

The Retention of California's Public Child Welfare Workers

October, 2004

Executive Summary

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## *Introduction*

The state is experiencing a shortage of child welfare workers that is expected to get worse (O'Neill, 2000). Public child welfare, with its mandate to both protect children and preserve families, is facing its own acute shortage of social work personnel. Statewide there were 6500 public child welfare positions funded for FY 2000/01, yet there was a need for twice that many to meet minimum standards and three times that many to meet ideal standards (American Humane Association, 2000). More important, the U.S. General Accounting Office (2003) reports that high turnover rates in child welfare agencies are a major obstacle to timely investigations, compromising the ability of agencies to protect children.

Although existing research has identified a number of factors that are closely related to employee retention and its correlates, this research has not determined which broad set of characteristics - individual, organizational, or economic - has the most effect on worker decisions to remain on the job. This study represents an advance on previous studies through the development of a more comprehensive model of prediction of retention, and, especially, through the use of a statewide multi-county sample which provides the opportunity to incorporate diversity in both agency characteristics and local labor markets. The retention of public child welfare workers is a pressing professional and practical concern. The conclusions from this study are intended to point directly to specific solutions to the problem.

## *Method*

The intent of this longitudinal study was to develop a hierarchical set of quantitative predictors of new public child welfare workers leaving the job, in order to establish the relative importance of individual, agency or local economic factors. Time 1 data are from a survey of California's public child welfare workers hired during a one-year period. Individual variables

were gender, ethnicity, age, country of origin, educational level of father, marital status, dependent children, income other than salary, educational degree, licensure, work experience and commitment to the career of child welfare. Factors that capture the relationships between individuals and their jobs include union membership, job satisfaction and self-efficacy. Agency variables are caseload size, time to full caseload, hours worked per week, amount and type of training received, job stressors, quality of supervision and administration, agency authority, job formalization, role conflict and congruence between individual values and the job. In addition, the survey measured intention to leave the job. This variable was used as an alternative outcome, in comparison with actually leaving the job.

Potential subjects for the study were all new public child welfare workers hired in California between April, 2000 and April, 2001. Data were collected from new workers in 44 counties. Over 1700 surveys were mailed. Thirty-two (6%) of the respondents had already left the agency at the time of data collection.

At the county level, available data were used as measures of local demographic and economic characteristics.

In addition, qualitative data were collected through an online focus group with a subset of the survey respondents.

Time 2 data consist of the turnover variable and were taken from county personnel records. Turnover data were collected for the entire population, not only those who completed the survey. In addition, we requested whatever qualitative data each county had regarding reasons for departure.

### *Limitations*

The effort to combine county level data in analyses with individual level data was largely unsuccessful due to measurement problems with county level data. We believe that the failure to establish the importance of these county level variables as predictors of turnover is due to the inadequacy of these measures, and that the primary research question of this study remains unanswered.

There was a response rate of only about 34%. The response rate varied across counties.

We were unable to achieve sufficient participation in the online focus group to derive meaningful findings.

The constraint of the two-year time limit of this study limits the applicability of these findings. In particular, it precluded the examination of the role of Title IV-E stipends in the decisions of new workers to remain on the job.

### *Findings*

#### *Turnover*

One hundred forty one survey respondents (27.2%) left the job. For those who left, mean and median time on the job was about 16 months. Those who stated their intention to leave at the time of initial data collection were more likely to leave than others. There are a significant number of workers still on the job who intend to leave.

Of the 1165 subjects on whom turnover data were received, 386 (33%) had left the job. There were 657 workers from 26 counties on which we obtained information on the reason for leaving the job. Of these, 240 (37%) had left the job. Sixteen (7% of 240) were fired or were unable to complete probation. Of 240, 26 (11%) transferred to other social service departments in the same county. Eight departees took similar positions in other nearby counties. Two of these were subsequently rehired by the same department of the same county. Eleven (5%) moved out

of the area; eight went back to school; six reported leaving for personal reasons, such as pregnancy. It is evident that worker turnover is not a single undesirable outcome. The biggest reported category of turnover - transfer and promotion within the same county - cannot be regarded as a negative event. The career paths of those leaving for personal reasons cannot be predicted, but many are likely to return to social work at some time in some capacity. The only truly negative outcomes are those who did not complete probation, or those few who left the field of social services all together.

### *Descriptive*

Fifteen per cent of the respondents were male, 58% White, 18% Latino, 11% African-American, 7% Asian, and 5% Other (Bi-racial). Fourteen per cent of the respondents were born abroad; 55% had a father with some college. Forty-eight per cent were married or living with a partner, 31% never married, and 21% divorced, separated or widowed. Forty-four per cent of the respondents reported having at least one dependent child living with them. Thirty-seven per cent of respondents had an MSW, 19% an MA, and 10% a BSW. Few (4%) had a clinical license, while 10% were under supervision for getting a license. Twelve per cent were in school at the time of the survey. The mean age for the sample was 35 years; the mean amount of work experience was 12 years; and the mean amount of household monthly income in addition to salary was \$1840. Seventy-nine per cent of the respondents were union members.

The average monthly salary was \$3172. Average caseload size was about 30 children; workers put in an average of almost 45 hours of work per week; and they reported spending about 52% of their work time doing paperwork. Most (70%) had taken the Core Academy and at least one Regional Training course (59%).

Respondents reported high levels of peer support and quality of supervision, though lower levels on quality of administration. Only medium amounts of role conflict and work formalization, and relatively low amounts of agency authority were reported.

Respondents reported a high level of commitment to the field of child welfare. Generally, respondents were satisfied with their jobs. They were least satisfied with the workload and most satisfied with job flexibility. Respondents reported very high levels of feelings of self-efficacy.

#### *Predictors of leaving the job*

Factors that workers bring with them to the job, i.e., gender, ethnicity, family background, education and work experience, are not as a group very strong predictors of leaving the job. Attitudes of individuals toward the job do not predict actual turnover. Job and agency characteristics as a set of variables do a better job of predicting turnover than individual and attitude factors.

Latinos and Asians are more likely to remain on the job than Whites and African-Americans.

Divorced or separated workers are more likely to remain on the job than married workers, but the same is not true for workers who were never married.

Workers who report more general job satisfaction are more likely to remain on the job, while other job satisfaction scales are not predictive of turnover.

While actual caseload size is not related to remaining on job, an unexpected and very useful conclusion from this study is that the more slowly new workers are assigned to full caseloads, the more likely they are to remain on the job.

Another unexpected, and unexplained, conclusion is that the presence of stressful job conditions is correlated with remaining on the job.

While individual salaries were not related to turnover, high salaries for child social workers at the county level were associated with leaving the job.

Workers in more densely populated counties were less likely to leave the job.

*Predictors of intention to leave the job*

Attitudes of individuals toward the job are more predictive of intending to leave the job than of actually leaving the job.

Compared to MSWs, workers with BAs are more likely to intend to remain on the job.

Workers with high levels of commitment to the field of child welfare are likely to intend to remain on the job.

Workers who report more general job satisfaction are likely to intend to remain on the job, while other job satisfaction scales are not predictive of intending to remain on the job.

Child welfare workers who perceive better local job opportunities are likely to intend to leave the job.