

FLASH SURVEY #4: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child Welfare Worker Satisfaction in the State of Wisconsin

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BACKGROUND

A flash survey was administered by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center (UWSC) under the direction of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) in June and July 2020 to explore child welfare workforce job satisfaction. Surveys were electronically sent to 1,732 individual caseworkers identified through eWiSACWIS with job functions in Access/Intake, Initial Assessment, Ongoing Case Management, Case Aide, and/or Foster Care. A total of 850 caseworkers responded by completing the survey representing a final response rate of 49%. Questions were designed to assess worker satisfaction based on workload, other job stressors, intention to stay in current job and field, colleague, supervisor, and agency support, and satisfaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Overall, respondents report a moderate level of job-satisfaction and good general work experiences. Additionally, average scores for colleague, supervisor, and agency support indicate that workers feel support from their colleagues and supervisors, and, to a slightly lesser extent, from their agencies. Further, responses indicate an average intention to stay in the job and field in the short term. And while many respondents did indicate a plan to leave their job in the next five years, respondents generally report plans to still be in the field of child welfare in five years.

Worker responses also highlight a few opportunities for improvement. While workers report a moderate level of overall job satisfaction, they also report a moderate degree of stress in their positions. Reports indicate that respondents are moderately dissatisfied with their workload, and experience other stressors related to a lack of resources for families, documentation requirements, and making difficult decisions. In addition to these stressors, respondents report a need for additional time for face-to-face interaction with families in order to effectively meet client needs. Respondents identify that a reduction in workload and other job-related stressors would support their ability to allocate sufficient time for face-to-face interaction with clients to meet child and family needs.

FIGURE 1: FUTURE PLANS BY WORKER EDUCATION



In addition, results indicate a relationship between educational attainment and caseworker job satisfaction. Respondents with higher educational attainment (Masters or higher), those with a degree specialization in Social Work and workers with Social Work licensure report more dissatisfaction with their job, higher levels of job-related stress, and more intention to leave their job and the field of child welfare.

As related to the COVID-19 pandemic, results indicate that respondents are moderately satisfied with their agencies' response to the pandemic. Additionally, workers experience an average, slight decrease in workloads due to the pandemic. While satisfaction with the agency response was somewhat positive, respondent job satisfaction during the pandemic decreased. Workers identify that their inability to serve families, concerns for worker health and mental health, concerns regarding child safety, and a lack of clear or consistent direction from their agency were cause for the decrease in overall job satisfaction during the pandemic.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The respondent child welfare workers in Wisconsin vary according to age, education, licensing, and region. The majority of respondents are between 25-35 years old (40.21%), have a Bachelor's degree (65.59%), are licensed Social Workers (77.06%), and work in the Northeastern region (25.65%). Most workers identify as female (89.02%) and are white non-Hispanic (85.76%).

Interestingly, some respondent characteristics are associated with job satisfaction.

Education

Compared to workers with a Bachelor's degree, those with a Master's degree or higher report increased levels of job dissatisfaction, higher rates of job-related stress, are more likely to express their intention to leave their job and the field of child welfare, and receive less support from their agency.

Gender

Female-identifying respondents report lower levels of workload dissatisfaction and are more likely to indicate an intention to leave the child welfare field relative to non-female-identifying respondents.

Race

Compared to respondents of color, white non-Hispanic respondents report higher rates of job-satisfaction, are less likely to express an intention to leave their job or the field, and are less likely to report experiencing an adverse impact of COVID-19 on their jobs. Conversely, respondents of color report feeling less safe in the field and are more likely to experience discrimination in their job.

Region

Reports of workload dissatisfaction were highest in Northern and Western regions and lowest in the Southern region. Northeastern and Milwaukee respondents report lowest levels of satisfaction in general (not just that pertaining to workload), while Western region respondents report higher rates of job satisfaction.

Respondents from Milwaukee are the most likely to report and intention to leave, and those from the Western region are the least. While Milwaukee respondents were the most likely to report low job satisfaction and to intend to leave the field, they were also the most likely to report feeling supported by their supervisor.

Respondents from the Northeastern region are the least likely to feel supported by their agencies and the least likely to report that their agency handled the COVID-19 pandemic effectively.

IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS

Caseworkers were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements regarding the amount of support they receive from their colleagues, supervisor, and agency. Responses ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Average agreement indicates moderate to high support in each category; high levels of colleague and supervisor support (4.1 and 3.9 out of 5, respectively) and moderate levels agency support (3.54 out of 5).

Respondents also indicated their agreement with statements regarding their general job satisfaction, with response options again ranging from 1 to 5. Caseworkers report overall satisfaction in their jobs; the average summary score for all caseworker satisfaction statements is 3.72 out of 5. Further, caseworkers are generally likely to stay in their jobs. On average, workers responded with moderate agreement to statements regarding their likelihood to stay in their jobs (3.61 out of 5) and in the field of child welfare (3.39 out of 5).

Finally, while respondents did indicate a moderate level of job-related stress overall, some stressors were less prevalent. On the 1-5 scale, caseworkers reported neutral to slight disagreement with statements regarding the following stressors:

“feeling unsafe while working in the field” (2.3 out of 5)

“lack of discretion in doing my job” (2.41 out of 5)

“inadequate training for the job” (2.44 out of 5)

Disagreement with these statements indicate that caseworkers feel moderate levels of safety while working in the field, that they have discretion in decision making, and are adequately trained for their jobs.

JOB SATISFACTION

Job satisfaction is assessed through respondent reports of workload satisfaction, time spent with families, and job-related stressors.

Workload Satisfaction – Overall, respondents are moderately dissatisfied with their workload; Reports of workload dissatisfaction are the highest for workers with a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree and for workers in Northern and Western regions.

Time Spent with Families –

Respondents were asked the average amount of face-to-face interaction with families they needed to effectively meet child and family needs. Most respondents (70%) report requiring at least 41 hours of face-to-face interaction with each family per month. However, only 33% of respondents report having the time to actually spend 41 hours per month or more for face-to-face interaction with each family.

Table 1: Caseworker Job Stressors (N=840)	Mean (SD)	N
Inadequate information to do my job	2.71 (0.81)	840
Amount of case documentation	3.48 (0.77)	836
Insufficient staff to cover cases	3.08 (0.90)	829
Inadequate training for the job	2.44 (0.88)	834
Stakeholders	2.76 (0.92)	818
Being held accountable for things which I have no control	2.89 (0.90)	832
Being blamed for something that goes wrong	2.74 (0.96)	832
Feeling unsafe while working in the field	2.30 (0.79)	824
Making difficult decisions	3.22 (0.80)	835
Lack of discretion in doing my job	2.41 (0.89)	836
Fear of making a mistake	3.09 (0.85)	839
Seeing families getting treated unfairly	2.78 (0.85)	834
Lack of resources for families	3.41 (0.78)	827
Carrying some of the workload for others	2.87 (0.89)	833
Experiencing discrimination in my job based on my own characteristics	1.61 (0.83)	834
Summary score (Cronbach’s alpha=0.85)	2.78 (0.49)	768

JOB SATISFACTION continued...

Job-related Stressors – As outlined in Table 1, respondents reported the frequency of experiencing each of the following job-related stressors, ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often).

- The most frequently identified job stressors were *case documentation, lack of resources for families, and making difficult decisions.*
- We identified some regional variation in job stressors:
 - *Inadequate training for the job* is a common stressor in Southern and Western regions and is an infrequent stressor in Milwaukee.
 - *Stakeholder related stress* is common in Milwaukee and Northeast regions and less common among Northern respondents.
 - Stressors related to both *feeling unsafe while working in the field* and *experiencing discrimination* are the highest for Milwaukee respondents.
 - *Lack of resources for families* is an infrequent stressor among respondents in the Northeastern and Milwaukee regions.
- Workers identified specific issues, such as:
 - Issues with leadership (lack of support/supervision and poor management);
 - Difficult work culture due to “politics” and “drama”;
 - Concerns about practice related issues related to colleagues or other service providers;
 - High staff turnover
 - Feeling devalued in court and legal proceedings;
 - Client-related issues (mental health issues, “no-shows”); and
 - Issues with community partners (lack of familiarity with child welfare role).
- Worker credentials are related with type of stress.
 - Workers that report having a Social Work license are more stressed about *lack of resources for families, and seeing families getting treated unfairly* as compared to workers without a Social Work license.
 - Workers that report they do not have a Social Work license or do not know their licensure status are more stressed about having *inadequate information to do my job, and fear of making a mistake* as compared to workers who do have a Social Work license.
- Worker’s roles are correlated with job stressors.
 - The most frequent stressors for foster care staff include *pressure to create placement resources, amount of documentation, being held accountable for things outside of one’s control, and mediating between foster families and other caseworkers without being in a supervisory role.*
 - Outside of Milwaukee, a *lack of time to work with community members to recruit and support families* is a common stressor.
 - Foster care staff indicate that reducing the administrative requirements, more rigorous recruitment and retention practices, reduced caseloads, and a shift of tasks that are outside their job purview to other staff would allow them to allocate more time to clients.

CASEWORKER RETENTION

We also inquired about respondent's intentions to leave or stay in their job and in the child welfare field. The respondents with the strongest desire to leave are older (specifically those nearing retirement age), hold a Master's degree (including those with a MSW), and people of color. Respondents from the Western region are the most likely to intend to stay in their job and the field. Milwaukee respondents are the least likely remain in their job or in the child welfare field, especially those with a Master's degree or higher.

SUPPORT FROM COLLEAGUES, SUPERVISORS, AND AGENCIES

While respondents broadly feel supported by their colleagues and supervisors and are moderately supported by their agencies, there is some regional variation of note:

- Respondents from Milwaukee are the most likely to feel supported by their supervisors.
 - In Milwaukee, workers with less than a Master's degree and those that identify as female indicate a higher level of support from supervisors.
- Respondents in the Northeast region are the least likely to feel supported by their agencies.

JOB SATISFACTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In general, respondents report feeling moderately satisfied with their agencies' responses to the pandemic and indicate that workloads have decreased or stayed the same. In addition, job satisfaction during the pandemic declined or stayed the same. Respondents of color and non-female respondents reported lower levels of job satisfaction during the pandemic as compared to White, female respondents. Milwaukee respondents report smallest decrease in job satisfaction compared to all other regions. Workers from the Northeastern region are the least likely to report that their agency handled the COVID-19 response effectively.

Workers also provided qualitative responses regarding the COVID-19 that can be categorized into several themes:

- Inability to adequately serve families (including lack of available service providers);
- Concerns for worker health and a tension between maintaining one's health while ensuring child safety, and;
- A lack of clear direction and inconsistent instructions from one's agency.