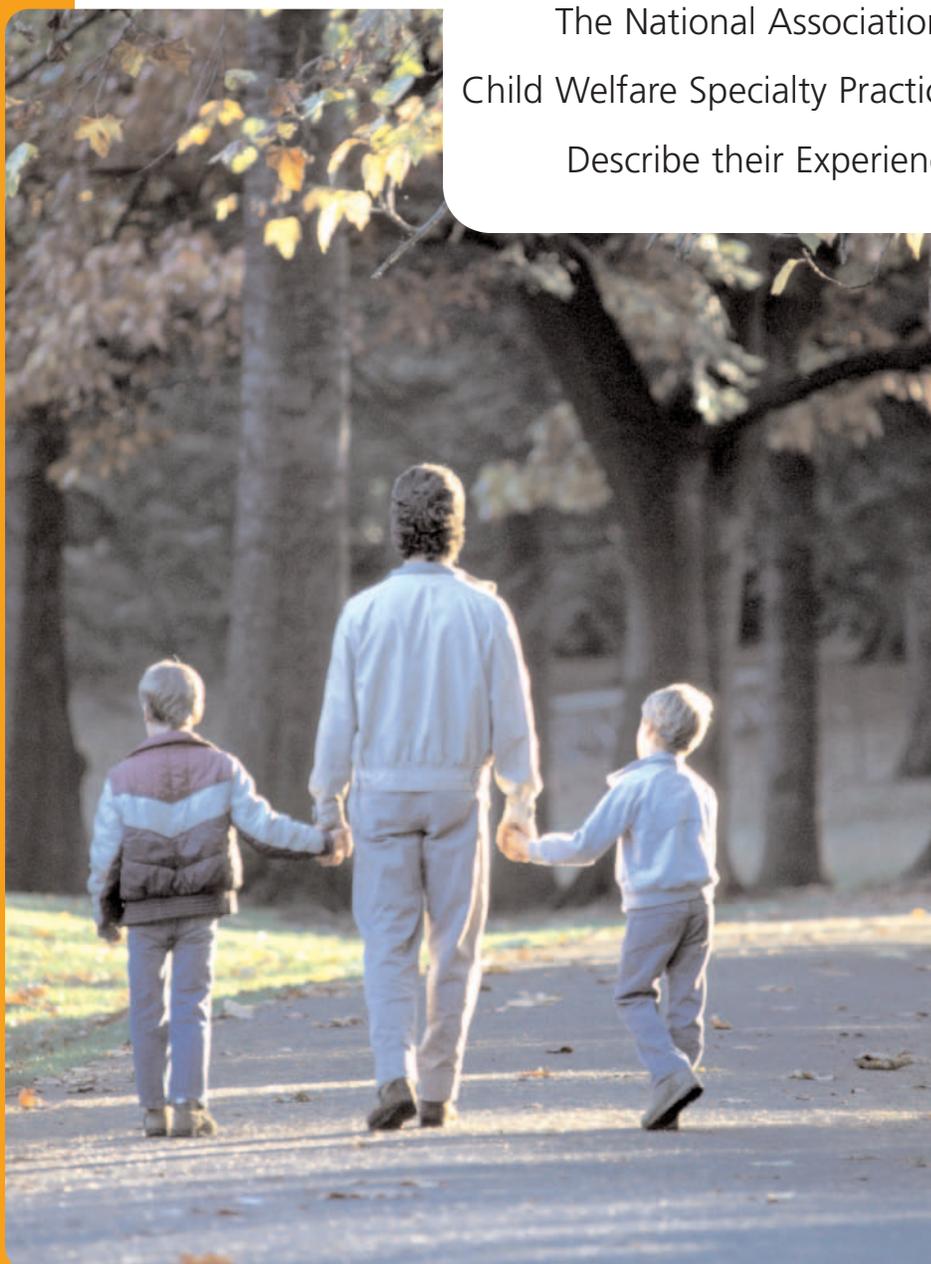


“If You’re Right for the Job, It’s the Best Job in the World”

The National Association of Social Workers’
Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section Members
Describe their Experiences In Child Welfare



Acknowledgements

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“As the United States enters the 21st century, the depth and breadth of society’s most insidious ills continue to affect children profoundly. Racism, poverty, violence, and abuse of alcohol

and other drugs impinge on the life of every child in the United States. Children are influenced by the society in which they are born and raised; they, in turn, influence society.”

David Liederman, 1997



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Introduction

The American public has been confronted head-on with the issue of child abuse and neglect, as a seemingly endless stream of media headlines—detailing the lives of children who have experienced and endured unimaginable abuse at the very hands of those entrusted with their care—captures the nation’s attention. These stories remind us of our ultimate failure, as a society, to ensure the health and safety of our most valuable and vulnerable citizens: our children.

Child abuse is a systemic issue with no easy answers and no simple solutions. The circumstances surrounding child abuse and neglect are complex, and the social responses needed to secure the safety of children while adequately addressing their needs and the needs of their families are equally complicated. In July 2003, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) launched a new initiative on child welfare. This initiative was in response to growing concerns about the fate of children—those at risk for abuse and neglect in their own families as well as those children who were removed from their homes and placed in alternative living arrangements.

The social work profession has always worked on behalf of those who are poor, neglected, and vulnerable. From this perspective, social work’s efforts on behalf of children who have been abused and neglected are perhaps the profession’s most perfect fit. And indeed, social workers within the child welfare system have made professional and personal commitments to protect children and preserve families through their clinical interventions and direct work with children and families, by developing programs and social supports that help prevent child abuse, and influencing social policies that provide children and families with safety nets and needed services when they find themselves in crisis. However, as the American public struggles to understand and simplify the very complicated reality of child abuse, these same social workers—

who are committed to children’s social welfare—find themselves at the other end of the pointed finger. All too often, they are blamed when children are abused, blamed for not knowing, not doing, or not doing enough to protect children from the tragic circumstances they encounter.

The media paints a picture of child welfare agencies as systems in disarray—comprised of inept and uncaring social workers whose incompetence contributes to children being physically lost, further abused, and even killed. The child welfare literature gives a similar view of a struggling workforce facing unmanageable caseloads, threats of violence, and low salaries.

Research has found that holding a degree in social work (BSW and MSW) correlates with higher job performance and lower turnover rates among child welfare workers (GAO, 2003). NASW, however, remained curious about social workers’ day-to-day experiences in child welfare:

What are their challenges and rewards? Are their caseloads overwhelming? Do they receive adequate support from supervisors? Do they have the resources they need to do their jobs? Would they recommend child welfare social work practice to new social workers?

While we accurately anticipated the responses to some of our questions, the optimism and hope of many of the answers surprised us. We share these findings to improve services for vulnerable children and their families and to increase the chances that every child may live a life free of violence and harm, with opportunities for success and happiness.



Issue Background

Child abuse is a pervasive problem in America, and the statistics are staggering. Every day, an average of 2,400 children are victims of child abuse, and approximately three children die each day as a result of child abuse or neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2002). Nationwide, child protective services (CPS) agencies receive more than 50,000 calls per week regarding suspected or known instances of child abuse (DHHS, 2001), with more than two-thirds of these calls determined appropriate for CPS investigation.

Child abuse and neglect occur in all segments of society, within families from all walks of life, at all income levels, all religious denominations, and all racial and cultural backgrounds. There is no single causal factor predictive of families who abuse and neglect their children. It is, rather, an interface of various forces within the social milieu that makes some families more vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Social workers recognize that, in order to

“I just wish we didn’t have to do this [work]. Kids shouldn’t have to grow up like this.”

truly help protect children by preventing child maltreatment, families must also be helped by identifying and addressing the individual, familial, and community-wide challenges they encounter.

Families with multiple stressors are at greater risk for child maltreatment. High stress levels may be attributed to economic hardships, lack of employment, and lack of available childcare, as well as housing issues and other personal problems. Families residing in severely disadvantaged neighborhoods afflicted with high poverty rates, limited social supports, and community violence may experience increased stress levels. Social isolation and insufficient or non-existent social supports and networks can also contribute to high levels of family strain and instability.

Problematic relationships associated with domestic violence also tend to make families more susceptible to child maltreatment. A general lack of

parenting skills and an inability to cope with the needs of children can also be an indicator of families who may be vulnerable to abuse, particularly for teenage or young parents who are negotiating the adult role of parenting along with their own developmental needs. Parents who struggle with behavioral health issues may also find it difficult to attend to the needs of children while trying to manage their own illnesses. Periods of depression, for example, may be linked to insufficient supervision, neglect of basic needs, and overall negative parent-child interactions.

Other issues related to family practices or cultural traditions may predispose families to abuse of their children. For example, children who have grown up in abusive homes may, in fact, not define their own experiences as abusive. Practices such as severe beatings with objects, long-lasting isolation, or the withholding of food as punishment for certain behaviors may be typified as “normal” disciplinary actions within that family system. Certain behaviors related to child discipline will likely be reintroduced across generations.

Where We Work: The Child Welfare System

Children grow and thrive best in families—families that are healthy, safe, and that can nurture and provide a safe haven for them. Ideally, families should be the primary providers for meeting children’s physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs. In addition to informal community resources that can offer assistance to families whose financial, medical, or emotional resources prevent them from ensuring the well-being of their children, the government has established a formal child welfare system to assist children who have been abused or neglected or who are at risk of abuse and neglect and their families (Liederman, 1997). The placement of children out of their homes is generally avoided unless it is the only way to protect them.

“I only wish children could have safe and healthy lives.”

The term “child welfare system” describes a continuum of services that includes child protective services, family preservation, family foster care, group homes, residential facilities, adoption services, and kinship care services. This system includes both public and private agencies, and works in close partnership with—and relies on—many other community systems, such as educational and mental health systems; financial, housing, and employment assistance; and substance abuse treatment services.

The child welfare system’s primary purpose is to keep children safe and to protect them from harm. Its secondary purpose is to provide necessary services to the families of children at risk, to improve conditions in their homes and bring stability to their family units. There are times, for example, when all a family needs to be healthy and safe are basic, core necessities such as food, shelter, and access to medical care (Rycus & Hughes, 1998).

Governing Constraints: Child Welfare Legislation Today

The Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act (P.L. 96-272), enacted in 1980, is often acknowledged as the beginning of the modern child welfare system. During the late 1970s, Congress became increasingly concerned about the growing numbers of children being placed into foster care and about the length of their placements. During that time, foster care was provided under Title IV-A, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADFC). Since IV-A funds were provided as an entitlement (guaranteed federal funding for all eligible children) and funding for Title IV-B child welfare services was capped, the debate centered on whether the guaranteed funding encouraged states to place children unnecessarily into foster care.

To address those concerns, P.L. 96-272 transferred the IV-A Foster Care Program to a newly created Title IV-E Foster Care Program, and provided new linkages with the IV-B Child Welfare Services Program. The new links were designed to encourage states to rely less on foster care and more on services aimed at preventing placement and encouraging family rehabilitation. The 1980 law also created the Title IV-E Adoption Assistance Program, to encourage the adoption of children with special needs. Also of note was the law's establishment of a new federal standard—one of "reasonable efforts." States were directed to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent foster care placement, and "reasonable efforts" to reunify children with their parents in cases where they were removed. The reasonable efforts standard governed child welfare practice for almost 20 years.

Enactment of the Title IV-B Family Preservation and Support Program in 1993 (P.L. 103-66) represents another legislative effort designed to prevent the unnecessary separation of children from their families and to promote family reunification. The program was reauthorized and renamed the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program as part of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act ([ASFA]P.L. 105-89) made the most significant changes to federal child welfare programs since enactment of P.L. 96-272 in 1980. ASFA created new standards for child safety, permanency, and well-being. The law established that a child's health and safety must be of paramount concern in any efforts made by the state to preserve or reunify the child's family. The law retained, but significantly revised, the "reasonable efforts" standard. It clarified that federal law does not require that a child remain in, or be returned to, an unsafe home, and created several exceptions when "reasonable efforts" to preserve or reunify a child's family should not be made.

The law also established new timeframes to expedite state action on moving children to permanent homes. ASFA requires that "permanency" hearings occur within 12 months of a child's placement in foster care (it

had been 18 months), and that states initiate proceedings to terminate parental rights on behalf of children who have been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months, with certain exceptions.

ASFA also is designed to hold states more accountable for achieving positive outcomes for children and families by requiring a series of Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs). Following their CFSRs, states are required to make program improvements as needed or face financial penalties.

Many of the past debates in child welfare are likely to affect enactment of federal child welfare legislation well into the future. Concerns that first surfaced more than 20 years ago about possible perverse fiscal incentives for placing children unnecessarily into foster care resurfaced in 2003. To address those concerns, the Bush Administration proposed to block grant funding under the Title IV-E Foster Care Program to focus additional federal resources on prevention services.

Given the increased concern by Congress and the Administration about the current state of the child welfare system, it is not inconceivable that the federal government, which was reluctant to

assume responsibility for the welfare of children in the beginning of the 20th century, could be moved to assert greater responsibility for the well-being of children in the beginning of the 21st century.



The Child Welfare Workforce

The child welfare workforce is diverse and complicated. Although, the public's perception is that child welfare services are staffed primarily by social workers, in fact, the staffing mix of these agencies is varied. A recent study of local Child Protection Services agencies conducted by the Children's Bureau, found that child protection agencies had an average of 26 staff, that included social workers or caseworkers, supervisors, support staff, case aides, specialist workers, and managers (DHHS, 2003). These agencies averaged "3 staff with less than a Bachelor's degree, 13 staff with a Bachelor's degree, 3 with a Master of Social Work (M.S.W.) degree, and 1 employee (or staff person) with some other type of advanced degree" (DHHS, 2003, p. 2-2).

"The child welfare staff person is always the bad guy in the eyes of the press and other service providers."

The public and the media also use the terms "child welfare" and "child protection" interchangeably, when, in fact, child protection services are only one component of the child welfare system. The prevailing data about the child welfare workforce paint a bleak picture:

- Ninety percent of states reported having difficulty in recruiting and retaining child welfare workers (GAO, 1995).
- Challenges to recruitment and retention include:
 - Low salaries;
 - High caseloads/workloads;
 - Administrative burdens;
 - Risk of violence;
 - Limited or inadequate supervision; and
 - Insufficient training (GAO, 2003).

Social Work Experiences in Child Welfare

NASW's survey of its Child Welfare Speciality Practice Section revealed intriguing findings about social work practice in child welfare settings. Overall, we found that social workers in those settings had more positive experiences than the general child welfare workforce.

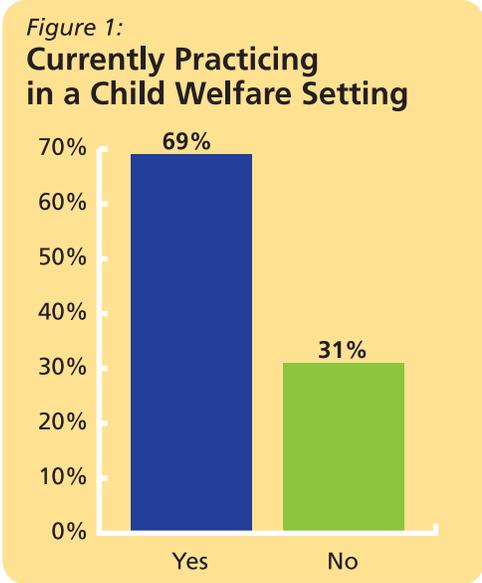
Methodology Overview

A 2002 study conducted by NASW found that eight percent of the 90,000 regular members identified child welfare as their primary area of practice (NASW, 2002). In response to these members, NASW launched a new Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section that has grown to more than 800 members since its inception in July 2002. Section membership, while geared towards different social work practice areas, is open to all NASW members for an additional fee. In October 2003, NASW conducted a survey of all 716 members of the Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section. The survey instrument included 52 open- and closed-ended questions covering:

- Practice
- Supervision
- Work environment and resources
- Paperwork
- Field and home visits
- Safety
- Training and professional development
- Professional challenges and rewards

Response Rate

NASW received a total of 534 responses to the mail survey, a 75 percent response rate. This exceptional response rate gives high confidence that mail survey results are representative of the entire population from which that sample was drawn. Of the 534 responses received, 367 (69 percent) of the practitioners indicated that they currently practice social work in a child welfare setting.

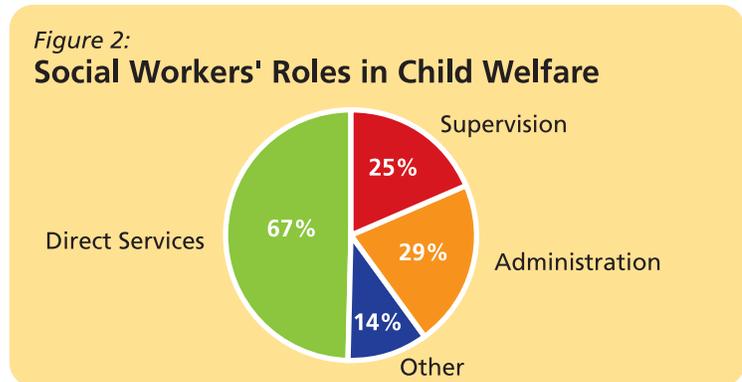


Demographics of the Respondents

The median age of the members of the Child Welfare Specialty Practice Section was 41.1 years, nine years younger than the median age of 50 of NASW's regular membership. The Section members had a higher percentage of women (84 percent) than the regular membership (77 percent). The Section members are also a bit more diverse than the regular NASW membership. Seventy-seven percent of the Section members are White (compared to 87 percent of the regular membership); 14 percent are African American (compared to five percent of the regular membership); and five percent are Hispanic/Latino (compared to two percent of the regular membership). In addition, 75 percent of the Section members have MSW degrees (compared to 97percent of the regular membership); 25 percent have BSW degrees (compared to 19 percent of the regular membership); and one percent hold a doctorate (compared to seven percent of the regular membership). In accordance with the geographic distribution of the regular membership, more Section members reside in the Northeast (New England and Mid-Atlantic states) than in the southern and western states.

Roles in Child Welfare

Section members were asked to identify all the roles they hold in the child welfare setting. Two in three practitioners report that they provide direct services; 25 percent provide supervision and 29 percent provide administration or management services.



Key Findings

1. Social workers in child welfare are more satisfied with their jobs than the general population of child welfare workers.
2. Issues confronting children and families were the most challenging aspect of the job, **not** the workplace issues confronting the social workers.
3. The single most satisfying aspect of the work of social workers in child welfare is "successes with children and families."

Findings

1. Longer Tenure

The average Child Welfare Section member has practiced in child welfare for 9.5 years.

Twelve percent of the social work practitioners have practiced in the child welfare field for 20 years or more, while 26 percent have less than three years of experience. On average, practitioners have been employed with their current agencies or organizations for 6.1 years, although nearly one-quarter are still in their first year.

In addition, when asked about whether they were looking to transition out of child welfare into a different social work practice setting, 50 percent of the Section members said they were not looking to make a change.

The average tenure of child welfare workers is less than two years (GAO, 2003).

“For the future of our country, it is the most important area, but the least valued by our society.”

Figure 3:
Child Welfare Experience

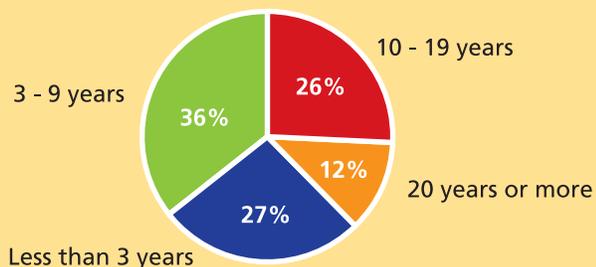
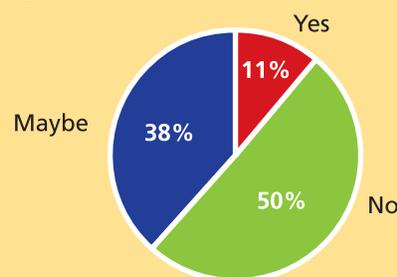


Figure 4:
Looking to Transition out of Child Welfare



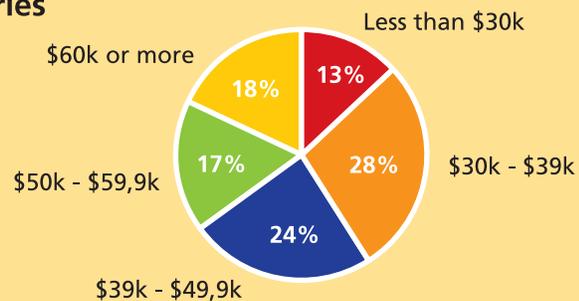
2. Higher Salaries

Of those Section members employed full-time, the median salary is \$43,000.

Only 13 percent of Section members earn less than \$30,000 for full-time work. Salaries increased with experience in the field, with those in the field 20 years or more earning a median salary nearly twice that of those in the field less than three years (\$60,000 versus \$32,300).

“The reward of helping children sometimes far outweighs the low salary. Social work is an awesome field to get into.”

Figure 5:
Salaries



The average annual salary for public child welfare agency workers is \$33,000. The average annual salary for private agency staff is \$27,000 (ACF, APHSA, CWLA, 2001).

3. Slightly Less Administrative Burdens

Section members report that they spend 50 percent of their time on paperwork, with 82 percent saying they spend at least a quarter of

“While I don’t love the paperwork, it is there to keep both myself and the clients safe.”

their time on paperwork. Practitioners complete an average of 20.4 forms for each typical child on their caseloads. Also, practitioners say that the amount of time they spend in court has increased since the enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997.

It is estimated that child welfare workers spend 50 to 80 percent of their time on paperwork (GAO, 2003).

4. Smaller Caseloads

The average caseload for Section members is 19 families. Section members identified a “manageable” caseload as 14.4 families, although 41 percent described their current caseloads as manageable. Only 25 percent of practitioners did not think their current caseloads were manageable.

“The complexity of families’ problems and issues require more time, paperwork, documentation and client contact.”

The average caseload for a child welfare worker is between 24 and 31 children. Caseloads range from 10 to 100 children per worker (ACF, APHSA, CWLA, 2001). The Child Welfare League of America recommends caseloads of between 12 and 15 children per worker. The Council on Accreditation recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 per worker.

5. More Comfortable Making Home Visits

Nineteen percent of Section members report having been victims of violence, although 63 percent say they have been threatened at some point in their child welfare practice. One interesting note was how many social workers cited violent acts by *children*. **However, 94 percent of Section members say they generally feel safe making home visits.** The overwhelming majority (98 percent) of Section members make home visits alone. Ninety-two percent say they are “somewhat” or “very comfortable” making home visits alone.

“Mostly verbal threats, but I have had parents try to attack me. . . however, this was only two times and I did have a law enforcement officer with me at the time.”

Seventy percent of front-line caseworkers have been victims of violence or received threats of violence (AFSCME, 1989).

6. Higher Satisfaction with Supervision

Eighty-two percent of Section members say the frequency of supervision they receive meets their needs “very well” or “somewhat well.”

In fact, 19 percent say they meet with their

“I would require a BSW or MSW for case managers, and a MSW/LCSW for all supervisors and administrators.”

supervisors more than once a week; 24 percent meet with their supervisors about once a week; 20 percent meet less than once a week; and 29 percent say they meet as needed. **In addition,**

73 percent of the practitioners say that the support and guidance they receive from their

supervisors meets their needs “very well” or “somewhat

well.” Sixty-nine percent of Section practitioners report that

their supervisors have degrees in social work.

Child welfare caseworkers indicated that their supervisors are often too busy to provide the level of supervision needed. Also, supervisors’ inaccessibility negatively impacts staff effectiveness and morale (GAO, 2003).

“I believe that my employer offers a variety of appropriate training which meets my needs. If I have special training requests that can be obtained outside my agency, I am allowed to take advantage of those opportunities.”

7. Adequate Training Opportunities

The average Section member spent 52.1 hours in job-related training in the past 12 months.

Seventy-eight percent of practitioners reported that their employers provided regular, ongoing professional development and continuing education opportunities.

Child welfare caseworkers report that available training does not meet their needs and they do not have time to participate in classes. Also, when training was available, high caseloads and work priorities hindered their attendance (GAO, 2003).

Additional Information

The respondents were also asked about the most challenging aspects of their work, what they would change about their jobs, and what they would tell new social workers considering careers in child welfare.

“The needs are so great and there continues to be fewer and fewer resources.”

Most Challenging Aspects of Work

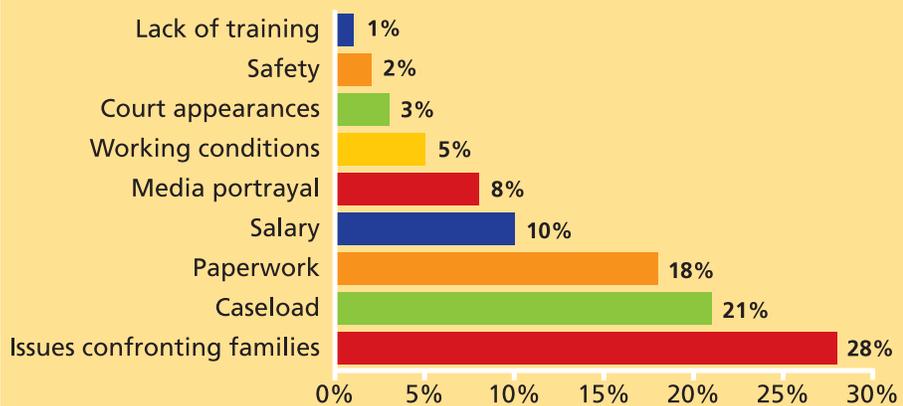
Survey respondents rated the most challenging aspects of their work from a list that included caseload/workload, paperwork, salary, media portrayal of social workers, working conditions, court appearances, safety, lack of training/professional development opportunities, and issues confronting children and families.

“Negative public perception leads to increased hostility by clients and family.”

Although caseload/workload, paperwork, salary, and media portrayal of social workers were all rated as highly challenging areas, “issues confronting families” was the most challenging aspect of the job.

“At times, dealing day-to-day with the issues faced by abused, neglected children is so emotionally stressful.”

Figure 6:
Most Challenging Aspects of Work



“It is difficult working with families who have extreme needs when resources are not available for them to meet basic needs no matter how hard they work.”

Although the issues confronting the families were paramount in terms of challenges, the social workers also described how the other issues affected their work. They described how public perception impedes their ability to establish trusting relationships with families; how time spent on paperwork takes time away from direct interventions with families; and how long work hours and the general lack of available resources for clients are points of frustration.

Recommendations for Improvements

“I would like the work to be more respected, less bureaucratic, more focused on the people we serve.”

The survey participants were asked an open-ended question about what they would change in their current jobs. Their responses ranged from concerns about increasing funding for services, to having more staff to decrease caseloads, to ensuring that staff have social work credentials. They also

“I would want all the staff under job titles of ‘social worker’ to actually be BSWs or MSWs. Individuals with degrees in psychology, counseling, or history are not adequately trained to do the job.”

described a desire for more positive media portrayals, less paperwork, and a higher priority on children’s overall well-being. Surprisingly, several respondents said they would change “nothing” about the work.

Advice for New Social Workers

Another open-ended question asked participants what they would tell a social worker who is considering a career in child welfare. Although some responses were cautionary, others were optimistic, encouraging, and realistic. Many spoke of the hard work, but described it as very rewarding. Some comments were:

"It is one of the most challenging social work fields, but can be very rewarding if you have the right fit. The impact you have with families is enormous and critical, and you are able to make a difference in the lives of many children and families."

"I would tell them to approach work from a strengths perspective, and to become an advocate for social justice, to practice self-care, and to keep their practice based on research."

"That it's a great job, but hard. I love my job."

"Come with a lot of passion. It is the most rewarding, but hardest job you will ever have."



Summary of Findings

As compared to the larger population of all child welfare workers, the surveyed social workers:

- Have more tenure and higher interest in remaining in child welfare;
- Have higher salaries;
- Spend a little less time on paperwork;
- Have smaller caseloads;
- Feel safer making home visits alone;
- Are pleased with the frequency and quality of supervision they receive;
- Have adequate training opportunities; and
- Are encouraging toward new social work professionals joining the child welfare field.

Conclusion

Without question, child welfare systems are faced with daunting challenges as they endeavor to provide essential services that protect and advance the well-being of children. However, the findings from this survey provide a glimpse into significant differences between the professionally educated social worker with practice experience and the general child welfare workforce in those systems. As one survey respondent said, *“When you’re right for the job, it’s the best job in the world.”* This sentiment rang true throughout the responses and strongly supports the conclusions that:

1. Unlike their caseworker counterparts, **social workers in child welfare are prepared to meet the challenges of this work.** On every measure, social workers' training, preparation, experience, and expectations aligned with their actual job responsibilities and available resources.
2. **Social workers in child welfare find their work satisfying and rewarding.** Social workers described their caseloads as manageable, their supervision and training opportunities as adequate and felt safe doing their jobs. They had been on their jobs longer than the general child welfare worker, and they were more committed to remaining in the field. They were also optimistic about their interventions with clients and positive and encouraging to new social workers entering child welfare.
3. **Properly prepared and trained professionals who possess a strong commitment to their jobs and the families they serve are the best hope for revamping the current child welfare system.** The findings of social workers' longer job tenure, higher job satisfaction and focus on success with children and families are important indicators for child welfare administrators struggling to reform agencies with high turnover; for policymakers and the public who are interested in seeing the child welfare system improved; and most importantly, for children and families who reap the benefits of sustained efforts from experienced and committed staff.

The findings from this survey answer many questions about the quality of social workers' working experiences in child welfare settings, and also lay a foundation for more research with this social work cohort. NASW will continue research efforts to focus on the role of social work in child welfare, as we seek to improve the quality of life for vulnerable children and their families.

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