

**Factors Influencing the Retention of  
Specially Educated Public Child Welfare Workers**

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# **Factors Influencing the Retention of Specially Educated Public Child Welfare Workers**

**Nancy S. Dickinson and Robin E. Perry**

## **Abstract**

Although public child welfare has historically been a major employer of professional social workers, within the last twenty years MSW graduates have shunned public social services for the private sector. Using Title IV-E funds, universities have responded to this shortage by providing financial and educational incentives for graduate social work students to work with the diverse and complex cases in public child welfare. As a result, the numbers of graduate social workers seeking employment in public child welfare have increased, but questions remain about the extent to which professional social workers remain employed in public child welfare agencies beyond their employment payback period. This paper reports the results of one research study on the factors that affect the retention of these masters' level child welfare workers.

## **Background**

Public child welfare agencies have long been key training and employment settings for professional social workers (Rubin, 1981; Sheehan, 1976; CSWE, 1960; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1952). Regardless, within the last twenty years, the deprofessionalization of many public sector jobs has made those positions unappealing to professionally educated social workers (Leighninger & Ellett, 1998; Dressel et al., 1988; Groulx, 1983; Getzel, 1983). Specific concern is focused on the limited number of MSWs employed in public child welfare services, since several studies suggest that those child welfare workers with MSWs are more competent and better prepared for the stresses typically encountered in public child welfare services than

non-MSWs (Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1990; Liebermann et al., 1988; Booz-Allen & Hamilton, 1987; University of Southern Maine, 1987). Many of these authors also suggested that states with minimum degree requirements of a BSW or an MSW for public child welfare staff have lower vacancy and turnover rates than states with no such requirements. These studies, however, differ in design rigor and their representative nature.

In addition to understanding how to increase the numbers of qualified professionals in public child welfare, it is important to know those factors that affect their retention. In a recent study of public child welfare workers in Oklahoma, Rosenthal, McDowell, and White (1998) found the following variables to be positively associated with higher retention rates: 1) age when the worker started in public child welfare; 2) time worked in a Department of Human Services agency before beginning work specifically in child welfare services; and 3) possession of a masters degree in a human service area other than social work. Public child welfare workers who participated in a Title IV-E funded training program did not remain employed longer than those without such training. Other studies have focused on the role of worker age, ethnicity and gender in retention of public social services workers (McNeely 1992; 1989; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984).

Additional studies on retention rates are not multi-dimensional in nature. Within this context, worker turnover rates have been positively associated with budget reductions and fears of layoffs (McNeely, 1992); limited or low monetary and non-monetary benefits (Henry, 1990; Herzberg, 1966); general job dissatisfaction (Mailick, 1991; Oktay, 1992); and the age of the agency and it's physical environment or "organizational conditions" (Glisson & Durick, 1988;

Weiner, 1991).

Since child protection workers, on average, experience higher levels of stress and role conflict than social workers employed in other settings (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984), stress and burnout may relate to retention. General studies of stress and burnout among social workers have focused on: 1) the importance of social supports within and outside of the work place (Jayaratne, Chess, & Kundel, 1986; Davis-Sacks, Jayarnte, & Chess, 1985); 2) work place financial and non-financial rewards and conditions (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984); 3) caseload size and demands (Maslach & Jackson, 1984); and 4) specific job functions and activities of child welfare workers (Vinokur-Kaplan & Hartman, 1986).

A number of variables have been examined for their influence on job satisfaction, which may also relate to retention. Vinokur-Kaplan et al. (1994) cite studies (McNeely, 1989; O'Toole, 1973) that equate low levels of job satisfaction with a decrease in the health, mental health, job effectiveness, and social functioning of workers. Other authors examine the importance of specific job factors on job satisfaction, including workload, work place comfort and safety, job challenges (and feelings of accomplishment), financial awards, promotional opportunities, social supports, role conflict and role ambiguity (Rauktis & Koeske, 1994; Tracy et al., 1992; Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991; Glisson & Durick, 1988; Jayaratne & Chess, 1982-83). Samantrai (1992) adds that job satisfaction is also influenced by the status that is afforded someone with an MSW degree and their public image and liability. Given the multitude of potential influences considered in the literature, there is a need for studies that

consider a range of variables in models used to predict worker retention in public child welfare.

Popular support in California for increasing the numbers of MSWs in public child welfare led to the creation of the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) in 1990 through the collaborative efforts of the deans and directors of California graduate schools of social work and the County Welfare Directors Association (which represents 58 County Departments of Social Services). In 1992, through a contract with the California Department of Social Services using federal Title IV-E training funds, CalSWEC began a Child Welfare Stipend Program that provides financial support for graduate students who pursue careers in public child welfare. Stipended students participate in a specialized curriculum based on the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are needed for child welfare practice. Upon graduation, the students are required to work one year in a public child welfare agency for each year of funding they received.

This study presents preliminary findings from a longitudinal study of CalSWEC's success in increasing the number of MSW graduates employed in public child welfare positions. In particular, this paper focuses on those Title IV-E stipended participants who have completed their contractual obligation to work in a public child welfare agency. The graduates who remain are compared to those who left public child welfare employment. Efforts are made to identify those factors most likely to influence the retention of specially trained social workers in public child welfare positions.

## **Method**

The researchers mailed a self-administered survey instrument to every social worker who

received Title IV-E funding from CalSWEC during graduate school. The survey was mailed to these social workers between three and six months following the completion of their contractual obligation to work in a county public child welfare agency (or employment payback). As of June 1999, a total of 368 former CalSWEC participants were surveyed.

The survey instrument consists of three sections. The first section asks questions related to work experiences in public child welfare, including job roles and responsibilities, the size and demands of each subject's caseload, the breakdown of their caseload by ethnicity, and the perceived nature and level of supervisory and social supports respondents typically relied upon while employed in child welfare services. Additional questions attempt to determine the likelihood that each respondent will seek alternative employment in the near future and the potential reasons for their decision to leave public child welfare employment. While the researchers developed many of these questions, several were adapted from other studies (Vinokur-Kaplan et al., 1994; Himle, Jayarante & Thyness, 1989; House, 1981; House & Wells, 1978).

Questions in the instrument's second section address each subject's perceptions of work conditions, including the extent to which each respondent feels "burned out" as a child welfare worker. To help facilitate this line of inquiry, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is integrated into the questionnaire. A copyrighted instrument, the MBI has been modified for human service professionals and consists of subscales measuring three dimensions of the "burnout syndrome:" emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal

accomplishment. Each subscale has demonstrated internal reliability as well as convergent and discriminant validity when used with a variety of service professionals. Normative sample scores of “social service workers” (which include social workers and child protection workers) detailed by Maslach and Jackson (1986) are used as a guide for interpreting the level of burnout experienced by respondents in this study.

In addition to the MBI, the second section includes questions adapted from other studies (Tracy et al., 1992; Jayaratne, Chess, & Kunkel, 1986) on the level of stress associated with specific duties or situations in child welfare services and measure the level of satisfaction each respondent has with a variety of employment related experiences. Finally, five questions (taken from Ellett et al., 1996) elicit each respondent’s views on the quality and efficacy of their work in child welfare.

The third section of the questionnaire relates to personal or socio-demographic variables. These include the age, sex, ethnicity, relationship status, religious affiliation, political and ideological affiliations, socio-economic status while growing up and time spent in a variety of none-work activities each week.

## **Findings**

### **Determining the Retention Rate of Title IV-E Stipended MSWs**

As of June 1999, 368 Title IV-E stipended CalSWEC participants—who completed their employment payback—had been surveyed. As noted earlier, each potential respondent was typically surveyed between three and six months following the completion of his or her

employment payback.

Of these 368 potential study subjects, 78.0% (n=287) remained employed in public child welfare (either in the agency where they completed their employment payback or at another county child welfare agency). A total of 81 (22.0%) study subjects were no longer working in the public child welfare agency where they completed their employment payback. Of these subjects, 27 were employed in a setting other than a public child welfare agency. The remaining 54 subjects could not be located. Given that 12 of the 287 subjects still in public child welfare were employed in a different public child welfare agency, it is possible that a small proportion of those who could not be located were employed in another county child welfare agency, thus under-estimating the actual retention rate of Title IV-E stipended social workers in public child welfare.

Of the 368 social workers surveyed, 63.9% (n=235) completed the survey instrument. The moderate response rate occurred because of a large number of incorrect mailing addresses. These 235 respondents comprise the subjects of this paper.

Among those subjects who responded to the survey (n=235), 88.5% (n=208) were still employed in a public child welfare agency. This retention rate is larger than that observed when the entire population of potential respondents is considered. A chi-square test (between the distribution of all potential cases according to whether they responded to the survey by their current employment status) revealed that those still employed in public child welfare are significantly over-represented among those who responded to the survey ( $\chi^2 = 41.93$ , df=1,

$p < .0001$ ). Any findings presented henceforth are qualified by this observation.

### **Group Comparisons Using Survey Data**

A total of 65 study subjects of the 235 social workers who responded to the survey were employed at that time in a public child welfare agency but indicated that they planned (or reported a likelihood within the next year) to leave public child welfare employment. When these subjects are combined with those respondents who had already left public child welfare, 39.1% ( $n=92$ ) of survey respondents had left or planned to leave public child welfare and 60.9% ( $n=143$ ) remained and reportedly intended to remain in public child welfare over the next year. In this section, survey responses of those who left or intended to leave public child welfare are compared with the responses of those who remained and intended to remain in public child welfare.

A series of bi-variate analyses (using t-tests and chi-square tests where applicable) was conducted with a multitude of variables (interval and categorical) where respondents' forecasted retention status (did they stay and did they intend to stay in public child welfare or not) served as the grouping variable. The unbalanced nature of the principal grouping variable may affect the accuracy of test statistics generated, as these statistics will typically have large confidence intervals. Any assumption violations call into question the accuracy of probability values generated for hypotheses testing. To address these concerns, the researchers tested the normality of each variable distribution for each forecasted retention group using the Lilliefors test. Further, the Levene's test was used to test whether variances were equal. Should the assumption of

normality be violated, the researchers used nonparametric procedures (the Wilcoxon Rank Sum W test with interval level variables) to test for differences between groups. If normality assumptions were met and variances were not equal, separate variance—as opposed to pooled variance—estimates were used in t-tests. Where assumptions of normality and equal variances were violated, the researchers discarded the analyses results.

### **Job Characteristics**

Several questions solicited information about respondents': 1) time spent in specific service areas (emergency response, court services, family maintenance, family reunification, adoptions, foster care, or family preservation); 2) salaries; 3) work hours, caseload sizes and types; and 4) time spent doing administrative versus service activities. When number of months spent in different service areas is considered, no significant differences are observed between both retention groups. This conflicts with preliminary findings on these data (Dickinson & Perry, 1998) where those who stay in public child welfare reported a significantly higher mean number of months' work in adoptions and permanency planning than those who left or plan to leave public child welfare.

Those who left or plan to leave public child welfare—on average—have an annual salary that was \$2,778 less than those who plan to stay in public child welfare (\$38,986 compared to \$41,764 respectively). This difference is statistically significant ( $t = -3.24$ ,  $df = 221$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In addition, those who have stayed in public child welfare report a statistically higher ( $t = -1.98$ ,  $df = 222$ ,  $p = .049$ ) mean percentage of African Americans on their caseload ( $= 28.24\%$ ,

S.D.=24.55) than those who left or plan to leave public child welfare (:=21.66%, S.D.=23.95).

No significant differences were observed between groups in terms of the percentage of time they spend in various administrative and service related responsibilities apart from time spent doing “other” tasks. Here, those who are staying in public child welfare report a significantly lower mean percentage of their workweek (:=3.04%) dedicated to “other” tasks than is reported by those who have left or plan to leave public child welfare (:=7.83%;  $t=2.61$ ,  $df=117.29$ ,  $p=.01$ ). When the nature of these “other” tasks are examined it appears those who have left or plan to leave public child welfare are more likely to be involved in court related tasks (testifying, writing reports and meeting with lawyers).

Although no significant differences were observed between groups in terms of the percentage of respondents who felt their caseload was either “too low” or “about right” versus “too high,” those workers who planned on staying in public child welfare carried an average caseload that was significantly higher (:=39.24) than that observed among workers who left or planned to leave public child welfare (:=34.35;  $t= -2.23$ ,  $df=199.55$ ,  $p=.027$ ). This finding suggests that the size of a caseload alone is not a reliable predictor of whether or not a worker will leave public child welfare. Although no information is available regarding the demands that individual cases had on individual workers, those who plan to remain in public child welfare appear to be able to manage larger caseloads across a variety of service areas and departments and are no more likely to perceive their caseloads as being “too high” than those who have left or plan to leave public child welfare.

## **Social Supports Within and Outside of the Agency**

The researchers asked several questions about the extent to which respondents felt they received various forms of support from their “immediate supervisor,” “other people at work,” “friends and relatives,” and their “spouse or partner.”

No differences were observed between groups in terms of the level or kind of reported support received from friends and family and spouses or partners. These groups differed, however, in the mean level of reported support received from work peers and supervisors. Here, those remaining in public child welfare reported higher levels of support from work peers when “...things get tough at work” ( $t = -2.00$ ,  $df = 232$ ,  $p = .046$ ) and in terms of listening “...to work related problems” ( $t = -2.68$ ,  $df = 231$ ,  $p = .008$ ) and helping respondents get their “...job done” ( $t = 2.24$ ,  $df = 232$ ,  $p = .026$ ) than those who have left who plan to leave public child welfare.

In addition, significant differences were reported in the levels of support received from respondents’ supervisors. Those respondents remaining in public child welfare rated their supervisors at a significantly higher level in terms of: 1) willingness to listen to respondents’ work related problems ( $t = -3.34$ ,  $df = 232$ ,  $p = .001$ ); 2) extent to which supervisors can be relied on “when things get tough at work” ( $t = -3.77$ ,  $df = 168.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and 3) helping respondents in getting their job done ( $t = -3.99$ ,  $df = 167.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Significant differences were observed between the study groups in terms of their views on the skills and characteristics of their supervisors. Those respondents remaining in public child welfare rated their supervisors as: 1) more competent in doing their job ( $t = -3.14$ ,  $df = 156.13$ ,

p=.002); 2) more concerned with their subordinates' welfare ( $t=-3.91$ ,  $df=231$ ,  $p<.001$ ); 3) more likely to show approval to respondents when they have done a good job ( $t=-3.40$ ,  $df=232$ ,  $p=.001$ ); 4) more likely to help respondents complete difficult tasks ( $t=-3.36$ ,  $df=232$ ,  $p=.001$ ); and 5) more likely to be "warm and friendly" when the respondent is having "problems" ( $t=-3.46$ ,  $df=232$ ,  $p=.001$ ).

### **Job Satisfaction**

Respondents were asked to rate (on a five point likert-type scale) the extent to which they were satisfied with twenty-two practice and work environment conditions. Those remaining in public child welfare experienced significantly higher levels of satisfaction on the job with respect to nine of these conditions: 1) "support and recognition from my supervisor" ( $t= -2.61$ ,  $df=167.8$ ); 2) "opportunities for personal growth and development" ( $t=-2.42$ ,  $df=231$ ,  $p=.016$ ); 3) "opportunities for promotion" ( $t=-2.06$ ,  $df=231$ ,  $p=.041$ ); 4) "opportunities for improving knowledge and skills" ( $t=-2.52$ ,  $df=231$ ,  $p=.013$ ); 5) "personal feelings of accomplishment" on the job ( $t=-3.01$ ,  $df=161.8$ ,  $p=.003$ ); 6) "recognition from other professionals" ( $t= -2.12$ ,  $df=231$ ,  $p=.035$ ); 7) "the authority to make professional decisions" ( $t=-3.44$ ,  $df=230$ ,  $p=.001$ ); 8) opportunities to "...make a difference in a client's life" ( $t=-2.08$ ,  $df=174.02$ ,  $p=.039$ ); and 9) the extent to which they were globally satisfied with their job ( $t=-5.92$ ,  $df=155.19$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

In response to questions assessing their beliefs about their practice and efficacy as child welfare workers, those remaining in public child welfare reported feeling a significantly higher

level of influence in positively affecting their clients ( $t = -2.93$ ,  $df = 230$ ,  $p = .004$ ).

### **Demographic Differences**

No significant differences (using chi-square tests) occur in the distribution of those who remained versus left public child welfare according to their gender or race/ethnicity (white/non-white), or the socio-demographic status (low, middle or upper) of respondents' families during their youth. Further, there are no significant differences between retention groups in terms of the mean age of respondents ( $M = 36.49$  years for those who remained and  $M = 36.34$  years for those who left).

### **Reasons for Leaving**

Respondents who left or were likely to leave public child welfare ( $n = 92$ ) were asked to rate on a five point likert type scale the level of importance for which nine statements influenced their decision to leave public child welfare. Among these nine statements, the four most important reasons include: 1) feeling "burned out" or over stressed ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $S.D. = 1.09$ ); 2) dissatisfaction with [their] current job/work environment ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $S.D. = 1.21$ ); 3) changes in career goals ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $S.D. = 1.26$ ); and 4) the availability of other jobs ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $S.D. = 1.27$ ). Given the prominence that feeling "burned out" or over stressed had upon workers' desire to leave public child welfare, it seems important to examine the dimensions, prevalence and influence of these variables with all study subjects.

### **Burnout and Stress**

The level of experienced "burnout" or job stress was principally measured using the three

subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory that measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment experienced on the job. Study subjects did not differ in the level of personal accomplishment and sense of depersonalization experienced on the job. Although the mean level of personal accomplishment was higher for those who stayed ( $M=36.56$ ) than those who left public child welfare ( $M=35.27$ ), these differences are not statistically significant and suggest that both groups—on average—experience similar levels of personal accomplishment that are not associated with high levels of burnout. Likewise, both groups—on average—experience the same level of depersonalization ( $M=7.82$  and  $M=8.48$  for those who stayed versus left public child welfare respectively) which are not associated with high levels of burnout.

There are significant differences, however, in the mean levels of emotional exhaustion experienced by both groups of study subjects ( $t=4.75$ ,  $df=231$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Those who left or were likely to leave public child welfare experienced mean levels of emotional exhaustion ( $M=29.98$ ) associated with high levels of burnout (see Maslach and Jackson, 1986). The mean level of emotional exhaustion ( $M=23.54$ ) experienced by those who remained in public child welfare is associated with average levels of burnout. These findings are consistent with Brett and Yadama's (1996) study (as cited in Rosenthal et al., 1998) of 177 child protection workers in Missouri where emotional exhaustion had a significant effect on job exit.

As noted earlier, in addition to the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the researchers asked a series of other questions regarding the stress that specific duties or situations affiliated with child

welfare services might cause for each respondent. Interestingly, both groups of study subjects were similar in the mean levels of stress they experienced with respect to all situations or duties except one. Those who left or were likely to leave public child welfare report higher levels of stress associated with “needing to work overtime” than those who remained and planned to stay in public child welfare ( $t=2.37$ ,  $df=229$ ,  $p=.019$ ). However, no significant differences are observed between groups in terms of the average hours worked each week ( $t=1.04$ ,  $df=146.76$ ,  $p=.295$ ), which is 43.67 hours (S.D.=6.33) and 42.87 hours (S.D.=4.45) for those who left or planned to leave and those who planned to remain in public child welfare, respectively.

### **Multiple Logistic Regression Model**

Given the significant differences between subject groups across a number of variables (using a series of bi-variate analyses), multiple logistic regression procedures were employed to develop a more parsimonious model of variable effects upon worker retention. The dependent variable is the respondents’ status regarding whether or not they stayed and planned to stay in public child welfare at the time they were surveyed ( $n=235$ ). Independent variables included all those variables for which a significant difference in their distribution existed (using a series of simple bi-variate analyses) between these two groups of Title IV-E stipended MSW graduates, as presented earlier.

Table 3 details results using a forward logistic regression model. These findings suggest that among the large number of variables shown to have a significant association with retention rates using bi-variate analyses, only five variables significantly influence the likelihood that a

specially educated Title IV-E stipended MSW graduate will remain employed in public child welfare beyond their employment payback requirement. Here, workers' salary and the level of social supports received from co-workers and their supervisors positively influence the retention rate of public child welfare workers. With respect to supervisory support, the greater the extent to which workers perceived their supervisor as being very concerned about their welfare, the greater the likelihood respondents would remain in public child welfare. Given the many ways by which a supervisor can show concern for workers' welfare, it is thought that this variable serves as a latent variable for the seven additional items associated with specific supervisory supports that demonstrated a significant influence upon retention rates when bi-variate analyses were conducted. In addition, findings in Table 3 suggest that as the level of emotional exhaustion and the percentage of time spent doing "other" tasks (court related activities) increase, there is a significant decrease in the retention of public child welfare workers.

**Table 3 Forward Stepwise Logistic Regression of Independent Variables on the Likelihood that Respondents Stayed and Intended to Stay in Public Child Welfare After Completing Their Employment Payback (n=208)\***

Dependent variable=whether or not respondents stayed and intended to stay in public child welfare.			
Independent Variables	$\beta$ (sig. $\_2$ )	Exp ( $\_2$ )	R
Level of emotional exhaustion as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory	-.0446 (p=.0076)	.9564	-.1363
Salary of respondent	.000088 (p=.0022)	1.0001	.1634
Percentage of work week spent doing "other" tasks	-.0333 (p=.0173)	.9673	-.1154
The extent to which "other people at work" listen to the respondents about work-related problems	.5935 (p=.0168)	1.8103	.1163
Level to which supervisor is very concerned about the welfare of workers under him/her	.6167 (p=.0056)	1.8529	.1435
Constant $\_0$	-5.839		

\* Using listwise deletion procedures, n=27 cases were excluded from the final model. A chi-square test ( $\_2=.405$ , p=.524) suggests that the distribution of cases included versus excluded from the model in Table 3 is independent of the distribution of cases according to their status as staying versus left/leaving public child welfare. Therefore cases excluded from the final model (in Table 3) are randomly distributed with respect to the dependent variable.

## **Conclusion**

Public child welfare services reach families with complex needs and children in imminent danger. They deserve the highest level of professional expertise. Title IV-E funded educational and financial incentives have increased the numbers of graduate social workers seeking employment in public child welfare, but these incentives are not sufficient for retaining professional social workers in public child welfare agencies beyond their employment payback period. This study adds to the growing body of research on the factors that affect the retention of these workers.

The findings show that 78% of one group of 368 California MSWs who received Title IV-E funded stipends and educational support remained employed in public child welfare three to six months after their employment payback requirement ended. While this rate may underestimate the true retention rate of specially trained MSWs, it is also possible that the rate is no different from—or even less than—the retention rate of child welfare staff with other degrees, since there was no control group of MSW graduates who did not receive special funding or educational curricula. Future studies of this nature should have such a control group.

In spite of these limitations, the results of a survey of the IV-E funded MSW graduates show some informative differences between the graduates who remained in public child welfare positions and those who left or intended to leave. The social workers who remained in public child welfare employment were less emotionally exhausted, earned higher salaries, spent less time on court related tasks and reported receiving more support from work peers and supervisors than

social workers who left or planned to leave public child welfare jobs. Worker retention in this study was not affected by age, race, or job service area.

Worker burnout was the number one reason for leaving given by subjects who had left or were likely to leave public child welfare employment. Burnout may have contributed to dissatisfaction with their jobs and led subsequently to changes in their career goals and to the awareness of the availability of other jobs—other reasons respondents listed for leaving public child welfare employment.

In this study, emotional exhaustion was the type of burnout that distinguished the leavers from those workers who remained on their jobs. While both groups experienced similar levels of personal accomplishment, that sense of efficacy was not enough to promote retention. Rather, the ability to form relationships with work peers where work-related problems were discussed and to rely on supervisors for support seemed to buffer those who remained on the job from the difficulties and isolation—and exhaustion--of public child welfare work.

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