

Child Welfare Worker Characteristics and Job Satisfaction: A National Study

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The education, recruitment, training, and retention of a quality child welfare workforce is critical to the successful implementation of public policy and programs for the nation's most vulnerable children. Yet, national information about child welfare workers has never been collected. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being is a study of children who are investigated for child maltreatment that also offers information about the child welfare workers (unweighted $N = 1,729$) who serve them in 36 states and 92 counties. These cases represent the national population of child welfare workers, estimated at more than 50,000, serving children approximately 12 months after a case was opened. Child welfare workers having any graduate or social work degree in a nonurban setting were more satisfied than their peers. Regression results indicate that worker satisfaction is associated with quality of supervision and urban setting but does not have a clearly independent relationship with having a degree in social work. Practice implications are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *child welfare worker; job satisfaction; national survey*

Concern over the quality of child welfare work appears regularly in the popular and scholarly press. The child welfare worker role involves dealing with high levels of uncertainty, danger, and emotion (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2002; Regehr, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe, & Chau, 2004). Some members of this workforce have educational preparation for the work that they are doing, but most do not (American Public Human Services Association [APHSA], 2005). The General Accounting Office (GAO) (GAO, 2003) has documented the difficulties agencies face in trying to attract and retain a qualified workforce.

The work that child welfare workers do is undeniably important, and there is significant demand for it. According to the Children's Bureau, using 2003 data, child welfare agencies receive nearly 500,000 calls a month concerning child maltreatment, 50,000 reports of maltreatment are accepted by child welfare services for evaluation each week (almost 3 million a year), and about 1 million cases are opened for child welfare intervention annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). These numbers are over and above the roughly 550,000 children who have ongoing involvement in foster care each year, and a larger number formerly in foster care and now adopted or in guardianships.

Certainly, child welfare workers have difficult duties to fulfill under less-than-optimal working conditions, including low salaries, poor work environments, incomplete training, and inadequate supervision (GAO, 2003). Yet many child welfare workers are able to manage the challenges of their work and have a sense of satisfaction (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2003; Rycraft, 1994). This article describes characteristics associated with reported job satisfaction among a national sample of child welfare workers.

In recent years, policymakers and scholars have attempted to study child welfare workers and their work on a larger scale (AECF, 2003; GAO, 2003). A few of these efforts have been aimed at testing education and training interventions that may strengthen the child welfare workforce (for example, Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003). Most studies have examined the characteristics and perceptions of child welfare workers, especially as they relate to such outcomes as turnover and retention (Dickinson & Perry, 2002), burnout (Anderson, 2000), and job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Glisson & Durick, 1988). The U.S. Children's Bureau recently funded eight university five-year demonstration grants to test ways of improving the child welfare workforce, primarily by strengthening child welfare worker

recruitment and retention (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2003). The APHSA (2005) has compiled data from 42 states to better understand the child welfare workforce. Georgia, Texas, and Milwaukee County are among many that have initiated workforce studies (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003). Other studies have focused on the experiences of graduates from social work programs with specializations in child welfare (for example, Dickinson & Perry, 2002). These reports typically include discussion of minimum preparation and training and describe how child welfare worker characteristics and their experiences in agencies blend together to affect job satisfaction and employment stability.

Research about the child welfare workforce varies in rigor and is almost always specific to a single locality. An earlier review of child welfare workers' characteristics and work environments (AECF, 2003) observed a marked lack of quality data describing workers or their satisfaction. Moreover, early research on workers (for example, Daley, 1979) may no longer be accurate because of recent changes in child welfare services and in the child welfare workforce. Hence, questions remain largely unanswered about the general population of child welfare workers and what contributes to their job satisfaction.

CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

Education

National studies reporting child welfare workers' demographic characteristics, such as education, are uncommon, and few studies have enlisted respondents from more than one state. Enrolling a purposive sample of 16 states' child welfare workers, Lieberman, Hornby, and Russell (1988) found that 15 percent of child welfare workers had a BSW degree and 13 percent had an MSW degree. An additional 56 percent had a bachelor's degree in another field and 13 percent had a master's degree in another field. The remainder had less than a four year degree (or a PhD). People with degrees in social work indicated they felt more prepared for their job (with MSWs reporting more confidence than BSWs) when compared with their non-social work peers. In a small study in Michigan in the mid-1980s, Jayaratne, Chess, and Kunkel (1986) found that only 6 percent of child welfare workers had an MSW, whereas about a third had completed

some graduate school. Virtually all of the remainder had a bachelor's degree. In a study of Missouri child welfare workers, almost 63 percent had bachelor's degrees; the remaining fraction's educational levels were unknown (Drake & Yadama, 1996).

Income

Other sources provide information about the income of child welfare workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2005) indicated that in May 2004, approximately 250,000 people worked in Child, Family, and School Social Workers, a category comprising people who indicate providing school social work or social work services to children and families, including child welfare services. These workers earned a mean of \$37,830, with a median of \$34,420. Those employed in schools earned the most; those employed in residential facilities earned the least. This suggests that child welfare workers earn close to the mean and median incomes for this category. However, it is not clear to what degree this BLS grouping fully captures child welfare workers.

NASW (2005) used multiple secondary sources to reach the conclusion that child welfare workers earn \$33,000 on average in the public sector but only \$27,000 in the private sector. In a separate analysis of multiple data sources, AECF (2003) reported a median of \$30,590 annually for child welfare workers with at least a bachelor's degree. In 2001 a team of interest groups, including the Child Welfare League of America, Alliance for Children and Families (CWLA, ACF), and APHSA, reported annual means of \$33,436 for public child welfare workers and \$28,646 for privately employed workers.

Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Information about child welfare worker demographics is limited. The AECF (2003) study also found that 72 percent of child welfare workers were female. A cross-sectional study of Missouri workers found most child welfare workers were white (85 percent) and female (81 percent) with approximately five years experience (Drake & Yadama, 1996).

Experience

Experience is generally defined to include only child welfare experience. In the AECF (2003) study, workers in public agencies were in their child welfare career for an average of seven years (at the time they were sampled) compared with only three years for those in private agencies. In contrast, Jayaratne and

colleagues (1986) reported only 3.4 years' experience for the "average" worker in their older study.

Age

Data on worker age are mixed. Reanalyzing 1981 data from the NASW survey of its membership, Jayaratne and Chess (1984) found some evidence that, among people with a social work degree, workers in child welfare and family services were more likely to be younger than age 40 than were those in community mental health. However, in a study of a single state's child welfare workers, Jayaratne and colleagues (1986) reported that 52 percent of child welfare workers were older than 35 years.

Job Satisfaction

Recent research on personal factors related to job satisfaction suggests that perceived supervisory support and promotional opportunities within the agency and a belief in the value of child welfare work contribute to job satisfaction (Landsman, 2001), whereas role conflict (Um & Harrison, 1998) and the perception of a nonsupportive organizational climate (Nissly, cited in Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005) are associated with lower levels of job satisfaction. Glisson and Durick (1988) concluded from their study of human services workers that the strongest predictors of worker satisfaction—skill variety and role ambiguity—were job characteristics. Likewise, a review of job satisfaction research in child welfare by Dickinson and Perry (2002) found a positive relationship to other job characteristics: compensation, promotion opportunities, support, and low role conflict.

Although information on worker job satisfaction is not as available as information about worker turnover, some retention studies show a link between the two. In their study of specially educated and stipended public child welfare workers, Dickinson and Perry (2002) found that those workers remaining in child welfare jobs experienced significantly higher levels of job satisfaction with respect to personal and job characteristics, including supervisor support and recognition, opportunities for personal and professional growth, personal feelings of accomplishment on the job, recognition from other professionals, and opportunities to make a difference in a client's life. That study, and one by Cahalane and Sites (2004) and Rosenthal and Waters (2006), found a positive association between retention and job satisfaction among MSW stipended graduates.

A qualitative study of 21 experienced (mean of 19.7 years) workers found no meaningful impact of social work education on worker satisfaction. Interviewees instead cited personal characteristics such as organizational skills, commitment to child welfare, supervisor support, and recognition as key contributors to job satisfaction (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

Using meta-analytic methodology and including all human services professionals, Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levin (2001) found low job satisfaction among several predictors of worker resignation, including the following: low professional and organizational commitment, burnout, and availability of alternate employment. Job satisfaction predicted intent to leave and actual departure, a finding that these authors, along with Lane (Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006), tested in a study of 418 child welfare workers from a large, urban public agency. Both job satisfaction and organizational commitment predicted workers' intentions to leave. Education also had a significant indirect effect on intent to leave—mediated through stress—but education was measured broadly as bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees. The relationship between possession of a social work degree and intent to leave was not studied.

Overall, the picture emerging from earlier research suggests that workers have trouble managing the work environment challenges outlined by Lipsky (1980) and Glisson and Durick (1988) and, in lieu of high pay, prestige, or other perceived gain, as well as supervisory support and opportunities to use their professional expertise, leave the child welfare workforce after relatively short careers. Workers who stay are able to experience job satisfaction, gain a sense of mission, and balance the challenges with perceived rewards. Discerning who will and who will not stay is difficult and requires longitudinal research that has not yet been developed.

In the interim, efforts to understand worker turnover and stability require inference from studies that examine the relationships between job satisfaction, turnover, and other variables, such as social work education. Historically, public child welfare was a major employer of professionally educated social workers, a relationship that some assert has diminished significantly over time (Jones & Okamura, 2000). The previously discussed survey of NASW members (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984), which found many child welfare workers distressed

by uncomfortable physical working environments and chronic role ambiguity, also showed modest positive associations between job satisfaction and having an MSW degree. Some evidence (CWLA, ACF, 2001; Cicero-Reese & Black, 1998; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005) suggests that child welfare workers with graduate education and education in social work are more likely to stay in their jobs. This is partial justification for the growth in BSW and MSW programs with stipended and specialized child welfare worker training (Dickinson & Gil de Gibaja, 2004).

In sum, the picture of who works in public child welfare suffers from lack of rigorous study and small and localized samples. The current study offers the first national data about the child welfare workforce. Furthermore, the study details relationships between the characteristics and satisfaction of active child welfare workers in a geographic context.

METHOD

Sample

The sample comes from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a national study of children in the child welfare system (NSCAW Research Group, 2002). Data were drawn at several waves from 92 clustered primary sampling units (PSU), which were counties, for the most part, unless the counties were very large or small, in which case the PSU might represent more than one small county combined into a single PSU or a region of a very large county. Cases were weighted to make the results nationally representative of children investigated for an allegation of child maltreatment. Although the intention was to interview child welfare workers about both these children and themselves at intake, the interviews were too burdensome for many agencies, and a decision was made to interview the child welfare workers at a one-year follow-up interview. At 12 months post-baseline, workers were surveyed about services received in the first year of these cases and child welfare workers' experiences.

For this study, the sample was reweighted to make it nationally representative of child welfare workers. Weights were developed using a formula based on the baseline analysis weights and the worker's likelihood of having a case included in the study. Adjustments also had to be made because some child welfare workers had more than one case in the sample. The unweighted sample size for the child

welfare workers was 1,729, indicating that each worker in the study had an average of about three cases. The weighted sample size for child welfare workers allows for an estimate of the number of child welfare workers (52,271) in the nation from 1999 to 2000, when these data were collected. This figure is comparable to the estimate from the CWLA National Data Analysis System (NDAS) (2005), which reported 26,938 workers in its 40 reporting states and the District of Columbia on the basis of data also collected in 1999. NDAS did not include data from New York and eight other states, which explains the difference.

Measures

Measures were selected because earlier research or the judgment of the authors suggested a possible link to job satisfaction or for more descriptive purposes. Job satisfaction was taken from a package of measures developed by Glisson and Durick (1988), and other items were developed ad hoc by the study team (NSCAW, 2002). Recoding of the variables was required to achieve a stable multiple regression model.

Job satisfaction is measured by a continuous scale examining a worker's sense of satisfaction with her or his work experience. The scale consists of responses to 10 five-point Likert scale items, each of which measures an aspect of work thought to contribute to overall job satisfaction (Glisson & Durick, 1988). A response of 50 would indicate perfect job satisfaction.

Urban status is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the PSU is in a predominantly urban setting. A PSU was classified as urban if it was in a county found to be greater than 50 percent urban in the 1990 census. *Gender* is a dichotomous variable indicating the worker's gender. *Race* is a dichotomous variable indicating the worker's categorical race, either minority (African American, Hispanic, Asian, or other) or not minority (white non-Hispanic). *Experience* is a continuous variable measuring the worker's number of years of experience in child welfare (capped at 40). *Supervision* refers to the number of hours of supervision per week typically received by a child welfare worker. *Social work degree* is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the worker has a degree in social work (BSW or MSW) or in some other discipline. *Role of worker* indicates whether the worker is employed in a unit doing primarily intake work or primarily

ongoing casework. *Income* is a continuous variable indicating the amount of money a worker earns annually. Workers reporting less than \$12,000 annually were excluded from analyses. In some analyses, annual worker income is categorized as less than \$30,000 (but still greater than \$12,000) or \$30,000 or more. Quality of Supervision is a continuous scale measuring a worker's opinion of the supervision received and consists of three five-item scales with one item each addressing amount (capped at 15 hours a week) and quality of supervision as well as emotional support received during supervision. A score of 15 indicates the highest perceived supervision quality.

Analysis

In the first bivariate analysis, work environment and demographic characteristics of child welfare workers and their relationship with urban status of the work environment are described. Results give the percentage of caseworkers or mean value for caseworkers of each characteristic by urbanicity and in total. Differences were tested between urban and nonurban settings by using *t* tests.

In the second bivariate analysis, urbanicity of the work environment was subdivided by the worker having a degree in social work (at either the bachelor's or the master's level) or not. Each characteristic was cross-tabulated with having a social work degree within setting. Differences were tested between having any social work degree or not.

A third bivariate analysis provides mean job satisfaction scores by worker demographic characteristics by the type (urban or nonurban) of PSU setting. Significant differences across categories of each characteristic were tested with a *t* test. Finally, a multiple regression model, with job satisfaction as the dependent variable and worker demographic and job characteristics as independent variables, was estimated. Standardized beta coefficients and significance tests are reported for each independent variable.

RESULTS

Demographics of child welfare workers in the United States—broken down by the urban or nonurban character of the PSU in which they work are provided in Table 1. Most (67.0 percent, $SE = 2.7$ percent) workers were white, female (81.1 percent, $SE = 1.6$), and employed in urban settings (77.0 percent, $SE = 5.1$) managing ongoing cases (72.6

percent, $SE = 2.2$). Almost half (48.8 percent, $SE = 2.5$) of workers have a non-social work bachelor's degree, the largest group; 39.5 percent, ($SE = 2.1$) of workers have a BSW or an MSW degree.

Results of the *t* test indicate the racial makeup of nonurban and urban child welfare workers was significantly different. More nonurban workers reported their race as white than did their urban peers, whereas more urban workers reported their race as black than did their nonurban peers. In addition, workers in nonurban settings earned less than their peers in urban settings, whether assessed by mean or median income. Finally, median supervision levels differed by urban status, with nonurban workers receiving approximately 1.6 hours more supervision per week; however, mean supervision levels were not significantly different. No other statistically significant differences were identified.

To determine whether the demographic characteristics of child welfare workers differed by social work training, a three-way cross-tabulation was completed (see Table 2). Each row represents a demographic trait, and each column represents both urban status and type of degree held. Relationships between variables were tested with a chi-square test of independence. A strong ($p < .01$) association was found between having a social work degree and worker income (as a categorical variable) for workers in the urban subgroup and in the full sample of workers. A significantly larger fraction of child welfare workers with a social work degree (73.8 percent, $SE = 5.1$) earned at least \$30,000 annually compared with their nonsocial work colleagues (60.6 percent, $SE = 4.4$). More child welfare workers with a social work degree (88.4 percent, $SE = 1.88$) also had at least two years of experience compared with those with a degree from another discipline (77.4 percent, $SE = 2.47$). This strong positive relationship ($p < .01$) was found between worker experience and having a social work degree for all workers and in the urban subgroup. Having a social work degree was less strongly related to income and years of experience for nonurban workers.

Relationships between job satisfaction and variables potentially associated with it were tested in preparation for subsequent regression modeling (see Table 3). Tests were completed to identify statistically significant differences in satisfaction levels across categories of the worker characteristics for urban, nonurban, and all workers. Specific characteristics were urban status, gender, race, degree (bachelor's

Table 1: Weighted Characteristics of Child Welfare Workers, by PSU Urbanicity

Characteristic	Nonurban (n = 180)	Urban (n = 1,475)	Total (N = 1,655)
	% (SE)	% (SE)	% (SE)
PSU setting	23.0 (5.1)	77.0 (5.1)	100 (—)
Gender (female)	82.8 (3.1)	80.6 (1.8)	81.1 (1.6)
Race**			
Native American	0.2 (0.2)	0.5 (0.2)	0.4 (0.2)
Asian	0 (—)	1.6 (0.7)	1.2 (0.5)
Black	12.3 (3.5)	21.8 (3.0)	19.5 (2.5)
Pacific Islander	0 (—)	0.6 (0.5)	0.4 (0.4)
White	81.1 (4.1)	62.7 (3.3)	67.0 (2.7)
Hispanic	0.5 (0.3)	11.1 (2.3)	8.6 (1.8)
Mixed	6.0 (2.4)	1.9 (0.8)	2.8 (0.9)
Degree			
BSW	24.3 (6.8)	20.4 (2.0)	21.3 (2.2)
BA/BS	54.8 (5.7)	47.1 (2.8)	48.8 (2.5)
MSW	10.6 (3.9)	20.5 (2.3)	18.2 (2.0)
MA/MS	10.3 (2.9)	12.1 (2.0)	11.7 (1.7)
Mean years experience	6.4 (0.8)	7.6 (0.4)	7.3 (0.4)
Median years experience	4.0 (0.9)	5.9 (0.5)	5.0 (0.5)
Mean worker income (\$)***	29,671 (1,291)	35,682 (1,169)	34,264 (980)
Median worker income (\$)*	28,832 (1,596)	33,538 (1,400)	31,971 (1,068)
Mean supervision (hours/week)	4.4 (0.3)	4.0 (0.3)	4.1 (0.2)
Median supervision (hours/week)**	3.6 (0.4)	2.0 (0.3)	2.6 (0.1)
Mean job satisfaction score	34.6 (0.7)	33.0 (0.4)	33.4 (0.4)

Notes: PSU = primary sampling unit.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

and master's, social work and non-social work), having at least two years' experience, earning at least \$30,000 annually, a scale of quality of supervision, and amount of supervision per week.

Several factors predicted job satisfaction. Quality of supervision was strongly related to worker satisfaction among urban and nonurban workers. Nonurban workers with a non-social work bachelor's degree

were significantly less satisfied than were their peers with any social work or graduate degrees. Among urban workers, those receiving at least two hours of supervision weekly were more satisfied. For all workers, at least two hours of supervision a week and two years of experience were significantly associated with higher levels of satisfaction. In addition, among workers with a bachelor's degree, those with social

Table 2: Weighted Cross-Tabulation of Social Work Education, by Gender, Race, Years of Experience, and Income within Setting

Characteristic	Nonurban (n = 180)		Urban (SE) (n = 1,425)		Total (SE) (N = 1,605)	
	SW % (SE)	Non-SW % (SE)	SW % (SE)	Non-SW % (SE)	SW % (SE)	Non-SW % (SE)
Gender (female)	91.4 (5.38)	75.8 (5.48)	78.9 (3.29)	81.4 (2.34)	81.4 (3.06)	80.1 (2.25)
Race (minority)	23.1 (7.16)	18.0 (5.91)	34.2 (3.24)	38.8 (4.12)	31.9 (2.91)	33.7 (3.47)
Years' experience (2+ years)	86.3 (5.78)	73.4 (6.25)	88.9 (1.83)	78.7** (2.48)	88.4 (1.88)	77.4** (2.47)
Worker income (\$30,000+)	65.6 (17.23)	43.7 (9.44)	75.9 (4.36)	66.0** (4.97)	73.8 (5.05)	60.6** (4.38)
Mean job satisfaction	37.3 (0.6)	33.4** (0.8)	33.0 (0.5)	32.9 (0.5)	33.8 (0.5)	33.0 (0.4)

**p = .01.

Table 3: Mean Score of Job Satisfaction Scale, by Key Predictor Variables within Setting

Characteristic	Nonurban <i>n</i> = 200 ^a	Urban <i>n</i> = 1,300	Total <i>N</i> = 1,500
	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SE</i>)
Urban status ^c	34.6 (0.68)	33.0 (0.40)	33.4 (0.37)
Gender			
Male ^d	34.5 (1.98)	32.3 (0.85)	32.7 (0.81)
Female ^e	34.7 (0.77)	33.2 (0.40)	33.5 (0.38)
Race			
Not minority ^f	35.0 (0.71)	32.8 (0.55)	33.4 (0.49)
Minority ^g	33.0 (1.39)	33.4 (0.53)	33.3 (0.49)
Degree			
BSW ^h	37.1 (0.64) ^a	33.4 (0.72)	34.4 (0.68) ^b
BA ⁱ	32.8 (0.79)	32.7 (0.52)	32.7 (0.45)
MSW ^j	37.8 (1.47)	32.5 (0.77)	33.2 (0.77)
MA ^k	37.0 (1.63)	33.5 (1.16)	34.2 (0.95)
Years' experience			
< 2 ^l	35.8 (0.91)	34.2 (0.83)	34.6 (0.67) [*]
2+ ^m	34.4 (0.82)	32.8 (0.40)	33.1 (0.39)
Worker income			
< \$30,000 ⁿ	33.5 (0.99)	33.2 (0.70)	33.3 (0.58)
\$30,000+ ^o	35.4 (0.80)	32.9 (0.44)	33.3 (0.42)
Quality of supervision (hours per week)			
2–12 ^p	32.1 (0.96) ^{**}	31.2 (0.49) ^{***}	31.4 (0.45) ^{***}
13–15 ^q	36.5 (0.98)	35.5 (0.40)	35.8 (0.42)
Amount of supervision (hours per week)			
< 2 ^r	34.5 (2.85)	32.0 (0.72) [*]	32.3 (0.75) [*]
2+ ^s	34.7 (0.69)	33.5 (0.44)	33.8 (0.38)

Notes: ^aUnweighted *n*s are approximate and vary slightly by table row resulting from missing data.

^bBSW vs. BA^{***}, BA vs. MSW^{***}, BA vs. MA^{**}

^cBSW vs. BA^{*}

^dNonurban *n* = 197, urban *n* = 1,450, *N* = 1,647.

^eNonurban *n* = 31, urban *n* = 271, *N* = 302.

^fNonurban *n* = 166, urban *n* = 1,171, *N* = 1,337.

^gNonurban *n* = 158, urban *n* = 824, *N* = 982.

^hNonurban *n* = 37, urban *n* = 582, *N* = 619.

ⁱNonurban *n* = 33, urban *n* = 288, *N* = 321.

^jNonurban *n* = 116, urban *n* = 632, *N* = 748.

^kNonurban *n* = 14, urban *n* = 280, *N* = 294.

^lNonurban *n* = 16, urban *n* = 210, *N* = 226.

^mNonurban *n* = 38, urban *n* = 229, *N* = 267.

ⁿNonurban *n* = 155, urban *n* = 1,191, *N* = 1,346.

^oNonurban *n* = 84, urban *n* = 373, *N* = 457.

^pNonurban *n* = 95, urban *n* = 918, *N* = 1,013.

^qNonurban *n* = 92, urban *n* = 839, *N* = 931.

^rNonurban *n* = 105, urban *n* = 600, *N* = 705.

^sNonurban *n* = 28, urban *n* = 342, *N* = 370.

^tNonurban *n* = 107, urban *n* = 701, *N* = 808.

^{*}*p* < .05. ^{**}*p* < .01. ^{***}*p* < .001.

work degrees were significantly more satisfied than their peers with non-social work degrees.

A multiple regression equation was estimated to determine the independent contribution of each of the demographic variables on the job satisfaction of respondents (see Table 4). Race and ethnicity, gender, education level, and amount of supervision did not distinguish the level of job satisfaction re-

ported by workers. In initial models, unit type, role of the worker in the agency, experience in child welfare, and annual income also did not distinguish between the amounts of job satisfaction reported by workers. The quality of supervision received proved to be strongly and positively associated with job satisfaction (*p* < .001) as was working in a nonurban setting (*p* < .05), after controlling

Table 4: Weighted Multivariate Analysis of Child Welfare Worker Job Satisfaction (N = 1,729)

Model Variable	Beta Coefficient (SE)	P
Intercept	18.05 (3.67)	<.001
Urban status	1.62 (.71)	.025
Gender	1.44 (.96)	.137
Race	-0.33 (.72)	.647
Education	0.14 (.41)	.742
Degree in social work	1.13 (.64)	.079
Quality of supervision	0.74 (0.11)	<.001
Amount of supervision	0.14 (0.09)	.120

Note: Overall model multiple adjusted $R^2 = .136$.

for other factors. In addition, having any degree in social work tended to be associated with job satisfaction ($p < .10$).

DISCUSSION

The demographic characteristics of the nation's current child welfare workers approximate those of earlier studies, suggesting little change over time. Both urban and nonurban workforces were found to be predominantly white and female, with somewhat more racial and ethnic diversity among urban workers. An analysis of the years of experience and race or ethnicity showed recently hired workers—those with fewer years of experience—were no more likely to not be white (61 percent white for all workers, 63 percent white for those hired in the earlier year), providing further evidence of demographic stability.

Worker salaries were somewhat similar to those of earlier nonrepresentative findings as well. Data reported by NASW (2005) and AECF (2003) indicated child welfare worker incomes to be in the low to mid \$30,000 range. This appears to be true for urban workers, but nonurban workers appear to have earned several thousand dollars less. Workers from suburban and rural settings may not have been represented in earlier analyses, or the analyses may reflect lower costs of living or less difficulty recruiting.

These findings offer the first clear description of the educational levels of child welfare workers. Well less than half (40 percent) of the child welfare workforce has a degree in social work at either the bachelor's or graduate level, with no significant

variation by demographic characteristics or urban setting. More than half (55 percent) of nonurban and 47 percent of urban workers have a non-social work bachelor's degree. Workers hired in the preceding year were less likely (28 percent compared with 39 percent) to have a degree in social work, suggesting a general trend away from social worker employment in child welfare. Earlier studies did not typically report worker education levels, but available information (for example, Smith, 2005) is not confirmed herein.

Job satisfaction showed little variability and suggested that workers as a group are somewhere between undecided and somewhat satisfied with their jobs. Individual items in which workers more often reported a lack of satisfaction were consistent with concerns expressed by workers in Glisson and Dureck (1988), Dickinson and Perry (2002), and other studies examining worker satisfaction or reasons for leaving (which often reflect specific concerns and areas of dissatisfaction). These reasons included ways in which agencies implement policies, low prestige of the job, lack of recognition for doing a good job, and little advancement opportunity. However, in contrast with other studies of satisfaction, workers in NSCAW generally perceived their supervision as high quality.

Quality of supervision was the strongest predictor of satisfaction among child welfare workers. In NSCAW, quality of supervision was defined by workers' perception of emotional support, advice giving, and amount received. Among urban workers, those receiving more than two hours of supervision had significantly higher levels of satisfaction, a difference that was largely continued ($p = .12$) even after controlling for all other factors. Workers in a nonurban setting with any social work or graduate degree enjoyed more satisfaction than did their nonurban peers; those with a non-social work bachelor's degree had similar lower levels of satisfaction across both urban and nonurban settings. Otherwise, job satisfaction scores did not vary with child welfare worker characteristics, and child welfare worker gender, race, and income were not strongly associated with worker satisfaction.

Although new workers were less likely to be social workers, it appears that social workers remain longer and, probably not coincidentally, earn more money than their non-social work peers when working in urban settings. Social workers were more likely to have at least two years' experience and earn more

than \$30,000 per year. Yet worker satisfaction scores were nearly identical, indicating that this is not a consequence of small sample size or other sampling issue. This apparent contradiction suggests satisfaction is not the only meaningful influence on worker retention in child welfare.

Overall, several implications may be immediately drawn from these data. First, diversity in gender and race and ethnicity remains limited among child welfare workers. This pattern is more evident in nonurban settings, but regardless of setting the child welfare workforce remains dominated by white people and women. Second, workers who stay in child welfare, on average, derive modest amounts of satisfaction from their jobs. A significant part of this satisfaction comes from receipt of adequate helpful, supportive supervision. This appears to concur with earlier research showing that supportive supervision is predictive of workers' intention to remain (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, 2000). This finding is also consistent with complaints of exiting workers regarding unsupportive supervision (GAO, 2003). Because increasing child welfare worker satisfaction appears to be a plausible means to increasing job retention, the need for more quality (that is, helpful and supportive) supervision appears to be high, especially in urban settings, where job satisfaction is generally lower. This suggests that, for many workers in urban settings, two hours per week of supportive and helpful supervision is a minimum.

Child welfare workers' concerns often involve institutional issues such as a lack of advancement and recognition and conflicts over policy implementation. A lack of opportunity for advancement and little recognition are endemic to the nature of the work being done, and supportive supervision may offset these issues. However, it seems that quality supervision is not able to mitigate some negatives (for example, negative perceptions of agency policy implementation).

Among nonurban workers, those without BSW degrees proved significantly less satisfied. Furthermore, when combined into the full sample, those with a BA were least satisfied and significantly less satisfied than their peers with a BSW. This difference was not found among the urban workers, yet social workers were more likely to have more experience and earning power. It may be that child welfare workers with BSWs see their work as a logical extension of their education in contrast with those from other disciplines who may not have expected

to have careers in child welfare or human services. Furthermore, social workers might be more willing to endure a mediocre sense of satisfaction because of a commitment to social work values and a clearer understanding of the dynamics of child maltreatment and the policies intended to address them. There may be at least some self-selection as well because the people attracted to social work may have the wherewithal to thrive in child welfare regardless of the difficulties inherent in the job. Several federally funded recruitment and retention projects aim to identify applicants who have the capacity to understand and manage these strains.

Interpreting the descriptive information about the characteristics of the child welfare workforce is largely straightforward. Nonetheless, appreciation of a few caveats is necessary. First, some variables were rare (for example, male social workers) and some had more than a nominal number of missing values. The result is a larger-than-desirable standard error in some estimates and lack of precision, which keeps some comparisons from showing significant differences between groups. It strengthens the argument, however, that the differences that emerged are so robust that they can be identified above the variation. Second, workers who have chosen to remain in the child welfare workforce are likely to have higher satisfaction levels; those with the very lowest job satisfaction scores are likely to have left the field. Thus, our estimates of average satisfaction may be inflated, which might have affected our estimates of the proportion of child welfare workers who had a social work degree. Furthermore, workers included in this study were generally public agency workers involved in ongoing case management activities. Investigative and other non-case management workers (for example, supervisors) and private agency workers were not well represented; consequently, the results may not fully reflect the experiences of those not adequately represented.

Measuring job satisfaction among current workers provides important clues to understanding the current workforce and, to some extent, what might be done to increase the retention of child welfare workers. Quality and amount of supervision, working in a nonurban area, and social work education are all associated with higher job satisfaction, although these variables account for less than 20 percent of the variance of job satisfaction. Many other unmeasured contributors appear to be at play. More research is needed to address these gaps in the knowledge base.

Additional research to understand which male and minority child welfare workers are most and least satisfied would be valuable to clarify how to recruit and retain them to promote diversity in the child welfare workforce.

The findings that fewer than half of the child welfare workforce have a social work education and that the typical worker has been on the job for less than seven years are cause for concern. Among the entire workforce, only 21 percent have both social work education and more than five years of experience. Practice experience and understanding of common practice wisdom are very important in fields like child welfare, education, and medicine, wherein relatively few discrete teachable procedures have been proven effective (Barth et al., 2005; Steinberg & Luce, 2005; Whitehurst, 2002). Increasing social work education and quality supervision are two promising paths toward achieving this goal.

Increasing the quality and quantity of supervisory training may also improve the ability of supervisors to be more effective with their staff, leading to workers' higher job satisfaction and retention. Further research is needed to understand what "helpful and supportive" supervision look like in a child welfare context. In a field in which decisions have highly significant consequences, supervisors must find a delicate balance between firm guidance and affirmation. Knowing more about how workers understand and experience supervision would aid in the development of effective supervision models for this field. Interventions to increase satisfaction and retention are being developed with federal funding. Glisson and colleagues (2006) completed a randomized trial, with National Institute of Mental Health support, in which workers and managers in the treatment agencies received a program designed to develop and sustain worker collaboration and innovation to mitigate organizational problems. The results indicate that the intervention was successful. ACF has also funded a suite of interventions. The components that are now under testing include a "realistic job preview" that helps applicants understand what child welfare work involves, screening and interviewing tools that help predict which workers will stay and be satisfied, "stay interviews" (as opposed to "exit interviews") that routinely reach child welfare workers before they leave, and senior management training regarding changes in the agency organization and climate that may affect child welfare worker performance and retention.

These efforts, combined with further research into the experiences of child welfare workers, may help create a more stable and satisfied workforce for this important domain of social work practice. **SW**

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