

IASWR Research Brief 3

Child Welfare Workforce Series

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Influencing Retention of
Child Welfare Staff: A
Systematic Review of
Research* visit
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UNDERSTANDING RETENTION IN CHILD WELFARE: SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

A recent systematic review of research on retention in child welfare, undertaken by the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) in collaboration with the University of Maryland School of Social Work, (see Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining and McDermott-Lane, *Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research*, 2005 at www.iaswresearch.org), identified 25 studies over the past three decades that specifically address the conditions and factors that influence retention and the strategies that have been implemented to increase retention. The systematic review was undertaken 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.

The convergence of findings from these research studies (52% are unpublished reports) indicate that it is a combination of organizational and personal conditions that encourage staff to remain employed in public child welfare and that Title IV-E education for child welfare practice partnership efforts are important strategies that have been implemented

to help states address recruitment and retention problems (See IASWR Child Welfare Workforce Series Brief #1 and #2 at www.iaswresearch.org).

This systematic review also identified that there is great diversity across the methods, samples, definitions and rigor of the retention studies. These differences limit our ability to compare findings across studies and to make definitive inferences on some frequently asked questions. Such questions include: What are minimum staffing requirements for child welfare staff?; What is a reasonable timeframe to expect a person to remain employed in a specific public child welfare agency; and, What are the links between expressed intent to leave a job and actual job exit? However, analysis of the differences across these studies and the limitations of the available research lead to recommendations for future studies. The focus of this *Brief* is to discuss these research design issues and to make recommendations to the field about methods to enhance the scope and quality of research efforts to address retention issues.

Issues

Lack of standardized definitions of retention and turnover limit ability to generalize findings. Research on retention among child welfare workers will be advanced by the creation of a consensus among experts in the field on consistently operationalizing the use of the terms *retention* and *turnover*. In some studies, actual turnover or job exit was examined through review of records, and in other studies input was sought from workers who left the public child welfare agency. In several studies “intent to leave” was used as a proxy for turnover because

according to Mor Barak, Nissly & Levin (2001) intent to leave is a precursor to and predictor of actual leaving.

Understanding study findings is furthermore complicated because in some studies turnover includes workers who retired or moved, or were ill or promoted and other studies only examined preventable turnover. In addition, the research studies do not always examine the time period for retention, thus not accounting for expected career moves to other agencies (often serving the same population in a different agency). In at least one study those who “intended to leave” were combined with those who had actually left, potentially confounding the findings related to actual retention. Furthermore, future studies need to examine the competence and commitment of those who stay and examine the link between worker competency and client outcomes.

Limited timeframes in study designs

Most of the studies in our systematic review were cross-sectional, limiting the exploration of relationships among variables over time. A cross-sectional design allows for the relationships among key variables at a point in time but prohibits causal inferences. Longitudinal studies advance the knowledge base about factors related to retention by establishing temporal precedence.

Inconsistencies in the characteristics of the sample and minimum qualifications for child welfare staff

The educational backgrounds of the samples of child welfare workers varied greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, with mostly bachelor’s degrees (e.g., Drake & Yadama, 1990; Ellett, et al., 2003; UALR, 2000a) to mostly master’s degrees (Jones, 2002, Nissly et al., 2005). Some studies examined only staff with MSWs and several studies only examined those with a particular tenure in the agency (Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992). Within agencies, different studies examined differing levels of staff, with some studies only including caseworkers, some studies including all levels of workers, and some studies only supervisors. Several studies did not specify the job tasks of the sample studied or the potential diversity of educational backgrounds from front-line workers to managers and administrators that might be study respondents. Since different agency environments provide opportunities for diverse career trajectories it is hard to make specific generalizations about minimum educational requirements for child welfare

jobs. Furthermore if a child welfare worker with significant experience and tenure leaves for a job in another agency but serving the same population – is that a positive or a negative outcome?

Lack of standardized measures

Only three studies (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Drake & Yadama, 1996; Reagh, 1994) used a standardized measure—the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). There are several instruments that can be further developed to clarify our understanding of retention factors in child welfare agencies. For example, Ellett (2000) and Ellett et al. (2003) have developed a measure of human caring that needs further testing. Measures adapted by Cahalane and Sites (2004) including Glisson and Himmelgarn’s (2000) Children’s Services Organizational Climate Survey and James and Sells (1981) Psychological Climate Questionnaire also need further testing in this child welfare context.

Lack of evaluation of strategies beyond Title IV-E Educational Partnership programs

According to the results of the 2005 APHSA survey, more than 50% of the states responding indicated that they had implemented at least 14 different strategies to address what they perceived to be retention problems. Of those 14 strategies, 6 were implemented by more than 80% of the respondents (Increased/improved in-service training; increased educational opportunities (e.g., MSW); increased/improved orientation/pre-service training; provided technology (e.g., cell phones, lap-top computers, improved professional culture throughout agency; enhanced supervisor skills). While the respondents provided their perceptions related to whether these strategies were “not effective, somewhat effective, or highly effective,” there is no indication that there is a systematic process used by the states to actually evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies.

Diverse methodologies used to examine Title IV-E retention outcomes

Although findings support the value of Title IV-E educational efforts as an effective recruitment and retention tool, our review found great variation in methods and processes to determine the outcomes of this investment of Title IV-E funds. Some studies compared different clusters of Title IV-E graduates, some compared IV-E graduates to other workers, and some just provided descriptive information about perceived benefits of Title IV-E participation. With about 40 states participating in educational

partnerships, consistency and clarity are important in evaluating these efforts in order to ascertain their effectiveness.

Recommendations

1. Develop a process to rigorously and regularly evaluate retention strategies being implemented by state and local public and private child welfare agencies.

In order to understand what are evidence-based retention strategies, rigorous research and evaluation efforts should be undertaken that meet the following criteria:

- Prior to implementation, develop a baseline that describes current staff unplanned turnover rates, as well as demographic characteristics of the workforce.
- Clearly describe the parameters of the planned retention strategy and define all variables to be examined.
- Undertake a longitudinal study that will gather data and track employees over time to ascertain the impact of the intervention as well as the relationship to other possible factors that influence retention and turnover.
- Create a study structure that includes a comparison group, use of standardized instruments/measures, and analysis using multivariate statistics.

2. Encourage Title IV-E Education for Child Welfare Practice programs to use similar measures, methods, and instruments in undertaking evaluation and research efforts in order to determine larger-scale retention outcomes for Title IV-E graduates as well as the key factors that will enhance retention.

- Create a working group of Title IV-E educational partnership evaluators to determine common definitions, variables, and measures to use in assessing retention outcomes as well as other outcomes of such educational efforts.
- Develop guidelines (e.g. by IASWR) to assist university/agency partnerships in carrying out evaluation and follow-up research. Such guidelines should address ensuring that there is specificity in defining the sample to be studied so that different parameters of IV-E programs can be distinguished. For example, what level of social worker is being educated (BSW or MSW

students, or both); clarify which participants were already employed in child welfare and returning to school with IV-E support or were recruited while in social work school to work in child welfare; develop clarity in evaluations of the current status of the sample, for example, has payback obligation been completed; clearly define a comparison or control group, for example, what are the current staffing requirements of the agency - is the minimum requirement a general bachelor's degree, a specialized bachelor's degree, a master's degree, for what positions, if any is a BSW or MSW required. This will help in better determining how the sample of IV-E graduates compares to the overall workforce in terms of retention as well as on service delivery outcomes.

- Undertake longitudinal studies so that career trajectories can be followed. This will help to better determine short-term, mid-range, and long-term outcomes of Title IV-E efforts as well as to better define retention outcomes.

3. Develop multi-site, multi-year initiatives to test intervention strategies across agencies and settings.

Develop a grant incentive program (supported by the Children's Bureau and foundation funders) to develop multi-site recruitment and retention strategies that would test interventions that address the key organizational and personal factors affecting recruitment.

4. Create research efforts to develop, pilot, and validate instruments and measures that test recruitment and retention outcomes.

- Create research consortia that will further validate instruments and further test their applicability for predicting retention of employees who express intent to remain based on certain personal and organizational factors. It will also be useful to validate these instruments in longitudinal rather than cross-sectional studies.
- Further identify, develop, and test instruments, perhaps drawn from other fields that can be used to guide the retention impact of factors related to job satisfaction, personal accomplishment, and burnout.

5. Create a center for child welfare workforce studies that can gather, track, and analyze studies and serve as a “clearinghouse” on recruitment and retention issues in child welfare.

- Develop a nationally recognized entity that gathers state of the science information on child welfare workforce issues, how they affect service delivery, and how they are being addressed in public and private agencies.
- Undertake further systematic reviews and meta-analyses that address variables beyond retention/turnover. For example further reviews might examine staff qualifications, educational level, or professional commitment in regards to job satisfaction, service delivery outcomes, or job performance. A more robust research base can help guide both practice and policy.
- Continue to develop and address workforce related research agendas and provide workshops, training, and technical assistance to state and local agencies on workforce improvements, i.e. supervisory improvements, caseload reductions, salary increases, etc.
- Serve as a resource to researchers and evaluators who are studying workforce issues.

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