



# A meta-analysis of turnover intention predictors among U.S. child welfare workers



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## ABSTRACT

The severity and prevalence of turnover among child welfare workers have resulted in increased attention and research—particularly in the past decade. While the literature, in its current state, has improved our broad knowledge of the phenomenon, our understanding is still based on—and consequently limited by—a dispersed collection of studies varying in terms of methodology and often reflecting inconsistent findings. To address this research gap, we conducted a meta-analysis of the existing literature on the turnover intentions of public child welfare workers in the United States. Turnover intention was measured by various measures of either the intention to leave or the intention to remain employed. Twenty-two studies were included in the final analyses involving the assessment of the effect sizes for thirty-six predictors, broadly classified into demographic, work-related, work environment, and attitudes/perceptions categories. Our findings showed that the attitudes and perceptions of child welfare workers (e.g., organizational commitment and job satisfaction) had the highest influence on their turnover intention. In contrast, demographic predictors (e.g., such as age, race, and gender) showed small or negligible effects on turnover intention. Among work-related predictors, stress and burnout had medium to high influence on turnover intention while worker inclusion and autonomy showed medium effect sizes. Work environment indicators, such as different types of support (e.g., organizational, supervisor, co-worker, and spousal), had varying influence on turnover intention while a worker's perceptions of fairness and policy had relatively high effect sizes. Based on these findings, the research and practice implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

High worker turnover in the child welfare system can have a detrimental impact on the youth who depend on its services. The average annual turnover rate among child welfare workers ranges between 20 and 40%, while estimates have shown turnover rates as high as 90% nationally over a 2-year period (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Drake & Yadama, 1996). In addition, the average vacancy rate for child welfare positions ranges from 7 to 10% while an open job position can take between seven and thirteen weeks to fill (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). In particular, turnover among child welfare workers impedes the necessary development of stable relationships with the child (Nissly, 2004; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005).

A comprehensive search of relevant journals (i.e., *Children and Youth Services Review* (CYSR), *Journal of Child Welfare*, and *Journal of Public Child Welfare*) found few studies prior to 2000 about child welfare workers' turnover and other management issues. In the past decade, the literature reflected an increased attention on child welfare workers'

turnover—which has paralleled a similar increase of awareness at the system and policy levels. Most notably, the Child Welfare Staff Recruitment and Retention Training program funded through Children's Bureau Discretionary Grants has helped to both promote research and researchers who are specialized in the turnover issue.

Previous research has shown that the turnover of child welfare workers is commonly explained by a broad range of antecedents. Among them, job satisfaction is commonly thought to be a key factor in turnover and has been examined in a number of studies (Chenot, 2007; Hom & Griffeth, 1995; Kyonnie, 2007; Lee, Rehner, & Forster, 2010; Levin, 2003; March & Simon, 1958; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Schwartz, 2007). Other variables, such as burnout, stress, organizational culture, organizational climate, and organizational commitment, have also been widely used to better understand and explain turnover among child welfare workers (Boyas, Wind, & Kang, 2012; Chenot, 2007; Ellett, 2000; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Harrison, 1995; Hwang, 2012; Kyonnie, 2007; Lee et al., 2010; Levin, 2003; Maertz, Griffeth, Campbell, & Allen, 2007; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Nissly, 2004; Schwartz, 2007; Shim, 2009; Travis, 2006). Although the contributions of these individual studies are indisputable, much of the existing research has largely relied on methodologies that may have limitations,

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such as small sample sizes, selection biases, error of measurement, and reporting errors. Such limitations are almost inevitable in individual studies, however, the consequences have been inconsistent and oftentimes, contradictory findings. For example, Lee, Forster, and Rehner (2011) found a strong correlation between turnover intention and coworker support ( $r = -.46$ ) while Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, and Withers (2008) found a negligible correlation ( $r = .03$ ).

Meta-analytical techniques offer a viable means to overcome the limitations of individual studies by pooling and quantitatively synthesizing the samples and results across multiple studies (Field & Gillett, 2010; Hunter & Schmidt, 2004). Previous meta-analytical studies have identified broad categories of variables that impact turnover and/or turnover intention—that provided a useful conceptual framework for the current study (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). For example, Mor Barak et al. (2001) examined 25 studies of human service employees in various settings including four studies of child welfare workers and revealed three broad categories of factors that influence turnover: *demographic factors* (personal and work-related), *professional perceptions* (burnout, value conflict, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and professional commitment), and *organizational conditions* (stress, social support, fairness-management practices, and physical comfort). In a meta-analysis of more than seventy-two studies of employees (not exclusively human services or child welfare workers), Griffeth et al. (2000) identified five categories of factors impacting turnover: *demographic predictors* (cognitive ability, education, sex, age, etc.); *job satisfaction, organization factors*, and *work environment factors* (overall job satisfaction, compensation, leadership, co-worker, stress); *job content and external environmental factors* (routinization, alternative job opportunities, etc.); *other behavioral predictors* (lateness, absenteeism, performance); and *cognitions and behaviors about the withdrawal process* (job search, withdrawal cognitions).

To date, Mor Barak et al.'s (2001) study of turnover was the first (and is possibly the only) meta-analysis of turnover among human service workers, which included but was not limited to child welfare workers (Mor Barak et al., 2001).<sup>1</sup> This article has been widely accepted and has been cited more than a hundred times (e.g., Web of Science which includes a Social Sciences Citation Index, conducted on Sept 13, 2014, returned 130 citations; and Google Scholar returned 465 citations). However, among the 25 studies included in the meta-analysis, only four studies specifically included child welfare workers, while the other studies included other or multiple types of human service workers, such as social workers and nurses. As a consequence, this study does not necessarily address the unique working conditions of child welfare workers, e.g., the presence of secondary traumatic stress (STS) caused by client violence against child welfare workers (Middleton, 2011; Song, 2005; Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011).

This study seeks to improve our understanding of turnover among child welfare workers by conducting a meta-analysis of the existing literature. Since studies with actual turnover as an outcome are limited, we instead focused on studies using proxy outcome measures for turnover (e.g., intention to leave). Specifically, the goals of this study were to: 1) comprehensively search, review, and summarize the empirical research results of turnover intention among child welfare workers; and 2) utilize meta-analytical techniques to examine the relationship between turnover intention among child welfare workers and its key predictors. This paper reports the key results and based on these findings, offers recommendations for future research and potential implications for practice.

## 2. Method<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1. Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for this meta-analysis were as follows: 1) a study's primary outcome was turnover intention, either the intention to leave (ITL) or the intention to remain employed (IRE); 2) predictors were antecedents of turnover intention and used in two or more studies; 3) correlation coefficients for the relationship between each predictor and turnover intention were used as effect sizes; 4) study participants were current front-line public child welfare workers; 5) a cross-sectional study design was employed; 6) the study was conducted within US, involved samples of child welfare workers in the US, and were written in English; and 7) the study was a journal article, dissertation, or various types of research reports published between 1990 and 2013.

In cases where there were inadequate information (e.g., sample characteristics), emails were sent to authors for clarification. Several studies included participants, a portion of whom did not fit the criteria for this study (e.g., including samples of both front-line workers and supervisors). In these cases, studies in which the sample was represented by 50% or more current front-line public child welfare workers were included. In cases where studies utilized the same data, the original and/or more comprehensive study was selected over other studies to address any potential violations of the independence assumption of meta-analysis and avoid unintentionally weighing certain studies over other studies (Arthur, Bennett, & Huffcutt, 2001; Hunter & Schmidt, 2004).

### 2.2. Search strategy

This study employed various search strategies to ensure a comprehensive review of the topic. Electronic databases included: EBSCOhost (Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text, Social Sciences Full Text—H.W. Wilson); ProQuest (Dissertations & Theses Full Text); Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index); and the Child Welfare Information Gateway (<http://www.childwelfare.gov>). A preliminary literature review found two sets of keywords, subject terms and topic terms. Subject terms extracted included "child welfare" or child\* or child protect\* or cps\* while topic terms include "turnover" or leave\* or quit\* or retent\* or retain\* or remain\* or stay\*." The field option was limited to "Title", which produced a manageable number of studies and met the purpose of the study. With the Child Welfare Information Gateway, only topic terms were used since this database exclusively includes child welfare research information. In addition, because of their focus, three journals, i.e., Children and Youth Services Review, Journal of Child Welfare, and Journal of Public Child Welfare, were manually searched. The reference lists of any studies found through this process were also thoroughly searched to identify any additional articles. The database search (including three journals) was conducted during the week of February 1–6, 2013.

Two steps of selection process were used to select articles which met the inclusion criteria (Fig. 1). First, the title and abstract of each article were initially reviewed to derive the first set of 144 studies. Of these, one study, which was not recovered with literature search, was identified through email communication with the author (A. Ellett, personal communication, March 6, 2013). Second, a more thorough review of the first set of articles resulted in a second set of thirty-five studies, which met the inclusion criteria. Six additional articles were found from the reference lists of these articles, but none met the inclusion criteria. Among them, only nineteen studies had sufficient information to conduct meta-analysis (i.e., sample size, correlation matrix, and

<sup>1</sup> There are a few systematic reviews of the child welfare workers' turnover. Interested readers may refer to Hwang (2012), DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008), Ellett, Collins-Camargo, and Ellett (2006), and Zlotnik et al. (2005) (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Ellett et al., 2006; Hwang, 2012; Zlotnik et al., 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Detailed description of method section can be found in Kim (2013).

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