

IASWR Research Brief 1

Child Welfare Workforce Series



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This brief is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Human Services Workforce Initiative, Grant #203.1301.

For the full report *Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research* visit www.iaswresearch.org

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RETAINING COMPETENT CHILD WELFARE WORKERS: LESSONS FROM RESEARCH

The well-being of children served by the child welfare system are put at risk by the difficulties child welfare agencies experience in recruiting and retaining competent staff as turnover results in staff shortages and high caseloads that impair workers' abilities to perform critical case management functions (GAO, 2003). Child welfare agencies need to identify and implement effective strategies to recruit and retain well-qualified staff that have the knowledge, skills and commitment to provide services to our nation's most vulnerable children and families.

To determine effective retention strategies that child welfare agencies can implement, the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) in collaboration with the University of Maryland School of Social Work's Center for Families and Institute for Human Services Policy, and with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Human Services Workforce Initiative, undertook a systematic review of research and outcome studies to answer the question: *What conditions and strategies influence the retention of staff in public child welfare?* Conditions include both personal and organizational factors, and strategies are actions taken by some entity that are targeted to retain staff. A synthesis of results across studies can provide lessons learned that can be used by practitioners, researchers, educators, policy makers, and administrators to take steps to increase the retention of a competent child welfare workforce.

Review Process

Through extensive literature searches and outreach to the academic and child welfare communities, 154 documents were located, dating from 1974 through May 2004, including journal articles, unpublished manuscripts, dissertations, in-press articles, agency reports, conference proceedings, newsletters and books. After thorough screening, 25 research studies (52% unpublished) were selected that met the criteria of a child welfare focus, and retention/turnover as the dependent variable. See Chart 1 for the authors and titles of the 25 studies.

Studying Retention and Turnover

According to these studies, retention/turnover were examined through:

- Follow-up interviews with workers who had actually left the agency (Bernatovicz, 1997; CWLA, 1990; Harris et al. 2000; Samantrai, 1992);
- Record reviews, comparing characteristics of those who stayed with those who left (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Rosenthal et al., 1998; Rosenthal & Waters, 2004);
- Workers own perceptions of their "intent to leave" or "intent to remain" employed in a public child welfare agency rather than actual turnover (Ellett, 2000; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Garrison, 2000; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Kleinpeter, Pasztor & Telles-Rogers, 2003; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992);
- Administrators' perceptions of causes of turnover and prevention strategies that were or could be implemented (Cyphers, 2001).

Seven studies specifically examined retention of child welfare workers through implementation of a specific strategy, *Title IV-E Education for Child Welfare Practice* partnership programs (Cahalane & Sites, 2004; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Jones, 2002; Lewandowski, 1998; Olson & Sutton, 2003; Rosenthal & Waters, 2004; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003), however each used differing methodologies and definitions, and there were also diversity in the educational levels and experiences of the samples.

Three studies were national in scope (Cyphers, 2001; GAO, 2003; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). One study included child welfare staff in two states (Ellett, 2000) and two studies compared direct service workers and supervisors perceptions in high turnover counties to respondents in low turnover counties (UALR, 2002a; 2002b).

Some studies included all levels of child welfare staff (administrators, managers, supervisors and direct service staff) and other studies sampled only one level of the child welfare workforce (e.g. child protective service workers) or only a particular jurisdiction (e.g. a large urban area).

There were also variations in the educational levels and backgrounds of the workers studied. This was due to both variations in study design as well as the diversity of minimum qualifications required for child welfare staff across the country. For example, California has a significant numbers of workers with master's degree (Jones, 2002, Nissly, et al., 2005) while in Georgia only about 15% of all levels of child welfare staff have a master's degree (Ellett, et al., 2003). Several studies only included participants with an MSW degree (Cahalane & Sites, 2004; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Olson & Sutton, 2003; Samantrai, 1992) or with MSW or BSW degrees (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Lewandowski, 1998; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003), and a few studies specifically focused on workers with a certain length of tenure (Reagh, 1994, Rycraft, 1994, Samantrai, 1992). The turnover studies of broad cohorts of workers, not with specific degrees or IV-E education, do indicate that *turnover is quickest for those without the professional commitment and/or at least a minimum level of education to perform job tasks.*

The differences in samples made it difficult to make a definitive recommendation about minimum staffing

requirements and to more fully understand what would be a reasonable time period to expect workers to remain in one job. Comparisons across studies were also difficult because of inconsistent definitions of turnover, e.g., combining anticipated turnover (through promotions or moves) with preventable turnover (due to dissatisfaction, work mismatch and burnout). There was also a dearth of standardized measures used. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was the most frequently used standardized and validated measure, and it was only fully used in three studies (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Drake & Yadama, 1996; Reagh, 1994). Nine studies used all or some qualitative methods, 19 of the quantitative studies were cross-sectional, three were retrospective, one was longitudinal, and six studies used comparison groups.

Conclusions

A synthesis of the qualitative findings and a careful review and comparison of the inferences that can be drawn from the bivariate and multivariate analysis reinforced the complexity of addressing retention in child welfare agencies. Figure 1 depicts these factors that influence retention. We can infer that there are ranges of personal and organizational factors that can positively influence retention of staff. Positive personal factors include:

- Professional commitment to children and families
- Previous work experience
- Education
- Job satisfaction
- Efficacy
- Personal characteristics (age, bilingual)

Organizational factors that can impact retention/turnover include:

- Better salary
- Supervisory support
- Reasonable workload
- Coworker support
- Opportunities for advancement
- Organizational commitment and valuing employees.

Professional commitment and level of education are the most consistent personal characteristics and supervisory support and workload/caseload are the most consistent organizational factors identified in the research. The attributes of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion, and role overload/conflict and stress all are negative factors that lessen retention and increase the likelihood of turnover. While emotional exhaustion, stress and overload may be characteristics

of the worker, those attributes often occur due to the work environment.

Title IV-E preparation serves as a “value-added” for retention strategies since IV-E initiatives reinforce the personal factors that support retention by recruiting participants who are committed to the profession and to serving children and families. The Title IV-E participants in the studies in this review often already had tenure (experience) in the agency, had prerequisite education (through acquisition of a BSW or MSW degree) and demonstrated efficacy. In addition, by offering this educational enhancement opportunity, the agency may be demonstrating that it supports and values its employees by providing the incentive to obtain an advanced degree, which may also open up new opportunities for promotion and increased salary.

In comparing Title IV-E graduates who stay with those who leave or intend to leave, organizational factors, especially supervision, distinguish between those who stay and those who leave. While intent to leave is considered to be a proxy for those who actually leave, a greater number of child welfare workers are likely to express intent to leave than the numbers who do in fact leave.

This review highlights the limited number of studies that actually evaluate a recruitment or retention intervention. Most of the studies were efforts to document the problems and to ascertain what organizational and personal factors and/or strategies could impact the turnover rate. While the literature suggests that agencies implement a range of recruitment and retention strategies (e.g., increased/improved orientation, enhanced supervisory skills, improved professional culture, educational opportunities, enhanced technology support), we did not find research and evaluation studies that examined the effectiveness and outcomes of those diverse strategies. Title IV-E Education for Child Welfare Practice programs were the only actual retention intervention strategy that we found studied. In the recent APHSA (2005) survey of state child welfare agencies, 94% of the states reported that they had increased/improved in-service training to enhance retention, with 37% of those states reporting it is highly effective and 63% reporting it is somewhat effective. However, we did not identify one study that tested the effectiveness of enhanced in-service training on retention.

To improve retention outcomes, a diverse set of stakeholders should consider the following questions:

- People seeking child welfare employment should ask - *Is it what I really want to do?*
- Staff selecting applicants for child welfare positions should ask – *Does the candidate have the professional commitment and experience to take on this job and deal with the related stress?*
- Child welfare supervisors should ask – *Do I have the knowledge and skills to provide support and case-focused supervision to my staff and do I have support from my superiors?*
- Agency administrators should ask – *Does the agency provide the necessary supports—supervisory, career ladder, working environment – that will attract workers and keep them at the agency?*
- Universities, especially social work education programs, should ask – *Can we strengthen our partnership with state and local child welfare agencies to provide education and training to current and prospective staff and to develop and implement research and program evaluation efforts that can help to guide agency practices?*
- Researchers and evaluators should ask – *Are we developing a study design that clearly identifies the sample, defines the variables, and uses standardized measures that will result in a high-quality study that can add to our understanding of staffing and workforce issues in child welfare?*

To address recruitment and retention problems there is no one answer. An agency that implements just one strategy (e.g., reducing direct service worker caseload but not improving supervision and agency supports or not hiring the staff who have professional commitment to the job) will probably not be very successful in the long run. **It is a combination of personal factors that current and prospective staff bring to their job that will result in improved retention—professional commitment, previous experience, relevant education, maturity to address the complex needs of the children and families served by the system—coupled with an organizational environment that values and supports these staff.**

CHART 1: STUDIES EXAMINING RETENTION IN CHILD WELFARE: 1974-2004

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Rosenthal, J. A., & Waters, E. (2004, July). *Retention and performance in public child welfare in Oklahoma: Focus on the Child Welfare Professional Enhancement Program graduates*. Paper presented at Weaving Resources for Better Child Welfare Outcomes Conference, Sante Fe, NM.

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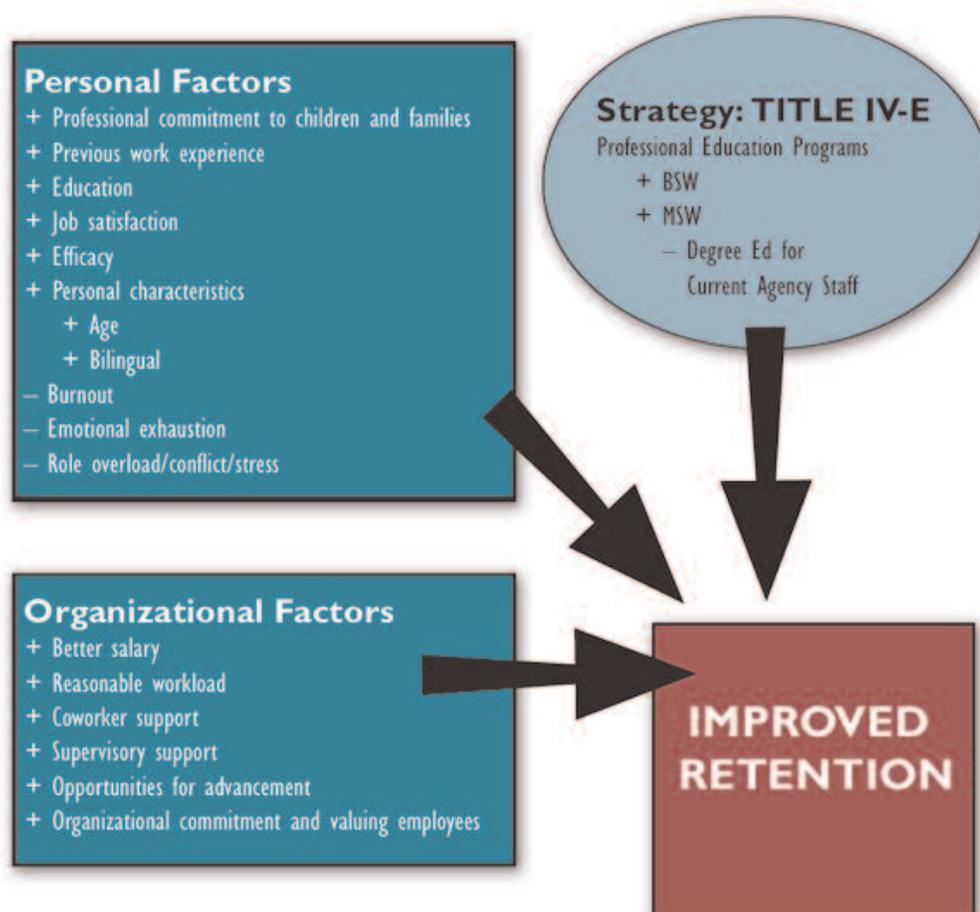
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FIGURE 1: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH: FACTORS THAT IMPACT RETENTION



About the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research

The Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) is a 501 c(3), non-profit organization, based in Washington, DC and launched in 1993. The mission of the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) is to advance the scientific knowledge base of social work practice by building the research capacity of the profession, by increasing support and opportunities for social work research, and by promoting linkages among the social work practice, research, and education communities. IASWR's purposes are to:

- Promote the development, support, and use of social work research on problems of serious concern to society.
- Promote social work research and the dissemination of research findings in order to improve practice, program development, and social policy that will enhance the quality of life for all people.
- Promote interdisciplinary as well as social work partnerships in order to advance the scientific basis for solving social problems.

IASWR's supporting organizations include the Association for Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors, the Council on Social Work Education, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Society for Social Work and Research.

IASWR Child Welfare Workforce Initiative

A well-trained, competent child welfare workforce provides an important underpinning to achieving the goals of safety, permanence and well-being. However, high caseloads, insufficient training, and high turnover have a negative impact on service delivery. Despite our awareness of these problems, there are few organized efforts to bring together the many different activities and studies that organizations have undertaken to address recruitment and retention problems or to systematically analyze research and outcome studies shedding important findings about the impact of the workforce on service delivery.

In 2004 IASWR launched a Child Welfare Workforce initiative, to enhance research to practice and policy connections, to strengthen agency-community-university partnerships, and to identify additional research needed to systematically improve the child welfare workforce.

Information about the initiative, including reports from two national convenings, *Developing and Sustaining a High Quality Child Welfare Workforce* (January 2004) and *Workforce and Accountability: Child and Family Services Reviews—Implications for Child Welfare Practice* (August 2004) and the full report from *Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research*, by J.L. Zlotnik, D. DePanfilis, C. Daining & M. McDermott Lane, visit the IASWR website at www.iaswresearch.org.

IASWR thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Fostering Results for support of the IASWR's Child Welfare Workforce Initiative.