

Public Child Welfare Workers' Safety Experiences: Predictors and Impact on Job Withdrawal Using Mixed-Methods Approach

HaeJung Kim, PhD

University of Maryland, School of Social Work

Baltimore, MD

Statement of the Research Problem

Compared to other social work fields, the child welfare profession is particularly highly vulnerable to workplace-related violence (Brockmann, 2002; Jayaratne, Vinokur-Kaplan, Negda, & Chess, 1996; Newhill & Wexler, 1997; Pahl, 1999; Shin, 2011). The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (1998) reported that 70% of front-line child welfare workers had been victims of violence. Newhill and Wexler (1997) found that children and youth service social workers were the most vulnerable to clients' violence, with 75 % of workers reporting property damage, potential or attempted attack, and actual attack. During the past five years, several social workers have been attacked and killed by their clients while conducting home visits. For example, in 2004, a child protective service social worker in Kansas was stabbed to death while visiting a client at his home. In 2006, a director with Texas Child Protective Services who had received work-related threats by clients' family members was found dead in a field. More recently, in 2008, a social worker in West Virginia was killed by her clients during a routine home visit.

Violence against child welfare workers occurs for several reasons. First, as Burry (2002) described, compliance with intervention in the lives of child welfare clients is involuntary, and clients' families often have other volatile issues, such as domestic violence and substance abuse. Second, child welfare workers who routinely make home visits often do so in dangerous neighborhoods (Burry, 2002; Newhill & Wexler, 1997). Therefore, compared to social workers in other fields, child welfare workers who spend a large percentage of their time visiting clients in their communities may experience a higher risk of harm. Third, child welfare workers tend to prioritize children's physical and emotional safety first, so child welfare workers often ignore the fact that they may become targets of violence. Lastly, many state governments currently are suffering from budget cuts; therefore, adequate funds to properly train and protect public child welfare workers are not available (CWLA, 2010). The lack of training opportunities increases the risk of workplace violence for child welfare workers.

The purpose of this study was to understand both child welfare workers' safety experiences during their home visits and the individual and organizational factors that influence their safety concerns.

Research Background and Hypothesis

The most significant limitation of existing literature is the lack of studies examining variables that may influence social workers' perception of risk during their home visits. In particular, no studies of home visit risks with child welfare workers have been conducted, even though there is literature suggesting that child welfare workers frequently face unsafe working environments, especially in larger communities.

Secondly, most studies on social workers' workplace violence experiences are descriptive, reporting the prevalence of violence or types of violence, with a few demographic variables (Horejsi et al.; Jayaratne et al., 2004; Newhill, 1996; Newhill & Wexler, 1997; Shields & Kiser, 2003). Little research has been done on how social workers' individual characteristics and organizational factors influence their perception of risk. Moreover, while predictors of intention to leave are widely studied in the child welfare field, there are still under studied variables, such as community characteristics and social workers' perception of risk.

In addition to a limited number of studies, there are several methodological problems in previous studies. Only two measures of perception of workplace violence have been reported in the social work literature: (a) past victimization from client violence scale (Jayaratne et al., 1996) and (b) fear of future victimization from client violence scale (Rogers & Kelloway, 1997). These scales have been discussed in several workplace violence-related articles in the social work field (e.g. Beaver, 1999; Jayaratne et al., 1996; Song, 2005); however, the scales have measurement-related problems. First, they have poor psychometric properties (i.e. reliability, validity). For example, information about the reliability and validity of Jayaratne et al.'s measure was not published. Second, though both measures include constructs of verbal and physical aggression, neither scale includes measures of home visit risk. In the social work field, no measure exists to assess social workers' personal safety concerns and behavioral responses during their home visits.

Finally, little research has been done on what specific policies and strategies exist in the public child welfare field to address workplace violence. No studies have addressed how organizational factors, such as policies, training, and organizational support, help to alleviate social workers' perceptions and concerns about risk.

To fill these gaps in the research literature, this study examined multiple factors that may predict perception of risk and its consequences on child welfare workers' personal and organizational outcomes. The specific research objectives of this study were to (1) understand child welfare workers' workplace violence experiences, (2) examine predictors of safety concerns, and (3) examine a relationship between safety concerns and job withdrawal. To fulfill the research objectives, four research questions guided this study.

1. What are the workplace violence experiences of child welfare workers?
2. What are the predictors of child welfare workers' perception of risk?
3. How is child welfare workers' perception of risk related to their job withdrawal?
4. What impact do organizational characteristics have on child welfare workers' perception of risk?

Methodology

A mixed methods design was used to examine the association between child welfare workers' perception of risk and their job withdrawal. In particular, a mixed methods sequential explanatory design that purposefully selects participants for a follow-up, in-depth, qualitative study (Creswell & Clark, 2007) was employed. In the first phase of the study, secondary quantitative data ($N=426$) were analyzed using factorial ANOVA, multiple regression, and multilevel analyses. All data analyses were performed using SPSS 18.0. In the second phase, follow-up interviews were conducted with nine child welfare workers who scored high both on perception of risk (upper 30%) and job withdrawal (upper 30%).

Results

In summary, quantitative results showed that child welfare workers frequently had engaged in avoidance behavior (e.g. end home visits earlier, meet clients at public place) because of their safety concerns. The results of four-factor ANOVA showed that none of the demographic variables were significantly different on the level of safety concerns. By performing a multiple regression analysis, a lack of respect from other professionals and negative public perception toward child welfare workers were found to be predictors of child welfare workers' safety concerns. As anticipated, safety concerns at the individual level were associated with child welfare workers' job withdrawal, which indicated that greater exposure to an unsafe working environment was associated with the higher level of job withdrawal. However, unsafe climate (aggregated at the organizational level) and cross-level interactions of unsafe climate with supervisor support or coworker support were not significant. Qualitative results showed that child welfare workers perceived home visiting as one of the most significant components of child welfare practice to ensure children's safety and well-being. Also, they perceived that addressing personal safety is critical to enhance both workers' well-being and clients' safety. The level of home visiting risks was determined by several factors, including workers' individual characteristics, situational factors, organizational characteristics, and community characteristics. Three types of workplace violence that child welfare workers frequently experienced were identified from qualitative interviews: (1) verbal or physical threats by clients (2) fear of violence while working in larger communities, and (3) fear of violence at clients' home. After experiencing direct or indirect workplace violence, child welfare workers felt discomfort, anger, burnout, stress, and they seriously considered leaving the organizations. Qualitative interviews also confirmed safety concerns as a primary contributor to child welfare workers' job withdrawal. In addition, major themes were identified from the interviews: 1) culture of silence regarding personal safety issues, 2)

lack of organizational policies or procedures, 3) lack of safety training or education, 4) and distrust in management's ability to deal with workplace violence.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This study can provide practical implications for supervisors, managers, and administrators in the social work field. Findings from this study indicate that safety concerns have an influence on child welfare workers' job withdrawal. The high turnover rate has been a major problem in child welfare field. (GAO, 2003), and it has steadily increased in the state of Maryland. Implementing intervention to reduce child welfare workers' safety concerns should be a top priority among child welfare managers and administrators.

One of the key findings from this study is that external stressors outside of the agencies, negative public perception and less respect from other professionals, played a critical role in predicting safety concerns and job withdrawal. This suggests that child welfare workers, including supervisors and managers, need to actively build and maintain a good reputation by expanding collaborative efforts with community members. At the child welfare agency level, it is also critical to have more attention on community practice, including community resource development, resource mapping, and community relationship building to address worker safety and retention issues.

It is important to note that child welfare workers in this study discussed the need for more efforts in developing and formalizing organizational policies and procedures addressing worker safety. Managers or administrators in the child welfare field should make efforts to create a safety climate by developing preventive policies and programs to promote social workers' safety. As suggested in the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Guidelines for Preventing Workplace Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers (OSHA, 1998), supervisors or administrators should have a responsibility to protect staff members from violent incidents by identifying needed supports and protective efforts. It is also essential for managers or administrators to develop practical and easily implemented safety action plans, risk assessment of clients and communities, and manuals to record and report incidents.

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