

# **Factors Influencing Retention of Child Welfare Staff: A Systematic Review of Research**

**A Report from the**

**Institute for the Advancement of  
Social Work Research**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Supported by a Grant from  
the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

RESEARCH · PRACTICE



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Conducted in collaboration with

**University of Maryland School of Social Work  
Center for Families & Institute for Human Services Policy**

Joan Levy Zlotnik  
Diane DePanfilis  
Clara Daining  
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June 2005

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IASWR thanks the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Cornerstones for Kids for support of this project and the IASWR Child Welfare Workforce Initiative through the Foundation's Human Services Workforce Initiative

Grant # 203.1301 to the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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). The need to address workforce issues has reached new urgency due to the findings of the Child and Family Services Reviews and states' development of Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) as well as efforts in states to achieve accreditation and respond to class action lawsuits. The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched its Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) with the assumption that a motivated workforce will yield better results for children and families. Child welfare agencies need to identify and implement effective strategies to recruit and retain well-qualified staff that has the knowledge, skills and commitment to provide services to our nation's most vulnerable children and families.

As one effort to determine what are effective recruitment and retention strategies that child welfare agencies can implement to address these important problems, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided support to 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 to undertake a systematic review of research and outcomes studies related to recruitment and retention in child welfare. Although there have been numerous literature reviews that report that there are organizational and personal factors that affect recruitment and retention, there has been no systematic review of research studies to more fully examine "what works" in regard to recruitment and retention in child welfare and to illuminate the specific methodology and definitions used to frame those studies. It is hoped that by synthesizing the results across studies, practitioners, researchers, educators, policy makers, and administrators in the child welfare field may use lessons learned to take steps to increase the retention of a competent child welfare workforce.

### *Systematic Review Process*

IASWR and the University of Maryland undertook a planned process, drawing from the Campbell Collaboration guidelines for systematic reviews, to provide structure and process to the review as much as possible ([www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org)). The project team agreed that it was important to make the review process as well defined, systematic, transparent, and unbiased as possible while maintaining a practical perspective. To increase the likelihood that studies could be compared, the team narrowed the scope of the review to examine retention or turnover of child welfare personnel as the dependent variable, with the understanding that recruitment strategies are only effective if they result in retention. Thus recruitment was considered as one of a number of strategies that could affect retention and turnover.

The review was undertaken to answer the question: *What conditions and strategies influence the retention of staff in public child welfare?* Conditions were viewed to include both personal and organizational factors, and strategies were operationalized to be actions taken by some entity that were targeted to retain staff, e.g. Title IV-E Education for Child Welfare Practice programs, recruitment initiatives, enhanced training, or procedures and policies to professionalize the workplace.

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. Initial screening identified 58 articles and reports that were a research study, had a child welfare focus, and had retention/turnover as the dependent variable. After more thorough screening, 25 studies remained to be included in the systematic review. Of these studies, 52% were found in the "gray literature" of unpublished studies. Chart 1 provides the authors and titles of the 25 studies. (Brief summaries can be found in Appendix B.)

These studies examined the dependent variable of retention/turnover in a number of different ways.

- 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);
- “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 preventable turnover (Cyphers, 2001).
- Seven studies specifically examined retention of child welfare workers who had participated in 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 was 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 covered samples in two states (Ellett, 2000),
- Two studies compared direct service workers and supervisors perceptions in high turnover counties to respondents in low turnover counties (UALR, 2002a; 2002b) and
- 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).

These variations in definition and scope made systematic comparisons across studies more complex than anticipated. There was also variation 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 while in Georgia only about 20% of child welfare workers have a master’s degree. 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 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. However, 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.

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. We can infer that there are ranges of personal and organizational factors that can positively influence retention of staff. Positive personal factors included:

- Professional commitment to children and families
- Previous work experience
- Education

- Job satisfaction
- Efficacy
- Personal characteristics (age, bilingual)

Personal factors that negatively impacted retention include:

- Burnout, including emotional exhaustion which is a component of burnout most linked to turnover
- Role overload/conflict/stress

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.

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.

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. 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.

The findings from this review can provide guidance to a diverse set of stakeholders who are interested in enhancing the quality of child welfare service delivery to achieve outcomes of permanency, safety and well-being for the children and families served. Considering the following questions can guide stakeholders in improving retention outcomes.

- 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 hiring staff with 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, relevant education, previous experience, 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.*

## **Recommendations**

The scarcity of research and outcomes studies and the limitations of those studies and how they are reported sets the stage for a number of recommendations targeted to more strategically understand recruitment and retention. For example, while our review finds that education is important, the diversity of the samples and research designs make it difficult to be specific about what specific minimum staffing requirements should be. Therefore we need to make recommendations to improve the rigor of our research and the specificity of designs in studying the complex nature of retention outcomes. The following recommended action steps provide a blueprint to expand our knowledge and improve our practices.

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

Action: 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 is analyzed using multivariate statistics.

### **2. Encourage Title IV-E “Education for Child Welfare Practice” efforts 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.**

Action:

- 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 to assist university/agency partnerships in carrying out evaluation and follow-up research. Such guidelines should address: what level of social worker is being educated (BSW or MSW students, or both); employment experience and status, including payback obligation and a clearly defined comparison or control group.
- 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.**

Action: 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 retention, especially models to improve quality of supervision.

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

Action:

- Create research consortia that will validate instruments and 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 “clearinghouse” to regularly gather, track, and analyze studies that examine recruitment and retention issues in child welfare.**

Action:

- Create a center for child welfare workforce studies that can gather, track, and analyze studies. Develop 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. Such an effort can track studies that examine retention outcomes as well as the impact of improved/enhanced retention on service delivery, child and family outcomes, etc.

*Undertaking these series of actions will provide the framework for the needed efforts to more fully understand and address the recruitment and retention issues that plague child welfare agencies and impact the delivery of services to our most vulnerable citizens.*

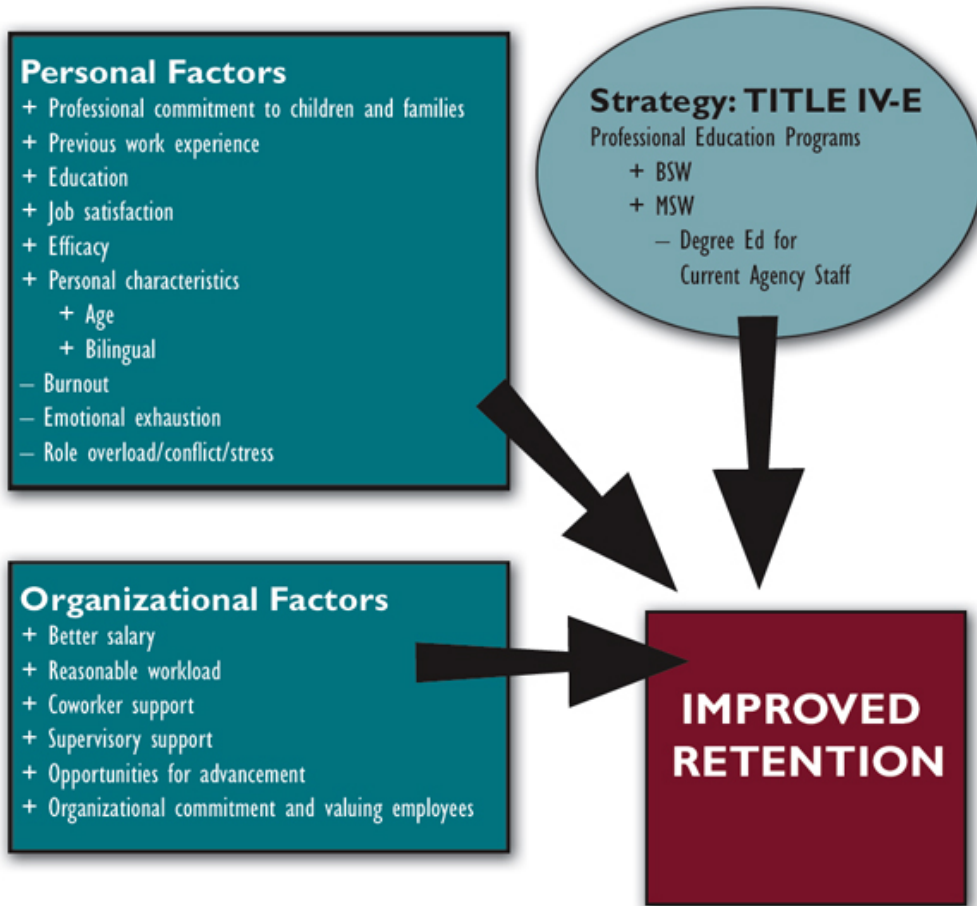
CHART 1: Studies Included in the Systematic Review

<p>Bernotavicz, F. (1997). <i>Retention of child welfare caseworkers: A report</i>. Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine: Institute for Public Sector Innovation, Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service.</p> <p>Child Welfare League of America. (1990). <i>Child welfare salary and retention study</i>. Florida: Author.</p> <p>Cyphers, G. (2001). <i>Report from the child welfare workforce survey: State and county data findings</i>. Washington, DC: American Public Human Services Association.</p> <p>Cahalane, H., &amp; Sites, E. W. (2004). <i>Is it hot or cold? The climate of child welfare employee retention</i>. Unpublished manuscript, University of Pittsburgh.</p> <p>Dickinson, N. S., &amp; Perry, R. E. (2002). Factors influencing the retention of specially educated public child welfare workers. <i>Evaluation Research in Child Welfare</i>, 15 (3/4), 89–103.</p> <p>Drake, B., &amp; Yadama, G. N. (1996). A structural equation model of burnout and job exit among child protective services workers. <i>Social Work Research</i>, 20, 179–187.</p>
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**Figure 2: Systematic Review Of The Research:  
Factors That Impact Retention**

**+ Personal Factors + Organizational Factors Enhanced by Title IV-E Professional Education = Improved Retention**



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