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Professional Social Workers in the Child Welfare Workforce: Findings from NASW

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The U.S. Children's Bureau has understood and supported the important role of the child welfare workforce in helping vulnerable families since its inception. Social work's early focus on child safety and protection evolved into child welfare practice, which valued the importance of professional skills in transforming the lives of vulnerable, dependent children (Perry & Ellett, 2008). This advocacy led to the formation of the U.S. Children's Bureau, whose early leadership rested squarely in the hands of prominent social workers such as Julia Lathrop and Grace Abbott (Perry & Ellett, 2008). The Children's Bureau's support of professional social work in child welfare and social work's early and ongoing commitment to child welfare resulted in close alignment of social work and child welfare practice (Perry & Ellett, 2008). The social work profession formed the professional base of the child welfare workforce and has continued to demonstrate an active commitment to the well-being of children and families. Social workers provide direct services, develop programs and influence social policies aimed at protecting children, preserving families and strengthening social safety nets (Whitaker, Reich, Reid, Williams & Woodside, 2004). In fact, despite the profession's expansion into other areas of social work practice, the image of the social work profession has been permeated by its connection to ensuring the well-being of children.

The Early Significance of the Child Welfare Workforce

Child welfare work centers around safeguarding the nation's most vulnerable members. Children whose own families are unable to protect, provide for, and care for them face an array of risks that can range from neglect to death. Children who come to the attention of the child welfare system often have childhoods that have been affected by poverty, neglect, violence, parental substance use and/or physical abuse. Ensuring child safety often involves working with fractured families, as well as identifying alternative temporary or permanent families.

In an early report to the Secretary of Labor, the Children's Bureau defined the complex nature of child welfare work:

The concept upon which the administration of child-welfare services is based is that child welfare in its broadest sense is a composite of the social and economic forces in community life which make it possible for a child's own family to nurture him through the years of childhood; and of the instrumentalities, both public and private, which supplement the capacities and resources of a child's natural family in such measure as may be necessary to insure wholesome growth and development (Children's Bureau, 1940, p.2).

This report also emphasized the necessity of a competent workforce comprised of professional social workers to support the breadth of this charge:

As the money made available to States can be used only for service, it is evident that the persons employed must be qualified by both formal training and actual experience to undertake a child-welfare program. Because of great emphasis in the majority of the States upon residence and the limited number of well-qualified children's workers available in many parts of the country, educational leave has been granted by 35 States and Hawaii to a total of 257 persons since February 1936 to enable them to attend professional schools of social work. (Children's Bureau, 1940, p. 3)

By the 1960s, more MSWs were employed by child welfare agencies than any other area of social work practice (Perry & Ellett, 2008). It was clear that child welfare "belonged" to social work and—unlike any other discipline—that the social work profession embraced child welfare by preparing its graduates for child welfare practice and envisioning the practice area broadly (Perry & Ellett, 2008; Whitaker & Clark, 2006).

However, social work has from its inception addressed child welfare from a much larger perspective that includes concern for (a) professional education/preparation for child welfare work; (b) strength-based, family-centered practice; (c) advocacy for children and families; (d) access and allocation of resources; and (e) safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families (Perry & Ellett, 2008, p. 151).

The Deprofessionalization of the Child Welfare Workforce

Despite the close association between social workers and child welfare practice, concerns about the adequacy of the supply of child welfare workers existed even during the early years of the Children's Bureau (Children's Bureau, 1940). These concerns have steadily increased, fueled by a number of factors, including predictions about high demand, the changing environment of child welfare practice, and the inability of schools of social work to produce enough graduates to meet the demand (Perry & Ellett, 2008). The resulting effect has been a de-professionalized child welfare workforce that has expanded beyond the exclusive purview of social work, jeopardizing the historic alignment of social work and child

welfare practice. Studies indicate that fewer than 15% of child welfare agencies require their staff to have social work degrees (CWLA, 1999) and that fewer than 40% of the child welfare workforce are social workers (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman & Dickinson, 2008). This de-professionalized and inexperienced child welfare workforce is a source of concern (Barth et al., 2008).

The current child welfare workforce is the subject of constant review and critique. Even as administrators seek to strengthen and support this cadre of workers, they find the task difficult. Child welfare workers are plagued by inadequate supervision, high caseloads and administrative burdens that result in high turnover for child welfare agencies (Barth et al., 2008; Children's Defense Fund & Children's Rights, Inc., 2006; GAO, 2003; Sudol, 2009). Increasing reliance is being placed on supervision as a tool for retaining a disparately-prepared child welfare staff (Barth et al., 2008; Hess, Kanak & Atkins, 2009; Perry & Ellett, 2008; Social Work Policy Institute, 2011). Social workers are often preferred workers because of their effectiveness, particularly with complex family problems (Children's Defense Fund & Children's Rights, Inc., 2006). Yet, investing in replenishing the supply of these professionals is often weighed against investing in existing staff, many of whom lack social work credentials.

The erosion of the social work presence in child welfare has given way to the emergence of a "child welfare workforce" that is not clearly defined by professional markers. In fact, child welfare may be emerging as a distinct profession in and of itself (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009; Perry & Ellett, 2008). Although studies support the value of a social work degree for child welfare workers (Children's Defense Fund & Children's Rights, Inc., 2006), there are counterarguments that suggest that social workers are not inherently the best child welfare employees (Perry, 2006). Some contemporary discussions about the suitability for child welfare work extol the personal attributes of workers and minimize the value of professional preparation (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). "Knowledge of the personal traits that correlate with effectiveness could also lead to a redefinition of child welfare worker's scope and responsibility" (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009, p. 18). This movement away from professional preparation for intervening in the lives of very vulnerable children and families should not be taken lightly. Although the gravity of staff shortages may push administrators to "think outside the box" when trying to fill positions, it is also important that the gravity of the work itself does not get lost.

NASW Studies

NASW conducted two studies exploring the experiences of social workers in child welfare, as well as issues of supply and demand (Whitaker et al., 2004; Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006). The initial survey was based on a sample of NASW membership; the second was based on a national sample of licensed social workers. Although there were areas of divergence between the studies, there were also significant areas of confluence that provide insight into factors that attract, retain and discourage social workers in child welfare practice.

The Study of NASW's Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section Members (2004)

Social workers from NASW's Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section were identified as the sample to be surveyed. Section membership is open to all NASW members for an additional fee. Since section members can be students, researchers, educators, practitioners or members who are interested in a particular area of social work practice, all 716 members of the section were invited to participate in the survey, rather than selecting a sample from the section membership. The survey achieved a 75% response rate. The survey was comprised of closed- and open-ended questions about the respondents' experiences in child welfare, including tenure, supervision, work environment, safety and professional challenges and rewards. Sixty-nine percent of NASW section members indicated that they were currently employed in a child welfare setting. Section members were primarily in direct service (67%) and administrative roles (29%).

The National Study of Licensed Social Workers (2006)

A random sample of 10,000 licensed social workers was surveyed to identify their demographic characteristics; practice setting and work locations; activities and tasks; education and training; compensation and benefits; attitudes about their work and perception of the job market. The response rate was approximately 50%. The data were analyzed aggregately, as well as segmented into four categories: social work with older adults; social work with children and families; social work in health care settings; and social work in behavioral health care settings. Thirteen percent of all licensed social workers identified child welfare/family as their practice area, second only to mental health (37%). The licensed social workers in child welfare practice were most likely to be in direct service roles (92%).

Findings

Child Welfare is a Significant Entry Route for Social Work Practice

Both studies indicated that child welfare remains a significant entry route for social work practice. More than a quarter (27%) of section members had fewer than three years of experience, whereas slightly more than a fifth (22%) of licensed social workers in child welfare were recent graduates with fewer than three years of experience (see figure 1). These findings suggest that, despite de-professionalization efforts, new social work graduates are still attracted to child welfare practice and choose to begin their careers in this practice area. So, for many new social workers, their initial experiences in child welfare—whether positive or negative—will ultimately contribute to shaping their experiences and expectations as social work professionals.



Figure 1. Social workers with fewer than 3 years of experience

Education & Experience

Social workers in child welfare were less likely to have master's degrees than comparable groups. The section members were less likely to hold MSW degrees (75% compared to 91%) and more likely to hold BSW degrees (25% compared to 3%) than the regular NASW membership. Similarly, licensed social workers in child welfare practice were less likely to have MSW degrees (64% compared to 79%) and also more likely to

hold BSW degrees (24% compared to 12%) than all licensed social workers (see figure 2). These findings underscore the important role of supervision for social workers in child welfare, given their increased likelihood of holding BSWs compared to social workers in other practice areas. The majority of section members (62%) had 3 to 19 years of experience in child welfare, whereas 39% of licensed social workers had between 5 to 14 years of experience in child welfare, with a median of 9 years.

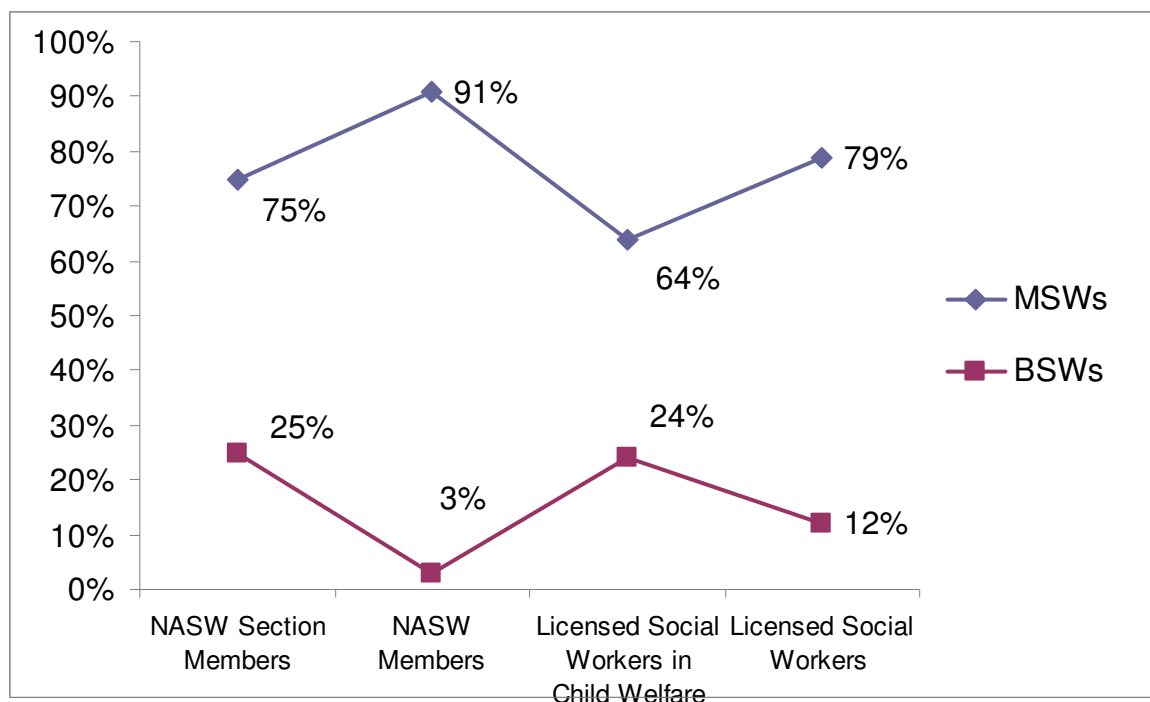


Figure 2. Education of social workers in child welfare.

Tenure and Intention to Remain in Child Welfare

The average length of employment for section members in their current agencies was just over 6 years, whereas the majority of licensed social workers (52%) had been employed by their current agencies between 5 and 15 years. The tenure reported by social workers in both studies indicates a significantly higher tenure than child welfare caseworkers whose average tenure is less than 2 years (GAO, 2003). Nearly two-thirds of licensed social workers in child welfare planned to remain in their current position for the next 2 years; whereas 50% of section members were planning to stay in child welfare (see figure 3). These data suggest

that social workers in child welfare experience lower rates of turnover and attrition than child welfare caseworkers.



Figure 3. Plans to remain in child welfare.

Supervision

Supervision was identified by licensed social workers as an important factor in assisting them in providing quality care to children and families. Although child welfare caseworkers have indicated that the supervision they receive is insufficient (GAO, 2003), the section members indicated that both the frequency and substance of supervisory meetings met their needs well. Eighty-two percent of the respondents were satisfied with the frequency of their supervision, which ranged from more than once a week to an “as needed basis.” Similarly, 73% of section members were satisfied with the support and guidance they received from their supervisors, compared with 70% of licensed social workers in child welfare. More than two-thirds of section members and licensed social workers (both 69%) were supervised by degreed social workers (see figure 4). These data suggest a positive relationship between social workers' satisfaction with supervision and receiving that supervision from other social workers.



Figure 4. Satisfaction with and type of supervisor.

Caseload Size and Complexity

Caseload size is often an issue that is raised as a deterrent to retaining social workers in child welfare practice. A strong majority (91%) of licensed social workers in child welfare identified caseload size as an important factor in providing quality care to children and families, and 69% indicated that their caseload sizes had increased over the past 2 years. However, 41% of section members characterized their current caseloads as manageable, compared to only a quarter who described their caseloads as unmanageable.

The size of the caseload notwithstanding, social workers were very concerned about the issues confronting the vulnerable families and children they served. When asked about the most challenging aspect of their work, 28% of section members identified “issues confronting families,” compared to 5% who identified “working conditions.” And licensed social workers (57%) reported that more than half of the children in their caseload had “very complex” problems. These findings suggest that the multitude of issues facing the families they served may be of greater concern to social workers than caseload manageability.

Safety

The lack of safety, particularly in field work, is often raised as an issue regarding child welfare practice. However, although more than half of section members reported being threatened at least once in their practice

in child welfare, the overwhelming majority (94%) reported that they felt safe making home visits, and expressed comfort in making those visits alone (92%). Conversely, licensed social workers in child welfare were less comfortable. Of the licensed social workers who reported facing safety issues (60%), more than two-fifths (41%) thought their employers' efforts to address safety issues were inadequate. These findings underscore the need to assure the safety of social workers in child welfare, particularly related to making home visits.

Vacancies

The issue of staffing vacancies and their effect on social workers was explored in the study of licensed social workers. Forty percent of social workers in child welfare indicated that vacancies were “common” in their agencies. Nearly two-fifths of the respondents (38%) reported that their agencies outsourced social work functions, and almost half (45%) described working in agencies that hired non-social workers to fill social work jobs (see figure 5). These findings indicate that child welfare agencies have placed a relatively low priority on social work qualifications for their workforce.

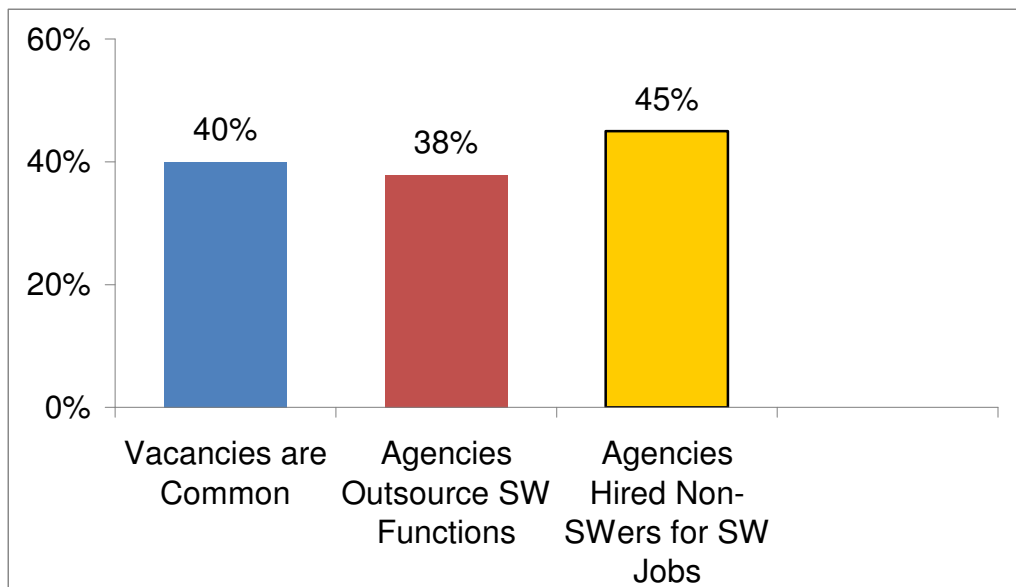


Figure 5. Licensed social workers and child welfare agency practices.

Discussion

The findings from NASW shed light on the experiences of social workers in child welfare practice. Clearly, social work has maintained its commitment to child welfare practice with approximately a quarter of both samples comprised of new graduates. The more experienced social workers in both studies demonstrated a "readiness for practice" that resulted in more stability, lower turnover and higher satisfaction than child welfare workers overall. In addition, social workers overall were more committed to child welfare practice and indicated greater intentions of staying in child welfare practice than child welfare workers overall. Although licensed social workers were concerned about the sizes of their caseloads, both groups of social workers were affected by the complexity of their caseloads. Notably, the NASW sample was more concerned about the issues facing their clients than about any workplace condition. Perhaps the largest area of congruence between the samples was their satisfaction with the quality of supervision they received and with their supervisors, the majority of whom (69% in both studies) were degreed social workers.

A major challenge facing child welfare administrators is attracting and retaining their child welfare staffing talent. However, one of the factors that contributes to the attrition of social workers is the same factor that seeks to remedy the supply shortfall. The study of licensed social workers found that social workers who reported plans to leave the profession were more likely to work in agencies that hired non-social workers for social work jobs. These social workers were also more likely to face safety issues that went unaddressed.

Conclusion

As resources and energies are invested in the important task of building and maintaining the child welfare workforce, more attention should be paid to the factors that support the professional foundation for this work. The NASW studies, albeit with limitations, paint a picture of social work practice in child welfare that is more compatible with the early vision of the Children's Bureau than recent media reports.

Social workers in these studies were interested in and deeply committed to child welfare practice. They were prepared to work with families in crisis, and were not overly concerned about workplace conditions. However, these social workers, committed though they may be, still deserve fair compensation, safe working environments and support from their agencies. Perhaps, though, what they deserve most is to have their education valued, their positions respected, and their

professionalism protected. With these goals as the foundation for recruiting and retaining social workers in child welfare, perhaps social workers and child welfare practice can again realign to ensure professional service delivery to America's most vulnerable children and families.

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