



ARTICLE

## Views of Specially-trained Child Welfare Social Workers

A Qualitative Study of their Motivations, Perceptions, and Retention

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the similarities and differences between those who choose to remain in public child welfare (stayers) and those who leave (leavers) in a sample of Title IV-E MSW graduates. Interview transcripts from a self-selected sample of 386 specially-trained, MSW-level child welfare workers were thematically coded to compare and contrast the motivations, perceptions and experiences of 304 stayers and 82 leavers over a 10-year data collection period. Results showed that dedication to children and families and social work values does not differ between stayers and leavers. Overall, respondents raised a central issue of disconnection between educational experiences and agency realities. While all participants acknowledged workload and stress as job challenges, stayers illustrated experiences that buffered job pressures, particularly encounters with supportive supervisors. Leavers tended not to experience these buffers, and expressed more difficulty in balancing their professional and personal lives.

### KEY WORDS:

motivation  
public child welfare workers  
retention  
social workers  
Title IV-E Training

## INTRODUCTION

The declared intent of public child welfare is to provide safety, permanency, and well-being for children. However, lack of skilled staff and worker turnover can result in incomplete and inaccurate assessments and delays in service – reasons often cited for adverse outcomes (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2006). Conversely, it is posited that focusing on recruitment and retention of qualified workers will reduce adverse outcomes and improve service quality (Bernotavicz, 2006; US General Accounting Office [US GAO], 2003). For these reasons, the training and retention of public child welfare workers are national concerns (American Public Human Services Association, Alliance for Children and Families, and Child Welfare League of America, 2001; Cyphers, 2001).

One strategy for addressing training and retention of skilled child welfare workers has been the formation of university-agency partnerships (Zlotnik, 2002). An example of one such effort at partnership is California's Title IV-E program. Title IV-E refers to this section of the United States' Social Security Act; this policy provides federal reimbursement to states for training and education in services for foster children. As such, the Title IV-E program implemented in California educates MSW-level social workers interested in public child welfare careers. An undergraduate-level Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program supported by Title IV-E was also recently implemented in 2004 on a limited basis in this state; plans to follow and survey these graduates have not yet been finalized. This study includes MSW-level graduates only. The Master of Social Work (MSW) is a master's degree in social work received from a graduate school that has been approved by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the national organization responsible for accreditation. The MSW requires two years of graduate study, including fieldwork.

The Title IV-E program's curriculum is designed around specific competencies deemed as important values, knowledge and skills for child welfare workers. To fulfill the requirement of this state's Title IV-E stipends, participants must finish a year-for-year work obligation period in public child welfare after completion of their master's degree in social work. By investing in a selected graduate student population and exposing them to a curriculum tailored around child welfare competencies, the aim of this program is to ensure that motivated, skilled, diverse, and committed MSW graduates will improve practice outcomes and remain employed in the field over the long term, ideally advancing to supervisory roles in the field.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the narratives of California's Title IV-E MSW graduates who have completed their work obligation in order to compare and contrast the motivations, perceptions and experiences of those

who stayed (stayers) and those who chose to leave (leavers). While wide-ranging research efforts have described various factors involved in job retention and public child welfare retention particularly, fewer studies have focused upon Title IV-E graduates. The qualitative methodology employed here allowed the specially-trained graduates to 'speak for themselves', elucidating the causes of preventable turnover in public child welfare. Due to the significant investment of resources in the Title IV-E program partnerships for building skills, increasing diversity, and improving retention in the public child welfare field, the perspective of the graduates themselves on their MSW preparation and organizational experiences is key to improving and maintaining high-quality practice, to strengthening the staying power of the workforce, and to evaluating and improving graduate-level social work curricula.

## BACKGROUND

### Worker Turnover and Retention

#### *The Importance of Retention in Public Child Welfare*

Multiple factors contribute to high turnover rates, including negative public perceptions of the field due to high-profile cases in the media, the difficulties of servicing court-mandated and therefore involuntary clients, the complex nature of the work, high caseloads, inadequate supervision, low pay, lack of administrative support, and worker burnout (Ellett et al., 2007). Turnover impacts the quality of outcomes for children and families due to reduced client interaction and delayed investigations (Bernotavicz, 2006; US GAO, 2003). The current research offers many factors that appear to influence worker retention. Broadly, the factors contributing to retention in the field of public child welfare can be categorized into those functioning on a personal level and those operating on an organizational level. Factors on both of these levels can co-exist and impact each other (Zlotnik et al., 2005).

#### *Personal Factors*

The literature identifies positive personal factors that contribute to retention in the field, including job satisfaction, professional and organizational commitment, previous work experience, and education (Landsman, 2001; Zlotnik et al., 2005). Improving levels of job satisfaction can positively impact organizational commitment (Landsman, 2001; Weaver et al., 2007). Factors related to job satisfaction include autonomy, compensation, and support of work-life balance (Arches, 1991; Smith, 2005). Arches (1991) noted that workers are most satisfied when they have autonomy to do their jobs and do not perceive themselves as being stifled by the bureaucracy or limited by funding sources. Commitment is greater for workers who perceive the organization's goals and values to match well with their own (Bernotavicz, 2006; Freund, 2005).

Conversely, negative personal level factors impacting the decision to leave public child welfare include burnout (specifically emotional exhaustion), conflict and stress (Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research [IASWR], 2005; Zlotnik et al., 2005). Feeling undervalued by the organization also contributes to turnover (Ellett et al., 2007). Issues of stress and burnout have been related to the organizational factors of quality of supervision and workload (Daley, 1979; Koeske and Koeske, 1989).

#### *Organizational Factors*

On an organizational level, compensation, workload, supervision, coworker relationships, opportunities to advance and the level of agency commitment to employees have been described as important retention dimensions (Bernotavicz, 2006; Ellett et al., 2007). Workload demand had a pronounced effect on stress and burnout for social workers whose social supports were insufficient and whose sense of accomplishment with their clients was lacking (Koeske and Koeske, 1989). Weaver et al. (2007) found that new workers who were initially given a full caseload were more likely to leave than those who were given time to gradually build their caseload.

Regarding supervision, Samantrai (1992) found that poor relationships with immediate supervisors distinguished between those workers who left the agency and those who stayed. Furthermore, Kleinpeter et al. (2003), found that quality supervision is integral to worker retention; workers used descriptors such as 'empathetic' and 'motivational' to describe positive supervisor qualities. In fact, supervision has been found in two states to have more of an impact in retention than workload and caseload (Ellett and Millar, 2004; Jacquet et al., 2007). Landsman (2001) indicated that support from one's immediate supervisor and opportunities for advancement have significant effects on job satisfaction, which in turn affects organizational commitment. One review of the retention literature indicates that supervisor support and workload are the most commonly cited agency-level factors for retention (IASWR, 2005).

#### *Title IV-E Program Studies*

The Title IV-E Program remains the primary intervention strategy for retaining skilled public child welfare workers in the USA. Although researchers have focused more upon public child welfare retention generally rather than specifically for Title IV-E graduates, Zlotnik and colleagues (2005) report that this program is the most-studied means of improving retention in public child welfare. Students and graduates in Title IV-E-funded programs in Louisiana (Gansle and Ellett, 2002), Texas (Brown et al., 2002), California (Jones, 2002), Oklahoma (Rosenthal and Waters, 2006), and Minnesota (Robin and Hollister, 2002) have been evaluated for dimensions such as student motivation for entering the field, skill acquisition and retention.

Studies indicate promising results regarding high rates of retention for Title IV-E graduates in the child welfare field as well as longer tenures than non-Title IV-E graduates (Jones, 2002; Robin and Hollister, 2002; Rosenthal and Waters, 2006). Olson and Sutton (2003) found commitment to children and families to be a significant factor in retention. Furthermore, Jacquet et al. (2007) and Dickinson and Perry (2002) also identified supervisory support as an important organizational component for the retention of Title IV-E graduates, even mitigating the effects of a high caseload.

### *Relevant Qualitative Studies*

Recent articles demonstrate that qualitative methods are useful for analyzing the attitudes, characteristics and experiences of public child welfare workers and parents encountering the child welfare system (Coleman and Clark, 2003; Ellett et al., 2007; Maiter et al., 2006; Meadows and Dodendorf, 1999; Palmer et al., 2006; Zell, 2006). Palmer et al. (2006) employed an exploratory qualitative design in order to elicit the thoughts, feelings and emotions of parents who had experienced the child welfare system, recognizing that accessing the details of these affective qualities may not have been possible with a quantitative design. In Coleman and Clark (2003), 37 focus groups conducted over four years with 550 Title IV-E MSW students were qualitatively analyzed for relevant themes. Current MSW students identified the emotional challenge of child welfare work as the strongest theme, and students described different ways of coping with these challenges (Coleman and Clark, 2003). Similarly, Ellett et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study comprising 58 focus groups with 369 professionals working in public child welfare; their study particularly addressed retention by illustrating personal and organizational dimensions of employee turnover through the narratives of the participants. Personal-level factors in employee turnover included feeling undervalued by the organization, intrusion of the job into one's family life and fear of liability, while organizational-level factors important to turnover included issues of excessive workload, inconsistent agency practices and poor perceived leadership. Factors identified as relevant to retention included supportive supervision on the organizational level and the 'desire to make a difference' on the personal level (Ellett et al., 2007). The present article intends to confirm and build upon these qualitative studies by focusing upon Title IV-E graduates specifically in a larger, longer-term qualitative retention study.

## **METHOD**

### **Conceptual Framework for Study Design**

The qualitative study of Title IV-E graduates is an integral part of understanding retention in public child welfare, as it provides the opportunity for a

contextually-based method consistent with subtle realist ontology (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This approach seeks to understand the profession from the perspective of the graduates themselves, identifying themes that comprise the meaning and priorities of their experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Maiter et al., 2006; Miller and Crabtree, 1999). This viewpoint supports the investigation of key questions within a given clinical context, to ascertain 'what makes a difference' to practitioners as well as care recipients in the examination of a practice (Malterud, 1999). Interview questions derived from existing knowledge about the field are used to form the broad categories for analysis. Consistent with a framework approach, participant responses are then organized into themes defined by their responses, allowing for relevant observations (Attride-Stirling, 2007; Ritchie et al., 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

### **Study Participants**

The following qualitative study was part of an ongoing inquiry regarding the retention of California's Title IV-E MSW graduates who have completed their work obligation in public child welfare. Each year, new Title IV-E MSW students graduate and find employment in public child welfare agencies. After completion of their work obligation, the graduates can freely choose whether to stay or leave public child welfare. This is the point, after their work obligation period is complete, that is selected to classify the retention status of Title IV-E MSW graduates into stayers and leavers. The researchers mailed the self-administered survey instrument via postal service within six months to one year after each new cohort of graduates completed their work obligation. At the end of the survey instrument, respondents voluntarily signed and returned a letter of consent if they wished to participate in a follow-up interview. Due to the travel distances involved and the number of participants in the retention research, budget constraints impeded the ability to conduct in-person or multiple interviews.

### **Data Collection**

The 18-question interview was constructed to focus on graduates' thoughts, feelings and experiences; it is included in Table 1.

Participation in the interview was voluntary, and participants could pass on any question. Interviews were conducted over the telephone and tape-recorded and transcribed with participants' permission, with most interviews lasting about 30 minutes. The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) at the University of California, Berkeley in the USA approved the study procedures.

The interviews were conducted over 10 years by trained graduate student researchers, between January 1996 and December 2005. The survey response rate for that period was 49.5 percent of all eligible graduates (791 graduates

**Table 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

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- 1 What is your understanding of the intent of the Title IV-E program?
  - 2 How did you feel about participating in that program?
  - 3 What were your principal reasons for entering the child welfare field?
  - 4 Why did you want to get a MSW?
  - 5 What were/are your job roles responsibilities? What did/do you do?
  - 6 What aspects of your job do/did you like the most?
  - 7 What aspects of your job do/did you like the least?
  - 8 Are you able to practice what you learned at your school about being a child welfare worker in your job as a child welfare worker?
  - 9 Would you recommend your agency to others looking for employment in social work?
  - 10 Would you recommend public child welfare services to others looking for employment in social work?
  - 11 Now that you have your MSW how do your most recent experiences in child welfare compare to past social work related work experiences?
  - 12 How would you describe the working conditions at your agency?
  - 13 Could you describe the clients you work(ed) with?
  - 14 Did your education prepare you for your job in public child welfare?
  - 15 Why do you stay?
  - 16 What led you to leave your job?
  - 17 Do you see public child welfare as the field for your overall career objectives?
  - 18 What else would you like to say about your job, IV-E stipend, your university experiences or this survey?
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completed the survey out of 1597 eligible). Slightly less than half of those who completed the survey (386 of 791 eligible) also elected to participate in the interview process (48.8%).<sup>1</sup>

### **Data Analysis**

In the qualitative examination of the 386 interviews, initial categories were defined by the predetermined interview questions. Subsequent themes were derived from gathered responses, combining both deductive and inductive approaches. The transcribed responses to each interview question were initially reviewed by a single reader, who thematically coded responses within the 18 interview questions. Two randomly selected subsets of 20 interviews (10 stayers and 10 leavers) were then coded by a second and third reader, to ensure thematic coding consistency. These three researchers met regularly to explore the themes

in reference to retention status. All interview transcripts were entered into QSR N5/NVivo7 qualitative software, which served to both organize the data and assist in analyzing the frequency of responses (Meadows and Dodendorf, 1999).

## RESULTS

The demographic information of the sample is presented here first, followed by a summary of the most relevant themes. Tables provide a synopsis of both demographic information and thematic coding of the interviews. Quotations illustrate these themes.

### Sample Demographics

In this qualitative interview sample ( $n = 386$ ), 78.8 percent ( $n = 304$ ) of the interviewed graduates chose to stay in public child welfare following their payback and 21.2 percent ( $n = 82$ ) left the public child welfare field. Demographics for all respondents are provided in Table 2 by retention status.

### Key Themes for Title IV-E Graduates

Questions relevant to this analysis and thematic breakdown with frequencies are included in Table 3.

#### *Why did you enter Public Child Welfare?*

These graduates overall described a commitment to their clientele – *working with children* and/or *working with families* – as motivation for entering public child welfare. Many graduates described a particular commitment to children, and a desire to improve their skills in assisting this population. Some related their commitment to children with a desire to make an impact. As graduates reported:

*Leaver-E0100:* [My reason for entering public child welfare was] Working with kids. My specialization in graduate school was children and families. I didn't have much exposure to child welfare. I wanted to learn it in a professional venue to expand my knowledge base.

*Stayer-B1017:* Working with the children, that's very rewarding. Being able to help them get out of a very terrible environment, home environment and making an impact on them to have better lives in their families. I think that's the part I enjoy. And also at the same time parents who are cooperative being able to help them make changes in their lives to have better relationships with their children.

In addition to *working with children* and *families*, the third most often cited reason graduates gave for entering public child welfare was *values-related*,



**Table 2 FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES BY RETENTION STATUS**

Demographic Variables	n (missing)	Frequency (valid percentage) Retention	
		Stayers	Leavers
Sex	386		
Female	321	254 (79.1%)	67 (20.9%)
Male	65	50 (76.9%)	15 (23.1%)
Race/ethnicity	375 (11)		
African American	46	40 (87%)	6 (13%)
American Indian	8	4 (50%)	4 (50%)
Asian American	29	23 (79.3%)	6 (20.7%)
Caucasian	178	141 (79.2%)	37 (20.8%)
Hispanic/Mexican American	80	63 (78.8%)	17 (21.2%)
Multi-cultural/other	34	25 (73.5%)	9 (26.5%)
Religion	382 (4)		
Catholic	92	74 (80.4%)	18 (19.6%)
Jewish	15	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)
Protestant	96	75 (78.1%)	21 (21.9%)
None	71	55 (77.5%)	16 (22.5%)
Other	108	84 (77.8%)	24 (22.2%)
Political party	382 (4)		
Democrat	270	211 (78.1%)	59 (21.9%)
Libertarian	2	2 (100%)	0
Non partisan	44	39 (88.6%)	5 (11.4%)
Other	16	14 (87.5%)	2 (12.5%)
Republican	50	36 (72%)	14 (28%)
Previous county employment	384 (2)		
County employee	135	114 (84.4%)	21 (15.6%)
Non-employee	249	189 (75.9%)	60 (24.1%)
SES	384 (2)		
Upper	19	13 (68.4%)	6 (31.6%)
Middle	241	197 (81.7%)	44 (18.3%)
Lower	122	91 (74.6%)	31 (25.4%)

**Table 3 KEY QUESTIONS WITH THEMATIC BREAKDOWN**

Questions and Themes	Frequencies and Percentages of Participants			
	Stayers		Leavers	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Why do you stay? (Asked of stayers only, <i>n</i> = 300, missing = 4)				
Enjoy job	86	28.7		
Money and benefits	78	26.0		
Clients/children and families	42	14.0		
Values/commitment	32	10.7		
Helping/making a difference	27	9.0		
What led you to leave your job? (Asked of leavers only, <i>n</i> = 82)				
Lack of support/respect			26	31.3
Management/supervisor			18	21.7
Stress/drained/burned out			16	19.3
Caseloads			14	16.9
What were your principal reasons for entering the child welfare field?				
Work with children	125	41.3	38	45.8
Work with families	71	23.4	15	18.1
Values-related	68	22.4	17	20.5
Why did you want to get a MSW?				
Job related	114	37.6	16	19.3
Values	59	19.5	16	19.3
Clinical	26	8.6	11	13.3
Career goal	33	10.9	5	6.0
Money	32	10.6	5	6.0
What aspects of your job do/did you like the most?				
Children	164	54.3	55	66.3
Families	139	46.0	37	44.6
Connecting resource/needs	60	19.9	21	25.3
Help	65	21.5	11	13.3

Table 3 continued

Questions and Themes	Frequencies and Percentages of Participants			
	Stayers		Leavers	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
What aspects of your job do/did you like the least?				
Court	84	27.8	20	24.1
Time constraints/not enough time	88	29.1	14	16.9
Paperwork	83	27.5	15	18.1
Caseload	45	14.9	17	20.5
Bureaucracy	37	12.3	10	12.1
Did your education prepare you for your job in public child welfare?				
Yes	145	48.7	39	47.0
No	29	9.8	13	15.7
Yes with qualifications	68	22.8	26	31.3
No with qualifications	8	2.7	2	2.4
Yes and no	43	14.4	4	4.8
Don't know	1	0.3	1	1.2

*Note: Themes are not mutually exclusive, therefore, numbers in each category do not equal number of respondents.*

including wanting to make a change or impact, having personal beliefs, or choosing a profession that had personal meaning. Hence, both stayer and leavers expressed an underlying sense of service and social commitment. For example:

*Leaver-A1032:* I chose social work because the sort of focus on helping people who need the help the most and social justice . . .

*Stayer-A1013:* [I wanted to enter public child welfare] to really make sure that a person of color would be involved to help negotiate children through the foster care system.

*Stayer-E0004:* I wanted to do something meaningful with my career. I thought that I could serve a purpose.

*Why Pursue an MSW?*

The reasons that graduates gave for pursuing public child welfare as a career path were primarily population and values-motivated. However, the reasons that graduates cited for pursuing an MSW were more *job or career-related goals*. Among these job-related goals were *advancement, higher compensation, professional stability* and *increased opportunities*. As one interviewee expressed:

*Stayer-L0579:* Actually, to be more clinical and also to be more marketable. Because, in most professions, whether it's social work or other professions that need social workers, there are many that demand that you have, that you're licensed. And in order to become licensed, you have to have your master's degree and then go on to do your licensing. So, it was to be more professional, to have the clinical experience, and also to be more marketable in the social work arena.

Therefore, while graduates associated the profession with a commitment to a particular clientele or values, they tended to associate acquiring the degree with career opportunity and stability.

*What did you like Most and Least about your Job?*

Overall, graduates identified working with children and families as the favored aspects of their jobs, along with connecting resources and helping. Conversely, graduates acknowledged that court, time constraints, a demanding workload, and bureaucracy were negative job elements. Many felt these negatives prevented them from having face-to-face client contact and hindered their ability to perform social work. For example:

*Stayer-F1032:* The bureaucracy – the red tape. There is a lot of paperwork, I have to make sure everything is followed through correctly according to legalities and this kind of takes away from doing actual social work.

*Leaver-C1111:* The part I liked the least is the feeling that the administration gave you of don't spend too much time and move on move on, the constant rush, and always feeling that you couldn't linger long enough with those families so that you could see them through connecting with services. That absolutely bothered me.

*Stayer-A0688:* I think the issue that existed then was the size of caseloads. That's a big, big issue . . . [On average] I had 54, and I think the state's standard is 27. You just push at people. You don't get to do your job . . . People just don't get the services they need because you don't have time to give – you have generational problems that you're supposed to fix in 10 minutes and you don't even have 10 minutes.

Many interviewees expressed that they had little time to relate face-to-face with their clients – their perception of a legitimate social work role – because of logistical, administrative, or time constraints.

*Were you prepared for your Job by your Education?*

Overall, respondents felt that their education had prepared them for their roles in the field. However, both stayers and leavers made comments about a *disconnection between educational content and agency realities*. Regarding this schism, the agency surfaced as the main focus of criticism, rather than the university, the public child welfare field, or the social work profession. For many respondents, the job of the social worker was to assume a professional role with clients rather than handle paperwork and other administrative tasks. Furthermore, as part of this professional role, graduates felt that the agency should reward efforts to seek training and development, in particular by offering clinical licensing hours and more training through the agency. Other identified areas for agency improvement that could strengthen the connection between education and job included more knowledgeable and supportive managers, more clerical assistance, transparency in administrative processes, improved communication, and better time management.

Although graduates tended to offer suggestions for improving their agencies rather than for their universities, many stayers and leavers discussed areas where school curricula could be improved to facilitate MSW program-agency transition. These suggestions included more reality-based discussion of the nature of child welfare work, content on working with involuntary clients, and more information on legal and mental health aspects of child welfare. As some graduates expressed:

*Stayer-E1048:* I would say from the University's perspective, they need to get more realistic about their IV-E program and really pull knowledge from people already in the field. Get some past social workers that used to be in the program, that are currently in child welfare, get them into the classroom, to talk to future social workers to give them the real deal about what they are getting into . . . A lot of people get disillusioned when they come into the agency and will leave quickly and would rather pay the money back than stay in child welfare. I would say making improvements in those areas would help.

*Leaver-B1168:* I believe they need to have additional classes on you know, the court stuff, and the legalities of it in the public agency. All of the clinical stuff that they do is also necessary, but I do think the Title IV-E students need a little more than the regular MSW students, because of the requirements of the legal system in the public area.

Therefore, while the agency surfaced as the main focus of critique for graduates, many had suggestions for how their education could have better prepared them for agency realities.

*Why did you stay?*

As previously discussed, both stayers and leavers expressed that they overall felt prepared for their job by the Title IV-E program, and they experienced similar frustrations in their work. However, stayers appeared to have more access to buffers and to experience the benefits of working in child welfare. When asked, 'Why do you stay?' the top reasons stayers reported were that they enjoyed their jobs, they appreciated stable money and benefits, they enjoyed serving children and families, and they felt they were working within their values and making a difference. For many stayers, the job provided flexibility as well as enrichment opportunities. For example:

*Stayer-T1062:* I think I stay mostly because this job is much more rewarding . . . I also stay because it is a very versatile job and there is always something new to learn in this field because it is just so far reaching . . . when I think of another job, I think of just being in an office just punching in numbers in their computer and just never leaving your desk . . . I couldn't do that, just sit at your desk all day. I think that is what I like most about the job, being able to move around and having my autonomy.

Stayers were more likely to report good supervision and positive work environments. As one stayer reported:

*Stayer-J1070:* I think I stay [because] . . . my unit is good, my supervisor is excellent and that really makes a difference. I think if I had a supervisor I wasn't getting along with or wasn't helping me I would really want to leave. You need that support while you are here because it's a hard job and you are dealing with difficult things . . .

Finally, stayers were more likely than leavers to report that they had been promoted and were themselves moving into supervisory roles. Promotion may provide positive support, which inspired graduates to stay, and may reflect enhanced skills translating into more advancement and opportunity.

*Why did you leave?*

When leavers were asked, 'What led you to leave your job?' the absence of buffers and benefits were apparent. Graduates who left reported a lack of support and respect from supervisors and other staff, difficulties with transferring within

or between counties, the inability to attend to personal and family responsibilities, and stress. As leavers reported:

*Leaver-R1003:* I just kind of felt like the system was screwed up and I didn't know how to change it and I didn't feel like I could change it from within, and I didn't feel like I could be a good social worker being as frustrated as I was . . .

*Leaver-R0772:* You know I was dedicated to being a social worker, I loved my job. I drove 50 miles a day to come to that job, and I put in 9–10 hours a day, and then I went home. You know I had my own family, and there was a point in time where, you know, I could tolerate my supervisor only to a point, when I realized that she was literally messing up my home-life with my children, and then I had to [choose], my job or my family.

While both stayers and leavers reported workload concerns and identified agency-level conditions that caused stress, the stayers more often talked about buffering forces – such as good quality supervision – to offset these challenges. Leavers recognized the value of buffers such as good supervision but felt they did not experience them.

*Leaver-B0847:* I think that if you have a supportive supervisor and a manageable caseload the job is probably doable. But you know, there's the exposure to trauma that's stressful . . . So I think that if . . . [you] have effective ways to process that, you know . . . if that's not so overwhelming then I think that maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

For these respondents, poor management and unresponsive supervision provided an added frustration that contributed to their decisions to leave. Furthermore, it appears that another buffer for workers is feeling that their input and training are valued when making decisions about clients. Leavers did not feel valued in this way. As one leaver expressed:

*Leaver-B1037:* I just needed, ultimately, to be in an arena, someplace where my experience, the education that I did earn . . . would be valued. And that did not happen there. So I just finally made the decision, I've just got to do something different, this is not healthy, it's not a healthy place for me to be. And so, I left. Never thought I would, I never thought I would.

Along with quality supervision and good management, stayers reported a good balance between meaningful work, job stability, and personal life. On the other

hand, leavers appeared more affected by stress and workload due to the absence of similar buffering factors, and experienced their jobs as causing an imbalance between professional and personal responsibilities. Finally, leavers expressed a desire to be valued as a professional, but did not ultimately find this respect in public child welfare.

## LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

Qualitative research standards include authenticity, credibility, verification, and completeness (Frankel, 1999). The framework approach allowed for themes to emerge directly from the perspectives of the graduates in response to informed questions, providing room for authentic responses within a prescribed structure. The credibility of the findings is supported by having a comparably larger sample size for a qualitative study. Furthermore, the sampled population – Title IV-E graduates – possesses unique knowledge to speak credibly to the opportunities and challenges of public child welfare retention. In terms of verification, the use of QSR N5/NVivo 7 software assisted with the organization of the identified themes. Multiple coders provided a further verification process for thematic coding. However, these data are largely retrospective, asking participants to recall past motivations, perceptions and experiences. This issue may compromise credibility and the ability to verify responses.

In terms of completeness, this study recruited interview subjects from a survey targeting all Title IV-E MSW graduates from one state who had completed their work obligation. This provided the opportunity to derive a range of themes from respondents, enhancing completeness. However, those who participated in the interview differed significantly from the greater surveyed population in terms of race/ethnicity and religion. Also, all interviewees were from one state. Both of these factors may affect the inclusion or exclusion of specific thematic priorities, detracting from completeness and limiting transferability. Finally, while a comparably larger qualitative sample gathered over a period of time may enhance completeness, the size and scope of the sample may also have compromised study depth for breadth.

## DISCUSSION

Two types of findings emerged from this qualitative analysis of graduates: those that were shared by all graduates, and those which appeared to distinguish the experiences of stayers from those of leavers. Additionally, issues regarding retention were separated into individual and organizational factors. Finally, narratives of graduates provided specific insights into the utility of their specialized educational experiences as applied to public child welfare careers.



While existing literature identifies organizational commitment and job satisfaction as individual factors in retention, our analysis suggests that both stayers and leavers were motivated by a commitment to a population – primarily children and secondarily their families. Relatedly, stayers and leavers could not be distinguished either through comparing the values and ethics which motivated their choice of profession or by their desire for career and financial stability. In fact, both stayers and leavers appeared to be dually motivated by service in choosing public child welfare as a career as well as financial stability and opportunity for advancement in pursuing an MSW degree. Both stayers and leavers experienced the difficulties of heavy workloads and time pressure, as well as frustration that administrative functions prevented them from fulfilling ‘true social work’ functions, which were viewed in terms of forming relationships with clients.

Many themes were shared among graduates, yet there were also some notable differences present. While both stayers and leavers experienced the challenges of public child welfare, stayers were more likely to describe supportive influences – such as positive relationships with supervisors and peers – that appeared to alleviate the stress they experienced. They also described agency training opportunities and opportunities for promotion more than did leavers. Stayers described more instances of positive life–work balance; for example, flexible schedules that allowed them time for their families while also accomplishing the tasks of their job. Leavers, on the other hand, did not describe supports as often and were more likely to illustrate experiences in which they actually felt worn out by the same influences – such as supervisors – which stayers had experienced as supportive. It is possible that the stayers were better able to recognize and utilize buffering mechanisms than leavers. However, it also appears that there were distinct organizational practices that influenced participant experiences. Leavers were also less likely to describe opportunities for career enrichment in their agencies. While both stayers and leavers desired the dignity and respect of a professional role, leavers were less likely to find this respect in their public child welfare workplaces.

Although some respondents qualified their responses by saying that ‘nothing could prepare you for a career in public child welfare’, both stayers and leavers overall affirmed the value of their Title IV-E experience in terms of increasing their career skills. Even though the feedback on education was generally positive, it is worthwhile to enhance the Title IV-E program by ensuring consistent inclusion in the curricula skills in how to use supervision, identification and use of buffering mechanisms, self-management techniques to balance work and personal life, and how to strengthen critical thinking skills. Agencies may improve retention by increasing training and support for supervisors, improving worker supports, and addressing worker caseload. These

organizational interventions have individual-level implications of promoting good work–life balance, supporting workers’ values and meaning for choosing the field, buffering against inherent job stressors.

### Notes

- 1 We performed a cross-tabulation using SPSS statistical software to assess whether the qualitative interview sample ( $n = 386$ ) was representative of the entire survey sample ( $n = 791$ ). Significant differences were found between those who responded to the survey only and those who responded to the survey and the follow-up interview. Slightly fewer African Americans than expected participated in both the survey and the interview, but significantly more Caucasians than expected participated in both (Pearson Chi-Square = 32.6,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). In addition, among those who completed both the survey and the interview, more than expected identified as Jewish and fewer than expected identified as Roman Catholic (Pearson Chi-Square = 14.18,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .007$ ). Finally, slightly more leavers than expected participated in the interview sample (Pearson Chi-Square = 2.57,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .091$ ).

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