

WORKFORCE



Listening to the Voices of Children in Foster Care: Youths Speak Out About Child Welfare Workforce Turnover and Selection

Strolin-Goltzman, J., Kollar, S. & Trinkle, J. (2010). Listening to the voices of children in foster care: Youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection. *Social Work, 55*(1), 47-53.

Issue

Recruitment and retention of an experienced workforce is a problem for most child welfare systems and service providers. High staff turnover places vulnerable children at greater risk for maltreatment, impede timely intervention, and can delay permanency. Workforce attrition estimates across Florida range from 25 percent to 60 percent, mirroring other parts of the country. This study explored the experiences and opinions of youth in the child welfare system who experienced caseworker turnover while in care. Additionally, the authors looked at the relationship between the number of caseworkers a youth had and his or her number of foster care placements.

Findings

From the youths' perspective, three themes relating to caseworker turnover were identified: 1) lack of stability – youth reported that due to turnover of their caseworkers, their permanency plans were disrupted or prevented from being accomplished. Analysis by researchers revealed that with every two new caseworkers, placements increased by one, thus confirming youths' self-reports; 2) loss of trust – workforce turnover perpetuates the cycle of the lack of stable, healthy adult relationships for youth, thus reinforcing their mistrust and hostility towards adults and authority figures; 3) second chance – researchers found that for a minority of youth, new caseworkers were viewed positively as they were hopeful of receiving a "second chance" from them, providing them the opportunity to "start fresh" with an adult who is more able to effectively meet their needs.

THEME	EFFECT
Lack of Stability	Every two workers increases placement disruption at a 2:1 ratio
Loss of Trust	Worker turnover erodes youths' trust in the system as a whole
Second Chance	Some youth view new workers as an opportunity to "start fresh"

Implications

The authors confirmed youth self-reports that worker turnover negatively impacted their placements and permanency plans, setting back their achievement of permanency. Worker turnover also reinforces youths' beliefs that the adults in their lives are chaotic, untrustworthy and unreliable. Contrasting these findings, the authors found for a minority of youth, getting a new worker was a "fresh start", which speaks both positively and negatively. To improve practice, the authors suggest:

1. Child welfare caseworkers develop case plans with their clients, solicit their clients' opinions on what services would be most appropriate, be honest with them about their options, and provide them with support to independently make important life decisions.
2. Agencies may want to consider the effects of caseworker unit rotation on child well-being indicators, such as bonding.
3. State agency trainers can use youth as resources to facilitate training in youth culture.
4. Child welfare administrators at the state and local levels can solicit youths' opinions on the causes of and solutions to system-wide problems.
5. Local agency administrators can seek the participation of youth during the selection of and recruitment of child welfare caseworkers.
6. Social work researchers can collaborate with foster care youth leaders to develop participatory research designs that investigate the effects of workforce retention on other measures of child wellbeing such as permanency, bonding, and educational achievement.