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The Child Welfare Workforce: An Overview

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Summary

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the front-line child welfare workforce because it is one component of larger occupational groups ("child, family, and school social workers" as well as "social and human assistants") employed in the public sector (state and local governments) and private sector (individual and family services industry) that provide a wide range of social assistance to disparate clients (job training to adults and nonmedical home care to the elderly). That being said, child welfare workers appear to be disproportionately women and African-Americans who deliver social services to at-risk children.

To be hired as a social worker, a bachelor's degree usually is necessary, although agencies rarely require that the degree be in social work. Agencies also employ front-line workers with little experience in social assistance or little education beyond high school. The share of college-educated individuals in the child welfare workforce has decreased over time, as agencies reportedly sought to expand the supply of available and affordable personnel in response to greater reports of child maltreatment in the 1960s and 1970s.

The annual earnings of child, family, and school social workers at private individual and family services agencies are $32,130 on average. State and local governments pay $37,920 and $42,100, respectively, to this group of social workers (excluding those employed in schools). The average earnings of social and human assistants at private agencies are $24,170, and in state and local government, $29,790 and $29,640, respectively. The wages of both occupational groups do not compare favorably with most other occupations having similar educational qualifications.

In addition to comparatively low salaries, child welfare workers are reported to experience threats of/actual violence. The nature of the work also can be emotionally draining and stressful given heavy case/workloads. Caseloads appear to be higher at public than private child welfare agencies, with relatively more government managers stating that caseloads are highly problematic for staff retention. Turnover rates are estimated to be in the double-digits: rates average about 40% for professionals in private child welfare agencies and about half that in public agencies. Nonetheless, other state and local government employees seemingly exhibit much less turnover. High turnover rates are of concern because they can pose problems, such as the continued provision of quality service to clients. Factors associated with turnover and retention, in addition to heavy workloads, are the extent of supervisory and collegial support as well as the employee's degree of satisfaction with such organizational variables as compensation, administrative duties, and professional development.

Prospects are good for those interested in front-line child welfare jobs. Above-average rates of job growth are projected, particularly in private agencies and for social/human assistants. Existing jobs are expected to open up, as well, due to current workers leaving for other fields or retiring. Prospects may not be as good for recruiting professionals into the human services workforce, however. This report will not be updated.

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Child welfare workers typically come to the general public's awareness as a result of news stories about the abuse or death of children "the system" allowed to remain with parents or placed in foster homes. Journalists then commonly describe child welfare workers with heavy caseloads and paperwork requirements that cut down the time they have to investigate reports of child maltreatment and to assist the children already in their care. Reporters often speak of a revolving door through which burned-out workers exit and new employees enter to begin anew with the children entrusted to them. In addition to the nonpecuniary effects of high job turnover on children and families (e.g., trust) and on workers (e.g., morale), the financial costs to the agencies of near-constant recruitment and training of new employees may be mentioned.[1]

Congress has directed resources toward training potential and current members of the child welfare workforce with the goal of improving the quality of service to clients. In FY2004, the federal share of state claims for training costs under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act was $271 million, up from about $250 million in FY2003 but down from comparable claims in FY2002 ($286 million).[2] Appropriations for a federal child welfare training program, authorized under Section 426 of the Social Security Act, have remained between $7.0 million and $7.5 million from FY1999 through FY2004.[3] Title IV-E is an open-ended entitlement. It allows states to obtain partial reimbursement for training costs of agency staff incurred in connection with children eligible for services under the federal foster care program and under the adoption assistance program. Section 426 authorizes discretionary grants to public and private nonprofit institutions of higher education to develop and improve education/training programs and resources for persons providing child

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[1] See, for example, Stephen Buttry, "Capping Caseloads Pays Off," *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 15, 2004; Patricia Callahan, "Child Welfare Workers Flagged: Task Force Bemoans Lack of Training, Heavy Caseloads, and High Turnover," *Denver Post*, Oct. 7, 1999; Kris Wise, "State Will Add Social Workers," *Charleston Daily Mail*, Apr. 28, 2004; and Mary Zahn, "Child Welfare Services Still Found Lacking," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Mar. 22, 2004.

[2] Title IV-E funds are used to train not only child welfare workers at public and private agencies but also foster and adoptive parents. States may claim training for public agency staff at 75% of their eligible expenses, while training of private agency staff may be claimed at the regular administration rate of 50%. The figure in the text above includes claims for training of foster and adoptive parents but does not including training costs of private agency workers.

[3] There are other sources of federal funds that may go toward training child welfare workers if the training is associated with the overall purpose of the program (e.g., Social Services Block Grant, Title IV-B-1 Child Welfare Services, and state grants under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act).

welfare services. Congress has shown its continuing interest in enhancing the quality of the child welfare workforce and in attracting/retaining more individuals to the field through, for example, the introduction of legislation extending loan forgiveness to students who complete bachelor's or master's degrees in social work and remain employed in public or private child welfare agencies for a given period of time.[4]

This report provides an overview of the child welfare workforce. It begins with a discussion of the duties, education and training, and other demographic characteristics of child welfare workers. The report next estimates the size of the child welfare workforce and examines its occupational composition, earnings, and other job characteristics (e.g., turnover). It concludes with an analysis of the job outlook for those interested in pursuing a career in the child welfare field.

Who Are Child Welfare Workers?

Child welfare workers are part of a larger group of individuals who provide social assistance to others with the goal of improving their lives. The assistance rendered to children specifically includes "adoption and foster care, drug prevention, life skills training, and positive social development."[5]

Members of the child welfare workforce may be employed under a variety of job titles. They include child welfare social workers, family services social workers, child protective social workers, social work assistant, child abuse worker, and case management aide.[6]

Education and Training

Education. Although some staff in public agencies that have dependent and neglected children as clients and in private nonprofit agencies that provide services under contract to these children, may be referred to as social workers, they may lack "professional training in social work."[7] A bachelor's degree in social work *or* in a closely related undergraduate major (e.g., psychology or sociology) commonly is required of persons seeking employment in social work. Some agencies require a master's degree, again, either in social work or another field.[8] Among child welfare caseworkers/case managers employed full-time by private agencies, for example, it

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[4] For more information on federal legislation, see "Student Loan Forgiveness" in CRS Report RL31746, *Child Welfare Issues in the 108th Congress*, by Emilie Stoltzfus.

[5] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), *Career Guide to Industries, 2004-05 Edition*, p. 223. (Hereafter cited as BLS, *Career Guide to Industries*.) Available at [http://www.bls.gov/oco/cg/cgs040.htm].

[6] BLS, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2004-05 Edition*. (Hereafter cited as BLS, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.) Available at [http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos060.htm], and [http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos059.htm].

[7] Elizabeth M. Tracy and Barbara A. Pine, "Child Welfare Education and Training: Future Trends and Influences," *Child Welfare*, Jan./Feb. 2000, p. 95.

[8] BLS, *Career Guide to Industries*.

appears that more employees have a bachelor's than master's degree, and among those with a bachelor's degree, in a field other than social work.[9]

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P.L. 104-193) authorized the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to undertake a national random sample survey of children and families investigated for abuse and neglect. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) collects longitudinal data related to 6,100 children from public child welfare agencies in 92 localities. Information is gathered from administrators in local and state child welfare agencies to supplement the NSCAW's main focus on child-level statistics collected from children, families, caregivers, caseworkers, and teachers. As shown in **Table 1**, the local agency survey found that virtually all public child welfare agencies require at least a bachelor's degree. Most accept a bachelor's rather than a master's degree. And, of those public agencies requiring a bachelor's degree, most accept one in a field other than social work.

Table 1. Lowest Degree Accepted by Local Public Agencies for Child Welfare Services Workers by Type of Worker

Lowest degree accepted	Type of worker			
	Investigator	In-home service workers	Foster care workers	Adoption workers
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
No degree	3.0	13.0	11.0	14.0
Bachelor's degree	96.0	87.0	89.0	86.0
— in social work	16.0	6.0	6.0	12.0
— in other major	80.0	81.0	83.0	74.0
Master's degree	1.0	0.2	0.1	0.2
— in social work	1.0	0.2	0.1	0.0
— in other major	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Child, Youth, and Families, *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: Local Child Welfare Agency Survey: Report*, Washington, D.C., June 2001.

When looked at on a worker as opposed to agency basis, another analysis of NSCAW data found that child welfare staff in public agencies who deal with children

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[9] Alicia Drais-Parrillo, *2003 Salary Study* (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2003). (Hereafter cited as Drais-Parrillo, *2003 Salary Study*.) Note: Caseworkers/case management staff are persons, other than child protective services workers, who deliver direct assistance or who coordinate services (e.g., in-home and foster care, adoption, and reunification) to children and families.

in foster care much more often possess bachelor's than master's degrees (61% and 37%, respectively). Among those with bachelor's degrees, the major less often is social work (25%) than another field (36%).[10] This pattern among public agencies concurs with the previously mentioned pattern among child welfare caseworkers/case managers at private agencies.

Agencies also employ individuals with little experience in social assistance or little schooling beyond high school.[11] For example, between 3% and 14% of local public agencies do not require a college education for employment as a child welfare worker. (See **Table 1**.) When employees rather than agencies are the unit of analysis, the NSCAW foster care survey estimated that 2% of child welfare workers do not have at least a bachelor's degree.[12]

Over time, there has been a decline in the share of college-educated child welfare workers.[13] The increased reporting of child maltreatment in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which reportedly stemmed from greater public awareness of the issue and the resulting passage of child maltreatment reporting laws, appears to have caused agencies to lower educational standards for child welfare workers in order to expand the supply of available and affordable staff.[14] This is referred to as the deprofessionalization or deskilling of the field, a phrase that has come to mean not so much the employment of persons without a college degree but the employment of college-educated individuals with a major other than social work.

Efforts to reprofessionalize the child welfare workforce through social work education were given a boost by the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272). The law created Title IV-E and authorized 75% federal matching specifically for public child welfare training expenditures but "was little used by schools of social work for degree education until several social work education leaders and child welfare administrators began promoting its availability around 1990."[15] The Family Preservation and Support Services provisions of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-66) did not directly address

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[10] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Child, Youth, and Families (ACYF), *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: One Year in Foster Care Report*, Washington, D.C., Nov. 2003. (Hereafter cited as HHS, *NSCAW: One Year in Foster Care*.)

[11] BLS, *Career Guide to Industries*.

[12] HHS, *NSCAW: One Year in Foster Care*.

[13] Alvin L. Schorr ("The Bleak Prospect for Public Child Welfare," *The Social Service Review*, Mar. 2000) cites HHS and GAO publications showing that in 1958, 62% of child welfare workers were college graduates compared to 28% three decades later.

[14] Sue D. Steib and Wendy Whiting Blome, "Fatal Error: The Missing Ingredient in Child Welfare Reform, Part I," *Child Welfare*, vol. 82, no. 6, Nov./Dec. 2003.

[15] Joan Levy Zlotnik, "Preparing Social Workers for Child Welfare Practice: Lessons from an Historical Review of the Literature," in Katharine Briar-Lawson and Joan Levy Zlotnik eds., *Evaluation Research in Child Welfare: Improving Outcomes Through University-Public Agency Partnerships* (Binghampton, N.Y.: The Haworth Press), 2002, p. 11. (Hereafter cited as Briar-Lawson and Zlotnik, *Evaluation Research in Child Welfare*.)

workforce quality although, in its implementation of the law's mandate that states set long-term goals, HHS required states to provide a staff development and training plan. In the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89), Congress established new timelines and procedural requirements to ensure safety and timely permanency planning for children. While the effectiveness of these provisions assumed competent staff with reasonable caseloads, the law contained no provisions explicitly related to workforce quality.

Table 2. Revenue Sources Utilized by Public Agencies to Support Caseload-Carrying Child Welfare Workers and/or Supervisors Pursuing Degrees in Social Work

Sources of financial support	Number of states supporting employees who are pursuing:	
	Bachelors degrees in social work	Master's degrees in social work
Title IV-E federal payments to states for foster care and adoption training	18	28
Federal child welfare discretionary training grants	4	4
Federal social services block grant	2	3
Federal child abuse state grants (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act)	4	1
State revenues	9	12
Local revenues	1	2
Other sources[a]	4	5

Source: Gary Cyphers, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State Agency Findings* (Washington, DC: APHSA, Feb. 2005).

a. A few states indicated such other sources as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and the Title IV-B, Subpart 2 program.

Information is quite limited on the use of government funds to reprofessionalize the child welfare workforce. As shown above in **Table 2**, the federal share of foster care and adoption training authorized by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act is the source that public child welfare agencies most often utilize to provide financial assistance to caseload-carrying child welfare employees and/or supervisors pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. State revenues come in a distant second according to public agencies that responded to a 2004 survey, but still well ahead of other federal sources of financial support to caseload-carrying child welfare staff seeking postsecondary degrees in social work. States also assist individuals in

these two occupational groups who are seeking related degrees. In these instances, the agencies more often rely upon state than federal revenues.[16]

Training. There are no federal standards regarding the education of child welfare workers, although federal law does include limited requirements for staff training as a condition of state receipt of certain welfare funding. As implemented by HHS, the federal Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) is a mandatory, consolidated plan for child welfare services that must be developed in consultation with other relevant parties in the state and incorporates the conditions and objectives of federal funding to states under the Child Welfare Services and Promoting Safe and Stable Families Programs authorized under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, state grants authorized under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA, Section 106), and funding for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program and related Education and Training Vouchers (authorized under Section 477 of the Social Security Act). States are required to have training programs that support the goals of their CFSPs; address services provided under the major child welfare grants to states authorized under Title IV-B and Title IV-E of the Social Security Act; and include initial and ongoing training for child welfare workers who deliver family preservation and support services, child protective services, foster care services, adoption services, and independent living. The training must "include content from various disciplines and knowledge bases relevant to child and family services policies, programs and practices" and must support coordination among various systems that service children and families.[17] In addition, CAPTA was amended in P.L. 108-36 to require that states give assurance they have provisions that address training of child protective services workers about their legal duties as well as provisions and procedures for improving training, retention, and supervision of caseworkers.

Public agencies typically impose pre-service training requirements on new employees. Some 7% of local public agencies require 1-3 days; 38%, 4-10 days; and 53%, 11-14 days of training before new employees start work.[18] Many fewer agencies mandate in-service training, with one in five lacking such a requirement and one in two requiring less than one day, according to an NSCAW survey of local public child welfare agencies. On a worker rather than agency basis, the pre-service training requirement at state agencies averages 141 hours for child protective service workers, 147 hours for in-house protective service workers, and 151 hours for foster

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[16] Gary Cyphers, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State Agency Findings (*Washington, D.C.: APHSA, February 2005). (Hereafter cited as Cyphers, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State Agency Findings*.)

[17] For more information see ACYF-CB-PI-04-01, issued Feb. 2, 2004 and available at [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/laws/pi/pi0402all.pdf] and 45 C.F.R. [Code of Federal Regulations] § 1357.15(t)(1).

[18] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Child, Youth, and Families, *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: Local Child Welfare Agency Survey: Report*, Washington, D.C., June 2001.

care/adoption workers.[19] The average time spent in mandatory in-service training is about 29-30 hours for the three occupations.

The federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) is intended, in part, to monitor the degree of state compliance with federal child welfare policies including those related to staff training. The initial round of the review (FY2001-FY2004) suggests that states perform slightly better on initial as compared to ongoing training of personnel. An HHS analysis of the review's findings identified common challenges states faced in meeting the initial training requirement: assignment of cases to workers who had not yet received or completed initial training, and training inadequate to prepare caseworkers for their jobs. With regard to the ongoing training requirement, the challenges most often mentioned by states were limited staff participation due to heavy caseloads and a lack of funds.[20] Other training concerns identified in state final reports of the CFSR include lack of cultural competency training, training too theoretical in content, failure of the state to have ongoing training curriculum or requirements, lack of supervisory training in child welfare practice as opposed to management, uneven training opportunities and inconsistent training requirements within the same state, and training resources stretched thin by high staff turnover.[21]

Gender and Race

Child welfare staff are predominantly and disproportionately women. According to 2004 data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), women account for 79% of all persons (regardless of occupation) employed in the "individual and family services" industry. (This is the federal industrial classification that includes private agencies engaged in child welfare assistance.) The same pattern prevails in public administration at the federal, state, and local levels: of all personnel staffing government human resources programs, including child welfare services, 71% are women. Similarly, on an occupational basis, women represent almost 4 of every 5 individuals employed as social workers in the public and private sectors. In contrast, women comprise somewhat less than 1 of every 2 employed persons in the labor force.

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[19] Cyphers, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State Agency Findings*.

[20] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *General Findings from the Child and Family Services Review*, posted online October 2004 at [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/results/statefindings/genfindings04/genfindings04.pdf]. Note: "Common challenges" were identified as those reported by at least 12 of the 35 states that were reviewed during FY2002-FY2004. (Seventeen states whose CFSRs occurred in FY2001 were not included in this content analysis due to changes in the format of the state final reports.)

[21] The provision of initial and ongoing training is first discussed in the Statewide Assessment that precedes the onsite CFSR review. Ratings related to training indicators are based on interviews with relevant stakeholders during the onsite portion of the review. For state final CFSR reports go to [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/staterpt/index.htm]. Items 32 and 33 address initial and ongoing training, respectively.

The child welfare workforce appears to be disproportionately composed of African-Americans as well. Blacks represent a minority of employees in the individual and family services industry and in the administration of government human resources programs: about 20% in 2004, according to CPS data. On an occupational basis, African-Americans comprise 1 out of 5 individuals who are employed as social workers. In contrast, blacks represent a little more than 1 of every 10 employed persons in the United States.

Size and Job Characteristics of the Child Welfare Workforce

The performance of the child welfare function in two broad industry groups complicates analysis of the child welfare workforce. State and local government employees as well as private sector workers in the "social assistance, excluding child day care" industry group provide a wide range of social services (e.g., worker training, nonmedical home care, and emergency provision of food and shelter). More specifically, as noted above, the federal industrial classification system places child welfare activities in the "individual and family services" segment of the private sector establishments that provide social assistance. Individual and family services is the largest component of the social assistance (excluding child day care) industry group, but even this segment focuses on more than children (e.g., the elderly and persons with disabilities). Similarly, child welfare is subsumed within the wide-ranging human resources activities of state and local government, thereby further increasing the difficulty of utilizing federal statistics to analyze just the child welfare workforce.

Reliance on nongovernment data sources is problematic as well. Some associations conduct surveys of their members, who may not be representative of workers in the child welfare field. As with federal data, these and other surveys may cover workers who assist individuals other than at-risk children. In addition, small sample sizes may make it inaccurate to disaggregate survey results to look only at child welfare workers.

What follows then, is an impression rather than a precise accounting of members of the child welfare workforce. The focus is on front-line workers rather than on others who perform functions that support the primary mission of assisting at-risk children.

Size and Composition of the Workforce by Industry and Occupation

Private Agencies. According to May 2004 data from the Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) program, some 847,000 persons are employed by non-profit and for-profit organizations in the private sector that provide individual and family services. These private agencies have 43,9000 child, family, and school social workers on their payrolls; they account for a little more than 5% of total employment

in the individual and family services industry.[22] Social and human service assistants, who aid social workers and other professionals in delivering services to clients, number 58,830. They comprise 7% of total employment in the individual and family services industry.

Private agencies, which typically are small,[23] have played an increased role in the delivery of child welfare services over time. Although public agencies have paid private non-profit organizations to deliver child welfare services since the early 1800s, contracting out to for-profit firms began to grow substantially during the 1960s and 1970s. The more recent participation of for-profit businesses in human services fields (e.g., child support enforcement and correctional facilities) has less often extended to child welfare practice.[24] According to one estimate, 31% of child welfare jobs are in non-profit and religious agencies, 16% in multi-employee businesses, and 3% in single-employee/self-employed business.[25] That leaves government as the single largest employer of child welfare workers.

Public Agencies. The OES program does not report government employment separately by type of social service performed. It does, however, produce data on government employment by occupational group. State government is the largest employer of child, family, and school social workers at 57,070 persons.[26] Local government is second at 50,800. (These figures exclude child, family, and school social workers employed by schools.) State government also employs 50,650 social and human service assistants; local government, 43,640. It should be recalled that not all employees in the two occupational groups provide child welfare assistance.

State governments reported employing 107,720 workers and local governments, 94,440 workers in the two broad occupational groups as of May 2004. Actual state versus local government breakdowns may vary from one area to the next, with state-administered systems likely to have more state government employees performing child welfare services compared to county-administered systems. There also are a few cases in which state and local governments have contracted with private agencies to perform most child welfare activities (e.g., Illinois, Kansas, and New York City).

Earnings

Annual earnings averaged across all child, family, and school social workers regardless of industry are $37,830, according to OES data for May 2004. The earnings of child, family, and school social workers at private individual and family

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[22] BLS, [http://stats.bls.gov/oes/2003/may/naics4_624100.htm].

[23] BLS, *Career Guide to Industries*.

[24] Madelyn Freundlich and Sarah Gerstenzang, *An Assessment of the Privatization of Child Welfare Services* (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2003).

[25] Paul C. Light, *The Health of the Human Services Workforce* (Washington., DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003). (Hereafter cited as Light, *The Health of the Human Services Workforce*.)

[26] BLS [http://stats.bls.gov/oes/2003/may/oes211021.htm], and [http://stats.bls.gov/oes/2003/may/oes211093.htm].

services agencies are below the all-industries' average, at $32,130. In contrast, state government ($37,920) and local ($42,100) government pay above-average wages to members of the occupational group (excluding those employed by schools). More specifically, the average annually salary of employees in child protective service positions at public agencies is $35,553; in home protective service jobs, $34,929; in foster care/adoption positions, $35,911; and in jobs involving multiple programs, $36,136.[27]

The average annual earnings of social and human service assistants in the individual and family services industry ($24,170) are below the all-industries average for the occupation ($25,890). In contrast, social and human service assistants employed by state ($29,790) and local ($29,640) governments (excluding those in schools) are paid above the average wage.

The wages of child welfare workers typically do not compare favorably with occupations having similar educational qualifications. Half of the child, family, and school social workers at private individual and family services agencies earn more, and half earn less, than $30,680. The median annual wages of these social workers in state government are $35,070; in local government, $40,620. Almost all occupations for which the usual credential is a bachelor's degree pay median salaries higher than those of child, family, and school social workers. This often holds true, as well, for female-dominated occupations in which a bachelor's degree is the usual educational minimum (e.g., elementary and kindergarten school teachers).

Similarly, most jobs that can be proficiently performed with moderate-term on-the-job training (according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) typically are paid more than social and human assistant positions. Half of all social and human assistants who work in the individual and family services industry earn more, and half earn less, than $23,400. The median annual earnings of these employees in local government are $28,230, and in state government, $29,270. Most of the better-paying jobs in this education/training category predominantly employ men (e.g., machine operators), leaving only a handful of somewhat higher paying occupations in which women are very prevalent.

The positive relationship that generally exists between salary level and educational attainment can be illustrated by looking at caseworkers and case management staff in private child welfare agencies. The average starting salary for someone without a college degree is $21,840.[28] Starting salaries for employees with a bachelor's degree are higher: an average of $26,063 for those with an undergraduate degree in social work and $25,072 for those with an undergraduate degree in another field. Persons having a master's degree in social work start at still higher average salaries ($30,436), as do individuals with a graduate degree in another field ($29,703). These figures also show that, on average, a wage premium goes to new hires who have a degree in social work as opposed to another field.

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[27] Cyphers, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State Agency Findings*.

[28] Drais-Parrillo, *2003 Salary Study*.

Working Conditions

Safety. According to a one-time survey sent to affiliates of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) that represent professional child welfare workers, more than 70% of 29 affiliates in 10 states said their members had been victims of violence or received threats of violence while performing their jobs. In addition to confronting actual or threatened physical harm, the affiliates reported that these child welfare workers encountered acts of vandalism, stalking, attempted rape, and kidnaping.[29]

Threats and violence aimed at child welfare workers are not limited to those employed in urban areas. For example, a survey of employees and supervisors at the Montana Department of Family Services concluded "that each year, one of every 10 workers is pushed, shoved, or hit by one or more agency clients."[30] This figure does not include instances in which clients unsuccessfully tried to harm agency employees, which happened almost as frequently as actual infliction of injury. It also excludes the very frequent occurrence of angry clients screaming or cursing at workers. In addition, death threats directed toward agency employees are common, as is fear among child protective services employees that their jobs might be the cause of harm to their family members.

Workload. The nature of the work, while satisfying, can be emotionally draining. Substantial case/workloads can produce a stressful work environment as well.[31]

There is no universally agreed-upon measure of the various activities performed in diverse agency settings by child welfare workers. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) has developed "best practice" ratios of client to staff members. The advocacy organization recommends that one child protective social worker involved in:

- initial assessment/investigation should handle no more than 12 active cases per month,
- ongoing cases should handle, at most, 17 active families with 1 new case assigned for every six open cases, and
- a combination of assessment/investigation and ongoing cases should handle a maximum of 10 active ongoing cases and four active investigations.

For foster family care services, the CWLA standard is 12-15 children per social worker.

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[29] American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), *Double Jeopardy: Caseworkers at Risk Helping At-Risk Kids* (Washington, DC, 1998).

[30] Charles Horejsi, Cindy Garthwait, and Jim Rolando, "A Survey of Threats and Violence Directed Against Child Protection Workers in a Rural State," *Child Welfare*, vol. 73, no. 2, (Mar.-Apr. 1994), p. 175.

[31] BLS, *Career Guide to Industries*.

In contrast to these guidelines, the average caseload per child protective service worker is 24 at public agencies and 13 at private agencies when a child is defined as a case, according to a survey of public and private agencies conducted by the Alliance for Children and Families, the American Public Human Services Association, and the CWLA. It is 17 and 13, respectively, when a family is defined as a case. The caseload for other direct service caseworkers (excluding paraprofessionals) averages 31, when based on a child, and 20, when based on a family, at public agencies. It averages 14 and 11, respectively, at private agencies.[32]

Perhaps not surprisingly given the heavier caseloads at public compared to private child welfare agencies, managers and supervisors at relatively more public (62%) than private (13%) agencies report that caseloads are highly problematic for staff retention. Some 39% of private agencies did note that workload in general is highly problematic for staff retention.[33] And, according to an HHS survey of randomly selected counties, the majority (69%) of local child protective services agencies consider their workloads to be excessive for at least one function (screening and intake, investigations, and alternative response).[34]

Turnover. The strain of heavy workloads commonly is offered as one factor prompting child welfare workers to leave their employers specifically or the field generally. Other frequently mentioned contributors include uncompetitive wage levels, increased administrative (including paperwork) burdens, insufficient supervisory support, little time for in-service training, inadequate pre-service training, unsafe working conditions, and the greater complexity of cases.[35]

Turnover rates are estimated to be in the double-digits, with employee separations as a percent of staff employment higher in private than public agencies. The average turnover rate among child welfare professionals at private agencies might be between 40% and 45% depending upon the exact definition of the measure and the workers covered.[36] State agencies report average turnover rates half as high

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[32] Alliance for Children and Families, American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), and Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), *The Child Welfare Workforce Challenge: Results from a Preliminary Study*, presented at Finding Better Ways 2001, Dallas, TX, May 2001. (Hereafter cited as Alliance for Children, APHSA, and CWLA, *The Child Welfare Workforce Challenge*.)

[33] Ibid.

[34] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *National Study of Child Protective Services Systems and Reform Efforts: Findings on Local CPS Practices*, May 2003, available at [http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cps-status03/CPS-practices03/index.htm].

[35] U.S. General Accountability Office, *Child Welfare: HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff*, GAO-03-357, Mar. 2003.

[36] Drais-Parrillo, *2003 Salary Survey*; and Alliance for Children, APHSA, and CWLA, *The Child Welfare Workforce Challenge*. Note: The former defines the turnover rate as the ratio of staff who exited positions (including those who changed positions within an agency) to the number of positions (whether filled or vacant) on a particular date; the latter defines the turnover rate as the ratio of staff who exited positions (excluding those who changed positions within an agency) to the number of authorized full-time-equivalent positions on

(continued...)

despite their previously mentioned greater caseloads. The wide disparity between private and public agencies, on average, may be associated with a few private agencies at which large shares of staff left over the course of a year. When the comparator is all state and local government employees rather than child welfare workers at private agencies, turnover at public child welfare agencies appears to be quite high.[37]

Interest exists in reducing the rate of turnover among front-line child welfare workers because of its impact on the continuity and quality of service delivery to clients. Rapid turnover also appears to be a problem for staff who remain: they must pick up the slack not only from leavers, but also from sometimes inexperienced individuals hired to fill vacated positions. As previously mentioned, pre-service training usually is required for child welfare workers, and even after this training period is completed, the number of cases handled by new hires may be increased only gradually thereby "continuing the pressure on the existing staff to carry the overall caseload and workload during the new staff "gearing-up" period."[38]

Research has been conducted to determine why some workers stay and others leave the child welfare field. Despite disparate methodologies (surveys and interviews), populations (all child welfare professions, caseworkers, and Title IV-E scholarship recipients), and scope (public agencies in different states and in different counties within one state), and dependent variables (intention to leave or to stay, and actual turnover or retention), the outcomes of these empirical studies are fairly similar. Although they do play a role, personal characteristics of child welfare staff (age, gender, and race) do not appear to be strong predictors of intention to leave. Instead, certain professional and organizational characteristics are estimated to account for much of the variation in who decides to leave or remain. This has been taken as a positive sign because "there might be a great deal that both managers and policy makers can do to prevent turnover."[39]

Supervisory support and internal career ladders are among the organizational characteristics estimated to be related to turnover and retention. This twin finding prompted the recommendation that public child welfare agencies utilize career

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[36] (...continued)
a particular date. The former applies to caseworker and case management positions; the latter to child protective service workers and other direct service workers (excluding paraprofessionals).

[37] Cyphers, *Report from the 2004 Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State Agency Findings*.

[38] Gary Cyphers, *Report from the Child Welfare Workforce Survey: State and County Data and Findings* (Washington, D.C.: APHSA, May 2001), p. 4.

[39] Michael E. Mor Barak, Jan A. Nissly, and Amy Levine, "Antecedents to Retention and Turnover among Child Welfare, Social Work, and Other Human Service Employees: What Can We Learn from Past Research? A Review and Metanalysis," *Social Service Review*, vol. 75, no. 4 (Dec. 2001), p. 625 (hereafter cited as Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levine, *Antecedents to Retention and Turnover*.). See also Dale Weaver and Janet Chang, *The Retention of California's Public Child Welfare Workers*, California Social Work Education Center, Berkeley, CA, October 2004.

ladders not only to encourage "professional development and advancement" but also "to support stronger mentoring roles for supervisors."[40] Agencies also

> might provide greater and more systematic supervisory training, reduce supervisor:employee ratios, reduce the rotation of supervisors to promote stability, and redistribute work tasks so that supervisors can spend more time with their workers. Similarly, coworker support might be improved through reducing the frequency of employee transfers across work units and by implementing regular peer-support meetings and other forms of team development.[41]

One professional characteristic — described in different studies as a sense of mission, commitment, and a belief that social work provides a valuable service to society — was estimated to strongly influence allegiance to the occupation and to remaining in the child welfare field.[42] This finding led to the suggestion that an individual's "orientation to service" be considered when recruiting employees as it might increase their likelihood of staying. But, even when the intrinsic value of the job is strong, other factors such as affective and competent supervisory support as well as organizational characteristics (turnover and caseload) appear to be important contributors to the likelihood of job retention.[43]

Not only do short-tenured child welfare workers with the strongest intention to remain in the field differ from those with the weakest intention in their professional commitment, but they also were found to differ in levels of job stress, perceptions about supervisory quality and leadership received, views about the degree of co-worker support, and their extent of job satisfaction with organizational variables including caseloads, compensation, paperwork, and support.[44] Other results show that relatively inexperienced workers and those who feel less competent are more inclined to leave, suggesting that

> managers might avoid turnover if they invest in training and job-related education that increased work-related knowledge and employee efficacy. This

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[40] Miriam J. Landsman, "Commitment in Public Child Welfare," *Social Service Review*, vol. 75, no. 3 (Sept. 2001), p. 408. (Hereafter cited as Landsman, *Commitment in Public Child Welfare*.)

[41] Jan A. Nissly, Michael E. Mor Barak, and Amy Levine, "Stress, Social Support, and Workers' Intentions to Leave Their Jobs in Public Child Welfare," *Administration of Social Work*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2005), pp. 96-97.

[42] Alberta J. Ellett, Chad D. Ellett, and John K. Rugutt, *A Study of Personal and Organizational Factors Contributing to Employee Retention and Turnover in Child Welfare in Georgia*, June 2003 (Hereafter cited as Ellett, Ellett, and Rugutt, *A Study of Personal and Organizational Factors*); Landsman, *Commitment in Public Child Welfare*; and Joan R. Rycraft, "The Party Isn't Over: The Agency Role in the Retention of Public Child Welfare Caseworkers," *Social Work*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Jan. 1994).

[43] Brenda D. Smith, "Job Retention in Child Welfare: Effects of Perceived Organizational Support, Supervisory Support, and Intrinsic Job Value," *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Feb. 2005).

[44] Ellett, Ellett, and Rugutt, *A Study of Personal and Organizational Factors*.

> might be accomplished through more comprehensive new-employee orientation programs, the development of peer-support groups, or the teaming of new employees and more experienced colleagues.[45]

Indeed, a longitudinal analysis of child protective services caseworkers in one state estimated that supervisory support for training and transfer of learning is associated with retention — perhaps because it implies to employees a willingness on the part of the agency to invest in her career development. The same study similarly found that coworker support for training helped to promote staff retention.[46]

Degree of support from co-workers and supervisors as well as salary level were estimated to affect the retention likelihood of persons who receive Title IV-E stipends while pursuing their masters in social work (MSW). Title IV-E program graduates who remain in public child welfare jobs also appear to be less emotionally exhausted (burned out) and to spend less time on court-related tasks than Title IV-E graduates who leave or plan to do so.[47] MSW graduates who receive Title IV-E scholarships may remain at public child welfare agencies for a longer period of time than other child welfare professionals.[48] In addition, a majority of employees at public and private non-profit child or family service agencies who utilized the cancellation provisions of the Federal Perkins Loan Program indicated an intention to remain with their employers after the debt was forgiven.[49] (This study included no group for purposes of comparison, however.)

Through the previously described CFSR process, HHS identified relatively new training procedures put in place in Delaware as a "promising practice" for improving staff training and retention. State legislation in 1997 increased education requirements for caseworkers to attainment of a bachelor's degree in a field closely related to child welfare, created promotional opportunities for caseworkers, established caseload standards, and allowed overstaffing to enable new staff to complete initial training before assignment of caseloads. In addition to their performance plans including expectations about turnover, supervisors now receive additional training in how to support staff. The state subsequently reduced both

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[45] Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levine, *Antecedents to Retention and Turnover*, p. 656.

[46] Dale Curry, Timothy McCarragher, and Mary Dellmann-Jenkins, "Training, Transfer, and Turnover: Exploring the Relationship among Transfer of Learning Factors and Staff Retention in Child Welfare," *Child and Youth Services Review*, vol. 27, no, 8 (2005).

[47] Nancy S. Dickinson and Robin E. Perry, "Factors Influencing the Retention of Specially Educated Public Child Welfare Workers," in Briar-Lawson and Zlotnik, *Evaluation Research in Child Welfare*.

[48] Ellett, Ellett, and Rugutt, *A Study of Personal and Organizational Factors*; and Loring Jones, "A Follow-Up of a Title IV-E Program's Graduates' Retention Rates in a Public Agency," in Briar-Lawson and Zlotnik, *Evaluation Research in Child Welfare*.

[49] Sunny Harris Rome, "Serving High-Risk Children: Recruiting Through Student Loan Forgiveness," *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 25, no. 10 (Oct. 2003). (Hereafter cited as Rome, *Serving High-Risk Children*.)

turnover and case backlog (i.e., reports of child maltreatment not investigated in a timely manner).[50]

Job Outlook

Prospects are good for those interested in employment as child, family, and school social workers as well as social and human service assistants. BLS projects relatively greater net employment growth for child, family, and school social workers (23%) and for social and human service assistants (49%) than for all workers on average (15%).[51]

More robust job gains are anticipated among social and human service assistants than among child, family, and school social workers, in part, because private social services agencies are increasingly expected to restructure their operations and hire more lower paid personnel.[52] In 2012, the employment of social and human assistants at private agencies delivering services to individuals and families could total 92,000 or 75% (40,000) more than in 2002. Over the same period, employment of child, family, and school social workers at these private agencies could reach 62,000 or 41% (18,000) above the 2002 level. (See **Table 3**.)

Public agencies also are projected to increase their employment of child, family, and school social workers as well as of social and human service assistants. As shown in **Table 3**, BLS projects state and local governments (excluding education and hospitals) could post a 9% (10,000) net gain in child, family, and school social workers and a 5% (4,000) net gain in social and human service assistants. These figures are considerably below those projected for private agencies, reflecting the expectation that government will contract out some social services activities. However, actual employment levels in future years at both public and private social assistance agencies likely will be affected by the fluctuating availability of government resources.

In addition to net employment growth due to increased demand for social services, many existing jobs could become available given the need to replace persons who switch to other occupations or leave the labor force (e.g., retire). In each year of the 2002-2012 projection period, an average of 75,000 positions for social and human service assistants (regardless of industry) could become available as a result of net job growth and replacement needs.[53] For the same two reasons, BLS projects that an average of 49,000 positions for child, family, and school social workers could develop annually.

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[50] See [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/promise/de.pdf] for a summary of Delaware's approach.

[51] BLS, *Occupational Projections and Training Data, 2004-05 Edition*, Bulletin 2572 (Washington, D.C., Mar. 2004). (Hereafter cited as BLS, *Occupational Projections and Training Data*.)

[52] BLS, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.

[53] BLS, *Occupational Projections and Training Data*.

Many of the job openings for social workers could come about as a result of the baby-boom generation's retirement. The youngest baby-boomer will be 48 by the end of the projection period, the oldest, 66. Some 43% of child, family, and school social workers (excluding those in schools and hospitals) are employed by state and local governments, most of which have pension plans enabling otherwise eligible employees to retire at or before age 55.[54] (The age composition of social workers in child welfare practice may differ from child, family, and school social workers overall, however.)

Based upon a 2002 survey of students a few weeks shy of obtaining bachelor's degrees in liberal arts or in social work, however, prospects are not nearly as good for recruiting professionals into the human services workforce (defined as jobs in child welfare, child care, youth services, juvenile justice, and employment and training). Relatively few had given serious consideration to getting jobs in any of these fields, and even among those who had, a minority were knowledgeable about how to find one. Additionally, 45% of students with the greatest interest in these fields called the hiring process confusing; 71%, characterized it as slow. Almost 3 out of 5 students who were very or somewhat interested in obtaining human services jobs anticipated remaining in them for five or fewer years.[55]

Findings like these have caused concern in some quarters that without effective recruitment strategies, the demand for child welfare service professionals might outweigh their supply. It appears that one federal initiative to increase recruitment of college graduates to the child and family welfare field may not be having much of an impact: as some 43% of survey respondents eligible for cancellation of Federal Perkins Loans under Section 465(a) of the Higher Education Amendments of 1992 (P.L. 102-325) did not learn of the cancellation opportunity until after college graduation, it is not surprising that only 12% reported the availability of loan forgiveness influenced their employment preference. Reasons other than timing that students offered for the seemingly limited usefulness of this program as a recruitment tool include the small share of indebtedness accounted for by Perkins awards, the lengthy employment period (five years) before cancellation occurs, and the rate at which forgiveness takes place within that period.[56] There also is concern that absent the implementation of effective retention strategies at public and private agencies, child welfare and other human services workers could "continue to cycle through the workforce with little lasting impact on behalf of the people they serve."[57]

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[54] Arlene Dohm, "Gauging the Labor Market Effects of Retiring Baby-Boomers," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 2000.

[55] Light, *The Health of the Human Services Workforce*.

[56] Rome, *Serving High-Risk Children*. Note: For information on student loan cancellation generally, see CRS Report RL32516, *Student Loan Forgiveness Programs*, by Gail McCallion.

[57] Light, *The Health of the Human Services Workforce*, p. 8.

Table 3. Wage and Salary Employment of Child, Family, and School Social Workers and of Social and Human Service Assistants by Selected Industries, 2002 and 2012

Occupation by selected industries	2002 Employment		2012 Employment		Change	
	Number (000)	Distribution (%)	Number (000)	Distribution (%)	Number (000)	%
Child, family, and school social workers	270	100	333	100	63	23
Individual and family services	44	16	62	19	18	41
Other social assistance[a]	17	6	25	8	8	47
Nursing and residential care	20	7	31	9	11	53
State and local government[b]	115	43	125	38	10	9
State	63	23	67	20	4	7
Local	52	19	58	17	6	11
Social and human service assistants	305	100	453	100	148	49
Individual and family services	53	17	92	20	40	75
Other social assistance[a]	41	13	76	17	35	85
Nursing and residential care	49	16	86	19	37	76
State and local government[b]	79	26	83	18	4	5
State	35	11	36	8	1	3
Local	44	14	47	10	3	6

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Employment Projections.

a. Other private sector social assistance industries are community food and housing, and emergency and other relief services; vocational rehabilitation services; and child day care services.
b. State and local government excludes educational services and hospitals.