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Turnover in California's Public Child Welfare Agencies

Key Message:

The external turnover rate of public child welfare social workers in California, as reported by 47 of 58 counties, has decreased since 2004. An analysis of the 2011 California Public Child Welfare Workforce Study revealed that the external turnover rate statewide was 6.1% for 47 (of 58) counties reporting. Comparing 2004 and 2008, the turnover rates for all social worker categories and supervisors are smaller in 2011.

Results from the 2011 Public Child Welfare Workforce Study indicate that about one third of the social work staff has experienced some change in their service assignment in 2010-2011. At the least, workers may need additional training for their new positions. Given this perspective, those concerned with turnover should examine internal turnover as well as external turnover. Training time for the new positions should be included when computing the costs of turnover.

In collaboration with the County Welfare Directors Association and the California Department of Social Services, CalSWEC has surveyed the state's public child welfare workforce every three to five years since 1992 to determine the extent to which the state is meeting its requirements for Master's-level social workers among child welfare social work staff.

The data for this 2011 study were gathered between August 2011 and February 2012 using two online survey instruments. The first was the *Agency Administrative Survey* aimed at gathering administrative data about agency staffing such as the number of staff, vacancies, need for bilingual workers, turnover and the effects of the economic downturn on hiring.

The second was the *Individual Worker Survey*. This survey was designed to obtain a more detailed perspective on the workforce by having individual child welfare staff complete it. As a result of the statewide participation of county child welfare agencies and public child welfare staff, we were able to gather substantial information on the demographics of the workforce, service assignments, changes in service assignments, education, professional licensure, experience level, interest in further training and further education.

Public child welfare worker turnover negatively affects the continuity of care for families and children. External turnover—when a worker leaves the agency—is the most common type of turnover noted. However, internal turnover—moving laterally from one unit to another, being promoted or moving to another public agency to serve the same families—also affects case management and continuity of care. This report seeks first to describe the types of turnover experienced by the county child welfare agencies in California and then how the workers who have moved to different service assignments see their training needs.

I. External Turnover¹

A 2001 study conducted by the Alliance for Children (AFC) the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) concluded that about 60% of turnover in child welfare work is preventable (Alliance for Children, Child Welfare League of America et al. 2001, May). The average length of time in current position for child welfare social workers is less than two years (USGAO 2003). Private agencies report higher turnover rates than public agencies (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2004).

An analysis of the 2011 California Public Child Welfare Workforce Study revealed that the external turnover rate statewide was 6.1% for 47 counties reporting². The counties that did not report external turnover constitute 10% of the child welfare staff statewide, excluding Los Angeles which accounts for another one third of all the public child welfare staff in the state. Consequently these rates should be viewed with extreme caution.

The 2004 turnover rate for case-carrying public child welfare social workers statewide was 9.5% (without Los Angeles County) and for supervisors it was 7.4% (with Los Angeles County), compared to 1998 data: 12.1% for direct service child welfare workers and supervisors combined (with Los Angeles County).

External Turnover Rates for Case-carrying Public Child Welfare Social Workers & Supervisors

	1998	2004	2008	2011			
	Social workers & supervisors	Social workers	Supervisors	Social workers	Supervisors	Social workers	Supervisors
Northern	11.8%	11.1%	12.%	13.%	6.8%	5.8%	2.9%
Bay Area	16.1	8.8	7.2	12.5	8.7	6.2	8.5
Central	11.1	9.8	7.3	10.9	3.2	11.8	5.8
Los Angeles	10.7	10.3	5.1	7.0	3.9	Not available	Not available
Southern	8.8	8.9	8.5	18.4	10	8.5	6.1
Overall	12.1	9.5 (excluding LA)	7.4 (with LA)	10.6	5.7	7.1	2.5

¹ External turnover was defined as the number of workers who left the agency by resigning, terminating, or who were terminated (During fiscal year (July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2011) divided by the total number of positions for each staff category as reported by the counties.

² These data and this comparison should be viewed with caution because in 2011, ten counties did not submit their external turnover numbers. The following counties were unable to provide external turnover statistics: Alameda, Alpine, Contra Costa, Fresno, Glenn, Los Angeles, and Stanislaus. The following counties did not participate in the Workforce Study: Del Norte, Colusa and Sutter counties.

II. Internal Turnover

The opportunities for voluntary lateral moves tend to increase retention (Clark, Uota, & Smith 2010), but there is some evidence that the lateral moves are not all voluntary (see Section III below). The opportunities for promotions are small. Historically the turnover rate in California has been lower than other states (USGAO, 2003; Cyphers, 2001). We began collecting information on internal turnover rates in 2008.

Internal Turnover—

Lateral Moves. The number of transfers/unit changes/lateral moves among child welfare staff (social work assistants, social workers, supervisors, managers, and administrators) reported by the counties³ in the *Agency Administrative Survey* was 576 for a reported rate of 8.3% for all positions. We did not ask whether these moves were voluntary or involuntary: There is research to suggest that voluntary lateral moves/unit changes are viewed positively by the child welfare staff; however involuntary transfers may not be seen the same way.

From the *Individual Worker Survey*, many respondents reported their moves in the passive voice (e.g., “I was transferred”, “I was re-assigned to...”, “I was redeployed to”, “added guardian cases”, “additional assignments due to not being about to fill program vacancies”, “added responsibilities due to blending units”, “I am currently given duties as assigned to other units”, etc.) than said they had volunteered to move laterally (“I volunteered to work in ER”, “I volunteered to transfer from ...”). The language indicates that many transfers were not voluntary.

Promotions. From the *Individual Worker Survey* the reported number of promotions, mostly from the social workers, was 108 for a promotion rate of 1.6%. Supervisors supervise several social workers at a time, so it stands to reason that there are fewer opportunities for promotion than there are social workers seeking promotion.

About twelve percent of the supervisors noted that their service assignment had changed because they had been promoted; about 21% of the managers responding had also been promoted during fiscal year 2110-2011.

Left Child Welfare but not the Public Agency. Child welfare staff moving to other departments within public county agencies (such as probation, mental health, health). 82 workers moved to other public agencies within 50 counties for a turnover rate of 0.1%.⁴ More than two-thirds were social workers (57). We did not determine to which departments the staff moved. The fact that 18 counties stated they are “superagencies” in which several human services are administratively located under the same umbrella did not affect the results.

³ Minus Alameda, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Santa Clara, Del Norte, Colusa, and Sutter.

⁴ Minus Alameda, Calaveras, Los Angeles, Mendocino, Santa Clara, Del Norte, Colusa, and Sutter

The table below reports on what the agencies reported about internal turnover from the Agency Administrative Survey, 47 counties.

Internal Turnover Rates for Case-carrying Public Child Welfare Social Workers & Supervisors (47 Counties) 2011

	NON Case-carrying social workers	Case-Carrying social Workers	Supervisors	Total
Internal Turnover: Lateral Moves	34	410	77	521
Internal Turnover: Promotions	5	62	18	85
Internal Turnover: Left Child Welfare but not the Agency	2	57	3	62
Total # who experienced an internal move	41	529	98	668
	4.8%	12.7%	11.2%	11.3%
Population	851	4165	870	5886

III. Service Assignment Changes

Service assignment changes represent lateral moves from one unit within child welfare to another. However they also may represent *adding* services or clients to a worker's or supervisor's workload during unit consolidation. Promotions also represent service assignment changes. The information reported in this section is from the *Individual Worker Survey* and includes all 54 counties that participated.

We asked the individual respondents⁵, "Has your service assignment changed within the past fiscal year (2010-2011)?" and, "If so, how has it changed?" These open-ended responses were analyzed by position separately: social workers (n = 2286) constituted the first group; supervisors another (n = 541); and managers/administrators (n = 150) the third.

Social Workers (including all case-carrying and non-case-carrying social workers). 24.3% of the social workers (n = 556) noted that their service assignments had changed during the last fiscal year (2010-2011). Additionally, 246 (10.8%) anticipated that their service assignments would change during the next fiscal year (2011-2012). Social workers are experiencing service assignment changes because counties are combining what used to be specialized units and moving to vertical caseloads. This has resulted in workers noting they have higher caseloads and higher workloads (e.g., more requirements to carry out new policies/procedures). One of the most common changes has been to disband court dependency units, combining them with emergency response units. Another common merger was family maintenance, reunification and permanency planning.

Most social workers and supervisors do not expect service assignment changes in fiscal year 2011-2012. However, among social workers and supervisors, who had already experienced at least one service assignment change in the last year (2010-2011), more expect changes in the coming year (2011-2012), or didn't know if they would have assignment changes. Stated another way, respondents who had not experienced service assignment changes in 2010-2011 believed that a service assignment change was not likely in 2011-2012. However among those who had already experienced change, they expect more change.

⁵ Respondents are from all the counties except one medium county, San Mateo, and three small counties: Del Norte, Colusa and Sutter.

The ways service assignments changed, as reported by the social workers, were to create higher caseloads, workloads, and with fewer resources to help families. The most common change was in combining previously specialized units into generalist, blended or vertical units. Several respondents mentioned going to “vertical casework”. Example, family maintenance, family reunification was combined with permanent planning. Court units were disbanded and combined with emergency response. Los Angeles’ workers noted the urgency of addressing emergency response cases and “redeployment” to that area.

Supervisors. Supervisors reported lateral moves that resulted in broader spans of control: Assuming additional responsibilities, more workers to supervise, in different areas of child welfare, new administrative tasks, and added duties. Most of the moves were not voluntary, but in response to agency need. Most of the changes occurred as the result of agency reorganization taking place in an effort to be more efficient and due to budget cuts or anticipated reductions due to realignment. However, some supervisors and managers noted that there were also programmatic changes due to new policies and procedures, such as a new program addressing the permanency needs for youth between the ages of 18 -21, Fostering Connections After 18.

Managers. Among 156 managers, 27.3 percent have experienced service assignment changes in fiscal year 2010-2011. About 21 percent of 150 responding managers experienced change through promotions in the last fiscal year. 14.1 percent expect their service assignment will change during fiscal year 2011-2012. Several noted that during 2010-2011, although they did not promote, they were re-assigned to different locations within the county or assumed responsibility for an additional service unit(s). Example, “with lost staff our workload has increased significantly; each of us are taking on additional varied roles.”

IV. Summary & Discussion

One reason for a lower turnover rate in 2011 may be the lack of perceived and real jobs available in the general job market due to the recession.

There was anecdotal evidence that in 2008-2009 many counties laid off significant numbers of child welfare staff, an event which was not captured by these studies. In 2011 the counties reported 33 persons were laid off. Another data brief in this series reports on what the counties and the staff think the economic recession has had and will have on child welfare services (See: The Effects of the Economic Recession on Child Welfare Services and Staff Data Brief).

Although external turnover in California’s public child welfare agencies has dropped since 2004, the recession has affected the organization and structure of the local county departments. An anticipated change in how the state funds local county services called “realignment” has created uncertainty and apprehension among the local agencies. County administrative data do not capture all the lateral moves experienced by the child welfare social work staff. Conversely individual worker data do not capture the voluntary or involuntary nature of these changes. However we have learned some things from both administrative and individual data.

Realignment reallocates public safety and protective services funding and services from the state’s general fund to the counties; the amount of available funds is less. To cope with realignment in child welfare, counties have begun to consolidate units and reconfigure services in order to maximize efficiency and still meet the needs of their clientele. Another related consequence of realignment is that the state’s adoption services units have been disbanded; now counties must provide adoptions services locally, either by themselves or in concert with another county.

Service assignment changes are indicators of internal turnover which is relevant to case continuity and increased training needs. Service assignment changes represent opportunities for training. They represent lateral moves from one unit to another and they represent promotions. “Lateral move” does not capture all the conditions under which a service assignment can change. Service assignment changes may mean adding different clients to an existing caseload because two service units combined, for example, or serving a broader population than before.

From the individual worker data we learn that child welfare service unit consolidation is leading to “vertical case management” or generalized child welfare social work practice, even in larger counties where specialized practice has been the norm for several years. Court Dependency Units have merged with Emergency Response, for example. As a result, social workers, supervisors, and managers feel they need to be well-versed about a wider range of child welfare practices and populations than in the past. The service assignment changes give some insight into how the recession and realignment has affected the staff.

Training is very much desired by public child welfare staff; unfortunately a significant number say they do not have time for training at the present time. This represents a challenge for the agencies and the training community to develop ways of meeting the needs of current workers and supervisors. (See the Training Data Brief for more information)

V. Methodology & Regulations

Although the methodology for this study has changed since 1992, the basic questions remain: “How many social workers and other professional staff work in public child welfare agencies in California? What proportion of the professional staff hold master’s degrees in social work/welfare?” Two online surveys were used to gather the data.

First, the 58 counties were asked to provide census information about the population of professional active/encumbered child welfare staff positions, needs for MSWs, vacancies, and proportion of bilingual workers among the staff population. 55 counties responded with administrative census data. Three counties that declined to participate were located in the northern region of the state and have small populations. Since those counties responded in 2008, their 2008 data was substituted for the 2011 missing data when the proportions of MSWs were calculated. The missing data amounted to 0.457% of the total population.

Second, a web-based survey was sent to all individual workers in 54 counties⁶ by their child welfare or human resources departments to provide educational level, service assignment, position, race/ethnicity, age, years of service, needs for additional education, and training experiences. 3496 responses were received from workers from 54 counties. When matched to the proportionate distribution reported in the census data there were not significant differences. This means that the sample responses are representative of the distribution of child welfare positions in the state.

In all but four counties, all public child welfare social work assistants, social workers, supervisors, managers/program managers, and administrators were given the opportunity to respond to the individual worker survey. Social work assistants were included in this study because they can be a

⁶ One county declined to send the individual worker survey to its workers but did complete the census survey. Three counties declined to participate in the study.

source of “home grown” social workers, and we wanted to gauge their interest in seeking additional degree education. Where appropriate, they were enumerated.

The application and approval letters are on file in the CalSWEC Office and the University of California Berkeley Office for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Copies of the surveys are available upon request.

California State Educational Qualifications for Child Welfare Staff

The Manual of Policies and Procedures, Division 31 Child Welfare Services Program, Regulation 31-070 states that “County staff who provide emergency response and family maintenance services shall meet the following qualifications:

“.11 At least 50 percent of the professional staff providing emergency response services, and at least 50 percent of the professional staff providing family maintenance services, shall possess master’s degree in social work, or its equivalent in education and/or experience as certified by the State Personnel Board or a county civil service board.”

“.12 One hundred (100) percent of the supervisors of staff providing emergency response and family maintenance services shall possess a master’s degree in social work, or its equivalent in education and/or experience as certified by the State Personnel Board or a county civil service board.”

The standards for MSW social workers in Adoptions are located in the Community Care Licensing Manual Sections 89152-89155.

California Child Welfare Training Regulations

An All County Letter (ACL-08-23) from the California Department of Social Services delineates Child Welfare Training Regulations Effective July 1, 2008. Among the items addressed are suggested topics for training content for newly hired child welfare workers and supervisors in core training. This ACL also spells out requirements for 40 hours of continuing training for current workers every 24 months:

“.1 County welfare departments shall provide training to employees who are newly hired, transferred, or promoted to social services positions.” Authority Cited: Sections 10553 and 10554, Welfare and Institutions Code. Reference: 45 CFR 1357.15(t); Social Security Act, Title IV-B, Program Improvement Plan, and Section 16206, Welfare and Institutions Code.

These regulations apply to juvenile probation officers as well as child welfare workers.

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