



# Child Welfare Workers' Perspectives on Contributing Factors to Retention and Turnover: Recommendations for Improvement



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 4 August 2014

Received in revised form 29 October 2014

Accepted 29 October 2014

Available online 4 November 2014

### Keywords:

Child Welfare

Retention

Turnover

## ABSTRACT

Rates of turnover are high in child welfare settings, impacting the organization, remaining workers and the children and families under their care. A number of demographic, psychological, social and organizational features have been associated with increased staff turnover, although we have limited understanding about how and why these factors are important; differences in influence at varying levels of seniority and career duration; and workers' perspectives on how to address workplace issues. This qualitative study assessed how factors impact employee retention and turnover in focus groups with 25 employees at different stages of employment: resigned case managers, case managers employed for less than one year and more than three years, and supervisors. Results suggested few differences in themes identified by groups. Two broad themes emerged for retention: supportive environment (including themes relating to children/parents, co-workers, and the organization) and opportunities within the agency (including new positions, experience and knowledge and job security). Two broad themes emerged for turnover: organizational issues (including themes about low compensation, challenging work demands, and system issues) and stress. Workers' perspectives and recommendations on how to address workplace problems were reported. Results are consistent with the existing literature, although a number of unique issues were identified, including workers' desire for clear communication flow through hierarchies, increased collaboration, and revisions to the way data is used/integrated. Workers expressed a strong desire to be heard by management, and this study reflects an important effort to provide feedback. These findings are relevant for informing organizational policy in child welfare agencies.

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## 1. Introduction

While the motives inspiring child welfare workers (CWWs) to enter child welfare are often altruistic, the reality of the work is many times more difficult. Staff turnover is high amongst child welfare staff (Fulcher & Smith, 2010; Smith, 2005), and has implications for financial costs to organizations (Graef & Hill, 2000), increased workload burden on remaining employees (Strolin-Goltzman, 2010) and although not directly studied, turnover, which often occurs in unsupportive organizational climates, is likely to impact the quality of services provided to clients (Glisson & Green, 2006). While a number of factors relating to employee turnover (and to a lesser extent retention) have been identified, there remains a gap in our understanding of *how* these factors affect employees, how these perspectives may be similar or different at varied stages of employment, and workers' perspectives on ways to manage workplace issues. Better understanding of the antecedents to staff turnover, and facilitators of staff retention is important to inform organizational change.

### 1.1. Factors relating to staff turnover

Although more recent research tends to suggest that organizational factors are the most important contributor to turnover, a number of personal and organizational factors have also been associated with staff turnover in child welfare agencies and organizations more generally, including demographic features, psychological features, and organizational factors such as job characteristics, policies and procedures. Some studies have suggested an impact of demographic features on turnover, including increased intentions to quit or actual turnover in younger employees (Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001), those with children (Ben-Dror, 1994), as well as amongst those who are more highly educated (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Mor Barak et al., 2001), possibly as a result of increased availability of alternative job options for those with adequate qualifications. Along with age, education and family situation, less experience in child welfare has also been associated with turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Zlotnik et al., 2005). Given that the average duration of employment for child welfare work is less than two years (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003), it would be helpful to understand if there are unique factors influencing turnover in this early stage of employment by examining the similarities and

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differences between early-career staff and those who have maintained employment for longer.

Burnout and job satisfaction are two psychological factors that influence staff turnover. Up to half of child welfare staff report high levels of burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011), which can be defined as a psychological experience of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment following chronic work with suffering populations (Maslach, 1982; Stamm, 2010). A high level of burnout in workers is associated with an increased risk of turnover (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Drake & Yadama, 1996; Mor Barak et al., 2001). Job satisfaction is another important psychological variable; lower levels of job satisfaction are related to poorer employee retention (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; McGowan, Auerbach, Conroy, Augsberger, & Schudrich, 2010; Zeitlin, Augsberger, Auerbach, & McGowan, 2014). It may be that some personal and organizational variables influence turnover indirectly through affecting an employee's level of burnout and job satisfaction.

Job and organizational characteristics are the most important and commonly associated factors with staff turnover in child welfare (Zlotnik et al., 2005). The incongruence between the salary and workload is often considered a drawback of the profession. Child welfare work is an underpaid profession compared with other frontline professionals, and lower salary and/or decreased satisfaction with contingent rewards is related to poorer employee retention in a variety of professions (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; McGowan et al., 2010; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Strand & Dore, 2009; Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011). In addition, CWWs report large caseloads (Mor Barak et al., 2006), and in some organizations, an individual worker may carry up to 100 cases, far exceeding recommendations of 25 by the National Association of Social Workers (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995). This high level of job stress, workload and caseload demands in workers is associated with increased intentions to quit, as well as actual turnover (Ellett et al., 2007; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007; Strand & Dore, 2009; Williams et al., 2011). Additionally, promotion and career development are important factors, and workers who feel restricted or limited in their capacity to use their professional skills, or feel limited in their scope for professional advancement are more likely to quit (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Strand & Dore, 2009; Zlotnik et al., 2005), leaving a shortage of highly trained and committed workers in the workforce.

Along with more specific job factors, organizational policies and procedures can have a significant impact on worker turnover. For example, the level of fairness embedded in organizational policies in terms of selection for promotion and employee compensation is important to workers (Augsberger, Schudrich, McGowan, & Auerbach, 2012; Mor Barak et al., 2001). Similarly, the values of an organization can be important for workers, and workers who experience a conflict between their professional values and organizational values are more likely to quit (Vandenberghe, 1999; Zeitlin et al., 2014). CWWs report finding intrinsic value in the work they do, however they report a strong desire to feel valued and appreciated (Reagh, 1994). Feeling undervalued by their agency and/or unappreciated for their work is associated with increased turnover or intentions to leave (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Ellett et al., 2007; McGowan et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2011), while those workers who feel that they are respected are more likely to stay employed (Augsberger et al., 2012).

### 1.2. Factors influencing staff retention

In comparison to the literature on staff turnover, there is far less attention paid to factors influencing retention. While the absence of, or alternatives to, factors discussed above may influence staff retention, there are other qualitatively different factors that are important for staff intentions to stay (Zeitlin et al., 2014). One of the strong motivations for workers to enter the profession is a belief that their work is meaningful and valuable, and studies have found that commitment to the profession

and to consumers is associated with increased intentions to stay employed (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Mor Barak et al., 2001, 2006; Rycraft, 1994). Organizational supports, including supervisory support, can be both a protective and risk factor when it comes to staff turnover. Lack of supervisory support, including poor availability or quality is generally associated with increased intentions to leave (Augsberger et al., 2012; Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007; Strand & Dore, 2009; Williams et al., 2011), while good supervisory support can increase employee retention by 46% (Smith, 2005). A moderating role has been suggested, where supervisory support may buffer against the negative effects of workload and role conflicts on workers' level of emotional exhaustion (Kickul & Posig, 2001). While supervisory support is often discussed as an important organizational influence, CWWs also highlight the important role of their relationships with co-workers on retention (Zlotnik et al., 2005), and staff morale can be affected when co-workers quit (Mor Barak et al., 2001, 2006). Increasing the understanding of *what* factors may encourage workers to remain in their current position, as well as *how* these factors impact staff is important in allowing organizations to identify and build on these aspects of the workplace.

### 1.3. Study rationale and aims

Although the factors above have been found to impact staff turnover and retention, there is less understanding about whether different factors are more salient at different stages of employment, as well as what workers believe may assist with addressing these problems. Quantitative research provides important insight into the statistical relationship between variables, however the richness of individual perspectives and stories are often lost. Qualitative research can provide more subtle and nuanced understandings of *how* particular issues are perceived or experienced by an individual, rather than just *what* is related. While intentions to stay or leave child welfare positions have been examined in other qualitative studies (Augsberger et al., 2012; Ellett et al., 2007; Zeitlin et al., 2014), and similarities in themes identified by case managers and supervisors were found previously (Ellett et al., 2007), this study extends these findings by explicitly examining similarities and differences in perspectives of employees who have been employed for shorter and longer durations (including those who had resigned), along with understanding workers' perspectives on how problems may be managed or negated.

The purpose of this study was to examine how contributing factors influence 1) workers staying in their job, 2) workers leaving their job, and 3) workers' perspectives on ways to address workplace problems. Given the high rate of staff turnover within the first two years of a CWW's career, case managers in the early stage of their employment (less than (<) 1 year) and later employment (more than (>) 3 years) were compared, as well as assessing the perspectives of supervisors, and staff who had resigned from their position. Within and across analyses by status of employee were explored to highlight the differences and similarities in perceptions of how factors contribute to turnover and retention.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Procedure

This study was approved by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited via distribution of paper and email flyers by six child welfare organizations (that all work under one lead child welfare agency) in a United States county that includes urban, suburban and rural communities. The organizations were private and all provided the same case management functions. Case managers provided direct case management services to children and their families who were involved in the child welfare system including assessment, case planning, coordination with the entities involved (e.g., court system, foster parents, Guardian Ad Litem),

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