



Organizational climate, services, and outcomes in child welfare systems[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines the association of organizational climate, casework services, and youth outcomes in child welfare systems. Building on preliminary findings linking organizational climate to youth outcomes over a 3-year follow-up period, the current study extends the follow-up period to 7 years and tests main, moderating and mediating effects of organizational climate and casework services on outcomes.

Methods: The study applies hierarchical linear models (HLMs) analyses to all 5 waves of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) with a US nation-wide sample of 1,678 maltreated youth aged 4–16 years and 1,696 caseworkers from 88 child welfare systems. Organizational climate is assessed on 2 dimensions, Engagement and Stress, with scales from the well established measure, Organizational Social Context (OSC); youth outcomes are measured as problems in psychosocial functioning with the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL); and casework services are assessed with original scales developed for the study and completed by the maltreated youths' primary caregivers and caseworkers.

Results: Maltreated youth served by child welfare systems with more engaged organizational climates have significantly better outcomes. Moreover, the quantity and quality of casework services neither mediate nor interact with the effects of organizational climate on youth outcomes.

Conclusions: Organizational climate is associated with youth outcomes in child welfare systems, but a better understanding is needed of the mechanisms that link organizational climate to outcomes. In addition, there is a need for evidence-based organizational interventions that can improve the organizational climates and effectiveness of child welfare systems.

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Introduction

Deficiencies in child welfare services have been widely documented and efforts to understand and address these deficiencies have focused on several factors including caseworker education and training, the use of evidence-based practice models, and the way in which services are structured and coordinated with other systems (Burns et al., 2004; Hazen, Hough, Landsverk, & Wood, 2004; Webb, Dowd, Harden, Landsverk & Testa, 2010). Efforts have also focused on understanding the role of organizational social context in the performance of child welfare systems (Glisson, 2010; Glisson & Green, 2006; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). This study provides additional information about one dimension of organizational social context, organizational climate, and its association with child welfare services and out-

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comes. The study relies on the 5 waves of data collected by the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) that includes a probability sample of children served by representative child welfare systems nationwide over a period of 7 years (Burns et al., 2004; NSCAW Research Group, 2002; Webb et al., 2010).

There is evidence that the organizational climates of child welfare systems vary widely and that caseworkers who provide services in the most positive organizational climates have better work attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction and commitment) are less likely to quit their jobs, and are more effective (Glisson, 2010; Glisson, Dukes & Green, 2006; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Glisson & James, 2002). Moreover, a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (2003) identifies poor organizational climate as a major factor in caseworker turnover and the low quality of child welfare services. However, there is limited information about how organizational climate affects child welfare systems and almost no information about the association of organizational climate, child welfare services, and outcomes.

The importance of organizational climate to service delivery

Organizational climate captures qualities of work environments that explain how those environments are experienced by the people who work in them (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Glisson, 2002). Effective child welfare services require caseworkers to be responsive to a variety of legal, emotional, and service delivery problems that arise in serving maltreated youth, while also being attentive to the unique needs of each child, tenacious in navigating the complex bureaucratic maze of state and federal regulations, and adept at winning the trust and confidence of a diverse group of children and families. Caseworkers perform these tasks in highly stressful situations that can involve angry family members, seriously emotionally disturbed children, aggressive attorneys, and demanding judges.

The climate of a child welfare system is defined as the caseworkers' perceptions of the psychological impact of their work environment on their own functioning (Glisson, 2009; Glisson, Landsverk, et al., 2008). Prior studies suggest that the nature of caseworkers' responsibilities, the behavioral and emotional problems experienced by the children and families they serve, and the roles played by judges, attorneys, advocates, and others contribute to the psychological impact of the child welfare work environment (i.e., organizational climate) on caseworkers' attitudes about their jobs, and the quality and outcomes of the services they provide (Glisson, 2010; Glisson & Durick, 1988; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Glisson & James, 2002). Poor organizational climates reduce caseworkers' capacities for helping maltreated children by increasing job related stress, contributing to high caseworker turnover rates, and depersonalizing the relationships they develop with their clients (Cyphers, 2001; Glisson et al., 2006; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). This is supported by two preliminary studies showing that positive organizational climates in child welfare systems are associated with improved child outcomes (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Glisson, 2010). The first study linked the organizational climates of county child welfare offices in 1 state to 1 year outcomes for children, while the second linked organizational climate to 3 year child outcomes in a nationwide sample of child welfare systems.

Estimating the cross-level association of organizational climate with services and outcomes

The current study estimates the cross-level association of *organizational*-level climate with *individual*-level services and outcomes. Relationships between individual-level variables (such as child outcomes) and organizational-level variables (such as climate) require statistical models that can provide estimates of relationships between variables that are measured at different levels (e.g., individual and organization) (Hedeker & Gibbons, 2006; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Rousseau, 1985). Models described in various literatures as mixed effects, random effects, random coefficient, and hierarchical models analyses are appropriate for making cross-level inferences that link the characteristics of individuals to the characteristics of the higher-level collectives (e.g., organizations) in which those individuals are nested.

This study uses random effects models to provide additional information about the cross-level association of child welfare system organizational climate and outcomes. In contrast to our preliminary studies, we examine child outcomes over a longer follow-up period (7 years versus 3 years) and explore the extent to which the quantity and quality of services either mediate or interact with the relationship between organizational climate and child-level outcomes (Glisson, 2010; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Services were assessed from 2 perspectives. First, caseworkers described the services they provided to each of the children and families who participated in the study. Second, the children's primary caregivers described the child welfare services they received.

We assessed the roles played by child welfare services from these two perspectives (caseworker and caregiver) in several steps. First, principal components analyses of services as described by the caseworker and child's primary caregiver, respectively, were conducted and scales constructed from each component. Second, climate was assessed as a moderator of the effects of services on service outcomes. That is, we hypothesized that the positive effects of services would be greater in those child welfare systems characterized by more positive organizational climates. Finally, we assessed services as mediators of the effects of organizational climate on service outcomes. That is, we hypothesized that more positive organizational climates would be associated with improved services which would be associated with better outcomes.

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