors' demographic characteristics, job qualities, and intent to leave child welfare to address the question of whether stability—measured by “intent to leave”—for this group is similar to stability among caseworkers. Research questions are: (1) what are the personal and job qualities of child welfare supervisors? (2) to what extent do supervisors report receiving and providing supervision, and (3) what personal and job qualities predict intent to leave among supervisors?

#### 1.2. Characteristics of child welfare supervisors and organizational tenure

In the past 10 years, there have been 6 published studies that focus specifically on child welfare supervision. Five of these studies focused on models of supervision such as clinical supervision, critical thinking, and the caseworker–supervisor relationship (Bogo & McKnight, 2006; Claiborne, Auerbach, Zeitlin, & Lawrence, 2015; Dill & Bogo, 2009; Lietz, 2009; Strand & Dore, 2009; Zinn, 2015). Only three of these

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articles focused on retention and job satisfaction (Claiborne et al., 2015; Johnco, Salloum, Olson, & Edwards, 2014; Strand & Dore, 2009). In the sections below, we pull from these studies as well as other studies examining the child welfare workforce more generally.

### 1.2.1. Supervisor characteristics

Many studies examining the child welfare workforce do not separate out supervisors from workers (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010; Scannapieco, Hegar, & Connell-Carrick, 2012). Supervisors have been found to comprise about 15 to 20% of the child welfare workforce (Potter & Brittain, 2009; Strand & Dore, 2009). Studies indicate that supervisor demographic characteristics are reflective of the overall child welfare workforce. The majority of supervisors are women (Claiborne et al., 2015; Dill & Bogo, 2009; Scannapieco, Molidor, & Molidor, 2000; Zinn, 2015). The majority are between the age range of 30 and 50 (Claiborne et al., 2015; Scannapieco et al., 2000; Zinn, 2015). While most supervisors nationally are white, African American and Hispanic supervisors represent 18 to 34% of supervisors in some agencies (Claiborne et al., 2015; Scannapieco et al., 2000; Zinn, 2015). Between 40 and 50% of supervisors have a social work degree, with one-fifth to one-third having a master of social work degree (MSW; Scannapieco et al., 2000; Zinn, 2015).

### 1.2.2. Supervisor retention

Much attention has been directed at the retention issues in the child welfare workforce, yet turnover rates have consistently remained high from 1990 to the present (Madden, Scannapieco, & Painter, 2014; Zlotnik et al., 2005). Reviews of the research on retention and turnover in the child welfare workforce suggest that there are personal and organizational factors influencing decisions to stay or leave the child welfare organization (Smith, 2005; Zlotnik et al., 2005). The most cited personal characteristics associated with turnover include age, education-level, gender, low job satisfaction and lack of prior experience in the field of child welfare. Organizational factors cited by Zlotnik et al. (2005) that influence turnover for workers include lack of supervisor and coworker support, high workloads, dissatisfaction with salary, inadequate training, and preparation for the position.

Conversely, a few characteristics have been found to influence retention among the child welfare workforce as a whole. Personal factors include having an increased sense of professional commitment, commitment to the mission of working with children and families, self-efficacy, having prior experience in child welfare settings, job satisfaction, advancement opportunities, and gender (Smith, 2005; Zlotnik et al., 2005). Organizational factors that have been shown to influence retention include higher salaries for child welfare workers, organizational commitment and valuing of the employee, manageable workloads, support from co-workers and supervisors, and organizational support (Smith, 2005; Zlotnik et al., 2005). However, as noted, studies to date that examine retention and turnover often do not distinguish between supervisors and workers. Three recent articles have differentiated child welfare supervisors from caseworkers related to satisfaction, retention and stress (Claiborne et al., 2015; Johnco et al., 2014; Strand & Dore, 2009), and these are described next.

In all three studies, supervisors aligned with workers on some aspects of job satisfaction and retention, while other factors varied (Claiborne et al., 2015; Johnco et al., 2014; Strand & Dore, 2009). Differences were found between supervisors and workers in the importance of organizational support and job autonomy (Claiborne et al., 2015). Organizational support was operationalized as the organization shows concerns for the well-being of workers and values their opinion (Claiborne et al., 2015). Supervisors were more likely to stay if they had positive organization support and job autonomy. In terms of supervision being an important factor, supervisors did not see receiving specific assistance as a factor related to retention in one study (Johnco et al., 2014), while others (Strand & Dore, 2009) found

that supervisors were more dissatisfied than managers and line-workers with supervisor support, pay and benefits, and opportunities for promotion.

### 1.2.3. Supervisor job stress and job satisfaction

Because supervisors are closely involved with child welfare investigations, placements, and the legal aspects of child welfare work, they likely experience some of the same exposures to stressors and trauma as front line case workers. This may make them vulnerable to high levels of stress, including secondary traumatic stress. In addition, supervisors are balancing administrative requirements and heightened liability concerns with the day to day supervision of front line staff, contributing to role ambiguity and conflict, stress, and job dissatisfaction (Dill & Bogo, 2009; Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howe, 2002; Silver, Poulin, & Manning, 1997). However, similar to retention and turnover, there is limited research that addresses the stress and job satisfaction of child welfare supervisors specifically. This is surprising since there is currently an increased emphasis on the stress and retention of front-line workers, and the role of supervision in the retention of workers (Carpenter, Webb, & Bostock, 2013; Johnco et al., 2014; Travis, Lizano, & Barak, 2015; Zinn, 2015).

A study by Regehr et al. (2002) examined potential stressors on supervisors and managers in response to child welfare reform. They found significant differences between the stress of workers and supervisors/managers relating to child deaths and the resulting investigations. In the qualitative section of this mixed method study, supervisors reported stress resulting from chronic turnover among workers, and the resulting new hires. The increased accountability associated with reforms created stress around reporting accuracy, paperwork, and liability. Other differences were seen in higher levels of stress due to organizational change and the public and media scrutiny of child welfare cases. Supervisors also reported stress related to increased need to hold staff accountable to comply with current reforms.

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) exists for frontline workers (Cieslak et al., 2014; Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011) and one study measured supervisor levels of PTSD symptoms using The Impact of Events Scale, finding that 49% of supervisors fell in the high or severe category of symptom expression (Regehr et al., 2002). In a study by Silver et al. (1997), 49% of child welfare supervisors reported medium to high levels of job satisfaction with just 21% endorsing low levels of job satisfaction. However, in comparison to levels of endorsed job satisfaction of frontline workers from two different studies, supervisors were found to have greater stress and less job satisfaction than frontline workers. (Jayaratne & Chess, 1983; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). This study also found that supervisors who reported high levels of stress and less tenure in their supervisory position reported significantly lower levels of job satisfaction compared with other supervisors. Conversely, supervisors who reported higher levels of collaboration with other professionals and trust in the organization reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction.

In summary, supervisor research in child welfare is limited due to the grouping of supervisors with caseworkers in the majority of studies related to retention, turnover and job satisfaction, with particularly limited information available about how supervisors themselves are supported in their work. With regard to retention, research thus far shows that retention overall in child welfare is predicted by a combination of personal (e.g. self-efficacy) and organizational characteristics (e.g. salary, team support), with some similarities and differences between caseworkers and supervisors. Most of the current research, however, focuses on how supervisors can better support workers, without sufficient attention to their own well-being and supervision. This study aims to help address these gaps by describing the job qualities and personal characteristics of supervisors specifically.

## 1.3. Overview of the initiative

The current study uses data from 85% of supervisors employed in child welfare across one state in the plains region of the U.S. In 2011,

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