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Commitment to child welfare work: What predicts leaving and staying?

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ABSTRACT

This study describes results related to worker turnover from a longitudinal study of public and private agency child welfare workers in one state. Findings from 460 new workers were examined for reasons respondents took their jobs and chose child welfare work, their commitment to their agencies and to child welfare for two and five years, and the relationship of these variables and demographic variables to whether they were still in their positions at follow-up. Among the findings were that public agency workers endorsed significantly higher levels of commitment on three of the four commitment variables and were significantly more likely to have taken their jobs because of good pay, benefits, and advancement opportunities than private agency workers. In contrast, private agency workers endorsed taking the job because it was the only job available and it was a good first job to take at significantly higher rates than public agency workers. Workers of color endorsed lower levels of commitment on three of the four of commitment variables, although race was not a significant predictor of actually having left the job. Variables that predicted staying on the job were having viewed the state's Realistic Job Preview before taking the job, good supervision, and higher job satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Turnover in the child welfare workforce is a problem that has plagued the child welfare field for at least four decades (e.g., Alwon & Reitz, 2001; Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Strolin et al., 2006). Estimates are that approximately a fifth of frontline workers in public child welfare leave per year and in the voluntary sector about twice that rate. In a national study conducted by Alliance for Children and Families, American Public Human Services Association, and Child Welfare League of America of the child welfare workforce, on average 20% of public child welfare workers and 8% of public child welfare agency supervisors turned over annually, and an astounding 40% of workers and 28% of supervisors in the private sector do so (Alliance for Children and Families, American Public Human Services Association, & Child Welfare League of America, May, 2001). Similarly, Alwon and Reitz (2001) report 15% of public agency staff and 27% in the voluntary sector leave every year. Finally, in 42 states participating in a recent study by the American Public Human Services Association (2005), 22% of child protective services workers left per year, compared to 9% of state and local government workers. On average child welfare workers in the United States last two years on the job (NASW, 2003; Strolin et al., 2006).

High turnover in staff has many detrimental consequences for the quality of child welfare work. First, turnover results in frontline workers with minimal experience making life and death decisions about child safety (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; Gonzalez, Faller, Ortega, & Tropman, 2009). Second, high turnover negatively impacts child well-being and permanency (Child Welfare League of America, 2001, 2002, 2009; Flower et al., 2005; GAO, 2004). Third, high rates of turnover mean that there are uncovered caseloads, thereby increasing the burden on the remaining workers (Alwon & Reitz, 2001). Fourth, work overload results in lower quality of service (Child Welfare league of America;GAO, 2003). Finally, both the loss of colleagues and the increased workload burden have a negative impact on worker morale (Alwon & Reitz, 2001; Graef & Potter, 2002).

Child welfare worker turnover is also costly. Training a new worker costs on average one-third to one-half of a worker's annual salary (Ellett, Ellett, & Lerner, 2008; Graef & Hill, 2000; Graef & Potter, 2002; Landsman, 2008). Child welfare agencies never have sufficient funds to provide the needed services. Preventing unnecessary turnover could have positive impacts on child welfare budgets, as well as on child welfare worker morale and quality of child welfare service delivery, thereby improving outcomes for children in the child welfare system and their families (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski; GAO, 2003).

The U.S. General Accounting Office published two recent reports (GAO, 2003, 2006) highlighting the serious workforce problems in child welfare. The GAO called upon the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to take a leadership role in addressing the child welfare workforce crisis (GAO, 2003). One response by the Children's Bureau within DHHS to this crisis was to make five year grants to eight schools of social work, who partnered with state child welfare agencies to address recruitment and retention of child welfare

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workers (Child Welfare Staff Recruitment and Retention Training Discretionary Grant Cluster, 2003–2008). Focused on training child welfare supervisors in recruitment and retention strategies, most of these programs have also engaged in additional important endeavors related to the child welfare workforce.

One such endeavor was developing Realistic Job Previews (RJPs) (Faller et al., 2009). Indeed, RJPs were one of the innovations recommended by the GAO (2003). Derived from the business field and the military (Wanous, 1998, 1992), Realistic Job Previews aim to provide the job applicant with an accurate, but balanced picture of the position he/she is seeking, to improve prospective employee decision-making about whether or not to take a job, to reduce turnover that is caused by a failure to understand the job — especially the difficult aspects, and to improve job satisfaction because the job-seeker is not unpleasantly surprised by components of the job (CPS Human Resources, Champnoise, & Masternak, 2004; Graef, 2005). Using Recruitment and Retention Grant funding, four of the eight social work school grantees facilitated the development of RJPs, and one school gathered data to evaluate its state's already developed RJP (Faller et al., 2009).

Another key factor that affects child welfare turnover is commitment, both to the field of child welfare and to the organization. The organizational literature on commitment to work is relevant to current efforts to understand workforce turnover in child welfare. A reduction in commitment to the organization is seen as resulting in loss of worker productivity, especially if workers are driven by a perception of unfair practices or problematic organizational behaviors, but lack of commitment also results in increased absenteeism and turnover (Knudson, Johnson, Roman & Martin 2003; Lambert, Pasukpuleti, Cluse-Tolar, Jennings, & Baker, 2006; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Akdogan & Cingoz 2009).

Commitment specifically in child welfare has also been examined (e.g., Landsman, 2001; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). In a study of public child welfare workers in Missouri, Landsman (2001) differentiated two types of commitment, commitment to the organization and to the occupation. Landsman's model demonstrates the relationship of different but overlapping factors to these two dependent variables. The distinction between organizational and occupational commitment is useful because there are a variety of child welfare jobs, with differing responsibilities and stresses (e.g., protective services, foster care, and adoption).

This distinction is also useful, however, because there are agency problems, not directly related to child welfare work that can determine whether workers are committed and intend to leave or stay. Agency-specific problems include poor supervision (e.g. GAO, 2003; Landsman, 2007), high caseloads, high workloads (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; Landsman, 2001), bureaucratic and punitive agency practices (Gonzalez et. al., 2009), and lack of resources to do the job. These work conditions, which may induce turnover, are different from those which are endemic to child welfare work (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2009). Child welfare-specific problems include constantly encountering child maltreatment and occasionally encountering child death, experiencing potential physical dangers from irate parents or the environments clients live in (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; GAO, 2003, 2006), having to make potential life and death decisions about children, and being overwhelmed by the complex mix of family difficulties (e.g., GAO, 2003, 2006; NASW, 2003).

In this article, we describe findings from a Longitudinal Study of the Child Welfare workforce in one state. We build upon the work of Landsman (2001) and Ellett and colleagues (e.g., Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003) and explore new worker commitment to the professional field of child welfare as well as commitment to a specific agency. We ask workers to indicate feasible timeframes for staying on the job, rather than life commitment (e.g., Landsman, 2001, 2007, 2008). In addition, unlike most studies of turnover, we examine whether workers actually left, rather than intent to leave (e.g., Ellett, Ellett & Rugutt, 2003; Landsman, 2001, 2007, 2008; Strolin et al., 2006).We identify a range of factors that affect whether child welfare workers leave or stay. These factors include reasons for taking the job in the first place, demographic characteristics, exposure to a Realistic Job Preview before being interviewed for the job (CPS Human Resources, Champnoise, & Masternak, 2004; Graef, 2005; CPS Human Resources & Champnoise, 2007; Faller et al., 2009),[1] quality of supervision (e.g., Collins-Camargo. & Kelly, 2007; Mor-Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Lietz, 2008; Landsman, 2007), and job satisfaction (e.g., Child Welfare League of America, 2002; Ellett et al., 2003, 2008; Landsman, 2001).

2. Study methods

The Longitudinal Study of Child Welfare employees was conducted in one mid-western state. The study questionnaire was designed to gather data from respondents at four points in time — baseline, 6-months, 12-months and 18-months. Specific topics covered in the questionnaire varied with data collection point. Respondents completed baseline questionnaires at the end of their eight week new worker training[2]. At the point of initial data collection (baseline), written consent was obtained from study participants to contact them again in order to collect the follow-up data. The study was approved by the relevant University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

The questionnaire content was designed to explore in depth an array of personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors which have been identified in the literature as being important predictors of job satisfaction and retention both in child welfare and the human services generally. We further refined the domains of inquiry using information gathered from 13 focus groups conducted with child welfare workers, supervisors, and administrators in the state. Most of the scales and items used in this study have been employed in prior research by numerous investigators.

2.1. Participants

Minimum requirements for child welfare workers are that they hold a bachelor's degree in a human service related field. There is a multi-stage, central hiring process for public child welfare workers. Private agency workers are recruited by the individual agencies, often through announcements posted on a private agency federation website. The screening and selection process for private agencies varied by agency. All workers, both public and private, are required to attend new worker training sponsored by the public child welfare agency. Between November 2004 and April 2007, 651 child welfare workers in the state completed baseline questionnaires. For this article, only workers who were new to their child welfare agencies ($N = 460$) were included, 327 public agency workers, and 134 private agency workers. The private agencies were under contract to the public child welfare agency[3]. Demographic characteristics of the participants are found in Table 1.

As Table 1 indicates, like most child welfare workforce samples (CWLA, 2009), participants in this study are overwhelmingly female, and about 70% have only a bachelor's level education. However the proportion of participants who are workers of color is higher than typically found in the child welfare workforce (35.4%) (NASW, 2003). Workers were about evenly split between child protection work and foster care work[4].

[1] Only public child welfare applicants saw the Realistic Job Preview. Public child welfare workers hired after July, 2005, were sent a DVD of the Realistic Job Preview after they had made written application for a position. They were required to review and return the DVD, indicating their continuing desire for the position, before they received a behaviorally based interview. Private agency applicants did not review the RJP.

[2] The response rate was 95.05%.

[3] We excluded workers who were "lateral transfers," that is, workers who were transferring between positions in their agency (e.g., from protective services to foster care).

[4] Although types of job (Protective Services or Foster Care) were entered into the regressions, it did not predict any differences on dependent variables.