A changing child welfare workforce: What worker characteristics are valued in child welfare?

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ABSTRACT

A child welfare system is responsible for making difficult decisions. Child welfare workers are charged with assessing and determining when a child is in need of protection, including when it is necessary to intervene on behalf of children when their caregivers' abilities and/or situation is deemed to put them at risk of abuse or neglect. Although the child welfare workforce in Ontario attended to an estimated 125,281 child maltreatment investigations in 2013, little is known about the skills, education, and experiences of these investigating workers. Notwithstanding assumptions about the qualifications and characteristics necessary for effective child welfare practice, few studies explicitly link the specific characteristics of workers to children, youth, and families achieving positive case outcomes. These assumptions have been shaped by a multitude of factors including knowledge of human resources, professional standards, and educational requiements. This study examined data from five cycles over twenty years of Ontario Incidence Studies (-1993, -1998, -2003, -2008, -2013) to provide a profile of child welfare workers. This is the first study to examine the changing profile of child welfare workers in any province in Canada and provides a foundation for developing effective recruitment and professional development strategies, and promoting a positive work environment. Policy and practice implications for the changing needs of these families are discussed.

1. Introduction

A child welfare system is responsible for making difficult decisions, including determinations of abuse or neglect, or intervening on behalf of children when their caregivers' ability and/or situation are deemed to put them at risk for abuse or neglect. Child welfare workers are mandated to conduct assessments and provide services for children considered in need of protection and are central in the functioning of child welfare services. Workers are, therefore, considered to be integral to achieving good outcomes for children and their families (National Association of Social Workers, 2013). Although this workforce attended to an estimated 125,281 child maltreatment investigations in Ontario in 2013 (Fallon et al., 2015), little is known about their skills, education, training, qualities, and work environment.

Child welfare systems identify what are assumed to be the qualifications and characteristics of an effective worker. Worker qualifications and characteristics are then used in recruitment and capacity building strategies (National Association of Social Workers, 2013; National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015; Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2018). These assumptions have been shaped by a multitude of factors, including human resources (Graef & Hill, 2000), professional standards

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(National Association of Social Workers, 2013), educational requirements (Jones & Okamura, 2000), and public perception of child welfare work as well as in response to the tragic deaths of children involved with the child welfare system (Office of the Chief Coroner, 2014). Although the child welfare workforce has been subject to the increased standardization and professionalization of the work and training (Parada, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007), there are few studies that explicitly link worker qualifications or characteristics to good case outcomes.

Upon hire, individuals responsible for investigating maltreatment allegations are expected to have several qualifications including a minimum educational degree (Folaron & Hostetter, 2006) and ideally some prior work experience or a demonstrated aptitude or knowledge of the job (Munro, 2011). Further, in order to conduct their job effectively, child welfare systems aim to provide training about how to do the job (National Association of Social Workers, 2013) and a caseload that allows for effective performance of their duties (Bowling, Alarcon, Bragg, & Hartman, 2015). Using data from the Ontario child welfare sector between 1993 and 2013, this study will examine the changing profile of the child welfare workforce and how it corresponds with system changes and family needs. This is the first Canadian study to examine a provincial child welfare workforce over time, and aims to provide a foundation for future research.

This study will address the following research questions: 1) Do the pre- and in-service qualifications of workers reflect the assumptions of a qualified child welfare workforce (i.e., social work degree, experience, trained)?; 2) How have worker qualifications and characteristics changed over time?; and 3) Do child welfare worker training and caseload size trends correspond with system changes?

1.1. The Ontario child welfare system

Child welfare organizations in Canada are provincially or territorially mandated to provide child welfare services. In most provinces, child welfare services are centralized and the government is directly responsible for the delivery of services. The Ontario child welfare system is unique among Canadian provinces and territories. Currently in Ontario, 47 Children's Aid Societies (CASs) are legislated to provide child welfare services. Although CASs are required to meet provincial standards, follow provincial legislation, and are funded by Ontario's Ministry of Children and Youth Services, each CAS is governed and operated by an independent Board of Directors and is its own legal entity (Wegner-Lohin, Kyte, & Trocmé, 2014). While CASs in Ontario are independently operated, promoting child safety, well-being, and permanency are the primary goals for the entire province.

Provincial legislation introduced in 1984 balances child safety and the best interests of the child, while considering the least intrusive course of action (Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, & Copp, 2002). In 1998, a new funding formula based on volume of services was introduced (Trocmé et al., 2002), and standardized decision-making tools were implemented. An influx of funding to child welfare organizations occurred in the early 2000s (Trocmé et al., 2002) with the intention of hiring additional staff to address the dramatic surge in the number of maltreatment investigations (Trocmé et al., 2002).

In the late 2000s in Ontario, the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda was introduced to protect children at risk of maltreatment and improve their quality of life through Differential Response, a focus on permanency planning, and promoting efficiency in legal processes (Ministry of Children & Youth Services, 2016). Customized investigations for non-severe maltreatment allegations were intended to strengthen assessments and decision-making through family-centred team decision making, clinical focus and tools, engaging families, and offering a wider range of supports (Ministry of Children & Youth Services, 2016). In 2009, the Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare was established with a three-year mandate to evaluate how to maximize positive outcomes for children and youth involved with the child welfare system in Ontario.

1.2. Child maltreatment investigations in Ontario

There have been significant changes to the number of child maltreatment investigations, types of investigated maltreatment allegations, case dispositions, and ages of children investigated over the past 20 years (Fallon et al., 2010, 2005, 2015; Trocmé et al., 2002). Between 1998 and 2003, the rate of investigation and transfer to ongoing services doubled, while the placement rate increase was less drastic than changes in the other dispositions (Fallon et al., 2005). During this time there were significant increases in allegations and investigations of emotional maltreatment and exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV; Fallon et al., 2005). In 1993, IPV was not identified as a reason for investigation; but by 2013 IPV was the most investigated and substantiated type of maltreatment in Ontario (Fallon et al., 2005). In 2013, 41% of investigated children had at least one child functioning concern (e.g., aggression, attachment issues), and 76% of caregivers had at least one risk factor (e.g., alcohol abuse, few social supports; Fallon et al., 2015). The complex clinical needs of children and families identified to the child welfare system provide some understanding of the demands placed on child welfare workers and the skills and knowledge required to meet these demands. Changes to the system and families served by the child welfare system require parallel changes to the workforce.

2. Theoretical framework

To achieve the goals of the child welfare system, organizations must build an effective workforce by recruiting individuals with the qualifications and characteristics required for providing effective services, build the capacity of child welfare workers, and offer an organizational environment that promotes effective practice with children and families (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015). The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (2015) has developed a framework that identifies key processes required for building an effective child welfare workforce. This framework suggests that a job analysis and position requirements, and