How does turnover in the child welfare workforce impact children and families?

For decades, high rates of staff turnover have plagued child protection agencies, and retaining a highly qualified workforce has become even more difficult in recent years. Knowledgeable, engaged, and committed child welfare professionals are vital to providing the quality supports that children and families need to thrive. High turnover rates not only impact children and families, they also affect agencies, primarily through higher costs. Not all staff turnover is preventable, but awareness of the factors that predict high turnover can inform both public and provider agencies’ efforts to strengthen the child welfare workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic, labor market shifts, a public reckoning with racial injustice, and the current youth mental health crisis have exacerbated workforce challenges. Yet child welfare leaders can use these challenges as an opportunity to rethink services, engage with communities, and create organizational climates that are conducive to effective practice. Agencies are implementing a range of direct strategies to improve recruitment and retention, but high turnover often is a symptom of broader systemic challenges that also need to be acknowledged and addressed.
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Measuring turnover
For about 15 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, child welfare turnover rates hovered between an estimated 20% and 40%1,2,3 with an estimated national average of 30% and even higher turnover rates among child welfare trainees in some states.4 In comparison, annual turnover rates below at or below 12% are considered optimal in the health care and human services sectors.5 A report from the Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development includes turnover rate estimates across jurisdictions, based on national data in a 2018 research study.6 Newer data suggest turnover rose in some jurisdictions as a result of the recent workforce challenges.7

Variation in turnover rates is due in part to differences in how turnover is calculated in each jurisdiction, which results in difficulty processing and comparing rates. If turnover is not measured effectively, it is difficult to address and track. The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development has a tool to help jurisdictions calculate their turnover rate.

Tracking annual turnover is only one step in understanding an agency’s workforce challenges. Agency leaders must explore and disaggregate turnover data a variety of ways, including demographics, roles, and geography, and hear from various workers about their reasons for staying on or leaving the job.

Why turnover matters
High staff turnover has a direct impact on children and families that an agency serves. Staff turnover has been associated with more placement disruptions, time in foster care, incidents of maltreatment, and re-entries into foster care. Research suggests that caseworker turnover is frequent, often abrupt, and constitutes a relationship loss with children that has complex and negative impacts on children’s well-being.8

Increased turnover at both the frontline and supervisor levels can lead to high caseloads for the staff who stay. A summary of research indicates that high caseloads and workloads impact caseworkers’ levels of stress, feelings of emotional exhaustion, and job satisfaction. They also impact key casework functions, such as timeliness, continuity, quality of service delivery, family engagement, and relationship-building.9,10

In addition to a direct impact on children, families, and caseworkers, high caseloads and workloads contribute to an array of direct and indirect costs for a child protection agency. Every time a caseworker leaves the workforce, the cost to the agency is approximately 70% to 200% of the exiting employee’s annual salary. In Texas, the agency cost was estimated at $54,000 per departing staff member.11 Costs of caseworker turnover include:

- Direct costs related to overtime, staff separation, and hiring/training new staff.
- Indirect costs to other staff (increased paperwork and case management, exhaustion from overwork, supervisors redirecting time to provide direct services).
- Failure to meet federal performance standards, including potential loss of federal Title IV-E funding.

Given the detrimental impact of turnover on agencies and the children and families they serve, using a holistic framework to understand and address workforce development, including the full range of factors likely to affect retention and turnover, should be a priority.

Turnover predictors
A 2014 meta-analysis indicated that stress, feelings of emotional exhaustion, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction had the highest effect on caseworkers’ desire to leave their position.12

More recently, research and jurisdictional experiences stress that a range of workforce challenges — including role ambiguity, low compensation, organizational culture, lack of peer support, increased administrative requirements, high caseloads, lack of community-based services, and the trauma many families have endured as a result of the pandemic — have only made it harder to keep staff, including supervisors.13

Racial equity and moral distress
Racial bias and discrimination also significantly impact the child welfare workforce. A lack of diversity in
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The workforce, especially in leadership, as well as perceptions of discrimination and bias can lead to lower job satisfaction. A recent study found that 22% of caseworkers who identified as BIPOC believed that they receive fewer opportunities for advancement, compared with 3.2% of white caseworkers.

Black and American Indian children are overrepresented throughout all types of child welfare involvement, resulting in considerable trauma for parents and children, and often setting families up for lifelong involvement with multiple government systems. The National Association of Social Workers acknowledged that caseworker bias has contributed to this disproportionate representation. There have been increasing calls to closely examine the entire child welfare system and the role it has in perpetuating harmful governmental intrusion and traumatizing children and families.

Relatedly, the number of staff that experience moral distress may also contribute to high turnover rates. A recent study revealed that over half of caseworkers reported not taking what they felt was the correct ethical action in a situation due to internal constraints (such as fear) or external constraints (such as lack of time or resources). More than 40% of caseworkers said their job required them to do things that were against their better judgment, and more than half said excessive rules and regulations impacted their performance.

The impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the workforce in many sectors, and child welfare is no exception. Workers reveal they are exhausted and experiencing high levels of personal trauma, which is compounded by the trauma they experience as part of their job.

That said, the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute’s COVID-19 Workforce Needs Assessment concluded that some of the changes brought about by the pandemic were improvements. For example, some workers indicated that working remotely allowed
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them more time to engage with families, saved driving time, increased productivity, and was less stressful than being in the office, while also helping them achieve a better work-life balance, further reducing stress. Caseworkers said they would like to maintain remote and virtual work options when possible.

As a result, some jurisdictions are considering how changes implemented in response to COVID-19 can be integrated into everyday practice. This includes designing flexible schedules and continued use of technology to support both families and the workforce.

To learn more, visit Questions from the field at Casey.org.

7 Turnover data from the years 2020, 2021, and 2022 is available online in reports from Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Missouri, and Ohio.
8 Curry, A. (2019). “If you can’t be with this client for some years, don’t do it”: Exploring the emotional and relational effects of turnover on youth in the child welfare system, Children and Youth Services Review, 99, 374-385.
13 Research and jurisdictional experiences from a variety of sources, including: Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. (2022). The Child Welfare Workforce Crisis – What We’re Hearing from the Field.