

**LINKING NC CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES WITH PROFESSIONALISM OF STAFF: ARE AGENCIES WITH HIGHER PERCENTAGES OF BSW AND MSW STAFF ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES?**

By

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This paper represents work done by a UNC-Chapel Hill Master of Public Administration student. It is not a formal report of the Institute of Government, nor is it the work of School of Government faculty.

**Executive Summary**

North Carolina local Departments of Social Services seek to provide services to ensure the safety of children and maintain families. This research focuses on the role of the educational background of the caseworker as it relates to outcomes for children and families in North Carolina. An analysis of three outcome measures was used to evaluate this relationship across all 100 DSS county agencies in North Carolina. This study found the percentage of BSW and MSW child welfare staff to be a statistically significant influence on length of stay in foster care by decreasing the median length of stay in foster care by 260 days for agencies with higher percentages of BSW workers and increasing the length of stay by 310 days for agencies with higher percentages of MSW staff. However, the percentage of BSW and MSW child welfare staff was not shown to significantly impact re-abuse and re-entry rates.

## INTRODUCTION

“With more than 800,000 children estimated to spend some time in foster care each year, the federal government allocates approximately \$7 billion each year to states to investigate abuse and neglect, provide placements to children outside their homes, and deliver services to help keep families.”<sup>i</sup> During the Federal fiscal year 2009 alone, over 3.3 million referrals alleging abuse and/or neglect were made to Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies across the nation.<sup>ii</sup> In some cases, child fatalities became the most catastrophic consequence of maltreatment, with 1,740 U.S. child fatalities reported in 2008 alone.<sup>iii</sup>

During a family’s involvement with CPS, the characteristics of the following key players have the potential to influence outcomes for families: the biological parent(s), the foster or adoptive parent(s), the child, and the caseworker.<sup>iv</sup> To date, few studies have examined the direct correlation between caseworker educational background and outcomes for children and families. Because so few studies have directly addressed this topic, the following study was conducted to gain greater insight into the issue for North Carolina by addressing the question: Are agencies with more BSW (bachelors of social work) and MSW (masters of social work) staff achieving better outcomes for children and their families?

This research will examine the impact of child welfare workers’ educational background on outcomes by comparing outcome data regarding length of stay in out-of-home placements (foster care), re-entry rates, and re-abuse rates with the professionalism of each of North Carolina’s 100 local department of social services (i.e. BSW/MSW versus non BSW/MSW).

## BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

North Carolina has a federally mandated, state supervised, county administered, social services system. Services and benefits are therefore delivered through the local Departments of Social Services (DSS) agencies with oversight from the State.<sup>v</sup> Within local DSS agencies, CPS units have a primary mandate to protect children from and prevent further maltreatment (abuse and/or neglect).<sup>vi</sup> Children residing in high-risk environments may be removed and placed into temporary foster care while caseworkers work closely with the family to reunify the family unit. Once a child is placed back into their home, CPS may continue to provide services or refer the family to additional resources/services in an effort to prevent re-abuse and/or re-entry into foster care. This service is extremely important given that child maltreatment is the second leading cause of death for children in the US.<sup>vii</sup>

### *What are North Carolina’s Child Welfare Statistics?*

Last year, North Carolina had 13,921 children in the foster care system.<sup>viii</sup> Close to forty percent of those children were under the age of five. Approximately, fifty-three percent were White and thirty-seven percent were African American.<sup>viii</sup> During 2007 (the last year assessed in this study), the number of children in custody per 1000 in North Carolina was about 7.3 and the average length of stay in foster care was about 22 months or 1.9 years. With respect to abuse and neglect, about 69,000 reports alleging abuse and neglect of children in North Carolina were made in 2008. Over 28,000 of the children involved in those cases were found to be victims of abuse and/or neglect and about 12,000 secondary reports were made.

### *What does a Typical Child Welfare Workforce Look Like? How Does North Carolina Measure Up?*

Many child welfare caseworkers have professional degrees in social work (currently less than 40 percent).<sup>ix</sup> However, this credential is not always required. Additionally, research shows that the typical child welfare worker has been on the job less than seven years and only about 21 percent have both social work education and more than five years of experience.<sup>x</sup> With respect to North Carolina, in 2007, the

number of child welfare positions across the State totaled 2,735 and approximately 43 percent of those positions were filled by BSW and MSW social workers. Ultimately, there is still much debate about what a “highly skilled child welfare workforce” means. Does it mean a higher percentage of child welfare staff with social work specific degrees or specific skill-sets? This is still to be determined in research.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Do social workers make better child welfare workers? Current research presents conflicting answers to this question. Several studies support this assertion on the premise that social workers are more satisfied with their jobs, have greater longevity in child welfare, and are more skilled in child welfare practice than their non-social work educated counterparts.<sup>xi</sup> However, conflicting research has found no significant difference in employee performance based on educational background as rated by their colleagues.<sup>xii</sup> Contradictory evidence could be attributed to the different approaches taken to answer the question and/or because we all have different expectations of what we mean by *better*.<sup>xiii</sup> “Is *better* reflected in improved outcomes for the children and families served by child welfare agencies or is *better* related to professional commitment to serving child welfare clients, self-efficacy, ethical practices, and improved retention?”<sup>xiv</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY**

To explore this research question, two major data sources were used: county-level outcome data obtained from various resources, and demographic information regarding level of education for child welfare staff obtained from each county’s annual report to the Jordan Institute for families. Additionally, a comprehensive review of literature was used to provide background information and to help establish independent variables to serve as controls for the linear regressions.

### **County-Level Data**

County-level data for length of stay in foster care, re-entry rates and re-abuse rates were obtained from the Jordan Institute for Families website. County-level data for population, unemployment rates and percent of population under 19 years of age was obtained from North Carolina State Data Center website. Data for county type was retrieved from North Carolina Rural Center website. Data regarding professionalism of North Carolina’s child welfare staff was obtained from the Jordan Institute for Families with permission from the State.

### ***Methods***

Multiple linear regressions using SPSS software were conducted to investigate the relationship between the three outcomes in question (length of stay in foster care, re-abuse rates, and foster care re-entry rates) and the educational backgrounds of employees during 2001-2007. Control variables included unemployment rates, county type (i.e. rural), year, county population, percent under the age nineteen, and percent of BSW/MSW child protection workers.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution. Multiple regressions are limited to the independent variables included their design. Therefore, multiple regressions are unable to take into account other factors influencing the dependent variables of interest. Additional intervening variables could include turnover rates, parent characteristics (i.e. substance abuse issues, health/mental health concerns, etc.).

Furthermore, results should be interpreted with caution given the limitations of the demographic data used for the analysis. The data used did not provide the position associated with BSW and MSW child welfare staff within child protective services (this unit may also include an adoption worker, case management and in-home services staff). Therefore, it is unknown what percentage of BSW and MSW employees directly impact the outcomes measured.

## FINDINGS

### *Length of Stay in Foster Care*

Several linear regressions were conducted to assess the relationship between professionalism of staff and the median length of stay in foster care for children in North Carolina (median length of stay was about 408 days during 2001-2007). Consistently, the results illustrated a positive impact on median length of stay in foster care for BSW child welfare staff and a negative impact for MSW workers. **This study found with 99 percent confidence that as the percentages of BSW child welfare staff increase, the median number of days a child stays in the foster care system decreases. However, as the percentage of MSW educated staff increases, the median number of days in foster care increases.**

### *Re-abuse Rates*

**The linear regressions for this dependent variable found no significant impact (an increase or decrease in an agency receiving a second report alleging abuse and neglect for a child) by either BSW or MSW child welfare staff.** However, variables found to impact re-abuse rates included population, county type and the percent of the population under the age of nineteen. The number of second reports was found to decrease as a county's population increases. However, the number of second reports was found to increase in rural counties and as the percent of the population below 19 increases.

### *Re-entry Rates*

Multiple linear regressions were also conducted to assess the relationship between professionalism of staff and the re-entry rates for children in North Carolina. **Consistently, the results found no significant impact by either BSW or MSW level staff on the likelihood that a child would re-enter foster care.** However, the year (2001-2007) in which a child re-entered foster care was found to be statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

Given the SPSS data referenced above, only social work child welfare workers were found to considerably impact the median length of stay in foster care. However, the results illustrate a counterintuitive notion as the number of days in foster care increase with higher percentages of MSW child welfare staff. **Thus, the findings from this study suggest that only social work specific education on the bachelors level improves the outcomes in question, specifically foster care in North Carolina.**

## AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research explored only three child welfare outcomes using information from the Jordan Institute for Families website. Additional research using different data from the Jordan Institute for Families website and the SPSS model provided could also be used to assess the impact of social work educated staff on following dependent variables: length of stay in first placement authority, placement stability, reunification achieved within 12 months and adoption achieved within 24 months.

Caseworker specific outcomes in foster care could also be tracked and evaluated using information obtained from 5094 forms that a worker completes each month for each child serviced by the agency (this form also tracks other demographic data such as age, race, and placement type of child).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a need for prioritizing the evaluation of the relationship between the educational background of child welfare staff and measurable outcomes for families and children to ensure that North Carolina's approach to facilitating better outcomes for children is effective. Further research building on the model presented in this study regarding the impact of BSW and MSW workers should take into consideration multiple levels of independent variables, including but not limited to:

- the influence and quality of the supervisory relationship on worker efficacy and client outcomes
- the knowledge and expertise of supervisors within specific fields of child welfare practice
- the contexts for which service is delivered (organizational culture and environmental factors such as low pay, high caseloads, turnover rates etc.)
- the operation of the court system as it relates to length of stay in foster care
- characteristics of worker caseloads to assess whether BSW and MSW workers are given more difficult cases
- client satisfaction with services received by workers of different educational backgrounds
- the characteristics of the players involved (child, parents, foster parents and last but not least, the caseworker).

These findings may be useful in making critical decisions regarding programs in North Carolina designed to increase the number of BSW and MSW social workers in child welfare and local departments of social services' recruitment strategies, especially in times of huge budget cuts.

## APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT<sup>1</sup>

### Physical Abuse Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-101

Abused juvenile means any child younger than age 18 whose parent, guardian, custodian, or caregiver:

- Inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon the child a serious physical injury by other than accidental means
- Creates or allows to be created a substantial risk of serious physical injury to the child by other than accidental means
- Uses or allows to be used upon the child cruel or grossly inappropriate procedures or cruel or grossly inappropriate devices to modify behavior.

### Sexual Abuse/Exploitation Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-101

The term abused juvenile includes any child younger than age 18 whose parent, guardian, custodian, or caregiver commits, permits, or encourages the commission of a violation of the following laws regarding sexual offenses by, with, or upon the child:

- First and second degree rape or sexual offense
- Rape of a child by an adult offender
- Sexual act by a custodian
- Crime against nature or incest
- Preparation of obscene photographs, slides, or motion pictures of the child
- Employing or permitting the child to assist in a violation of the obscenity laws
- Dissemination of obscene material to the child
- Displaying or disseminating material harmful to the child
- First and second degree sexual exploitation of the child
- Promoting the prostitution of the child
- Taking indecent liberties with the child

### Emotional Abuse Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-101

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<sup>1</sup> A better understanding of this issue and the various definitions across States' statutes may be obtained from:

[http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state/index.cfm?event=stateStatutes.processSearch](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/index.cfm?event=stateStatutes.processSearch)

The term abused juvenile includes any child younger than age 18 whose parent, guardian, custodian, or caregiver creates or allows to be created serious emotional damage to the child. Serious emotional damage is evidenced by a child's severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior toward himself or others.

**Neglect Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-101**

Neglected juvenile means a child:

- Who does not receive proper care, supervision, or discipline from his or her parent, guardian, custodian, or caregiver
- Who is not provided necessary medical or remedial care
- Who lives in an environment injurious to his or her welfare
- Who has been placed for care or adoption in violation of law

In determining whether a child is a neglected juvenile, it is relevant whether that child lives in a home where another child has been subjected to abuse or neglect by an adult who regularly lives in the home.

**Abandonment Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-101**

The term-neglected juvenile includes a child who has been abandoned.

**Standards for Reporting Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-301**

A report is required when there is cause to suspect that a child is abused, neglected, or dependent.

**Persons Responsible for the Child (Caretaker) Citation: Gen. Stat. § 7B-101**

A person responsible for a child's health and welfare means:

- A parent, guardian, or custodian
- A stepparent, foster parent, or an adult member of the child's household
- An adult relative entrusted with the child's care
- Any person, such as a house parent or cottage parent, who has primary responsibility for supervising a child's health and welfare in a residential child care facility
- An employee or volunteer of a division, institution, or school operated by the department

## APPENDIX B: RESULTS

Figure A. Linear Regression Output for Length of Stay in Foster Care

Dependent Variable	Is the relationship between the variables in question significant? <sup>xv</sup>	How confident are the findings about that significance? <sup>xvi</sup>	How much of this variance be explained across counties? <sup>xvii</sup>	What is the impact on length of stay in foster care? <sup>xviii</sup>	How significant is the relationship between the dependent variables and length of stay? <sup>xix</sup>	How confident are the findings? <sup>xx</sup>
BSW	8.297	.000	.429	-310.837	-2.732	.008
MSW	8.297	.000	.429	260.878	1.503	.138

Figure B. Linear Regression Output for Re-abuse Rates

Dependent Variable	Is the relationship between the areas in question significant? <sup>xxi</sup>	How confident are the findings about that significance? <sup>xxii</sup>	How much of this variance be explained across counties? <sup>xxiii</sup>	What is the impact on re-abuse rates? <sup>xxiv</sup>	How significant is the relationship between the dependent variables and re-abuse rates? <sup>xxv</sup>	How confident are the findings? <sup>xxvi</sup>
BSW	3.201	.003	.022	-.004	-.384	.701
MSW	3.201	.003	.022	.020	.696	.486

Figure C. Linear Regression Output for Re-entry Rates

Dependent Variable	Is the relationship between the areas in question significant? <sup>xxvii</sup>	How confident are the findings about that significance? <sup>xxviii</sup>	How much of this variance be explained across counties? <sup>xxix</sup>	What is the impact on foster care re-entry rates? <sup>xxx</sup>	How significant is the relationship between the dependent variables and re-entry rates? <sup>xxxi</sup>	How confident are the findings? <sup>xxxii</sup>
BSW	3.287	.002	.023	.007	.362	.717
MSW	3.287	.002	.023	.010	.212	.832

## APPENDIX C: REFERENCES

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## **APPENDIX D: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## APPENDIX E: NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, n.d.

<sup>iii</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.

<sup>iv</sup> Ryan, J.P., Garnier, P., Zyphur, M. & Zhai, Fuhua., 2006

<sup>v</sup> North Carolina Division of Social Services, n.d.

<sup>vi</sup> The federal government sets the minimum standards of care and protection of children by caregivers and each State has the authority to define abuse and neglect. North Carolina's definitions (General Statutes) for abuse, neglect, caregivers along with standards for reporting are provided in Appendix A

<sup>vii</sup> Children Defense Fund, n.d.

<sup>viii</sup> Jordan Institute for Families, n.d.

<sup>viii</sup> Jordan Institute for Families, n.d.

<sup>ix</sup> Barth et al., 2008

<sup>x</sup> Barth, et al., 2008

<sup>xi</sup> Barth et al, 2008; Rittner, B. and Wodarski, J.S., 1999; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003; Zlotnik, J.L., 2006;

<sup>xii</sup> Perry. R., 2006; Perry, R.E., 2006; Hughes, R.C., Zlotnik, J.L., Strand, V.C. & Anderson, G.R., 2009

<sup>xiii</sup> Zlotnik, J.L., 2006

<sup>xiv</sup> Zlotnik, J.L., 2006

<sup>xv</sup> This figure corresponds with the F value obtained from the linear regression for length of stay in foster care using SPSS software

<sup>xvi</sup> This figure corresponds with significance of the F value obtained from the linear regression for length of stay in foster care using SPSS software

<sup>xvii</sup> This figure corresponds with the adjusted  $R^2$  valued obtained from the linear regression for length of stay in foster care using SPSS software

<sup>xviii</sup> This figure corresponds with the B value obtained from the linear regression for length of stay in foster care using SPSS software

<sup>xix</sup> This figure corresponds with the t value obtained from the linear regression for length of stay in foster care using SPSS software

<sup>xx</sup> This figure corresponds with the significance of the t value obtained from the linear regression for length of stay in foster care using SPSS software

<sup>xxi</sup> This figure corresponds with F value obtained from the linear regression for re-abuse rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxii</sup> This figure corresponds with the significance of the F value obtained from the linear regression for re-abuse rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxiii</sup> This figure corresponds with adjusted  $R^2$  valued obtained from the linear regression for re-abuse rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxiv</sup> This figure corresponds with the B value obtained from the linear regression for re-abuse rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxv</sup> This figure corresponds with t value obtained from the linear regression for re-abuse rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxvi</sup> This figure corresponds with the significance of the t value obtained from the linear regression for re-abuse rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxvii</sup> This figure corresponds with F value obtained from the linear regression for re-entry rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxviii</sup> This figure corresponds with the significance of the F value obtained from the linear regression for re-entry rates using SPSS software

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<sup>xxix</sup> This figure corresponds with the adjusted  $R^2$  obtained from the linear regression for re-entry rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxx</sup> This figure corresponds with B value obtained from the linear regression for re-entry rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxxi</sup> This figure corresponds with t value obtained from the linear regression for re-entry rates using SPSS software

<sup>xxxii</sup> This figure corresponds with the significance of the t value obtained from the linear regression for re-entry rates using SPSS software