

A New Perspective: Administrator Recommendations for Reducing Child Welfare Turnover

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment impacts society on multiple levels, and consistent turnover in the child welfare workforce creates financial challenges and problems associated with service delivery. This study explores the qualitative survey findings from a statewide sample of child welfare administrators in one state ($n = 86$). When asked to provide suggestions for improving workforce retention, nine overarching themes emerged: compensation, decreased workload, organizational culture, job factors, professional development, frontline supervision, performance management, leverage external partners, and competent and engage leadership. A comparative analysis ensues, where these strategies are juxtaposed with those of frontline supervisors and frontline workers. Similarities, differences, and implications are explored.

KEYWORDS

Child welfare; administration; turnover; retention; workforce/workplace issues in human service organizations; organizational and management theory and analysis; management; leadership and organizational change; implementation; community engagement and advocacy

Introduction

According to Peterson, Florence, and Klevens (2018), the annual US economic burden for child maltreatment is estimated to cost more than 292 USD billion and publicly funded agencies' decisions and priorities are influenced by competing fiscal priorities requiring administrators to make choices regarding how to invest limited funds to address challenges. This cost is influenced by workforce turnover that places a large financial burden on agencies – estimated to cost approximately 54,000 USD for each worker who leaves (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2016). To contextualize this issue, it is important to understand the magnitude of this problem. Estimates of voluntary turnover rates range of 15%–40% (Boyas, Wind, & Ruiz, 2013; Edwards & Wildeman, 2018) High rates of workforce turnover hinder service delivery and continuity of care and create difficulties in providing essential services and meeting performance standards (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007). The cost of child welfare turnover is thus experienced on societal, organizational, and family levels. The child welfare workforce is the face of the agency, the mechanism of intervention, and the key component in addressing maltreatment and preventing its reoccurrence. Therefore, a stable and effective workforce is a necessity of significant importance to child welfare administrators.

Child welfare workforce turnover

A robust body of literature has explored factors associated with child welfare workforce turnover. The variety of influential factors have been categorized in a number of ways. For example, Hopkins,

Cohen-Callow, Kim, and Hwang (2010) clustered contributors into personal/work factors (e.g., worker characteristics, salary, and caseload), perceived organizational/environmental factors (e.g., supervision and coworker support, inclusion in decision making, safety, psychological climate) and attitudinal/affective responses (e.g., job satisfaction and job commitment). Barbee, Rice, Antle, Henry, and Cunningham (2018) examined specific individual (risk and resiliency factors), team (cohesion and shared vision), and organizational factors (leadership, job preparation, and role overload). Private child welfare administrators report that they compete with both other private child and family serving agencies and public child welfare agencies for staff (McBeath, Collins-Camargo, & Chuang, 2012).

A number of important characteristics have been found to shape the child welfare professional's work experience and longevity. On one hand, having a commitment to the profession, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction are associated with workforce retention (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010; Shier et al., 2012; Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011). On the other, having a graduate degree, prior child welfare experience, inflexible thinking, and the fear of liabilities are all associated with workers leaving their positions (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Ellett et al., 2007; Nissly, Barak, & Levin, 2005).

The interplay between professional and work-related performance has also been found to be important. Career enrichment opportunities, measurement of job performance, and satisfaction with contingent rewards are key factors associated with retention (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010). Job performance is a central component for consideration, as Kim and Kao (2014) found a lack of performance measures may discourage high-performance child welfare workers and contribute to their leaving and seeking other jobs.

Agency programmatic factors have been shown to constitute another area of influence with respect to the child welfare worker's longevity. According to Clark, Smith, and Uota (2013), promotions, training, supervision, field instructional opportunities, and mentoring were key motivators for retention. Programmatic factors such as a rising caseload have negatively influenced the workers' experience as well. A statewide study of 511 frontline child welfare workers identified an unmanageable workload as a key factor influencing the respondent's intention to leave the agency (Griffiths, Royse, Culver, Piescher, & Zhang, 2017). Other programmatic factors have contributed to turnover in child welfare workers, including pay, support (administrator, supervisor, and peer), training, recognition, and policy changes (Claiborne, Auerbach, Zetitin, & Lawrence, 2015; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Westbrook & Crolley-Simic, 2012). Encapsulating this situation, Johnco, Salloum, Olson, and Edwards (2014), identified "challenging work demands," "low compensation," and "system problems" as particularly important factors that shaped the child welfare worker's experience.

The vast majority of literature related to child welfare staff turnover or retention has drawn from frontline workers and not from leadership (i.e., supervisors and administration); however, a small number of studies have found that the same factors affect them as affect their line staff. For instance, McCrae, Scannapieco, and Obermann (2015) found that supervisors who receive more supervision have lower job stress, time pressure, and more positive perceptions of organizational leadership and also provided more supervision to their staff. Claiborne et al. (2015) found that supervisors with organizational support, role clarity, and manageable workloads reduced their looking for another job. In two meta-analyses within organizations other than child welfare, a negative relationship was found between social support provided by supervisors and turnover intentions (Chiabaru & Harrison, 2008; Ng & Sorensen, 2008).

Few studies have captured the direct contribution of the voices of child welfare administrators, especially related to workforce turnover and retention and how to improve this challenge. A reason might be the necessity for having an adequate sample size when conducting a comparative analysis. In a recent study, Brabson, Herschell, Kolko, and Mrozowski (2019) sought this comparative approach by using hierarchical linear modeling to examine associations between methods of evidence-based training and predictors of turnover for a sample of 200 behavioral health professionals (100 clinicians, 50 supervisors, 50 administrators). Significant differences were found with respect to organizational climate and turnover for supervisors and administrators, yet this study took place across outpatient behavioral health clinics.

Related to child welfare, Claiborne et al. (2015) examined the feedback from 165 child welfare administrators, yet they integrated the contributions of 153 clinical professionals as well to conduct structural equation modeling. Qualitatively, Akin, Dunkerley, Brook, and Bruns (2019) explored the perceptions of child welfare administrators through semi-structured interviews, albeit focused on system change and trauma-responsive services. While the sample included child welfare administrators ($n = 10$), it also included 16 supervisors, and a contrast of individuals working at public and private agencies, foster care, and public child welfare. Almost twenty years ago, Landsman (2001) sent paper surveys to public child welfare workers in Missouri to rural/urban differences in child welfare practice. Strengths associated with working in rural areas were identified, and the study included the contribution of 49 child welfare administrators out of a total of 990 employees.

This paper focuses on a substudy within the broader context of an agency-wide study of factors associated with working conditions, job satisfaction, and staff retention in one southern state. The current paper addresses the relative scarcity of research on child welfare administrators' views regarding strategies for responding to the problem of line staff turnover by surveying a statewide sample of child welfare administrators and using an open-ended question to capture their ideas for retaining their employees. Rather than reporting on perceptions of what contributes to turnover, the focus is on what should be done to prevent it, from the unique perspective of those tasked with managing child welfare agencies and responding to the challenges facing them.

Administrators and organizational influence in child welfare turnover

Child Welfare administrators influence line staff through policies and procedures, organizational processes and supports, and organizational culture. In one of the few studies measuring administrator perceptions, Spath, Strand, and Bosco-Ruggiero (2013) conducted focus groups with managers, supervisors, and direct line child welfare staff and found respondents were critical of the agency's "passive defensive culture" and suggested that improvements in supervision, communication, recognition, rewards, and shared decision making would improve the organizational health and assist in positive change.

Outside of child welfare, studies of agreement between administrators and clinicians on organizational climate identified that administrators identified more positive ratings for organizational culture and other organizational constructs (Beidas et al., 2018). As has been summarized above, there is a large body of research related to what factors contribute to turnover or promote retention in child welfare, but the identification of promising strategies to address this issue is less common. However, addressing line staff turnover must also involve the suggestions of administrators interested in promoting workforce retention – foundational data useful for developing strategies for agency transformation to improve child welfare service delivery.

Methodology

A descriptive research design was employed and approved by both the university and agency Institutional Review Boards. Data were collected in 2016 using an electronic survey, consisting of both open and closed-ended items. The agency's Commissioner distributed a preliminary support e-mail that identified the research team's affiliation with local universities and described the confidential and low-risk nature of the study. Respondents received their first opportunity to participate in the study through a government e-mail listserv, as a high-ranking administrator sent an approved e-mail to agency employees with an embedded hyperlink to access the survey. Two weeks later, employees were sent a one-time reminder e-mail as their last opportunity to participate in the study. A total of 877 child welfare agency employees serving in various agency roles participated in this study. While multiple reports have focused on the experience of the frontline worker and the frontline supervisor (Griffiths, Desrosiers, Gabbard, Royse, & Piescher, 2019; Griffiths, Harper, Desrosiers, Murphy, & Royse, 2019; Griffiths, Murphy, Desrosiers, Harper, & Royse, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2017;

Griffiths, Royse, Piescher, & LaLiberte, 2018; Griffiths, Royse, & Walker, 2018), this manuscript will address a gap in the literature by uniquely examining feedback from agency administrators employed during the time of data collection.

Sample

The public child welfare agency in which this study was conducted is located in a largely rural state in the central United States, with three metropolitan areas. It organizationally sits within an umbrella agency that also includes departments responsible for public health, mental health, and public assistance programs. This state-administered child welfare agency is divided into nine service regions. Therefore, administrators included as respondents in this survey may be in middle management roles in regional offices or in the central office itself. The organizational context in which the study was completed was probably similar to most public child welfare agencies in terms of concern regarding recruitment and retention of staff, and the pressure to improve the quality of service delivery which is exacerbated by it, while working within the confines of the public policy that governs the agency and the resources assigned to it by state policymakers. At the time the study was conducted, executive leadership was interested in collaborative research to better understand these problems, and initiating strategies to address them.

Criteria for inclusion in the study necessitated the respondent's primary job duty as working in an administrative capacity. Administrators served in multiple positions, including regional management and state-level positions at the centralized office. Therefore, all respondents identifying their primary position as support staff, frontline staff, frontline supervision, or having client any contact were excluded from the analysis. Of the possible 320 child welfare administrators that met criteria for inclusion and received the electronic survey invitation, 86 respondents participated in the study (26.8%).

The administrators reported a mean age of 43.85 (SD 8.04), an average of 16.52 years of employment at the agency (SD 5.99) but 59 respondents (69.4%) reported no prior experience in child welfare before working at the agency. The sample was primarily white ($n = 77$; 89.5%) and female ($n = 73$; 85.9%). About half of the administrators were stationed in their home county ($n = 45$; 52.9%) and almost two-thirds worked in a rural area ($n = 53$; 63.1%). Related to education, 62 administrators (72.1%) had a degree in social work (i.e., BSW, MSW, or both).

Data analysis

This study used a qualitative thematic content analysis to examine the responses to an open-text item from the electronic survey. Specifically, respondents were asked to "Provide any ideas you have that might help [the agency] retain employees in terms of benefits, training, workload, supervision, support, and recognition." MaxQDA12Plus (2019) qualitative data analysis software was used to code each response, line by line, using the six-phase process of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying, reviewing, and defining themes, and constructing the report. As data were limited to typically brief responses to one question in a survey, unlike the richness often found in interview data, these data had to be taken at face value without opportunity for further exploration. However, responses were generally straightforward listing of strategies. Themes were created inductively (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), drawing on those reported in the extant literature regarding child welfare staff retention. Although the question provided examples of types of strategy respondents may consider, the researchers strove to use an inductive process for identification of themes as opposed to organizing responses into those categories. Investigator triangulation was used by each coauthor to affirm the validity first author's initial coding (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). The research team worked together to gain agreement on clustering of codes into themes. While it may not be possible to ensure that the themes generated were completely discrete, the researchers reached conceptual agreement on their organization. To demonstrate those strategies or actions which were most commonly recommended by participants, frequency counts were employed (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Of the 86 agency administrators participating in this statewide study, a total of 84 (97.7%) responded to the open-text item. One respondent simply stated “none,” yet the other 83 respondents provided a total of 317 separately extracted mentions. Nine themes emerged: Compensation, Decrease Workload, Organizational Culture, Job Factors, Professional Development, Frontline Supervision, Performance Management, Leverage External Partners, and Competent and Engaged Leadership. Additionally, Table 1 identifies each relevant subtheme associated with these overarching themes. In order to be considered a subtheme, at least five observations were required to be identified in the data. For example, under the theme Compensation, two subthemes emerged – salary and benefits. For some themes, such as Frontline Supervision, no subthemes were identified.

Compensation

In the largest theme, administrators identified improvements to compensation that they believed would help the agency to improve employee retention. A total of 87 comments and two separate subthemes were included.

Administrators asserted the need for improvements to *salaries* ($n = 66$) as a primary avenue for improving employee retention, with a focus on increased compensation and a need to financially recognize veteran workers who had remained with the agency through lean times and without adequate cost of living or incremental raises. They stated that retention could be improved by “higher salaries,” and “pay increases,” with one administrator stating that “I believe pay should be increased as we continue to lose good employees to higher salaries.” In that same vein, financial recognition was identified as an avenue for improving employee retention through “the ability to reward tenured employees with pay increases,” and “a raise – not just for new entry level workers, but for the senior workers who’ve been

Table 1. Thematic content analysis: Themes, subthemes, and number of mentions ($n = 317$).

Theme	Subtheme	n
Compensation		87
	Salaries	66
	Benefits	21
Decrease Workload		81
	Reduce Caseloads in General	46
	Hire More FSW Staff	22
	Hire More Support Staff	13
Organizational Culture		37
	Culture of Appreciation and Respect	19
	Reduce Punitive Approaches	8
	Communication	5
	Support	5
Job Factors		33
	Opportunities for Advancement	16
	Flexible Work Schedule	7
	Facilitate Lateral Transfers	5
Professional Development		27
	Training Process	17
	Mentoring and Coaching	10
Frontline Supervision		18
Performance Management		17
	Performance Incentives	11
	Performance Evaluation	6
Leverage External Partners		9
Competent and Engaged Leadership		7
None*		1

*The number of participants reporting that they did not have any ideas that might help [the agency] retain employees.

working without any raises for a significant amount of time.” Another suggested to “start with your workers now, take care of them, it is all good if you want to pay new employees more, but you have to take care of the ones now.” A direct quote from an administrator illustrated this circumstance:

When we increase the wages for entry level staff, increase the wages for experienced staff also. Ultimately newer staff end up making quite a bit more and it leaves a bad taste in the mouth of someone who stayed with the agency when they realize the new people almost make as much as they do after ten years. We need to find a way to fairly compensate and have opportunities for improvement, given that pay raises for experienced staff in the past ten years have also been very poor.

The second subtheme focused on improving *benefits* ($n = 21$), as a means for improving employee retention. While some comments were precise and administrators simply mentioned “better healthcare” and “better benefits,” one stated that “workers need more pay and better health insurance options to cover spouses. We work for the government and often our own families don’t have health coverage due to the high premiums.”

Decrease workload

The second-largest theme identified administrator suggestions to decrease the workload to help in improving employee retention. A total of 81 comments and three subthemes were included.

The first subtheme consisted of administrator perceptions of an overarching need to *reduce the caseload in general* ($n = 46$), where one respondent stated that the agency must “lower workloads across the board.” Others stated that the agency should “have manageable workloads,” focus on “workload reduction,” and that “the caseload size is out of control. It is difficult to manage.” Some specific areas where a reduction could occur were mentioned, such as reducing administrative tasks and the burden of being on call. Implications of this challenge became apparent, as an administrator identified that “we are asking too much of our staff. It is unrealistic what we ask of them and it doesn’t surprise me when one by one they exit.”

The second subtheme associated with a decreased workload was a call to *hire more frontline staff* ($n = 22$). Administrators mentioned that they need additional frontline workers, and that “the workloads needs to be decreased to a manageable level, which requires hiring more quality staff.” Another stated that they agency needs “more frontline staff to reduce amount of time on-call and caseloads” and needing “more social workers to meet the rising demands of society and the social ills that this field services.”

The third subtheme to assist with decreasing workload involved administrators suggesting that retention could be improved if the agency would *hire more support staff* ($n = 13$) to assist workers in completing their job responsibilities. Assisting in the facilitation of paperwork and logistical processes, administrators requested that the agency “retain secretaries for office support” and that “we need more support staff to enter information for the workers so they can do more work with clients and not spend bulk of their time with data entry.” Additionally, administrators identified the need to help workers expedite time-consuming and important tasks by stating that “more help is needed to transport and supervise visits for children in out of home care.” Further, they requested “additional clerical support and support service aides are needed to help front line staff,” and another asked for “more SSAs [social service aides] to transport and supervise visits.”

Organizational culture

The third-largest theme identified administrator suggestions for changes in the organizational culture as a means for improving employee retention. We draw from Schein’s (2010) definition of organizational culture, encompassing the artifacts, values, and assumptions espoused by the agency and its employees, over which leaders have a significant influence. A total of 37 comments and four subthemes were included.

The first subtheme focused on developing a *culture of appreciation and respect* ($n = 19$) where administrators called for significant agency change. Administrators requested that the agency focus on “appreciation” and “recognition,” mentioning that “appreciation goes a long way. If you recognize workers hard work and dedication that boost morale.” Additionally, administrators stated that the agency should “treat employees with respect” and provide “respect for the frontline social workers/supervisors, and recognition of the numerous daily personal sacrifices workers make.”

The second subtheme called for the agency to *reduce punitive approaches* ($n = 8$) with one administrator mentioning that “the caseloads are high, but workers need time to be viewed as human beings and not just another body to fill a position.” Another stated that “we are required to write up people for not meeting expectations that they have no hope of meeting. It creates no incentive to meet the requirements down the line; it only feeds apathy.” Additional sentiments reflected this subtheme as respondents stated a need for “less pressure on numbers and more on outcomes” and through this notable quote:

We have to change as an agency. Millennials are the new kids on the block and require different styles of mgt. We need to upgrade. I met with a group of workers to get their feedback. They talked about being stifled said “we are working harder but not smarter.”

The third subtheme identified improvements in *communication* ($n = 5$) as a means for improving employee retention, as administrators asked for “better communication at all levels” and for “more networking between staff members to help out with staffing issues.” Also, administrators described that opening lines of communication would help retention by “staff having an active mechanism to voice concerns with their office outside of the grievance system.” They specified that systemic communication could be improved by better “response times.” Finally, one respondent captured the essence of this subtheme by stating that “If the importance of certain tasks were explained to them in advance, we could be a more proactive agency. In many instances I feel that we are reactive rather proactive. By being proactive we could look for future problems rather than spending hours catching up!”

The fourth and final subtheme identified the importance of *support* ($n = 5$) to improve retention, where administrators simply noted the necessity for “support” and another mentioning that they feel workers need to “receive support from regional office.”

Job factors

The fourth-largest theme identified administrator suggestions for changes in job factors that they believed would assist in improving employee retention. This category of responses includes aspects or characteristics of employment and processes in the agency, such as the agency hiring and use of technology, not child welfare work in particular. A total of 33 comments and three subthemes were included.

The first subtheme identified *opportunities for advancement* ($n = 16$) as a strategy for improving retention. Some administrators simply mentioned the need for “better promotional or upgrade opportunities” and “career development,” while others stated that retention could be improved if employees had “more promotional opportunity.” They also requested “more opportunities for front line workers to advance while continuing to provide front line services.” Further, they asked to “re-instate the old career ladder for advancing” and provide “the opportunity for movement congruent with new skills and added responsibilities and that will allow for compensation growth over time.” The unique administrator perspective showcased the value of opportunities for employee advancement, stating that there needed to be “more opportunities for workers to promote [as] not everyone wants to be a supervisor” and that there is “there is no real reason to move up if you get more work/more responsibility without any more pay.”

The second subtheme identified the benefit of having a *flexible work schedule* ($n = 7$), as administrators suggested that “giving the worker the option of having a flex schedule” and having “staff able to work varied work shifts rather than 8–4:30” would help to improve retention. Also, administrators

mentioned ways to create a flexible working environment by stating that the agency should allow staff to “work from home” or work “part time.”

The third subtheme illustrated the value of being able to *facilitate lateral transfers* (n = 5), as a strategy for improving retention. Administrators mentioned that the ability to periodically change primary job responsibilities would help, identifying the need for “more opportunities to move around and or specialize so they don’t get burned out in one area” and to “allow for more lateral transfers to help prevent burnout.”

Professional development

The fifth theme identified ideas for enhancing professional capacity. Administrators suggested avenues for professional development to improve employee retention. A total of 27 comments and two subthemes were included.

The first subtheme focused on improvement to the *training process* (n = 17), where administrators described the initial training for newly hired employees (the academy) and how improvements could assist in retention efforts. One administrator identified an issue with “the length” of the education and training system, stating that “not everyone is able to pick up and leave their family every other week for almost six months. Not to mention the academy is far away for some so they can’t commute.” Additionally, administrators requested improvements for the new employee training system by stating that “they need to learn how to do the actual job- not theories” and that “you must perform the duties of the job to fully understand the process, it cannot be taught in a classroom.” Finally, an administrator gave a specific idea of how to revamp the training system, included in this quote:

Utilizing a formal, on-the-job training model in which a trainee shadows a seasoned and high performing worker would be more useful than the academy alone. Having the Field Training Specialist demonstrate strong and ethical work with our clients and then rating a new employee over several months on their ability to absorb then demonstrate necessary skills would build capacity and depth to the front line. The model that would best suit protective services is the SanJose model (Field Training Officer) that has been duplicated/utilized by law enforcement across the country.

The second subtheme focused on *mentoring and coaching* (n = 10) to assist in retention, as administrators stated that the agency needs “improved coaching and mentoring,” a “mentor program,” and “having a peer mentor, especially for offices with relatively new staff.”

Frontline supervision

The sixth theme identified the administrator perception of *frontline supervision* (n = 18) as a key element in workforce retention. While some administrators identified the need for “effective supervision” and for “more formal supervision/consultation,” others shared the challenges associated with its facilitation. Specifically, one respondent mentioned that “managers are extremely overworked and also carry caseloads during shortages.” Another requested assistance by stating that “supervisors are overwhelmed with all their responsibilities.” Despite these demands, the value of supervision was clear and relayed by an administrator who stated that “I have seen that offices with a strong, competent, available, and supportive supervisor that also have a cohesive team work much better. I wish I knew how to accomplish this in each office.”

Performance management

The seventh theme focused on suggestions for performance management as a strategy for improving employee retention. A total of 17 comments and two subthemes were included.

The first subtheme focused on *performance incentives* (n = 11) that administrators felt would improve agency retention. Some respondents mentioned “incentives for exceeding,” while others gave

specific ideas about creating “an incentive salary pay scale for staff to obtain raises without going into supervision.” Financial incentives were also discussed, as respondents stated that the agency should provide “monetary bonuses for employs who complete work timely” and “money tied to [receiving] employee awards.”

The second subtheme identified the *performance evaluation* ($n = 6$) as a factor influencing retention. Some spoke of accountability, stating that the agency could improve retention if they have the “ability to hold poor performers accountable quickly.” One administrator identified a current challenge with their perception of the evaluation system, stating that “performance evaluations should reflect an employee’s quality of work.” Finally, a respondent summarized this area by stating that “the entire evaluation system needs to be changed to be less ‘numbers’ driven and more performance driven. This system encourages workers to cut corners, and make paperwork a priority which directly impacts children’s safety.”

Leverage external partners

The eighth theme identified the suggestion to *leverage external partners* ($n = 9$) to improve retention. Administrators recognized the necessity for developing additional community partnerships, stating that retention would be improved if frontline employees had “better access to consultants in areas of psychiatry, special education, physical health. People who can pair with them and do part of the work since there is just too much even with manageable caseloads.” On that same note, one respondent mentioned that “the child welfare department needs to increase access to licensed behavioral health professionals, nurses, pediatricians and a child psychiatrist.”

Administrators also acknowledged the need to improve public perception by collaboration with media, as “child welfare personnel are not seen as trained professionals delivering a professional service,” and that the agency should be “more proactive in the media by somehow telling our success stories and not just letting the public see stories about where we have supposedly failed. All the public sees in print media or on the news is the bad stories. We do a tremendous amount of good as well. We need to share that with the public.”

This theme also illustrated perceptions of challenges associated with the status quo, as an administrator requested “release us from the political tinkering that leads us to not be able to dictate to our contracted services providers of in-home services, private child care, or training providers.” Another important challenge related to leveraging external partnerships was apparent in the plea for help, as one respondent stated “I fully believe that higher management supports us and would make changes if they can. However, this is out of the range of anyone in my office and needs to come from the government.”

Competent and engaged leadership

The ninth and final theme identified the need for *competent and engaged leadership* ($n = 7$) as an important factor to improve retention. While some respondents mentioned that “agency leadership needs to work harder at advocating for current staff, as well as advocating for the hiring of new staff, which means talking to the necessary folks at the capital,” others suggested “inclusion in policy development” would help retention. Another mentioned that “workers need to see that it’s not just a member of leadership telling them what they will do, but also doing it with them. Maybe leadership can help in inputting notes, etc. to assist. I think workers feel that they are demanded upon with no support from leadership.” Finally, an administrator requested a call for competent and engaged leadership by stating that “There is a bias that undermines the profession, and it’s interwoven into how the whole system operates such that we suffer from an excess of layperson leadership and oversight. At the very top of the agency, and through its layers, if you don’t have people that have done the work, then you have people who can’t lead the work.”

Discussion

Administrator perceptions compared to other staff

This study adds to the extensive literature related to factors contributing to child welfare workforce turnover, but with a new twist. Data collected from 86 administrators provided nearly 300 qualitative responses regarding the retention of frontline staff. The majority of the extant literature in this area relies on the perceptions of workers themselves (e.g., Ellett et al., 2007; Shier et al., 2012). The qualitative data indicated that despite removal from direct practice, administrators were largely in sync with staff perceptions, which is in itself worth documenting. Table 2 shows the ordering of themes as identified by administrators compared with those of frontline supervisors and workers published elsewhere (Author, 2019, 2016). While the perceptions of these administrators are in many ways aligned with that expressed by the frontline, there are some differences as we discuss below.

As the table reveals, for the most part, the same themes were identified, although the prioritization of them varied based on the role of the respondent (Griffiths et al., 2019; Griffiths, Royle, & Hurt, 2016). Interestingly, frontline workers were more likely to suggest training/professional development, and an organizational culture of appreciation and respect, than to reduce caseloads and hire more staff. Both administrators and supervisors prioritized increased staffing and workload reduction. Both supervisors and workers prioritized competent and engaged leadership than their managers did, as this theme had the fewest endorsements by managers of any of the identified themes. This is interesting in that it may imply that these administrators were less likely to see their own practice as influencing turnover. Similarly, frontline supervisors did not identify improving their practice as a strategy, although it was identified by both managers and workers.

Perhaps even more telling, some themes were only raised by respondents of one role type. Only administrators acknowledged the need to leverage external partners, which may be related to their frequent involvement with entities outside the agency. Only supervisors suggested structural realignment, and to reduce the number of upper and middle managers in favor of hiring frontline workers. It is of note that only frontline workers focused on the need to address safety concerns and work/life balance in order to retain staff. Frontline workers and supervisors both recognized the importance of promoting self-care, and changing specific policies and procedures, while administrators did not prioritize these strategies. It is important to remember that this study employed a focus on proposed strategies to reduce turnover, rather than identifying those factors they believe contribute to it.

Table 2. Categories of strategies to promote worker retention in order of frequency of observation.

Administrators (n = 86)	Supervisors ^a (n = 117)	Frontline Workers ^b (n = 511)
Compensation	Compensation	Compensation
Reduce caseload	Reduce Caseload	Training/Professional Development
Hire More Staff	Organizational Culture of Appreciation and Respect	Organizational Culture of Appreciation and Respect
Organizational Culture of Appreciation/Respect	Training/Professional Development	Reduce Caseload
Job Factors	Hire More Staff	Hire More Staff
Training/Professional Development	Competent and Engaged Leadership	Competent and Engaged Leadership
Frontline Supervision	Performance Management	Job Factors + Improvements in Paperwork, Policy and Practice
Performance Management	Job Factors	Frontline Supervision
Leverage External Partners	Improvements In Paperwork, Policy and Practice	Performance Management
Competent and Engaged Leadership	Structural Realignment	Self-Care
	Self-Care	Safety Concerns
		Work/Life Balance

^aAdapted for comparability from Authors (Griffiths, Desrosiers, Gabbard, Royle, & Piescher, 2019)

^bAdapted for comparability from Authors (Griffiths, Royle, & Hurt, 2016)

The administrator role

McBeath et al. (2014) presented an institutional and organizational context of child welfare work in which organizational characteristics and behaviors interacted with staff and client characteristics and behaviors, while externally influenced by institutional forces, market incentives and pressures, and community factors, to impact frontline service delivery and client outcomes. This is the context in which child welfare administrator practice. Subsequently, Collins-Camargo, Chuang, McBeath, and Mak (2019) proposed a dynamic configuration of external pressures and organizational strategies designed to address them. Funding, staff recruitment, and retention, interorganizational relationships relate to operations and practice expectations, within statutory/regulatory and contractual contexts, to create child and family outcomes. Based on data collected from private child welfare agency administrators, they propose an array of actionable strategies that can be employed to confront those pressures: advocacy, investment in data and technology, use of data and evaluation, practice and program change, collaboration with peer and public agencies, staffing adjustments, and training and professional development (Collins-Camargo et al., 2019). While some of the terms are different than the labels used for themes in the current study, the strategies recommended by administrators to address turnover can be seen to fall within this broader framework of strategies used by child welfare administrators.

The roles of public child welfare administrators are somewhat different than those in the private sector. In private agencies and businesses, while managers must work within the confines of their budget, regulations related to billing for services, contractual requirements of funders and possibly the approval of a board of directors, they may have more latitude to innovate or make decisions related to salary and benefits, creation of job classifications and hiring more staff (Murphy & Robichau, 2016; Van Slyke, 2006). In the public sector, these decisions require the approval of other governmental entities such as personnel departments and sometimes the legislature. In the current study, administrators most frequently recommended strategies that are beyond their personal control which require the actions of policymakers – increasing compensation and hiring additional staff, rather than looking internally at strategies that can be employed without the action of external entities, such as promoting self-care or changing practice requirements. In fact, over half of the responses would fall in this category.

On the other hand, there is some indication that public and private child welfare administrators may see the response to challenges they face similarly. In a recent study of the pressures faced by private child and family serving agencies, frontline staff recruitment and retention was one of six overarching challenges reported by managers. The most frequently mentioned strategies private agency leaders reported using to address this challenge were increasing salaries, new hiring practices such as working to be an employer of choice, retention activities such as career ladders, mentoring and flexible work schedules, training, and advocacy (Collins-Camargo et al., 2019).

Merging policy and practice is a key responsibility of administrators as they facilitate the integration of multiple systems and monitor the political culture of regulation and accountability that creates barriers for child welfare organizations (Caffrey and Munro (2017)). Navigation of bureaucratic models of organizational structure and program health creates contention for child welfare administrators in their role as a liaison between legislature and agency staff. State child welfare systems are at the mercy of legislators and policies that dictate practice, program, and performance standards. Recent literature suggests that at the management or administrator-level measurement of performance and staff work, for example, are connected to policy and statutory guidelines (Hood, Grant, Jones, & Goldacre, 2016). A study by Willging, Green, Gunderson, Chaffin, and Aarons (2015) examined the macro-level influences in child welfare through the review of evidence-based practices (EBP) and identified that political and legal pressures have implications for sustainment of certain practices which can create discord at the organizational and client level of services by diminishing the role of child welfare staff in decisions regarding practice decisions. This disconnection at a macro level indicates a larger issue surrounding child welfare policies and practices that can influence workforce turnover.

New public management (NPM) philosophy may be another intervening variable at the policy level that ties bureaucratic models to child welfare creating an outcome-based goal that compromises the practice and program factors impacting retention of child welfare workers. NPM philosophy has roots in the assumptions that organizations should employ a combination of job analysis and improvement functions such as results-based accountability and tracking key performance indicators, and the application of private sector management techniques and targets in the public sector (Webster & McNabb, 2016). Other than strategies related to performance incentives, the administrators in this sample did not reflect NPM approaches. Webster and McNabb (2016) assert that such approaches divert attention from those managerial practices that focus on the improvement of social work practice, such as clinical supervision. The adoption of NPM philosophy may widen the chasm between administrators and child welfare workers due to conflicting priorities, such as worker belief the agency is too focused on outputs and numbers rather than quality practice and improvement in client functioning. In our sample, however, there was little focus on effective work with families as influencing intent to remain employed.

When comparing worker and administrator perceptions, the differences suggested by the current study are more reflective of emphasis. While certainly noted in some frontline staff studies as a relevant factor (e.g., Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett et al., 2007), compensation is typically not seen as one of the more impactful strategies for addressing child welfare turnover. For example, Griffiths & Royse, 2017 found that lack of organizational support was the primary reason workers left their public child welfare job. Hopkins et al. (2010) found that organizational climate explained most of the variance in organizational withdrawal behaviors in preparation for turnover than individual or other organizational factors. This may be an inherent difference in worker versus administrator perceptions. For example, outside child welfare, Beidas et al. (2018) found administrators tended to perceive organizational culture as more positive than their staff.

The role of administrators in setting the tone of organizational culture has been well documented. Schein (2010) suggested that there are six embedding mechanisms leaders can use to influence organizational culture in their agency: selection of what they regularly measure and control, how they respond to crisis, allocation of resources, role modeling and coaching behavior, reward systems, and how staff are recruited, hired, and promoted. Respondents in this sample specifically spoke to the need for a culture of appreciation and respect for staff. Purposeful administrators within each of these embedding mechanisms could be used to promote such a culture. Thinking more broadly, many of the actionable strategies that administrators recommended could be facilitated through leveraging these mechanisms. For example, increasing compensation and providing opportunities for professional development imply the agency appreciates and values frontline staff.

Frontline supervision has been emphasized in the empirical literature as impacting retention for decades (e.g., Dickinson & Perry, 2002). Krusich, Mienko, and Courtney (2014) found the role of the supervisor to be a key factor, in part through its relationship to the psychological safety of workers. While strategies associated with organizational culture and support were the third most frequently observed category, administrators overwhelmingly focused on compensation and reducing caseload through hiring staff. Supportive frontline supervision was only observed in 18 responses. Other factors deemed significant in studies reporting worker perceptions that are missing or de-emphasized here include job satisfaction (Landsman, 2001), organizational commitment (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001), and practices congruent with the agency's mission (Rycraft, 1994). Buck and Watson (2002) found that human resource management strategies can affect organizational commitment. This may suggest that administrators, at least in this sample, have a tendency to look outwards rather than inward for answers. This, too, may be related to the bureaucratic structure and functioning of public agencies. As an organization within the state government, public child welfare agencies are constrained by the laws and regulations that govern it, and the limitations of the resources allocated to it by policymakers. Some processes under the control of independent agencies, such as hiring, salaries and benefits, and other personnel policies, are outside their control. Blome and Steib (2014) suggested that the structure of child welfare agencies is not conducive to the mandates they seek to perform.

Implications for practice

This study has implications for managerial and organizational practice. Administrators may benefit from reflection on how their perceptions differ from those of their staff and the factors which may have influenced their emphasis. Particularly, greater consideration of the potential impact of changes within their own purview as either state-level or regional administrators, including organizational culture and climate, communication, professional development, and leadership behaviors. Regular measurement of organizational factors such as these not only would provide data from which to gauge the impact of changes, but suggest a culture in which organizational learning and excellence are prioritized as Schein suggested (2010).

Elsewhere in the human services, the professional literature has examined the perception of administrators regarding how best to retain staff, often contrasting with differing recommendations of line workers (e.g., Brewer, Zayas, Kahn, & Sienkiewicz, 2006; Moon, Beck, & Laudicina, 2014). In one study of community mental health organizations, administrators prioritized improved compensation, while practitioners emphasized the addressing factors associated with the intrinsic nature of the work (Blankertz & Robinson, 1997). A more recent study of substance abuse treatment staff retention found similar differences (Gallon, Gabriel, & Knudsen, 2003).

The issue of workforce retention in child welfare has been the subject of a wide array of demonstration projects in recent years. The Children's Bureau has funded a number of recruitment and retention demonstration grants, as well as the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, which have tested interventions such as the use of design teams to improve organizational culture, supervisory training, and enhancement of leadership capacity (Zlotnik, Strand, & Anderson, 2009). The federally funded Quality Improvement Center on Workforce Development is conducting a multiyear study of the impact of a number of workforce initiatives designed to promote retention in eight sites, including telework for field staff, organizational supports to address secondary traumatic stress in workers and supervisors, initiatives to improve organizational culture and climate, a competency-based employee selection process, practice redesign focused on teaming and prevention, a supportive frontline supervision model, a manualized staff-onboarding process, and case supporting technological interventions (Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development, n.d.). These initiatives clearly align with some of the strategies suggested in the current study although not others. There is a tremendous need for research into the relative impact of strategies to promote staff retention so that organizations can determine where to invest their limited resources.

The answer to retaining child welfare staff certainly may require an infusion of resources to right-size workload and compensate them appropriately, but many of the strategies identified here can be employed without funding. What they do require, however, is managerial competencies that may or may not be present in all public child welfare administrators. The National Network of Social Work Managers' Human Services Management Competencies (Wimpfheimer et al., 2018) provide a comprehensive list of critical skills and emphases. The strategies recommended by the current sample of administrators certainly require competency in the resource and strategic management as well as community collaboration and executive leadership categories, described therein. In a study examining human service managers' solutions to challenges, Hopkins and Hyde (2002) found that solutions reported did not match well with the challenges they were designed to address, and noted that current management practices did not meet expectations described in the literature for them to be more visionary and innovative. This aligns with the call for transformational leadership, which has been associated with positive leadership outcomes (Mary, 2005).

Study limitations

While the findings in this study provide insight into an area of child welfare that has minimal information, there were some study limitations. The collection of administrators' perspectives for this study was limited to a sample of 86 administrators in one geographical region. Further, the

response rate was 26.8%, the study was cross-sectional, and the sample was limited in diversity with more than 80% of the population identifying as white females. Despite these considerations, few studies have actually involved the direct contribution of the voices of child welfare administrators with respect to having a focus on child welfare workforce turnover and retention.

Finally, these data were restricted to responses to one open-text question in the survey. Strategies to improve frontline staff retention was not the only purpose of the broader survey, so there was no additional data that could have been pulled from the quantitative components of the survey to inform this paper. By way of example, the question also listed possible strategies such as benefits, training, workload, supervision, support, and recognition which have been found as important in this effort (Auerbach et al., 2010; Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Koeske, Kirk, Koeske, & Rauktis, 1994; Shim, 2010).

This could certainly be considered as a leading question, and as such may have suggested possible responses. Certainly, some of these strategies were reflected in the responses, but the themes identified both in the administrator responses, as well as the supervisor and worker responses published elsewhere (Griffiths et al., 2019, Griffiths et al., 2016) do not align directly with these suggestions, and in fact, go well beyond these suggestions. While suggesting the type of information requested in this question, manager responses indicate a prioritization of those strategies deemed most important to be considered. Nevertheless, the nature of the question asked and the potential biasing of responses must be acknowledged.

Conclusion

Administrators are a key element in an effective child welfare system, possibly having tenure that overlaps multiple political agendas and changes in leadership. The inclusion of administrator perceptions on strategies to address workforce turnover is instrumental in closing the gap between macro-level process and micro-level intervention. Administrators serve a key role in the child welfare agency, as the liaison between legislation and policy, and practice. There is a lot of agreement here related to retention strategies worth exploring when compared to the perceptions of frontline supervisors and workers, but this study also illustrates some differences. The matter of perception based on your own orientation to the work and the nature of one's position is relevant. Perhaps the implications of this study can be most easily summarized as follows. The potential strategies to promote retention in child welfare and perhaps the human services in general are varied, and the insights of administrators, supervisors, and workers are all relevant. While ultimately the infusion of resources to adequately staff and compensate the frontline may be needed, strategies that depend less on funding and more on the leadership, culture, climate, and level of support experienced by staff may well be worth attention. Research is needed to assess relative impact, but in the interim, a variety of interventions at the fingertips of administrators may warrant implementation.

Practice points

- Prior research into child welfare workforce turnover has largely focused on collecting feedback from the frontline staff, excluding the top-down perspectives of agency administrators.
- Administrator perceptions for reducing employee turnover were associated with the following areas: compensation, decrease workload, organizational culture, job factors, professional development, frontline supervision, performance management, leverage external partners, and competent and engaged leadership.
- A comparative analysis examines the categories of strategies to promote worker retention in order of frequency of observation by administrators, frontline supervisors, and frontline workers. Similarities, differences, and implications are explored.


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