The Role of Supervision in the Retention of Public Child Welfare Workers

Susan E. Jacquet PhD, Sherrill J. Clark ACSW, PhD, Jennifer L. Morazes MDiv & Rebecca Withers MSW

To cite this article: Susan E. Jacquet PhD, Sherrill J. Clark ACSW, PhD, Jennifer L. Morazes MDiv & Rebecca Withers MSW (2008) The Role of Supervision in the Retention of Public Child Welfare Workers, Journal of Public Child Welfare, 1:3, 27-54, DOI: 10.1300/J479v01n03_03
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J479v01n03_03

Published online: 22 Sep 2008.

Article views: 145

View related articles

Citing articles: 11 View citing articles
The Role of Supervision in the Retention of Public Child Welfare Workers

Susan E. Jacquet
Sherrill J. Clark
Jennifer L. Morazes
Rebecca Withers

ABSTRACT. Contrary to common belief, having a manageable caseload size may not be critical to the retention of child welfare MSW social workers. In this study of the retention of 765 title IV-E MSWs in public child welfare, support from supervisors emerged as a pivotal factor in employee retention. With analyses regressing retention and intent to leave public child welfare agencies, support from supervisors emerged as a predictor, but caseload size did not. The preliminary findings of qualitative interviews corroborated these results. This study corroborates literature indicating that support from supervisors enhances retention of specially trained child welfare workers. doi:10.1300/J479v01n03_03

KEYWORDS. Retention, intent to leave, supervision, child welfare, caseload
High employee turnover rates continue to plague social services, including the public child welfare system. The national annual turnover rate for child protective services workers increased from 19% in 2000 (Child Welfare League of America, 2001) to 22.1% in 2004 (American Public Human Services Association of America, 2005). Research on retention of social workers in child welfare has been connected to several factors, such as the match between the mission of an agency and the philosophy of workers in regard to intervention methods, the goodness of fit between the agency and the employee’s skills, interests, and job responsibilities, and the level of personal investment of the employee (Rycraft, 1994). Retention has also been associated with job satisfaction in relation to structural features of the workplace, job stressors, and professional identification (Landsman, 2001), and a lack of opportunity for change within the department when a worker feels burned out (Samantrai, 1992). Some of the strongest predictors of retention, however, stem from organizational or job-based characteristics, rather than from personal factors (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett & Millar, 2001).

**RETENTION, INTENT TO LEAVE, AND SUPERVISION**

In any discussion on turnover, both the actual retention of child welfare workers and their intention to leave employment in child welfare need to be addressed. Retention signifies workers’ decisions about staying in or leaving a child welfare agency. Intention to leave denotes whether or not workers have considered leaving. This study focused on how supervision relates to both retention in and intention to leave public child welfare agencies for specially trained title IV-E MSWs. The study participants were all MSWs who graduated from universities in the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) consortium. All participants had completed their work obligation in public child welfare in California county agencies.

While retention of public child welfare workers can be affected by a number of factors, supervision appears to play a key role in whether or not an employee chooses to remain at an agency. Studies have linked retention to the degree of support from a supervisor (Landsman, 2001; Rycraft, 1994; US General Accounting Office, 2003), an unsatisfactory relationship with immediate supervisor (Samantrai, 1992), and how sympathetic a supervisor seemed toward the employee (Samantrai, 1992). Other studies have shown that perceived supervisory support and
professional commitment are associated with retention (Ellis, Ellett, & DeWeaver, 2006; Smith, 2005), particularly for new employees (Ellett & Millar, 2004). Supervisors have also identified the importance of supervision to retention (Kleinpeter, Pasztor, & Telles-Rogers, 2003). Similar results have been found regarding child welfare workers’ intentions to leave an agency. The most common factors related to workers’ decisions about leaving include, lack of satisfaction with the job (Freund, 2005), stress and burnout, and lack of support from a supervisor or the agency (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Freund (2005) also found that lack of commitment to the organization was associated with intention to leave an agency. In a recent qualitative study by Westbrook, Ellis and Ellett (2006), public child welfare workers who had worked in agencies for at least eight years spoke about the need for personal and professional support from supervisors, particularly as a buffer between their work and the demands and criticisms of the agency.

Due to the stressful nature of work in public child welfare, supervisors must be especially sensitive to employee needs. There are specific supervisory characteristics that workers are likely to perceive as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. In a qualitative study in Australia, Wagner, van Reyk and Spence (2001) reported that the main factors contributing to job satisfaction related to supervision/management were: commitment to regular and effective supervision; group supervision; supervision as a means of personal and professional development; assistance with workload, flexible hours, and stress management; implementation of policies and procedures that assist staff; assurance of back-up and accountability; and occasional rewards and expert advice. The contributors to low job satisfaction regarding supervision included: lack of access to and support from supervisors/managers, lack of priority given to supervision, and lack of distinction between debriefing and professional supervision. Rycraft (1994) found that caseworkers preferred supervisors to be consultants and guides rather than instructors and monitors. Some of the main qualities that caseworkers stated that they valued in a supervisor were accessibility, knowledge of the system and of casework practice, management and leadership skills, and mainly, support.

A shortage of trained child welfare workers to replace those who leave agencies compounds retention. In 2001 and 2002 a series of state legislative hearings in California focused on the severe shortage of social workers, including child welfare workers. Results of the hearings revealed an estimated need for 3,400 additional social workers (more than 50% of the workforce at that time) in California’s ten largest county child welfare agencies. Only 25% of child welfare social workers in the
The year 2000 had an MSW degree, which raised additional concerns about the workforce (Aroner & Deichert, 2002). In 2004, 36% of child welfare workers who responded to the California Workforce Survey had MSW degrees, but the percentage varied widely by county across the state (Clark & Fulcher, 2005).

**RETENTION AND CASELOAD**

Worker shortage, high caseload size, and retention, go hand in hand in the child welfare system. When a caseworker leaves, the number of clients is distributed among fewer workers, resulting in high caseloads for everyone. In response to the concerns about the shortage of child welfare workers in California, the state of California passed Senate Bill (SB) 2030 that required an evaluation of workloads of child welfare staff and budgeting issues. The resulting study (State of California, 2003) found that caseloads for California child welfare workers were twice those of recommended levels. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recommends no more than 17 ongoing cases per social worker (CWLA, 1999). The Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (2005) review of retention and turnover in child welfare concluded that reasonable workload was among the predictors of retention. Other studies have resulted in similar findings (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005; United States General Accounting Office, 2003; North Carolina Division of Social Services, 1999).

Given that caseloads are higher in California than those recommended (State of California, 2003), a condition that likely affects all public child welfare workers, the amount of support workers get from supervisors may be the deciding factor in the decisions of child welfare workers to remain or leave employment in child welfare. From a social exchange perspective (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the relationship between public child welfare social workers and their supervisors can be deemed as interdependent. Supervisors rely on workers to provide services to children and families, and workers rely on their supervisors for support and guidance to carry out this work. Workers who receive personal support from their supervisors may weigh this benefit against the cost of leaving the agency, may be less likely to seek alternative employment, and may be more likely to develop a personal/professional commitment to the agency. When supervisors provide support, help, and a positive environment for child welfare workers, the workers may be more likely to
remain with the agency and develop a sense of professional and organizational commitment regardless of the size of their caseload.

**CALIFORNIA SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION CENTER**

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act is a federal program for the maintenance of children in out-of-home care and for training of those who provide services to them (Zlotnik & Cornelius, 2000). In an effort to improve child welfare services for children in out-of-home care and their families, the title IV-E federal training funds are applied to training child welfare workers to work with children and their families in foster care. The title IV-E training funds support students with stipends or travel, tuition, and books. They also support infrastructure such as, curriculum development, teaching personnel, evaluation, and field instructional opportunities (Zlotnik, 2001). The title IV-E MSW training program of the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) was created in 1989 with a mission to promote a partnership between the schools of social work, public human service agencies, and other related professional organizations to assure effective, culturally competent service delivery to people of California (California Social Work Education Center, 1999). The CalSWEC IV-E program seeks to do this by increasing: (1) the numbers of current county/state child welfare workers to return to school to obtain their MSWs; (2) retention among public child welfare workers; and (3) the ethnic proportion of child welfare workers who represent the children and families who use this system.

CalSWEC is a consortium of California’s accredited social work/welfare graduate schools, public human service agencies, and other related professional organizations. Beginning in 1993 and continuing each year with funding from the federal title IV-E grant, CalSWEC has offered stipends to MSW students at schools participating in the consortium (currently 18 universities). By virtue of a contractual agreement, upon graduation, the MSWs who receive title IV-E stipends from CalSWEC are required to work in an MSW level position at a public child welfare (county or state) or tribal agency for a period of time at least equal to the period for which they received support.

Within six months to one year after completion of the contractual work obligation in public child welfare, CalSWEC mails the title IV-E MSW graduates a paper survey to examine the factors that may contribute to whether or not the MSWs remain in public child welfare beyond their work obligation period. The survey participants are also invited to
complete a phone interview in which they provide qualitative information about their work experiences in child welfare. Data from both the survey and the interviews are included in this study.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

In this study we wanted to explore whether indeed perceived supportive supervision contributes to retention in a significant way. In addition we examined whether supportive supervision predicts retention over and above other factors that have been associated with retention such as size of caseload. The research questions framing this study were as follows:

- Do perceptions of support from supervisors predict whether or not IV-E MSW child welfare workers remain with their agencies after they complete their contractual work obligation in public child welfare?
- Do IV-E MSW child welfare workers’ perceptions of support from supervisors predict intentions to leave (i.e., thoughts about leaving) the agency?
- Do perceptions of support from supervisors predict both retention and intent to leave more than do perceptions of support from others (i.e., peers, family, and friends)?
- Do perceptions of support from supervisors predict both retention and intent to leave more than do caseload size and other variables regarding clients?
- Do other factors related to caseload size and supportive supervision predict retention?

In an earlier analysis of these data but with a smaller sample of participants (n = 235), Dickinson and Perry (2002) used a slightly different grouping in their analysis than the one used in this study. They grouped together participants who had left their agencies with those who said they would have left (the variable used for *intent to leave* in this study), and compared that group with the remaining participants who were still at their agencies. They found that those who left and those who would have left rated both co-workers and supervisors significantly lower on support variables than did those who had stayed with their agencies.

While Dickinson and Perry’s study showed that greater perceived support from supervisors was associated with the retention of the IV-E MSWs, the current study goes further by using a larger (n = 765) and more diverse
sample. The larger sample in this study allows for a test of retention (those who left and those who stayed) separately from intent to leave (those who would have left, would not have left, or were not sure). Like Dickinson and Perry, this study not only considered other support systems such as peers, family and friends, but also examined size of caseload, and participant’s satisfaction with these items, all in relation to retention and intent to leave.

METHODS

This is an ongoing study of the retention of the CalSWEC title IV-E MSWs who have completed their work obligation in public child welfare. At that time the MSWs are no longer under contractual obligation and can freely choose whether to stay or leave. This is the point that was selected to determine the retention rate of the CalSWEC MSWs. Within 6 months to one year after the CalSWEC MSWs complete their contractual work obligation they are mailed the self-administered survey instrument via postal service. The study was reviewed by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (C.P.H.S.) and found to provide necessary protections for participants.

Sample

From May 1996 through April 2005, a total of 1,498 CalSWEC MSWs who had completed their work requirement were mailed the retention survey questionnaire. As of September 2005, 765 MSWs (51.1%) had responded to the survey; 435 of the survey participants (56.8%) had agreed to a telephone interview; and 387 of the interviews had been completed, transcribed, and analyzed. Because this is an ongoing study tracking and recruiting of survey non-responders and those persons who were not located is an ongoing process. The data on participants in this study, however, comprise a completed block of data. Future studies of these data may include additional participants, as more CalSWEC MSWs complete their work obligations and respond to the survey.

Measures

The mailed survey consisted of questions related to participants’ child welfare work experiences, work conditions, and demographic information. The work experiences and work conditions sections included questions
about the number of children comprising caseloads, satisfaction with caseload size, perceptions of the work environment and social support systems, and other questions not relevant to this study.

Retention and Intent to Leave. The retention dependent variable for this study was based on the question, “Are you currently employed in the same agency where you worked when you completed your employment payback?” The intent to leave dependent variable was based on the question, “If you were not contractually obligated to remain in public child welfare . . . would you have left or considered leaving public child welfare earlier,” with responses of (1) (yes), (2) (unsure) and (3) (no). All survey participants had completed their year for year work obligation period at the time that they filled out the survey.

Support Systems. The independent variables used in this study included measures of support systems. Participants used a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true) to rate five support systems using the same three questions. The five support systems were: (1) Immediate supervisor, (2) Other supervisors/managers at work, (3) Peers at work, (4) Friends and relatives, and (5) Spouse or partner. With each of the support systems in mind, participants rated the how true the following questions were: (1) How much can/did you rely on the following people when things get/got tough at work?” (2) How willing are/were each of the following people to listen to your work-related problems?” and (3) “How helpful are/were each of the following people to you in getting your job done?” The last question asked only about participants’ immediate supervisor, other supervisors/managers, and co-workers, and not about spouse or partner, or friends and relatives. The support system, “Other supervisors/managers at work,” was added to the survey in the year 2000.

In order to examine whether the five support systems were distinct variables, a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was computed on all of the support items together (i.e., one’s own immediate supervisors, other supervisors, co-workers, friends/relatives, and spouse/partner). Table 1 shows the item/component loadings (correlations), eigenvalues, and the percentage of variance explained by each of the four components extracted. Four components emerged from an unconstrained solution that converged in 5 iterations. The components paralleled the five support systems except for the support from friends/relatives and support from spouse/partner items that loaded highly on a single component. The item/component loadings for items defining each component were very strong (.70 to .88) and demonstrated a predictable patterning across components. The four components
extracted accounted for a total of 72.06% of the total variance in the solution.

Because some participants had missing values on some of the individual items, the item mean was substituted for missing values. The four variables identified with the unconstrained PCA and Cronbach Alpha reliabilities were as follows: immediate supervisor ($\alpha = .86$); co-workers ($\alpha = .77$); other supervisors ($\alpha = .85$); and support from friends/relatives ($\alpha = .80$).

Supportive Supervision. To further examine participants’ perceptions of supervisor support, participants rated six additional items based on a supervision questionnaire by Shulman (1982), which measured the degree of supportive supervision provided by participants’ immediate supervisors using a 4-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (very true). The items asked the participants to rate the following statements about their immediate supervisor: “My Supervisor . . . (1) is competent in doing his/her job, (2) is very concerned about the welfare of those under him/her, (3) gives information when I need it, (4) shows

### Table 1: Component Loadings and Eigenvalues for the 4-Component Principal Components Analyses of the Support System Items (n = 765)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Spouse/Friends</th>
<th>Immediate Supervisor</th>
<th>Other Supervisors</th>
<th>Peers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on immediate supervisor</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.881</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>-.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate supervisor listens</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.872</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate supervisor helps</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.832</td>
<td>.175</td>
<td>.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on other supervisors</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.868</td>
<td>-.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other supervisors listen</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.201</td>
<td>.832</td>
<td>.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other supervisors help</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td>.855</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on fellow workers</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow workers listen</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>.838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow workers help</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>.792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on friends/relatives</td>
<td>.768</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/relatives listen</td>
<td>.704</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance on spouse/partner</td>
<td>.830</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>-.075</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse/partner listens</td>
<td>.819</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>-.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Variance Explained</td>
<td>27.941</td>
<td>19.43</td>
<td>13.06</td>
<td>11.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
approval when I have done well, (5) is willing to help me complete difficult tasks, and (6) is warm and friendly when I have problems.” Another Principal Components Analysis was completed using these six items, and the same methods and criteria as those used for the support systems. Only one component was extracted, which explained 70% of the variance, and all item/component loadings exceeded .78. In a second analysis forcing a two-component solution, the majority of the items loaded above .50 on both components, which indicated an overlap in the components, and the solution was discarded. Again because of missing values on some of the items, the mean rather than the sum of the 6 items was computed to form a variable, which was labeled attitudes toward supervisor ($\alpha = .91$).

**Satisfaction with Supervisor.** Another measure of participants’ perceptions of support came from a satisfaction scale. A 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), participants rated their satisfaction with: (1) support and recognition from my supervisor, and (2) support and recognition from co-workers.

**Caseload Size.** To assess caseload size, participants answered the question, “On average, how many children are/were in your caseload?” which was named caseload. The number of children on participants’ caseloads ranged from 3 to 354 with a mean of 36.5, a standard deviation of 22.6, and a median of 35. A test for statistical outliers indicated 31 extreme cases with caseload size of over 70 children. Rather than eliminate all these cases from the analyses, only the seven participants who had an excess of 100 children in their caseloads, ranging from 120 to 354 children, were eliminated. All but one of the outliers had stayed with their agency.

**Perceptions of Caseload.** To measure perceptions of caseload, participants rated how they perceived the size of their caseload, with a 3-point Likert scale with 1 (too low), 2 (just about right), or 3 (too high). The variable was labeled perceptions of caseload size. Finally, participants used a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), to rate their satisfaction with the size of their caseloads, which was labeled satisfaction with caseload.

**Quantitative Data Analysis (Surveys)**

The dichotomous and categorical nature of the dependent variables, retention and intent to leave suggested the use of logistic regressions for the analyses, which allows both dependent and independent variables to be categorical. The independent variables used in the model included
the support variables except for *other supervisor/manager support*, which had been added to the questionnaire in year 2000. To include this variable would have eliminated all participants prior to year 2000, which amounts to just over one-third of the participants. As an aside, a test analysis showed that this variable did not significantly predict *retention* or *intent to leave*. The other independent variables included in the regression were: *caseload size, perceptions of caseload size, satisfaction with support from supervisor, satisfaction with support from co-workers*, and *satisfaction with caseload size*. Demographic variables that differed significantly by *retention* or *intent to leave* were also used in the regression analyses as control variables. Only concurrent county employee (i.e., those students working for public child welfare while they attended school) differed significantly and was used in the final analyses.

Both forward and backward stepwise logistic regression analyses were completed (using Wald’s statistic as a criterion), with a $P$-value for entry of 0.05, and a $P$-value for removal of 0.1. The forward stepwise method is the stricter of the two methods, but the backward elimination limits the possibility of failing to find a relationship due to suppressor effects.

**Qualitative Data Analyses (Telephone Interviews)**

After completing the survey measures, participants who wished to participate in a follow-up telephone interview voluntarily returned a signed consent form that was included with the survey. Interviews were completed over the phone by trained graduate student researchers and tape recorded with each participant’s permission. Participants could pass on any question. The intent of the interview was to expand on the survey with questions that focused more in depth on the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the title IV-E MSWs and their work in child welfare. The responses to each of the 18 interview questions were reviewed first by a single reader using content analysis. The reviewer coded all the responses to each question, according to trends that emerged from the initial review. This process was replicated for each interview question.

To check on coding consistency, a subset of 20 randomly selected interviews was subsequently coded by two additional readers. The Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD*IST) qualitative statistical software was used both as an organizing tool and to assist in analyzing frequencies of responses.
Transcripts and analyses were completed on 387 interviews. Of the 387 interviewees, 304 continued to work in public child welfare after their work obligation (Stayers) and 83 chose to leave employment in public child welfare (Leavers).

**RESULTS**

As of March 2005, a total of 2,732 CalSWEC title IV-E MSWs graduated from the participating CalSWEC universities. Of the 2,732 graduates, 1,497 had completed their contractual work obligations in child welfare and were eligible for participation in the study. Fewer than six percent of the graduates had defaulted on their contracts and were in monetary payback, and fewer than one percent had received medical or hardship waivers from their work obligations. With data used for monitoring and tracking all of the CalSWEC title IV-E students and graduates, a comparison of the survey responders (n = 765) with the non-responders (n = 732) on demographic variables of gender, race/ethnicity, year of enrollment in school, and concurrent student/county employment (the MSWs who worked for public child welfare agencies while going to school), yielded differences only for race/ethnicity. The statistically significant Chi-square \( \chi^2 (df = 5) = 39.76, p < .001 \) showed that more non-responders than would be expected left their agencies after completing their work obligation in public child welfare.

**Sample Demographics**

Table 2 shows the frequencies of the survey demographics for the entire sample and by the two dependent variables, retention and intent to leave. Of the 765 participants, women outnumbered the men by more than 4 to 1. Three participants’ data were missing for this variable. The group was racially/ethnically diverse. Only a little more than a third of the sample reported that they were Caucasians. The others were Hispanic/Latino, 24.7%; African Americans, 15.0%; Asian Americans, 9.8%; American Indians, 1.8%; and Multicultural/other ethnicity, 10.7%. Four participants failed to report ethnicity/race. During their graduate work, 254 of the participants (33.2%) were concurrently employed in county child welfare agencies while they attended school.

A total of 633 survey participants (82.7%) reported that at the time of the survey they were still with the child welfare agency in which they
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>$n$ (Missing)</th>
<th>Retention</th>
<th></th>
<th>$n$ (Missing)</th>
<th>Intent to Leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>Stayers</td>
<td>Leavers</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not Sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>765 (0)</td>
<td>633 (82.7%)</td>
<td>132 (17.3%)</td>
<td>695 (70)</td>
<td>356 (51.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study sample*</td>
<td>758 (0)</td>
<td>627 (82.7%)</td>
<td>131 (17.3%)</td>
<td>690 (68)</td>
<td>355 (51.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>755 (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>687 (71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>517 (82.5%)</td>
<td>110 (17.5%)</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>290 (51.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>108 (84.4%)</td>
<td>20 (15.6%)</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>64 (52.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>758 (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>690 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>100 (87.7%)</td>
<td>14 (12.3%)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>55 (53.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9 (64.3%)</td>
<td>5 (35.7%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5 (41.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>65 (87.8%)</td>
<td>9 (12.2%)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>35 (50.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>238 (83.8%)</td>
<td>46 (16.2%)</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>137 (53.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Mexican American</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>148 (79.6%)</td>
<td>38 (20.4%)</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>78 (45.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-cultural/Other</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>63 (76.8%)</td>
<td>19 (23.2%)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>42 (53.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent county employment</td>
<td>758 (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>690 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County employee</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>226 (89.7%)</td>
<td>26 (10.3%)</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>144 (61.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-employee</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>401 (79.2%)</td>
<td>105 (20.8%)</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>211 (46.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Outliers omitted ($n = 7$) for this and all remaining variables.
completed their payback work obligation. A total of 132 (17.3%) left their agencies after they completed their work requirement. Chi-square tests revealed no significant differences between those who stayed and those who left on demographic variables, except for concurrent county employee status \[\chi^2 (df = 1) = 13.12, p < .001\]. Cell by cell analyses showed that among participants who left their agency following their contractual work obligation, significantly fewer than expected had been county public child welfare employees during graduate school. Only that particular cell contributed to the statistical significance of the Chi-square.

Of the 765 survey participants, 356 (47%) responded no to intent to leave (i.e., they would not have left their agency if they had not been contractually bound), 116 (15%) responded not sure, and 223 (29%) responded yes (i.e., they would have left). About 10% \((n = 70)\) did not answer this question. On this variable participants did not differ on demographics except, again, for concurrent county employment status \[\chi^2 (df = 2) = 19.01, p < .001\]. Cell by cell analyses showed that significantly fewer concurrent county employees and significantly more non-county employees than expected reported that they would have left their agency, if not contractually bound. Conversely, significantly more concurrent county employees and significantly fewer non-county employees than expected reported that they would not have left their agency. Due to the significant Chi-squares for concurrent county employment, for both retention and intent to leave, this variable was included in the logistic regression analyses.

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of the independent variables by the dependent variables of retention and intent to leave. The subset of participants, whose caseloads numbered 100 or less, had a mean caseload of 35.05 children, a standard deviation of 15.7, and a median of 35. These caseloads are twice that of the CWLA recommended standard (CWLA, 1999). For the question on perceptions of caseload size, only 2% of participants reported that the number of children on their caseload was too low; 64% reported that it was too high; and 34% reported that it was just right.

**Predictors of Retention**

Results of the logistic regression analyses showed that in both the forward and backward stepwise regressions for retention, the variables remaining in the equation for the final model were support from supervisor,
TABLE 3. Means and Standard Deviations of Independent Variables by Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(Missing)</th>
<th>Retention</th>
<th>Intent to Leave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stayers</td>
<td>Leavers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children on caseload*</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>(102)</td>
<td>35.23 (15.61)</td>
<td>34.17 (16.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of caseload size</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>(46)</td>
<td>2.64 (0.51)</td>
<td>2.59 (0.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from supervisor</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>3.73 (1.21)</td>
<td>3.54 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from co-workers</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>3.86 (0.92)</td>
<td>3.81 (0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseload size</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>2.45 (1.23)</td>
<td>2.36 (1.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of paper/computer work</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>1.80 (0.97)</td>
<td>1.75 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from supervisor</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>3.24 (0.74)</td>
<td>3.07 (0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes toward supervisor</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>3.37 (0.66)</td>
<td>3.26 (0.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from other supervisors**</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>(271)</td>
<td>2.45 (0.80)</td>
<td>2.53 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from peers</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>3.46 (0.58)</td>
<td>3.50 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends/relatives</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>2.91 (0.79)</td>
<td>2.92 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Outliers omitted (n = 7) for this and all other variables.

**This item was added to the survey in 2000, which accounts for the smaller n, and it was not used in the analyses.
concurrent county employment and perceptions of caseload size. Table 4 includes the final model summary and significant Wald test statistics, which tests the significance of individual independent variables for the logistic regression for retention. The statistically significant Chi-square of the model indicates a good fit to the data, and the statistically non-significant Hosmer and Lemeshow, lack of fit test, also indicates that the model prediction does not significantly differ from the observed and that the model is therefore a good fit. The Cox and Snell R-square is a pseudo indicator of the amount of variance explained by the model.

With other variables held constant, a single unit increase in ratings of support from supervisor would mean the Odds Ratio for remaining at the payback agency was 1.46. Therefore, participants who rated their supervisor favorably were 1.46 times more likely to still be with their agency (or be Stayers) than those who rated their supervisors unfavorably. The Odds Ratio (OR) that a participant who was a county employee would stay with the payback agency was 2.26. County employees were 2.26 times more likely to be Stayers. However, for an incremental increase in perceptions of caseload size, the OR that one would stay with the agency was 1.44. Given that the higher rating means that the participant felt the caseload was too high, this finding is counterintuitive. The participants who felt that their caseload was too high were 1.44 times more likely to be Stayers.

TABLE 4. Final Binary Logistic Regression Model of CalSWEC Title IV-E MSWs’ Retention Status with Support Systems and Caseload Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Retention (Stayers vs. Leavers)</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Exp β&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>13.55***</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent county employment</td>
<td></td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>10.66***</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of caseload size</td>
<td></td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>8.21**</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall model evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td></td>
<td>307.90</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox and Snell R-square</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosmer and Lemeshow</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Odds Ratio.

**p < .01, ***p < .001.
Predictors of Intent to Leave

Somewhat similar results occurred with the logistic regression on intent to leave, using a multinomial logistic regression and the same independent variables with both forward entry and backward elimination methods. Table 5 includes the final model and the summary and Wald test statistics for intent to leave. In these analyses, the final equation for both methods included support from supervisor, and concurrent county employment, but in this regression satisfaction with caseload size was also in the model. The statistically significant Chi-square indicates that the model is a good fit to the data. The Cox and Snell R-Square and Nagelkerke R-Square are the pseudo indicators of the amount of variance explained by the model.

The three independent variables demonstrated strong statistical significance for those who would not have left versus those who would have left. For an incremental increase in support from supervisor, the OR that a person indicated that he or she would have stayed with his or her payback agency rather than leave was 1.65. That is, those who reported greater support from their supervisor were 1.65 times more likely to say that even if they had not been contractually bound to work in public child welfare they would have stayed with their agency and not left. The OR that a county employee would have stayed with the agency was 2.37; that is the county employees were 2.37 times more likely to report that they would have stayed rather than leave, if they had not been contractually bound. With a 1.46 OR, participants who reported greater satisfaction with caseload size were 1.46 times more likely to say they would have stayed with their agency than to say they would have left.

For those who were not sure versus those who would have left, satisfaction with caseload size and concurrent county employment were statistically significant. For every incremental increase in satisfaction with caseload size the OR that a participant indicated that he or she would be unsure about leaving rather than would have left was 1.25. The participants who reported greater satisfaction with caseload size were 1.25 times more likely to report that they were unsure that they would have stayed with their agency rather than reporting that they would have left. And the OR that a county employee would be unsure rather than would have left was 2.09; that is the county employees were 2.09 times more likely to say that they were unsure that they would leave their agency than that they would have left. For these two variables, it appears that without their contractual agreement, those who were not sure whether
TABLE 5. Final Multinomial Logistic Regression Model of CalSWEC Title IV-E MSWs’ Intent to Leave Status with Support Systems and Caseload Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Would Not Have Left vs. Would Have Left</th>
<th>Would Have Left vs. Not Sure</th>
<th>Not Sure vs. Would Not Have Left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Wald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>13.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent county employment</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>15.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with caseload size</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>19.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model Summary Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>58.23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox and Snell R-Square</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R-Square</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Odds Ratio.

\(p < .1, {p} < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.\)
they would have left were more closely aligned with those who would have stayed than they were with those who would have left. For participants who would not have left versus those who were not sure, however, support from supervisor only approached statistical significance and the other two variables were not statistically significant.

**Qualitative Analysis**

Preliminary findings of participants’ responses to the qualitative interviews corroborated the survey results for the participants who stayed with their agency and those who had left. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences in their payback agencies. Pertinent to this study, the questions in which the responses made reference to supervision, supervisors, or caseloads included: (1) the aspect of the job that they liked the most, (2) the aspect of the job that they liked the least, (3) to what extent they experienced role conflict in their job (4) why do you stay (asked of the Stayers), and (5) why did you leave (asked of the Leavers).

After coding responses, 37 different categories emerged as aspects of the job liked most by participants. A total of 54% of the Stayers and 66% of the Leavers mentioned children, and 46% of the Stayers, and 45% of the Leavers mentioned families. Supervision was mentioned by 10% of the Stayers and 8% of the Leavers.

In response to the question about the aspect of the job that the participants liked least, 36 different coded categories emerged. The Stayers listed time constraints (29% of the responses to this question), court (28%), paperwork (27%), and caseload (14%) most often. Stayers also mentioned both “lack of support” (6%) and “supervisor” (5%). Leavers listed the same top four with slightly different percentages, court (24% of the coded responses), caseload (20%), paperwork (18%), and time constraints (17%). A greater percentage of Leavers than Stayers, however, mentioned “supervisor” (14%) and “lack of support” (13%). One participant summed up the impact of supervision by stating “the job can be really good if you have a good supervisor, and it can be really bad if you don’t.”

In the comments from both Leavers and Stayers, high caseloads were mentioned. A Leaver chagrined, “Just the caseload size, it was just too overwhelming.” One of the Stayers noted the problem with caseloads that were too high:

In my agency all of us, us meaning front line workers, people who are working with the families, have just way too many cases, way...
too high a workload to provide adequate and effective or highly effective services. I just think it's impossible at this point, given what our caseload and workload is; I just honestly don't feel that we are providing the best possible services to our clients.

Another Stayer from a different agency mirrored these sentiments:

I’m always pretty pressed for time and one of the agency’s biggest goals and priorities as far as the casework, is that we get out to complete our visit, and we complete our court reports. There’s no focus, really, on the quality of those visits, no focus on the content of those reports. A lot of the time it’s just a rush to meet that deadline. In that rush that often means you often neglect . . . sometimes you’re just not able to do the practice and the theory. Sometimes that’s just not realistic.

Both Stayers and Leavers seemed overwhelmed by high caseloads and described the impact of high caseloads on the quality of their work.

For the first five years of the study from 1996 through 2000, participants were asked in the phone interviews to what extent they experienced role conflict in their job. Both Stayers and Leavers most often mentioned the conflict between their dual roles of investigator and advocate, which they often had to perform simultaneously. This was the type of response that the question was intended to elicit, that is, conflicting roles for social workers. However, among the Leavers who responded to this question, 26% mentioned “conflict with supervisor” as their response, which was twice the percentage of responses from Stayers (13%). This response dealt with conflict in general rather than role conflict per se.

Why the Stayers Remained and the Leavers Left

The two questions that comprised the core of the retention interview were “Why do you stay?” (asked of the Stayers) and “Why did you leave?” (asked of the Leavers). Among the coded responses of the Stayers, 33 different categories emerged. The response “enjoy the job” was mentioned most often (29% of the Stayers), and 7% of the Stayers mentioned “good supervisors.” When asked what the agency or university could do to encourage them to stay, 46 categories were coded from the responses to this question. Most often mentioned by the Stayers was lower caseloads (24% of the responses). Second most often mentioned by 18% of Stayers
was better support, and 13% of the Stayers said supervision/management could be improved. One participant noted the positive contribution of a supervisor, “Because of my supervisor I can be creative and unique in my interventions.”

Among the Leavers’ responses to the question of why they left their agency after their contractual obligation, 24 different categories emerged. The Leavers most often mentioned lack of support and respect (31% of the responses); 21% of the Leavers said management/supervision; and 16% said caseloads. A Leaver alleged that the reason for leaving was the supervisor by saying, “the thing that really lit a fire under me was a particularly bad supervisor.” Another declared, “My supervisor, um, needed a whipping horse, and I saw her go through four other people before she came to me, and uh, you know, there’s only so much you can put up with, and uh, and that was it.” Yet another Leaver pointed out that support from the organization and supervisor would have made a difference:

I think if I had had better supervision, I could have been convinced, maybe, to hang on. They just need to let people know when they are doing good work. They just don’t do that. It sounds kind of basic, but it actually makes a difference, I think. That’s when people are talking about sending out resumes and looking for other work. If you don’t feel like you matter to the unit or the agency as a whole, why stay? Because you are not going to get that kind of feedback from our clients; that’s not part of social work, so you have to get it somewhere.

**DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to explore whether perceived supportive supervision contributes to retention in a significant way, and whether supportive supervision predicts retention over and above other factors that have been associated with retention such as size of caseload. The results in this study concurred with other findings that child welfare caseloads were high. In this study the number of children on participants’ caseloads averaged 35 children, compared to the AB2030 statewide workload study recommendations of about half that (State of California, 2003), as well as CWLA recommended caseloads of no more than 12 active cases per month and 17 active families per social worker. However, caseloads for participants in this study were high for both
Stayers and Leavers, and caseload size did not predict participants’ retention or their intent to leave. Satisfaction with caseload size did predict intent to leave, and this prediction was in the expected direction. The higher the participants’ satisfaction with the size of their caseload, the less likely they were to report that they would have left their agencies if they had not been contractually bound to child welfare. Participants’ perceptions of the size of caseload also predicted retention, but not as one would expect. Participants who felt their caseloads were too high were more likely to be Stayers than Leavers. Although Stayers may have been more satisfied with the size of their caseloads, they may have been voicing a complaint about the current situation of the workload in general. That is, caseloads are just too high to do the work. In the qualitative study, the Stayers mentioned most often that lower caseloads would encourage them to stay and one of the Stayers explained why, “I have a high caseload and it does not allow me to do real social work, I spend most of my time doing paperwork, instead building a relationship with my clients.”

The Stayers may be expressing their professional commitment to the agency in a vocal way by indicating that their high caseloads doesn’t provide the time with their clients that they need. Ellis, Ellett, and DeWeaver (2006) found a positive relationship between human caring and intention to remain with child welfare, and the Stayers in our study may be exhibiting that human caring and professional commitment to their clients. Indeed, the majority of the interview participants in this study reported that the aspects of their job that they liked best were the children and the families. Commitment to clients may trip the issue of high caseloads.

The results in this study corroborate the Child Welfare League of America (2004) finding that supportive supervision is related to retention. We found that for the CalSWEC title IV-E MSWs, perceptions of good support from supervisors not only predicted retention and that they would have stayed if they hadn’t been contractually bound to work in child welfare, but supportive supervision also mattered more than caseload size. Having a supportive supervisor may increase tolerance for a large caseload. The rigors of heavy caseloads plagued both Stayers and Leavers, but our findings suggest that it is the support and guidance from supervisors that keeps them on the job. Support from supervisors may ameliorate the rigors of working with high caseloads.

Support from peers and family and friends did not predict retention in this study. However, a simple post hoc comparison of the means in Table 2 indicated that participants rated support from peers significantly
higher than that of supervisors \[ t(764) = 7.88, p < .001 \], yet support from co-workers did not predict retention \[ t(763) = 0.43, p = .67 \] or intent to leave \[ F(2,692) = 1.92, p = .15 \] child welfare. Peer support is likely to provide reassurances for both Stayers and Leavers, but does not replace the guidance and mentoring that workers receive from supportive supervisors, and doesn’t make a difference in whether the MSWs stay in child welfare.

A similar post hoc comparison of means revealed that participants rated support from immediate supervisors significantly higher than that of other supervisors \[ t(493) = 19.8, p < .001 \], yet support from other supervisors did not differ between those who stayed and those who left public child welfare \[ t(492) = 0.38, p = .71 \]. Interestingly, participants did differ in ratings of other supervisors for intent to leave child welfare \[ F(2,478) = 3.48, p < .05 \]. The differences occurred between those who would have stayed and those who would have left, if they had not been contractually bound. This variable was not in the logistic regression analyses because the item was not part of the survey for the first 5 years, and would have reduced the sample by half.

The only demographic characteristic which proved to be statistically significant in a Chi-square distribution of Leavers and Stayers was concurrent county employment status (participants who were county employees when they entered the MSW program), and this variable was included in the analyses. Those IV-E MSWs who were county employees were more likely to stay with child welfare beyond their contractual period than were those who had not worked in child welfare while they were in school. It is likely that the title IV-E MSWs who were already working in child welfare had a realistic sense of what the work was like, were more committed to the families they served or to child welfare. They also may have entered graduate school for additional education to better perform the tasks involved in child welfare. In response to the interview question, “Would you recommend public child welfare services to others looking for employment in social work?” one of the Stayers responded this way, “I would recommend it to the right person. And to a person who really knew what they were getting themselves into.” The participants who were working in public child welfare before and during their MSW programs did know about the difficulties and challenges and were therefore more likely to stay.

There are limitations that mitigate the results of this study. The participants are CalSWEC title IV-E MSW child welfare workers in California who have received specialized education from one of several graduate schools. All the schools in the CalSWEC consortium agree to incorporate
special student learning experiences into their curriculum, but there is no way to ensure that the curriculum is delivered in the same way at each school. We therefore cannot directly attribute these results to the specialized training the graduates received. Nor can the results be generalized to a wider sample of child welfare workers. Results may differ for those who have participated in a different title IV-E program, who have not participated in any title IV-E program, or who hold other degrees. However, our findings do corroborate results from other studies of child welfare workers who were not specifically title IV-E MSWs, yet the studies have demonstrated that supervision is a key factor in retention (see, for example, Kleinpeter, Pasztor, & Telles-Rogers, 2003; Landsman, 2001; Rycraft, 1994; Smith, 2005; US General Accounting Office, 2003).

The response rate, which was just over 50%, may be a limitation to the findings if the responders differed from the non-responders. It is possible that those who chose to respond to the survey had more positive perceptions of their supervisors, their jobs, or their graduate school experience than did those who did not respond to the survey. Conversely, because more Leavers chose not to respond to the survey, the results might possibly prove to be stronger with the full complement of eligible IV-E MSWs. This would likely be true if the non-responders had perceptions similar to the responders.

Leavers who did respond may have had more extreme experiences and wished to express their perceptions. This may be especially the case for those who agreed to the phone interviews. The proportion of Leavers in the interviews was higher than the proportion of Leavers among the survey participants, and many of those who were interviewed had negative comments about their supervisors. Participants may also have had multiple supervisors over the course of their work obligation period, which could change the perceptions of support from supervisors in either positive or negative directions. Despite the limitations of this study the results can provide valuable information to the field of public child welfare.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Bruce and Austin (2000) developed a comprehensive framework for supervision in social work based on a collection of texts that outline the
roles for supervisors and emphasize productive approaches to social work supervision. Their framework includes supportive, educational, and administrative functions. Our results on supportive supervision confirm the importance for a framework on effective supervisory practices for supervisor/worker relationships. Our findings also indicate that support from supervisors plays a critical role in the retention of child welfare MSWs.

To encourage the retention of child welfare social workers, child welfare agencies could focus resources on helping supervisors improve their supportive skills when dealing with their supervisees. Child welfare agencies could improve training for supervisors, lower worker to supervisor ratios, and make other organizational changes, such as reducing the caseloads for workers. Another step for child welfare agencies would be to determine what types of supervision facilitate workers’ needs and what kinds of training supervisors need to enhance their work. One of the resources for learning about what constitutes quality supervision could come from what workers suggest. As one of the Stayers in this study reported in the interview:

I think more emphasis needs to be . . . listening to people that are out there working with the population that we’re serving, I think sometimes supervisors and upper-management can lose perspective on that, and they need to include the line workers in more of the policy and/or decisions that they’re creating or making on behalf of clients. I think they lose perspective because they’re not the actual on-line worker, and they need to . . . consider social workers that are on the line [and their] feelings, thoughts, concerns.

Future research that might benefit child welfare agencies could test for differences in the kinds of supervisory support needed by new workers and more experienced workers. Within the core supportive, educational, and administration functions of supervision as described by Bruce and Austin (2000), it might also be important to make the distinction between what new supervisors and experienced supervisors might want and need in the way of support and training to help them do their jobs. Future research would also be helpful to ascertain what it is about supportive supervision that enables workers to stay despite high caseloads. If Leavers argue that they cannot do the things they learned as best practice in social work because of high caseloads, then what enables Stayers to persist in spite of it all? Is it a cost/benefits situation as social exchange theory suggests (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959)? Do Stayers
have stronger professional commitments and human caring than the Leavers as Ellis, Ellett, and DeWeaver (2006) have shown, or are there other variables that serve to strengthen the holding power of the child welfare organization for Stayers? When asked whether the participant would recommend child welfare as a career option, one of the Stayers responded this way, “I think it takes a unique person to do this job . . . so I would recommend it to the right person . . . a person who really knew what they were getting themselves into.” It appears that the Stayers in this study exhibit that “unique” quality, or perhaps it is merely the commitment necessary for work in public child welfare. Then when supervisors provide support, help, and a positive environment, workers’ commitment is strengthened and they remain with child welfare regardless of the size of their caseload.

REFERENCES


RECEIVED: 04/15/05
REVISED: 04/16/07
ACCEPTED: 04/22/07

doi:10.1300/J479v01n03_03