



High Caseloads: How do they Impact Delivery of Health and Human Services?

High caseloads lead to increased staff turnover as well as increased costs and decreases in quality delivery of services.

Overview

The current tight economic times are affecting many health and human service agencies. Budgets are being cut and agencies must make difficult choices that may result in increased caseloads and workloads for front-line and supervisory staff. This may further exacerbate already strained workplace conditions, potentially affecting worker performance, worker retention, and the well-being of child, youth and families being served.

Concern about high caseloads, especially in child welfare agencies is longstanding. This *Research to Practice Brief* highlights recent studies that can provide guidance about how high caseloads might impact retention of workers. While it is understood that worker retention is affected by a combination of **personal factors** (i.e., education, self-efficacy, professional commitment to children and families, previous work experience and job satisfaction [burn-out; emotional exhaustion; role overload/conflict and stress]) and **organizational factors** (i.e., salary, workload, coworker support, supervisory support, opportunities for advancement, organizational commitment to valuing employees) (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining & Lane, 2005), as indicated below, several research studies do indicate that high caseloads specifically affect staff turnover and service outcomes.

What Does the Research Tell Us about the Impact of Caseload on Retention?

- Results of the 2004 survey of state public child welfare administrators found that high caseloads and/or workloads are among the top reasons for preventable turnover (APHSA, 2005)
- In a systematic review of research on child welfare worker retention, examination of nine studies that used multivariate analysis found that emotional exhaustion was a significant factor in predicting retention, intent to remain and turnover. Few studies specifically examine caseload or workload. However, factors that may be related to workload including emotional exhaustion and lack of supervisory and administrative support, have been found to relate to turnover or intention to leave (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008).
- A comparison of high turnover and low turnover counties in New York State found that low turnover counties have lower median caseloads than higher turnover counties (Lawson, et al., 2005).
- A comparison of counties in California found that those counties with lower rates of child abuse reports also had the best paid staff, lowest rates of staff turnover and compliance with recognized practice standards (NCCD, 2006). Practice standards address caseload size (i.e., national Child Welfare League of America and Council on Accreditation Standards).
- An Illinois study found that to complete all statutory and policy requirements for foster care cases, workers could have no more than 15 foster care cases per month. Investment in low caseloads was offset by reduced child removal, reductions in residential placements and shorter lengths of stay in foster care (McDonald, 2003).
- A study of the retention of California's public child welfare workers found that workers who more slowly assumed a full caseload upon hire were more likely to stay while those who were given a full caseload upon hire were more likely to leave (Weaver & Chang, 2004).

Considerations for Policy

- **Staff turnover affects case outcomes**
 - ◇ In Milwaukee County, there was a direct relationship between the number of foster care placements and the number of caseworkers serving a particular child (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005).
 - ◇ Staff turnover and high caseloads result in a lack of relationships between workers and families and a limited focus on child safety while also affecting the timeliness of decisions regarding safe and stable placements (GAO, 2003).
- **Staff turnover is costly to agencies**
 - ◇ Costs of staff turnover are estimated to be between 1/3 and 2/3 of the worker's annual salary. Costs include separation, recruitment and training costs (Cowperthwaite, 2006; Dorch, McCarthy & Denofrio, 2008; Graef, 2000, Tooman & Fluke, 2002).
 - ◇ Turnover affects the workload of the workers and supervisors who remain, sometimes resulting in decreased efficiency and burnout, which may lead to additional staff turnover as well as poorer case outcomes.

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For More Information

NASW Center for Workforce Studies –
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NASW Social Work Policy Institute –
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National Child Welfare Workforce Institute –
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