



The Impact of Turnover on Families Involved in Child Welfare

Turnover rates in the child welfare workforce have been a serious concern for decades. Despite consistent research on the causes of and remedies for turnover, the rate remains too high. How turnover directly impacts children and families continues to be a gap in the research and literature. Additionally, the voices of the communities directly impacted by turnover in the child welfare workforce are often overlooked. Despite these gaps, this brief gathers several resources that look at turnover from the perspectives of families, children, workers, agencies, and other impacted groups.

This brief¹ consists of thirty resources divided into three sections that examine the impact of turnover and highlight the importance of studying and developing strategies to address this topic:

Section 1 IMPACT

Section One of the brief looks at the emotional, financial, and administrative impact of turnover. Stress and emotional exhaustion have been shown to contribute to staff turnover. Because high caseloads and workloads, as well as caseload severity, impact stress and emotional exhaustion, their effect on turnover and family outcomes is also explored.



Section 2 COMMUNITY VOICE

Section Two examines the impact of turnover from the community perspective. This section includes studies that incorporate the voices of children, youth, parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, and workers.



Section 3 SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Section Three focuses on systems transformation. Additional costs and impacts of turnover are discussed in this section. The positive impact of retention, the one caseworker model, family partnership, systems structure, and thorough training on family outcomes and organizational culture is explored alongside strategies for improvement.



¹ Each section lists the resources in order of year of publication, starting with the most recent resource. A brief summary and link for each resource is provided.

Section 1: Impact



Caseload and Workload Management (Issue Brief, 2022)

Large caseloads and excessive workloads in many jurisdictions can make it difficult for child welfare caseworkers to serve families effectively, however, reducing and managing caseloads and workloads are not simple tasks for child welfare administrators. This issue brief aims to build the knowledge base about caseload and workload issues with the goal of helping state child welfare managers, administrators, and others learn how they can improve caseload and workload situations in their agencies.

Unacknowledged Protectors: Consequences and Costs of Turnover in the Child Welfare Workforce (Overview/Summary, 2021)

This overview focuses on the consequences and costs of caseworker turnover in Pennsylvania. The authors talk about costs to the individual workers, families, supervisors, the system, and the state. They also share suggestions on how to address caseworker turnover in ways that will benefit caseworkers and the families they serve.

How Case Severity and Workplace Resources Impact Worker Retention (One Page Summary, 2021)

This document summarizes a study that used survey and administrative data from 485 Oregon Department of Human Services caseworkers to investigate how family or child case severity and job resources impact workers' decisions to stay in the field.

State Roundtable Reports (Annual Reports, 2016-2019)

This website provides links to the annual reports for the Pennsylvania State Roundtable Caseworker Retention Workgroup during their four years of work. In the 2016 document, the impact of retention and turnover on the court, agency, county commissioner, state, fiscal budget, and caseworkers, as well as children and families, is addressed. Results of "stay interviews," which attempt to understand caseworker retention and turnover, are included. Subsequent years' reports continue to explore these issues, their work to address them, and tools to support caseworker retention.

The Impact of Multiple Caseworker Changes on Child Permanency Outcomes: Illinois' Birth Through Three, IV-E Waiver Caseload and Workload Management (Evaluation Report, 2018)

The child welfare field has prioritized the use of evidence-supported interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of child maltreatment on children in foster care. However, few evidence-based interventions have been implemented and rigorously tested using families involved in the child welfare system. The Illinois Birth through Three (IB3) Waiver aims to fill this gap by tailoring two evidence-based interventions to address the needs of children in foster care. This study examined the impact of number of caseworker changes on a child's odds of exiting foster care via unification with a family member (i.e., birthparent, relative, fictive kin). Findings suggest children who are assigned to receive therapeutic, evidence-based interventions are more likely to achieve permanence than children who receive standard foster care services. The findings also suggest that number of caseworker assignments can impact child welfare outcomes. Children are more likely to achieve permanence if they are assigned fewer workers over the course of their stay in foster care. Pages 106, 116, 130, and 135-136 discuss turnover specifically and explain the need for further research on the impact on families.



[How Does Turnover Affect Outcomes and What Can be Done to Address Retention?](#) (Overview/Summary, 2017)

This overview uses supporting research to show what factors are predictive of high turnover and strategies that can be used to address those factors. It highlights the direct and indirect costs to families, the worker, and the agency and provides state turnover rates. Additionally, it discusses why understanding and addressing these factors is important to improving outcomes and well-being for families, youth, and children.

[The Nebraska Foster Care Review Office Annual Report](#) (Annual Report, 2017)

This annual report reviews the state of foster care in Nebraska in 2017. On pages 30-31, it describes the impact multiple placement changes has on children and some of the reasons placement changes occur. Pages 42-44 show that caseworker turnover correlates with placement disruption and drastically decreased the probability of the child achieving timely permanency. This report also reviews caseworker turnover in Nebraska in 2017.

[The Impact of Title IV-E Training on Case Outcomes for Children Serviced by CPS](#) (Journal Article, 2012)

This study highlights how policy and the de-professionalization of social work has contributed to caseworker turnover and retention as well as the impact on families and the system as a whole. Additionally, it examines how six case outcomes for families were affected by having a caseworker who was a Title IV-E stipend recipient. The data supports that CPS should continue to hire social workers with degrees. This study also suggests that more research is needed to understand why Title IV-E stipend workers had better reunification and adoption outcomes and why social work workers with degrees had better child maltreatment, foster care placement, and adoption outcomes.

[High Caseloads: How Do They Impact Delivery of Health and Human Services?](#) (Research to Practice Brief, 2010)

This brief highlights studies that show how high caseloads negatively impact worker retention and service delivery outcomes. It discusses how high caseloads impact agency spending in terms of training and recruitment costs and by placing added stress on workers who remain.

[Review of Turnover in Milwaukee County Private Agency Child Welfare Ongoing Case Management Staff](#) (Review, 2005)

This review of Milwaukee County's private child welfare case management staff demonstrates the ongoing challenges with turnover. Children were less likely to achieve permanency if they had more than one worker. The cost of turnover as well as the factors leading to it are discussed and the need for more research on outcomes for families is highlighted.

[HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff](#) (GAO Study, 2003)

The child welfare workforce must be stable and highly skilled to effectively provide child welfare services that meet federal goals. This report identifies:

- The challenges child welfare agencies face in recruiting and retaining child welfare workers and supervisors
- How recruitment and retention challenges have affected the safety and permanency outcomes of children in foster care
- Workforce practices public and private child welfare agencies have implemented to successfully confront recruitment and retention challenges



Section 2: Community Voice



“If you can’t be with this client for some years, don’t do it”: Exploring the Emotional and Relational Effects of Turnover on Youth in the Child Welfare System (Journal Article, 2019)

This study explores children’s lived experiences of turnover. The findings are from a two-year, multi-perspective, multi-method qualitative study that explored the relationship between young people and child welfare professionals. Findings reveal that from young people’s perspectives, turnover happens frequently, is abrupt and poorly processed, occurs with all their child welfare professionals, and is a relationship loss. These losses were found to influence the emotional and relational well-being of youth. The authors suggest that turnover needs to be approached in a child-centered and relationship-based way.

Collaborative Alliance of Parent and Child Welfare Caseworker (Journal Article, 2019)

This secondary analysis of data utilizes family voice to describe the experiences of 3,035 parents. Drawn from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being II, it identified factors that foster the collaborative alliance among parents and caseworkers within the child welfare system. The authors looked for associations between caseworker engagement as perceived by the parent and parent’s interpersonal capacities, intrapersonal dynamics, problem severity, and racial/ethnic background, and between that perception and caseworker turnover. Parents in the sample had been substantiated for maltreatment of their children. Results showed that parent’s perceived caseworker engagement was positively associated with seven factors: parent’s social support, parent’s mental health, kinship care, out-of-home placement, parent’s African American ethnicity, parent’s Hispanic ethnicity, parent/caseworker shared ethnicity, and family income. Parent’s perceived engagement decreased with caseworker turnover (i.e., the higher the number of caseworkers assigned per parent case, the less engagement was perceived). Implications for practicing social work within the child welfare system are discussed.

Parental Perspectives of Permanency Planning and Staffing Barriers in Child Welfare (Journal Article, 2019)

Caseworker turnover in child welfare agencies has been a problem for many years. The turnover negatively impacts the agency, staff left behind by their departing peers, and continuity of services to clients. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore parental experiences with child welfare staff turnover to determine clients’ perceptions of how turnover impacted their child welfare case. The research questions for this study focused on:

- How clients perceived that child welfare turnover impacted their case
- How the turnover impacted their case plan
- Recommendations for child welfare to enhance services

The results of this study can help child welfare agencies learn how clients are affected by turnover and what families need from the child welfare agency when facing turnover. The study’s findings could contribute to positive social change by providing guidance for practice and a greater opportunity to help families who experience staff turnover in child welfare agencies.



Who Stays, Who Goes, Who Knows? A State-Wide Survey of Child Welfare Workers (Journal Article, 2017)

Child welfare workforce turnover remains a significant problem with dire consequences. Designed to assist in its retention efforts, an agency-supported state-wide survey was employed to capture worker feedback and insight into turnover. Results showed a stratified pattern of worker dissatisfaction in all areas (salary, workload, recognition, professional development, accomplishment, peer support, and supervision), with workers who intended to stay at the agency reporting the highest satisfaction levels, followed by workers who were undecided and then workers who intended to leave. Additionally, there were significant (and shared) predictors among leavers and undecided workers including dissatisfaction with workload, professional development, and working in an urban area. Child welfare workers who intended to leave the agency in the following 12 months expressed significant dissatisfaction with supervision and accomplishment and tended to be younger and professionals of color.

Listening to the Voices of Children in Foster Care: Youths Speak Out About Child Welfare Workforce Turnover and Selection (Journal Article, 2010)

This study explored the experiences and opinions of youth in the child welfare system about workforce turnover and retention. It also explores the relationship between the number of caseworkers a youth has had and their number of foster care placements. Findings indicate that turnover causes youths to experience a lack of stability, loss of trusting relationships, and, at times, the opportunity for a second chance with a new worker. Youths suggested that caseworkers, state trainers, local and state administrators, and social work researchers should engage with youths in relationships that facilitate genuine systems change around social work practice and the child welfare workforce crisis.

Foster Care: Voices From the Inside (Report, 2004)

This report, commissioned by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, presents the results of three focus groups the Commission conducted in September and October 2003 in:

- Washington, D.C., with young adults who had grown up in foster care
- New York City, with parents who had safely reunited with their children after the children had spent time in foster care
- Denver, with foster and adoptive parents

It discusses the cost of turnover and additional factors related to the agency, clients, and community including funding structures and other barriers to creating positive outcomes for families and staff. Commission members were thoroughly engaged in this process—from creating and revising the focus group discussion outlines, to leading each discussion session, to lending their insights to the report.



Section 3: Systems Transformation



The Administration of Children and Families (ACF) describes the importance of [reshaping child welfare in the United States \(2018\)](#) to focus on strengthening families through primary prevention of child maltreatment and unnecessary parent-child separation. The resources in this section are split into two subsections:

Additional Costs and Impact: While the previous sections of this brief explored research on what is currently known about the impact and cost of turnover, the research in this subsection focuses on the additional costs and impact family separation can have on families, communities, and systems. High turnover has been shown to negatively impact a system that is already strained. This additional strain increases the length of stay for children in care, increases the length of cases, increases placement disruptions, and leads to new caseworkers making decisions around child safety. These factors often lead to family separation rather than prevention or preservation and impact an already overloaded foster care system.

Training, Retention, Partnership, and Positive Outcomes: While there are gaps in research, there is literature that documents factors that can lead to positive family and organizational level outcomes. This subsection includes resources that show the importance of family partnership, having one caseworker, increasing retention, and providing thorough training for caseworkers that supports the systems transformation ACF is pursuing. Increased training may lead to a reduction in caseloads through prevention and family preservation efforts. The cost savings of caseload reduction is explored in addition to decision-making models, caseworker partnership with families, and other strategies that have shown a positive impact on placement, permanency, and positive family outcomes.

Additional Costs and Impact

[The Unseen Costs of Foster Care: A Social Return on Investment Study](#) (Data Analysis, 2019)

This analysis studies the social return on investment for children placed in foster care and demonstrates the cost as well as the additional impacts out-of-placement has on children and the system. This includes information on the cost and impact of turnover, strategic recommendations, and a breakdown of the data and the tools used to analyze it.

[Evidence Base for Avoiding Family Separation in Child Welfare Practice](#) (Research Analysis, 2019)

This research describes the need for caseworker training in family preservation intervention and kinship placements to avoid negative outcomes and placement disruption and outlines the harmful effects of placement disruption. Epidemiologists Susan Marshall Mason and Dunia Dadi argue that we must develop practices and policies in child welfare that acknowledge the “interdependence of children with their families and communities” and “shift our focus from ‘protecting’ children toward equitably protecting and investing in families.”



The Harm of Child Removal (Journal Article, 2019)

When the state proves or even merely alleges that a parent has abused or neglected a child, a court may remove the child from the parent's care. However, research shows separating a child from their parent(s) has detrimental, long-term emotional and psychological consequences that may be worse than leaving the child at home. This is due to the trauma of removal itself, as well as the unstable nature of, and high rates of abuse in, foster care. Nevertheless, the child welfare system errs on the side of removal and most often fails to consider the harms associated with that removal. Only two jurisdictions require courts to consider the harms that will occur when a child is taken from their family. While recent federal law recognizes the importance of family preservation and the negative effects of separation, that does not solve the problem by itself. This article is the first to comprehensively examine why the harm of removal should be an integral part of every child welfare decision. It also analyzes existing law and legal practices and demonstrates how consideration of the harms of removal can be built into existing legal frameworks to achieve the stated purpose of the child welfare system and truly protect our children.

Training, Retention, Partnership, and Positive Outcomes

Family Engagement: Partnering With Families to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes (Bulletin, 2021)

This bulletin discusses how engaging families in the casework process promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system and is central to successful practice. It shares how effective family engagement occurs when child welfare practitioners actively collaborate and partner with the family network (e.g., maternal and paternal relatives and fictive kin) throughout their involvement with the child welfare system, recognizing them as the experts on their respective situations and empowering them in the process. Caseworker turnover is discussed as being a barrier to family engagement.

Family Preservation or Child Safety? Associations Between Child Welfare Workers' Experience, Position, and Perspectives (Journal Article, 2016)

In child welfare, there is sometimes a false dichotomy between child safety and family preservation. This article looks at an evaluation of Family Group Decision Making in four child welfare jurisdictions where surveys were administered to caseworkers, supervisors, program directors, and program coordinators asking about worker perceptions, demographics, organizational culture and climate, and job characteristics. The surveys contained the Dalglish Scale, an instrument designed to measure the perspectives of workers across the continuum of child safety versus family preservation beliefs. Assessing several worker characteristics, the analysis revealed that staff who have worked in child welfare longer are more likely to be oriented toward family preservation, whereas newer staff are more likely to be oriented toward child safety. Evidence has demonstrated that caseworkers' perspectives influence CPS case decisions, and that child and family outcomes, such as maltreatment recurrence or out-of-home placement, are not solely determined by family and case characteristics. Developing a better understanding of staff orientation has implications for organizational culture, compliance with policy mandates, workforce development, and most importantly, outcomes for child welfare-involved families.



[An Innovative Child Welfare Pilot Initiative: Results and Outcomes](#) (Journal Article, 2016)

Results of this study suggest that using a community partnership model that incorporates family engagement, enhanced service provider accessibility, reduced caseloads, and one caseworker for each family results in more successful reunification outcomes. Additionally, families who experienced intervention were more likely to have their needs met with clinical or economic services; experienced fewer days in out-of-home placement, shorter involvement with the agency, and reduced placement moves; and were more likely to be reunified sooner compared to the group who received standard child welfare services. At one year follow-up, families who experienced intervention also had fewer substantiated child maltreatment reports and children were more likely to be living in the parental home.

[Cost Savings From Reasonable Child Welfare Workloads](#) (Overview/Summary, 2016)

This overview discusses the positive impact of retention and the negative impacts turnover has on case outcomes for families. It discusses preventable turnover, how to calculate savings from reducing caseloads, and the cost of high turnover.

[Retention: NCWWI 1-Page Summary](#) (One Page Summary, 2016)

This resource highlights findings of a ten-year study examining the personal and organizational factors that impact length of employment and retention of child welfare caseworkers. It also offers workplace interventions and strategies to move toward achieving a more stable workforce.

[Development of an Instrument to Understand the Child Protective Services Decision-Making Process, With a Focus on Placement Decisions](#) (Journal Article, 2015)

When children become involved in the child welfare system, they become tangled in a process where decisions are made that have a significant effect on their future and well-being. The decision to remove children from their families is particularly complex; yet surprisingly little is understood about this decision-making process. This paper shares the results of a study to develop an instrument to explore, at the caseworker level, the context of the removal decision, with the objective of understanding the influence of individual and organizational factors on this decision. Turnover as a potential factor that contributes to challenges in decision-making is also discussed.

[Reducing Turnover is Not Enough: The Need for Proficient Organizational Cultures to Support Positive Youth Outcomes in Child Welfare](#) (Journal Article, 2013)

High caseworker turnover has been identified as a factor in poor outcomes of child welfare services. However, almost no empirical research has examined the relationship between caseworker turnover and youth outcomes in child welfare systems – there is a critical knowledge gap regarding whether, and how, caseworker turnover relates to youth outcomes. These researchers hypothesized that the effects of caseworker turnover are moderated by organizational culture, meaning that reduced caseworker turnover is only associated with improved youth outcomes in organizations with proficient cultures. They found that youth outcomes improved with lower staff turnover in proficient organizational cultures and that the best outcomes occurred in organizations with low turnover and high proficiency. A proficient organizational culture appeared to be a necessary pre-condition for caseworker retention to be positively associated with youth outcomes. To be successful, staff turnover must decrease and agencies must ensure that caseworkers are competent and responsive to the needs of the youth and families they serve.



Components of an Effective Child Welfare Workforce to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families: What Does the Research Tell Us? (Report, 2006)

The recruitment, preparation, support, and retention of child welfare staff are important and ongoing public policy concerns. Many questions have been raised about the quality and capacity of the child welfare workforce. Child welfare data and literature has highlighted the impact of workforce issues on outcomes for children, youth, and families and on expenditures at the federal, state, and local levels. The characteristics that contribute to positive experiences and outcomes for children and families are explored.

Investigating the Effects of Caseworker Characteristics in Child Welfare (Journal Article, 2006)

Caseworkers can influence the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions their agencies provide. They can also influence clients' eligibility for services and can maneuver through the system in a way that has the most direct effect on clients. This paper investigates the caseworker's role in determining outcomes in the child welfare system. A variety of multi-level and multiple membership models were developed and tested to better understand the association between caseworker characteristics and child welfare outcomes. Specifically, the focus was on the relationship between the number of caseworkers assigned to each child (i.e., turnover), the racial match between the child and the caseworker, and the role of graduate education (possession of an MSW) on a child's length of stay in the child welfare system and family reunification.

Considerations for Discussion

While this list of resources elaborates on what is currently known about the impact of turnover, retention, and training on family outcomes, limitations include the need for more research and inclusion of community voice, which could strengthen understanding of additional challenges and potential solutions. The standards and measurements for monitoring turnover, retention, and training and their impact on families are unstandardized, incomplete, and not comprehensive.

However, these gaps provide opportunities for further exploration, learning, and training. Conducting research on the direct impact turnover, retention, and training have on families is essential to building collaborative solutions that result in positive outcomes, family preservation, and timely permanency. Creating measurement standards for this research is equally important for monitoring change over time. Building a body of research around these subjects also provides an opportunity to work with youth and families directly to ensure their voices are heard.

This research provides examples of supports that have been beneficial to both workers and families. There are many organizations implementing strategies that include meaningful family engagement, one caseworker models, improving organizational culture, and providing thorough caseworker training. This research also illustrates that having a steady caseworker effects children and families on many different levels. Additionally, a stable workforce positively impacts the system as a whole and decreases financial strain. The one caseworker model, if facilitated with reasonable caseloads and thorough training on family preservation, has the possibility to impact family outcomes, decrease a child's time in care, decrease unnecessary parent-child separation, and improve retention – factors that benefit both families and the child welfare system.

