Crawford, M., (2025). J Soci Work Welf Policy, 3(1): 151
https://doi.org/10.33790/jswwp1100151

Journal of Social Work and Social Welfare Policy

Understanding Social Worker Attitudes and Perceptions Regarding Staying in Child Welfare Practice: A qualitative Exploration of Intent

Marcus Crawford, MSW, PhD

Associal Professor, Department of Social Work Education, California State University, Fresno,United States.

Article Details

Article Type: Research Article
Received date: 06th May, 2025
Accepted date: 26th June, 2025
Published date: 28th June, 2025

***Corresponding Author:** Marcus Crawford, MSW, PhD, Associal Professor, Department of Social Work Education, California State University, Fresno, United States.

Citation: Crawford, M, (2025). Understanding Social Worker Attitudes and Perceptions Regarding Staying in Child Welfare Practice: A qualitative Exploration of Intent. *J Soci Work Welf Policy, 3*(1): 151. doi: https://doi.org/10.33790/jswwp1100151.

Abstract

Purpose: Retention of child welfare social workers directly influences both the quality of services provided and the stability of the workforce. This research sought to explore social workers intent to stay in their roles in public child welfare.

Methods: This qualitative research investigated elements that affect social workers' intentions to stay in public child welfare through semi-structured interviews with frontline practitioners. Using responses from in-depth interviews with front line social workers, thematic analysis was used to explore the intent for social workers to stay or leave their roles.

Results: Findings identified three central themes: leadership, workload and burnout, and workplace culture, recognition and flexibility. Leadership played a vital role in employee retention through supervisory support which served as a crucial element; practitioners with supportive supervisors experienced higher job satisfaction but those with inconsistent supervisory support felt isolated and stressed. Participants felt frustrated because upper management failed to engage sufficiently and did not communicate adequately which resulted in increased disconnect and discontent. The main factors driving burnout consisted of uneven caseload distribution and intense demands which made workers consider quitting their roles. The workplace culture displayed a lack of recognition and inconsistent flexibility policies which forced reliance on peer support instead of strong supervisory and management systems. The analysis demonstrates that strengthening social worker retention and enhancing results for children and families requires structured supervisory training and proactive management engagement combined with fair workload distribution and comprehensive recognition programs alongside standardized flexibility policies and strategic wellness initiatives.

Keywords: Child Welfare; Retention; Workforce; Social Workers

Introduction

The retention of child welfare social workers within county agencies is an ongoing concern, significantly impacting the quality and consistency of child welfare practice. Workforce stability is essential, as turnover can disrupt client-worker relationships, hinder effective service delivery, and impose substantial financial burdens on agencies [1]. Understanding factors influencing retention is critical for agencies seeking to develop strategies aimed at retaining skilled, committed professionals in child welfare settings.

Literature Review

A substantial body of research highlights organizational and supervisory support as central factors influencing child welfare worker retention. Benton [2] identified supervisory support as the strongest predictor of retention among Title IV-E graduates, suggesting the critical role of supervisors in shaping retention outcomes. Multiple researchers conclude similarly that supportive supervisory relationships increase worker engagement, reduce burnout, and enhance organizational commitment [3-6]. Effective supervision offers emotional and professional support, mitigating burnout and promoting job satisfaction and professional identity [7, 8]. Furthermore, structured clinical supervision programs have been shown to enhance supervisory competence, job satisfaction, and retention [9]; when combined with a supportive organizational culture, an engaged supervisory leadership significantly reduces turnover intentions among child welfare workers [10]. Key factors in producing supportive structures include professional development opportunities, emotional and psychological supports, and respect and equity.

Professional development opportunities

Retention research highlights the crucial role that education and professional development play. Title IV-E programs and similar educational initiatives are identified as particularly impactful in enhancing workforce stability and professional competencies [5, 11-13]. Specialized pre-service training and certification significantly improve worker preparedness, competence, and retention rates [14]. Graduate education, specifically MSW degrees, positively influences job satisfaction, professional confidence, and commitment to stay within public child welfare roles [15, 16]. Organizations investing in ongoing education and structured training with mentorship programs

experience improved staff retention rates which underscores the importance of continuous professional development for social workers [17, 18].

Emotional and psychological factors

Burnout, emotional exhaustion, and secondary traumatic stress (STS) frequently emerge as significant predictors of workforce turnover. Secondary trauma and burnout are leading contributors to worker attrition, necessitating structured interventions to address emotional health [19, 20]. Carder and Cook [21] described the management of emotional responses within child welfare roles as contributing significantly to emotional distress and turnover without adequate organizational support mechanisms. Programs focusing on mindfulness, resilience-building, and professional mental health support effectively mitigate the effects of stress, enhancing worker retention and overall workforce health [22-25].

Respect and equity

Perceived workplace respect and equity significantly shape workers' retention intentions. Eisenberg, Rhoades Shanock, and Wen [26] found workers scoring lower on measures of workplace respect were significantly more likely to leave their positions, identifying domains such as organizational support, equitable pay, and clear communication as crucial. Similarly, Chenot, Boutakidis, and Benton [27] demonstrated that perceptions of fairness in workload distribution profoundly impact job satisfaction and retention, overshadowing ethnic and demographic differences.

Additional factors

Other factors frequently cited by those leaving the field include overall job satisfaction and realistic recruitment efforts. Job satisfaction is consistently identified as a strong predictor of worker retention. Clear role expectations, manageable workloads, and supervisor support significantly enhance job satisfaction and retention [4, 28]. Proper caseload management is essential because excessive caseloads cause a rise in both employee burnout and turnover rates [29]. The presence of clear professional progression routes alongside career advancement opportunities and systematic organizational backing leads to improved job satisfaction and longer workforce retention [30].

Enhanced job satisfaction begins with recruitment though. Structured recruitment and selection processes substantially impact retention by aligning expectations with actual job demands. Strand [31] highlighted that providing realistic previews through internships and other settings can effectively reduced early turnover by establishing accurate worker expectations. Similarly, Wilke, et al., [32] found structured employee selection protocols employing comprehensive assessments and realistic simulations resulted in higher worker retention. Combining robust recruitment initiatives with structured onboarding and mentoring significantly reduces early-career attrition [32, 33].

Strategies and Interventions for Improving Retention

Integrated service delivery models represent effective strategies for enhancing workforce retention. Barbee and Antle [34] revealed that workers in co-located service models experienced improved morale, reduced stress, and enhanced collaborative support, significantly lowering turnover. Research demonstrates that organizational interventions like design teams and mentoring programs effectively build agency culture and reduce turnover by enhancing worker engagement and team problem-solving [29].

Organizational culture and leadership profoundly influence worker retention outcomes. Griffiths et al. [10] identified supportive organizational culture, engaged leadership, clear communication, and positive supervisory relationships as significantly reducing turnover intentions. Transformational and inclusive leadership styles enhance workforce stability by fostering organizational support, reducing job-related stress, and improving overall employee engagement [35].

Strategies addressing burnout include addressing secondary trauma, financial compensation, and non-financial incentives. Comprehensive approaches to secondary trauma—including structured wellness programs, trauma-informed care, and professional mental health interventions—are essential to sustaining a healthy and resilient workforce [19, 36]. Financial compensation packages such as competitive salaries, tuition reimbursement, and stipend programs have proven effective in improving worker retention [10, 37]. Non-financial incentives, such as flexible working arrangements, professional recognition, and clear opportunities for career advancement, also significantly enhance retention by increasing job satisfaction and organizational commitment [38].

Retention of child welfare social workers in county agencies requires multifaceted strategies addressing supervisory support, professional development, psychological well-being, workplace equity, and targeted incentives. Agencies adopting comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to retention will likely see improved workforce stability, enhanced job satisfaction, and better outcomes for the children and families they serve. In the present study, we explored the experiences of frontline child welfare social workers and what made them remain in their roles so we could better understand factors related to retention.

Methods

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of frontline social workers in public child welfare agencies around their intent to stay working in the field. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at California State University, Fresno. Participants were recruited using a convenience sample from a survey sent to county social workers. The end of the survey included a self-select option where they could provide contact information to be part of an interview that explored their intent to stay at the agency. Participants were not paid for their interviews, and no rewards were offered by the researcher or agency for participation. To maintain confidentiality of the participants and ensure honest and open feedback, the agency was not notified of who participated in interviews. Participants were invited to provide personal or work email addresses to schedule interviews, whichever they were comfortable with.

Interviews were conducted via zoom and recorded with the participant's permission. The interview used a semi-structured interview guide with probing questions about the worker's experience in child welfare and their intention to remain working in child welfare practice. Interviews began with informed consent and collection of basic demographic data including gender, race/ethnicity, current role, and years of practice. The semi-structured interview guide focused on experiences with management (supervisors and upper management), asking participants to define "upper management." Participants were also asked to name something supervisors and upper management do great and something they could improve. For participants who indicated they intended to stay in their positions, we asked about what makes them want to stay. For those who expressed an intent to leave their jobs, we probed what led to that decision and what steps they had taken to initiate an exit. Finally, participants were asked about their general satisfaction with their work, their responsibilities, their stress, and their ability to maintain a balance of life and work.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim using the zoom auto-transcribing feature and then checked for accuracy by listening to the recordings to verify the transcripts. Participants were asked to leave their cameras off during interviews to ensure that we could maintain confidentiality. Names on the zoom recording were changed to pseudonyms which are used in this paper. Analysis of the transcript included initial coding of the data for common experiences among the participants. These codes were used with ChatGPT Scholar to analyze the transcripts for sections of interviews related to those topical areas. Data were extracted using these codes and themes were developed based on the extracted data. The author then organized the data into the themes for the results.

ISSN: 3049-0243

To ensure rigor in qualitative studies, several techniques were used. Creswell [39] recommends verbatim transcription, which was used with doubling checking against the recordings to ensure accuracy. Because this is a single author paper, to guard against bias, the coding were checked with an independent reviewer [40], which helped to ensure triangulation of analysts. Finally, during the development of the initial codes, the author met with the independent reviewer to verify the coding themes and check bias. Often qualitative research, an author may provide a reflexivity statement to identify potential bias and ground themselves in the research [41]. The author of this paper is a master's level social worker with a PhD in social work. He worked in child welfare in direct practice for nearly 15 years before earning his PhD. During that time, he worked with families from the case inception to case closure. He has experience in training new workers and the development of curriculum. These experiences bring an understanding of the challenges in remaining in child welfare long term and the stresses and obstacles that prevent social workers from remaining in their roles. The independent reviewer of the files was not a social worker and had never worked in child welfare, which helped to guard against biases from the author.

Results

A total of 16 interviews were completed. Analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of three themes: Leadership, workload burnout, and culture, recognition, and flexibility.

Theme 1: Leadership

The first theme that emerged regarding social worker feelings about retention related directly to ways in which management can create conditions that foster retention. Javier stated this succinctly: "Right now, I don't feel like I get the support I need from my supervisor." Three areas help define the theme of leadership: supervisor support, upper management engagement, and communication about decisions.

Supervisory Support

Supervisory support became a key element that determined social workers' experiences at the county child welfare agency. Participants reported supervisors as vital mentors and advocates or as obstacles to their practice because of limited availability and poor engagement. Workers' daily operations and their views of the agency's support for their well-being were both affected by whether supervisory support existed. The subtheme emerged from regular observations of supervisory practices influencing employee job satisfaction and stress levels while affecting their organizational retention intentions.

Participants experienced strong supervisory relationships through open-door policies combined with active engagement and direct assistance from their supervisors. Staff with dependable supervisors reported that the support they received increased their decision-making confidence and provided stability in their job roles. For example, Luis described his supervisor as someone who was not only accessible but also willing to step into the field when necessary, stating:

> *She actually goes into the field when needed. I had a case where I had to remove children, and she drove all the way to Kalinga with a van to help. Some supervisors don't go out into the field, but she steps up during stressful situations.*

This kind of active, hands-on support reinforced workers' perceptions that their supervisors understood the realities of frontline child welfare work and were willing to share the burden.

Many other participants, however, reported a stark absence of supervisory engagement, leading to feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and frustration in their roles. Sorina described being left to figure out situations on her own, even as a new worker "*with little to no training.*" Workers who experienced this lack of support frequently described supervisors as hands-off, inaccessible, or only present when issues arose. Jose stated, "*Even a simple daily check-in would make a difference.*" The sporadic nature of communication between supervisors and workers was a common theme in these accounts, particularly among those who worked in high-intensity roles where real-time guidance was crucial. Dorothea expressed frustration with the lack of support from her direct supervisor, highlighting the isolation of being in a standalone unit and the feedback only coming as criticism when things go wrong.

The absence of structured supervisory support had direct consequences on workers' ability to perform their jobs effectively. Amber, who worked in Emergency Response, highlighted the challenge of receiving minimal direction in high-stakes situations:

> *When I was a newer worker, I asked for support with writing reports, but I often felt like I was left to figure it out on my own. Then, when I submitted my reports, I'd be told, 'This is wrong,' without much guidance.*

This trial-and-error approach to learning on the job created frustration and stress, particularly for newer employees who lacked experience in complex case decision-making.

While some participants were able to compensate for inadequate supervision by relying on peer support, others indicated that the lack of consistent, structured supervisory involvement contributed to greater job dissatisfaction and disengagement. Sorina recalled a defining moment in which she felt entirely unsupported: "*There have been moments when I really needed support and didn't get it. For example, my first detention on call—I was left to figure it out on my own, with little to no training.*" In critical, time-sensitive cases, the absence of guidance from supervisors not only placed undue stress on workers but also had potential implications for child safety and case outcomes. Lidia explained she had only met with her supervisor once in the three months that she has been in her unit: "*I'm reading reports, signing off on finalizations, and just hoping I'm doing things correctly because I've received very little direction.*"

Upper Management Engagement

Beyond the impact of immediate supervisors, upper management significantly influenced workers' views of agency culture and leadership priorities. The key subtheme around upper management involvement revealed workers' perceptions of distant leaders who were unresponsive to frontline realities concerns while fixating on performance metrics. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with decisions made without consultation while highlighting the absence of meaningful interaction with frontline staff and noting leadership's focus on bureaucratic efficiency at the expense of worker well-being.

One of the most recurrent grievances about upper management stemmed from their separation from frontline operations both physically and operationally. Multiple staff members observed that leaders seldom engaged directly with caseworkers which created a broad perception of their inadequate understanding of child welfare employee challenges. Peter captured this sentiment bluntly, stating, "*Upper management is too far removed from the work we do. Most of them haven't been in the field for 10+ years, and now, everything is about numbers. They've stopped seeing people as people—they only see statistics.*" Luis agreed, stating that child welfare practice "*is much more than numbers*" but this is the only thing management looks at. This emphasis on quantitative targets over qualitative understanding fostered resentment and disengagement among workers who felt their experiences and concerns were systematically overlooked.

The lack of communication and transparency from upper management further reinforced workers' sense of disconnect and exclusion from decision-making processes. Several participants described instances where significant agency-wide changes were implemented without prior consultation or explanation, forcing workers to adapt reactively rather than proactively. "*Too often, management makes changes that*

don't align with what we actually need," Lidia stated. She expressed frustration at the lack of input about major changes. Irving recounted a specific instance of this disjointed decision-making process: "*There's a disconnect between upper management and what's actually happening on the ground. They recently reassigned workers to core units without consulting staff. If they had talked to us, they would have realized the impact.*"

These examples highlight how top-down decision-making without frontline input led to confusion and operational inefficiencies, ultimately exacerbating worker dissatisfaction. The use of hierarchy as a means of control rather than collaboration was also a recurrent concern regarding upper management. Anita described a situation where her unit was left without a supervisor, and they were told the program manager would step in to assist. "*But they [the program manager] have not attended any meetings or provided any direct support*," she lamented. Some workers described feeling intimidated by program managers and directors, with leadership structures reinforcing a sense of power imbalance rather than fostering mutual support. Georgina, for instance, explained, "*Program managers often use the deputy director or director to intimidate us, which doesn't work for me anymore—I know my job and I'm not afraid of them. But newer workers feel pressured.*" This dynamic of hierarchy-based intimidation not only discouraged open dialogue between leadership and frontline staff but also contributed to a culture of fear rather than support for newer employees.

Despite these concerns, some workers acknowledged efforts by upper management to engage more directly with staff, though these efforts were seen as inconsistent and largely insufficient. Several participants suggested specific strategies for improving engagement, with Sochi advocating for structured communication between leadership and workers: "*Upper management should hold regular individual meetings with staff, either monthly or quarterly. This would create better communication so they could hear directly from us about challenges and successes.*" This suggestion for increased direct engagement underscores the fact that workers were not resistant to management oversight, but rather, they sought meaningful interactions that recognized their contributions and expertise.

Decision-Making & Communication

Closely linked to the theme of upper management engagement, the subtheme of decision-making and communication captured workers' concerns about how leadership formulated policies, disseminated information, and structured organizational changes. Across interviews, participants described poor communication from management, delayed or unclear policy updates, and a lack of inclusion in agency-wide decision-making. "*Policies the state has implemented are great in theory, but they don't account for the actual time it takes to put them into practice*," described Irving. Workers frequently expressed frustration over leadership's failure to explain or justify changes, leading to feelings of disempowerment and uncertainty.

A dominant issue raised by participants was the slow and inefficient approval processes that created unnecessary barriers to completing work. Many workers described situations where they had to wait extended periods for management decisions or were subjected to excessive oversight that hindered their ability to work efficiently. Georgina illustrated this challenge clearly, stating, "*Upper management takes forever to approve things, and the constant questioning wastes time. Instead of making my job easier, they add unnecessary steps that slow things down.*" This bureaucratic bottlenecking not only delayed casework progress but also reinforced perceptions that leadership lacked an understanding of the urgency required in child welfare work.

In addition to inefficiencies, many workers described confusion caused by frequent, unexplained policy changes. Several participants recounted instances where significant procedural shifts were implemented without prior communication, forcing employees to adjust with minimal guidance or rationale. Lidia talked about changes in leadership resulting in policy shifts before even seeking to understand the agency culture. This was a common concern. Amber stated, "*We get a lot of people coming in from other counties who want to implement massive changes, which creates pushback. They don't take the time to understand how things actually work here before deciding what needs to change.*" Margarita provided an example of this issue as well, stating, "*Upper management needs to be clearer with policy changes. We recently switched back to an old process, but no one announced it—we just found out by accident. Better communication would help everyone adjust.*" The lack of structured communication channels made it difficult for workers to keep pace with evolving expectations, contributing to stress and inefficiencies.

Participants identified unrealistic performance expectations as a problem beyond process inefficiencies which showed a misalignment between policy requirements and actual workload capacity. Workers frequently criticized leadership's reliance on performance benchmarks that did not account for caseload realities, making them feel as though they were being set up to fail. Teresa, for example, articulated this frustration, stating, "*We're expected to meet unrealistic performance goals—like 95% contact rates—while carrying 60+ cases. It feels like we're being set up to fail.*" Peter reflected that if leadership spent "*One evening with an ER social worker could change the way they run this department.*" This tension between policy-driven expectations and workforce capacity not only impacted worker morale but also led to heightened stress and disengagement.

Despite these frustrations, some workers provided suggestions for improving leadership decision-making processes. Several advocated for increased frontline worker involvement in policy discussions and opportunities for leadership to directly observe casework challenges. Peter offered a concrete recommendation: "*I'd want them to do an 'Undercover Boss' experience. Let them see what it's like to go without eating for nine hours while handling a crisis.*" The proposal was partly rhetorical but represented a common belief that leaders needed direct exposure to caseworker challenges to better understand their work. Sochi stated directly that "*Leadership decisions directly impact worker retention and service quality. If upper management placed the right people in key positions, it would improve everything.*"

Theme 2: Workload and Burnout

The second theme developed as social workers discussed challenges that prevented them from wanting to remain in their roles. Primarily among these challenges were issues around their workload leading to burnout. Franco described the workload as something that "*breaks people down. Some leave because they just can't handle the stress anymore.*" For Konstence, the increased responsibilities in her workload created an obstacle to her success. "*My stress has definitely increased.*" Overall, the theme can be explored through the following subthemes: workload distribution and burnout and stress management.

Caseload & Workload Distribution

A consistent and pressing concern among participants was the overwhelming workload and inequitable distribution of cases. Social workers frequently described excessive caseloads, unpredictable demands, and a lack of strategic distribution of responsibilities. Dorothea said, "*The workload is out of control. Caseloads are too high.*" Many expressed frustrations over how some workers bore a disproportionately heavy workload while others had significantly fewer cases, which exacerbated burnout and created tension among staff. Several participants described feeling drowned by unrealistic caseloads, making it difficult to provide quality services to families. Teresa illustrated this challenge clearly:

ISSN: 3049-0243

At one point, I had 78 cases, and my coworker had 75, while newer staff had 15 to 20 cases. Some of them didn't step in to help at all. It's frustrating to be drowning and then get emails criticizing stats—saying reports are late or that social workers haven't returned calls.

This imbalance in workload distribution was a significant point of contention, particularly when new hires or less experienced staff were given lighter caseloads while seasoned workers carried the bulk of cases.

Beyond inequitable distribution, staffing shortages were repeatedly identified as a core contributor to workload struggles. Luis lamented that his "*county is shifting support staff into social work roles to fill vacancies, but that means we're losing resources we rely on.*" Participants described how high turnover and insufficient hiring led to a situation in which fewer workers were available to manage a growing number of cases. Sochi highlighted this issue, explaining, "*We don't have enough workers to meet the demands of the job, and it's affecting service delivery. Hiring more people is important, but retention is the bigger issue. We need to focus on keeping the staff we already have.*" Workers were acutely aware that hiring alone would not resolve the issue; retaining experienced staff was critical to maintaining continuity and reducing workload burdens. Anita described the revolving door of new workers as part of the problem: "*High turnover means I'm constantly training new workers, which adds to my workload. I'm already stretched thin, and adding training duties makes it worse.*"

Another major issue was the unpredictable nature of workload spikes, particularly in crisis-oriented units like Emergency Response. Irving described the challenges of working in a high-intensity, crisis-driven role, stating, "*We operate in crisis management mode daily. Unexpected events or sudden requests from upper management disrupt workflows, making it difficult to stay on track.*" This reactive mode of working, rather than proactive case planning, contributed to worker stress and reinforced feelings of exhaustion and instability.

Burnout & Stress Management

As a natural consequence of unsustainable workloads and management pressures, burnout was a pervasive and recurring theme across participant interviews. Workers described physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion stemming from unrelenting job demands, secondary trauma, and a lack of organizational support. Many articulated a sense of depletion that extended beyond the workplace, affecting personal relationships, mental health, and overall well-being.

For some, burnout escalated to the point of considering a leave of absence or leaving the field entirely. Teresa openly discussed the severity of her stress, stating, "*Last year, my stress was so bad that I seriously considered taking a leave of absence. I even lined up the paperwork with my doctor.*" This level of burnout, where workers reach a breaking point, was not an isolated experience—several participants described previous periods of extreme stress that led them to either take time off or transition into different roles. For Sochi, the demand for her to serve on-call has become the breaking point. "*I'm ready to have my weekends and nights to myself.*"

Workers frequently cited management-related stressors as a key driver of burnout rather than the nature of the work itself though. Peter captured this sentiment clearly: "*My biggest stressor isn't the families I work with—it's management's constant pressure, the threats of write-ups, and the obsession with numbers.*" Management contributing to the stress of an already demanding job was cited by several participants. Georgina said, "*Advocating for families while also pushing back against the agency itself is exhausting.*" The focus on performance metrics and compliance standards rather than supporting workers in managing complex cases was a source of widespread frustration.

For many, finding ways to establish boundaries became essential for survival in the field. Luis, who initially struggled with burnout, explained how he reclaimed control over his stress levels: "*A year ago, I wanted to quit. Now, I've set boundaries—I take at least one day off a month, I don't take work home, and I don't work for free.*" Amber discussed that she found herself detached from family because of the stress of work, leading her to re-evaluate her life balance, prioritizing her children and herself over work. This intentional effort to create separation between work and personal life helped some workers sustain their roles longer, but many noted that not everyone had the ability to enforce such boundaries.

While some workers were able to develop coping strategies, others felt the cumulative effects of long-term exposure to stress, leading them to actively seek career alternatives. Lidia, who spent years in child welfare, shared: "*I applied for jobs every 3 to 4 months when I was in family reunification because I needed a break after six years in that role.*" The desire to leave was frequently linked to exhaustion, reinforcing the connection between burnout and workforce retention issues.

Theme 3: Culture, Recognition, and Flexibility

The workplace culture strongly influences how employees experience belonging and professional satisfaction as demonstrated in participant accounts. Workers frequently reported an uneven workplace culture which lacked meaningful employee recognition and work-life balance while failing to establish structured peer collaboration. Social workers reported a workplace culture that devalued hard work while requiring personal time sacrifices and enforced team collaboration as a survival strategy rather than an ideal practice. These findings support the following three subthemes: recognition and appreciation; work-life balance and flexibility; and team collaboration and peer support.

Recognition & Appreciation

Across participant accounts, recognition—or the lack there of—emerged as a critical factor influencing morale, job satisfaction, and perceptions of agency investment in its workforce. Workers consistently expressed frustration at the absence of recognition for their accomplishments alongside immediate attention to their errors by management. Employees reported that their hard work received no rewards while only negative feedback was provided, which strengthened their belief that management treated them as easily replaceable rather than as valued contributors.

Several workers noted that recognition was inconsistent, with no standardized system for acknowledging employee efforts. Many social workers felt that recognition efforts were largely superficial, with brief gestures such as pizza parties or social worker appreciation events failing to address larger structural concerns. Georgina captured this sentiment when she stated, "*When we close a case successfully, they just move on to the next crisis. They give us small treats during Social Worker Appreciation Month, but that's about it.*" This cycle of constant crisis management with little acknowledgment of achievements contributed to feelings of disengagement and frustration.

Many workers expressed a strong desire for meaningful, structured recognition programs that extended beyond one-time appreciation events. Sochi, for example, suggested, "*A structured, consistent recognition system would go a long way. Even small things, like emails acknowledging good work, would make a difference.*" Konstence reported a similar program was being implemented in her unit. "*A new morale committee is being formed to implement recognition programs across the department. In the past, recognition efforts have been inconsistent and varied by unit.*" These ideas did not need to be grand for most participants but needed to be specific. Lidia said, "*I get general praise—'Good job,' 'Nice work'—but nothing specific. It would be nice to hear exactly what I'm doing well.*" This perspective highlights that workers were not necessarily looking

ISSN: 3049-0243

for grand gestures but rather for consistent, authentic appreciation integrated into agency culture.

Some workers had experienced formal recognition but described it as awkward or arbitrary, reinforcing a sense that recognition efforts were not well thought out. Anita shared an example of this disconnect, stating, "*I did win a Public Service Recognition Award last year, but even that felt awkward. No one explained why I got it, and I felt like other workers deserved it more.*" For Dorothea, the rewards given don't align with the work being done. "*The recognition we get often feels meaningless. They hand out awards, but it doesn't match the level of work we do.*" The lack of transparency in how recognition was awarded further contributed to the perception that agency leadership was out of touch with employee contributions.

Work-Life Balance & Flexibility

A central concern for many workers was the ability to balance professional responsibilities with personal well-being. Participants frequently described long hours, unpredictable scheduling demands, and on-call expectations that made it difficult to establish boundaries between work and home life. Workers with high caseloads, extensive overtime, or roles in crisis-driven units expressed significant strain in maintaining a sustainable work-life balance.

Several participants emphasized that establishing personal boundaries was essential for protecting mental health, particularly in a profession as emotionally demanding as child welfare. Teresa, for example, explained how she took control over her availability: "*I've started setting boundaries—I turn off my work phone and don't check emails outside of work hours. That's been really important for my mental health.*" Luis discussed the need for this greater flexibility and that he still struggled in other ways. "*This job is flexible in some ways—we can adjust our schedules—but the emotional toll is harder to manage.*" Workers who were able to set and enforce boundaries often described reduced burnout and greater ability to sustain their roles.

However, not all workers had the ability to enforce boundaries, particularly those in Emergency Response or roles requiring frequent after-hours work. Peter highlighted this reality, stating, "*Honestly, in ER, you don't have much of a home life. I work 40 to 80 hours a week. There's no cap on overtime, no cap on referrals. The workload is non-stop.*" Georgina described her unit as having frequent on-call while other units seldom had the responsibility. "*It would help if the county eliminated mandatory after-hours shifts,*" she suggested and instead allowed people to sign up for on-call to get overtime. This perspective underscores that for many, work-life balance was largely unattainable due to the unpredictable and unstructured nature of their job duties.

A major point of frustration among workers was the inconsistency in telework and flexibility policies. While some participants reported that they were able to work from home periodically, others found that flexibility was entirely dependent on their supervisor or unit leadership. Sochi described how telework had improved her well-being, stating, "*I work from home two days a week, and that has helped prevent burnout. Being in a comfortable setting, away from constant office interruptions, makes a big difference.*" Meanwhile, others, like Lidia, expressed a desire for more structured flexibility, noting, "*More telecommuting would help. I wouldn't want to work remotely full-time, but an extra telework day per week would increase productivity.*" The disparity in how teleworking and scheduling flexibility were granted across different units was a source of tension and frustration, particularly among workers who saw others receiving accommodations they were denied.

Team Collaboration & Peer Support

Despite facing excessive caseloads and insufficient supervision along with disengaged leadership many workers relied on their peers and teamwork to stay effective in their positions. Employees who worked with dependable collaborative teams reported higher job satisfaction and resilience compared to those without reliable peer networks who experienced isolation and overwhelming stress. For many, team cohesion provided a sense of security in an otherwise stressful work environment. Teresa, for example, stated, "*We rely on each other a lot because the job is overwhelming. Without my coworkers, I don't think I'd still be here.*" This sentiment was widely echoed among workers who found that collegial support helped mitigate some of the systemic issues they faced. Lidia described support form management as "*inconsistent*" while Luis said "*management is not always there to support us.*" Georgina recognizes the need for supportive colleagues and as the most senior frontline staff in her unit, she is often the one people come to. "My coworkers ask me questions, and I help when I can."

Some workers noted that team support helped compensate for weak leadership, particularly when supervisors were unavailable or disengaged. Peter described how his team had adapted to a lack of supervisory involvement: "*Our unit works well together. We've formed an alliance because we know how hard this job is. We support each other because we can't always rely on management.*" Luis described his team as providing him with "*support [that] makes the job more manageable.*" This self-reliance among workers highlights how peer support often filled gaps left by inconsistent leadership engagement.

However, not all teams were equally collaborative, and some workers noted disparities in peer engagement and willingness to assist others. Lidia, for example, emphasized that she had to be selective in seeking support, explaining, "*I have trusted colleagues I can go to for support, but I've also learned to be selective in who I confide in. Not everyone is equally supportive.*" This suggests that while peer support was an essential factor in workplace satisfaction, it was not always universally available.

Discussion

Results from this qualitative research identify essential areas of supervision and upper management engagement that require development to support the retention of child welfare social workers. The workers repeatedly voiced major concerns about insufficient supervisory support together with management disengagement which directly affected their morale levels and job satisfaction as well as their intentions to remain in their positions.

The findings suggest that improved structured supervisory support should be prioritized. The study's participants repeatedly mentioned problems with receiving proper leadership direction and inconsistent management access. These findings are connected to earlier research that demonstrates how supportive supervision plays a key role in reducing staff burnout and improving employee retention [2, 3, 7, 8]. Agencies need to establish thorough training programs for supervisors that focus on structured interactions and emphasize emotional support along with active engagement practices. Supervisors should undergo specific training in balancing providing constructive feedback and delivering supportive coaching which leads to professional development and confidence building for frontline staff.

Research participants identified major gaps between upper management decisions and frontline worker experiences which demonstrated a lack of understanding by management. Leadership detachment led to decreased employee perceptions of agency support and responsiveness with research showing similar detrimental effects on workforce stability in the literature as well [9, 10]. To close this communication gap between management and frontline workers, upper management should implement regular engagement channels such as monthly or quarterly forums together with routine site visits. Experiences such as shadowing frontline workers or participating in exercises to help managers better understand frontline challenges may foster empathy, better decision-making, and policies that reflect frontline requirements.

Enhanced communication from leadership teams remains as important as any other initiative. Employees consistently reported dissatisfaction due to ambiguous policy changes and slow decision-making processes. Leadership needs to develop clear communication protocols to distribute policy updates and organizational news efficiently while maintaining transparency. Organizational trust will increase through dialogue enhancement when leaders provide regular briefings and maintain open channels for frontline worker feedback.

Social workers' perception of inadequate support requires specific supervisory enhancements along with active management participation. Further, participants attributed their burnout predominantly to managerial pressures and unrealistic performance expectations rather than the inherent emotional demands of child welfare practice. Management-imposed stressors, including constant oversight, unrealistic performance metrics, and inadequate decision-making support, heightened emotional distress. Structured supervision training in combination with consistent managerial involvement and transparent communication methods will lead to better workforce retention and increased job satisfaction which will ultimately produce positive results for both children and families supported by child welfare agencies.

Limitations

The qualitative methodology and convenience sampling of the study limits the generalizability of the findings. Recruiting voluntary participants may also hinder our understanding of retention as those most disaffected by their employment may be the least likely to respond to an interview request. Conversely, those with grievances to air may choose to participate as a way of expressing those concerns that are not shared by most social workers in the agency. Important and meaningful insight can, however, be derived from the rich exploration of the participants' experience. Future studies should utilize longitudinal, mixed methods designs to evaluate the techniques of direct supervision and the importance of actively involved upper management.

In conclusion, retaining child welfare social workers requires comprehensive, multifaceted strategies addressing supervisory consistency, upper management engagement, equitable workload distribution, structured recognition, standardized flexibility policies, and robust organizational wellness initiatives. Addressing these dimensions will likely yield improved workforce stability, job satisfaction, and enhanced outcomes for children and families served.

Competing Interest: The authors of this research declare no competing interest regarding this study.

References

1. Furman, R. Gibelman, M., & Winnett, R. (2021). *Navigating Human Service Organizations: Essential Information for Thriving and Surviving in Agencies*. Oxford University Press.
2. Benton, A. D. (2016). Understanding the diverging paths of stayers and leavers: An examination of factors predicting worker retention. *Child & Youth Services Review, 65*, 70-77. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.04.006
3. Anderson, M. (2022). Supervisory support, job satisfaction, and leadership development in non-profit organizations. *Nonprofit Leadership Review, 15*(2), 45-62.
4. Brown, A. R., Walters, J. E., & Jones, A. E. (2019). Pathways to Retention: Job Satisfaction, Burnout, & Organizational Commitment among Social Workers. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work, 16*(6), 577–594. https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2019.1658006
5. Li, Y., Huang, H., & Chen, Y. (2020). Organizational climate, job satisfaction, and turnover in voluntary child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 105640. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105640
6. Nielsen, M. B., Johannessen, H. A., Christensen, J. O., & Finne, L. B. (2023). Emotional dissonance and burnout among child welfare workers: The moderating role of social support from colleagues, supervisors, and organization. *Journal of Social Work, 23*(4), 615-635. https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173221143649.
7. Dominguez, D., Chambel, M. J., & Carvalho, V. S. (2020). Enhancing Engagement through Job Resources: The Moderating Role of Affective Commitment. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology, 23*, e17. doi:10.1017/SJP.2020.19
8. Orgambídez A, & Almeida H. (2019). Supervisor Support and Affective Organizational Commitment: The Mediator Role of Work Engagement. *Western Journal of Nursing Research. 42*(3), 187-193. doi:10.1177/0193945919852426
9. Martin P, Lizarondo L, Kumar S, Snowdon D (2021) Impact of clinical supervision on healthcare organisational outcomes: A mixed methods systematic review. *PLOS ONE 16*(11): e0260156. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260156
10. Griffiths, A., Collins-Camargo, C., Horace, A., Gabbard, J., & Royse, D. (2020). A new perspective: Administrator recommendations for reducing child welfare turnover. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership, & Governance, 44*(5), 417-433. Doi: 10.1080/23303131.2020.1786760
11. Barbee, A. P., Antle, B. F., Sullivan, D. J., Dryden, A. A. A., & Henry, K. (2012). Twenty-five years of the Children's Bureau investment in social work education. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 6*(4), 376-389. Doi: 10.1080/15548732.2012.705237
12. Jenkins, L., Wisdom, D., LaBrenz, C.A., & Ryan, S. (2025). Examining a decade of Title IV-E outcomes: a scoping review. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, online first.* Doi: 10.1080.15548732.2025.2458484
13. Washburn, M., Carr., L.C., & Leung, P. (2024). The impact of title IV-E training on public child welfare turnover. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 19*, 418-446. Doi: 10.1080/15548732.2024.2328101
14. Radey, M., Schelbe, L. & King, E.A. (2019). Field Training Experiences of Child Welfare Workers: Implications for Supervision and Field Education. *Clin Soc Work J 47*, 134–145. Doi: 10.1007/s10615-018-0669-2
15. Choi, M. J., Koo, J., & Fortune, A. E. (2020). Predictors of Job Satisfaction among New MSWs: The Role of Organizational Factors. *Journal of Social Service Research, 47*(4), 458–472. https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2020.1830920
16. Leung, P., Cheung, M., & Olson, L. (2022). Social work degrees and Title IV-E stipends: Predictive factors for worker retention in public child welfare. *Child Welfare, 98*(5), 78-92.
17. Potter, C. C., Leake, R., Longworth-Reed, L., Altschul, I., & Rienks, S. (2016). Measuring organizational health in child welfare agencies. *Child & Youth Services Review, 61*, 31-39. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.11.002
18. Toh, Y.P., Karthik, R., Teo, C.C., Suppiah, S., Cheung, S.L., Krishna, L. (2017). Toward Mentoring in Palliative Social Work: A Narrative Review of Mentoring Programs in Social Work. *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, 735*(3), 523-531. doi:10.1177/1049909117715216
19. Barnes, D. (2022). How child welfare agencies can help reduce secondary trauma—and increase retention. *Policy and Practice*, 7-23.
20. Chung, Y., & Choo, H. (2019). A structural path to job satisfaction, burnout, and intent to leave among child protection workers: A South Korean study. *Child & Youth Services Review, 100*, 304-312. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.03-018

ISSN: 3049-0243

21. Carder, S., & Cook, L. L. (2025). Emotional labour in child and family social work teams: A hybrid ethnography. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 39*(1), 53-67. Doi: 10.1080/02650533.2024.2415658
22. Flaherty, H. B., Henshaw, L. A., Lee, S. R., Auerbach, C., Beckerman, N. L., et al. (2024). Understanding self-care: Exploring its impact on secondary traumatic stress among social work students. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 1-13. Doi: 10.1007/s10615-024-00969-4
23. Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2017). Building Resilience in Early-Career Social Workers: Evaluating a Multi-Modal Intervention, *The British Journal of Social Work, 47*(7), 1979–1998,https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw164
24. Orsi-Hunt, R., Harrison, C. L., Rockwell, K. E., & Barbee, A. P. (2023). Addressing secondary traumatic stress, burnout, resilience, and turnover in the child welfare workforce. *Child & Youth Services Review, 15*(1), 107044. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107044
25. Rudaz, M., Twohig, M. P., Ong, C. W., & Levin, M. E. (2017). Mindfulness and acceptance-based trainings for fostering self-care and reducing stress in mental health professionals. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science, 6*, 380-390. Doi: 10.1016/j.jcbs.2017.10.001
26. Eisenberg, R., Rhoades Shanock, L., & Wen, X. (2020). Perceived organizational support: Why caring about employees counts. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 7*, 101-124. doi: 10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-044917
27. Chenot, D., Boutakidis, I., & Benton, A. D. (2014). Equity and fairness perceptions in the child welfare workforce. *Child & Youth Services Review, 44*, 400-406. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.07.006
28. Chen, S. Y., & Scannapieco, M. (2010). The influence of job satisfaction on child welfare worker's desire to stay: An examination of the interaction effect of self-efficacy and supportive supervision. *Child & Youth Services Review, 32*, 482-486. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.10.014
29. Turley, R., Roberts, S., Foster, C.,…Nurmatov, U. (2020). Promoting the retention, mental health, and wellbeing of child and family social workers: A systematic review of workforce interventions. *Project report. What works Centre for Children's Social Care*. Retrieved from https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WWCSC_Systematic-Review-of-Workforce-Interventions_July-2020.pdf
30. Turley, R., Roberts, S., Foster, C., … Scourfield, J. (2021). Staff Wellbeing and Retention in Children's Social Work: Systematic Review of Interventions. *Research on Social Work Practice, 32*(3), 281-309. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315211052639 (Original work published 2022)
31. Strand, V.C. (2018). Trauma-Informed Strategies for Staff Recruitment and Selection in Public Child Welfare. In: Strand, V., Sprang, G. (eds) Trauma Responsive Child Welfare Systems. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64602-2_17
32. Wilke, D. J., Radey, M., King, E., Spinelli, C., Rakes, S., & Nolan, C. R. (2017). A Multi-Level Conceptual Model to Examine Child Welfare Worker Turnover and Retention Decisions. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 12*(2), 204–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2017.1373722
33. Osborne, C., Huffman, J., Caldera, S., & Galbraith, A. L. (2020). The influence of field-based training on caseworker turnover. *Child & Youth Services Review, 108*, 104645. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.108645
34. Barbee, A. P., & Antle, B. (2011). Cost effectiveness of an integrated service delivery model as measured by worker retention. *Child & Youth Services Review, 33*, 1624-1629. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.04.004
35. Park, T., & Pierce, B. (2020). Impacts of transformational leadership on turnover intention of child welfare workers. *Child & Youth Services Review, 108*, 104624. Doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104624
36. Hardan, T., Bosk, E.A., Mendez, A., Williams-Butler, A., Julien, F., MacKenzie, M.J., (2023).A Relational Workforce Capacity Approach to Trauma-Informed Care Implementation: Staff Rejection Sensitivity as a Potential Barrier to Organizational Attachment. *Behav Sci (Basel). 4; 13*(8):652. doi: 10.3390/bs13080652
37. Sorn, M.K., Fienena, A.R.L., Ali, Y., Rafay, M., & Fu. G. (2023). The effectiveness of compensation in maintaining employee retention. *Open Access Library Journal, 10*(7), doi: 10.4236/oalib.1110394
38. Lee, J. and et al. (2018). The Effects of Knowledge Sharing on Individual Creativity in Higher Education Institutions: Socio-Technical View. *Administrative Sciences 8*: 21. DOI:10.3390/admsci10010012
39. Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five approaches, 3rd Ed*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
40. Padgett, D. (1998). *Qualitative methods in social work research: Challenges and rewards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
41. Patton, M. (2001). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods, 3rd Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

ISSN: 3049-0243