

Recruitment and Retention in Child Welfare Services:

A Survey of Child Welfare League of Canada
Member Agencies

Madeleine Anderson and Shalan Gobeil



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Child Welfare League of Canada
209-75 Albert Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5E7
Tel: (613) 235-4412, ext. 24
E-mail: crccy@cwlc.ca

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The fact is that good people with good minds and good hearts are drawn to the human and social services. Yet, realities of the enormity of problems people in need face, of the incredible tangles of bureaucracy and of the endlessness of it all are real problems when we talk about recruiting and retaining staff.

—*Ruth Mayden, National Association of Social Workers*

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We sincerely thank the people in the agencies who devoted time and energy to responding to the survey and hope that, as a form of compensation, the information contained in the report will be of benefit to them.

And lastly, thank you to Peter Dudding for his patience and support.

We take full responsibility for the final document, including any errors or omissions that it may contain.

Overview/Context

A shortage of trained, competent child welfare workers¹ is hampering the ability of organizations and governments to build the organizational capacity needed to deliver high quality services. Canadian child welfare organizations are aware of these systemic issues and are beginning to adopt proactive measures. The planning and preparation of workforce strategies is an essential step to ensuring that agencies have the capacity to develop a workforce with the skills and knowledge needed in the increasingly complex, demanding climate in which today's child welfare services are being evaluated.

The Child Welfare League of Canada (CWLC) collaborated with the McConnell Foundation to commission the following survey, with these intentions:

- To provide a snapshot of the scope and nature of factors contributing to the current and anticipated shortage among child welfare workers being faced by CWLC member agencies
- To identify areas of congruence between the findings in the literature and the experiences of a selection of child welfare agencies across the country
- To identify some of the strategies being implemented within agencies to address the shortage
- To assist the CWLC in determining appropriate actions to be taken in response to what agencies are now experiencing as well as what support/strategies they perceive they will need in the future
- To allow for a sharing of information within the CWLC

¹ For the purposes of this report, the terms “child welfare workers” and “workers” refer to social workers in child protection agencies, children’s mental health centres and residential young offender programs. The academic qualifications of these workers range from Child and Youth Worker Diplomas to master’s level social work degrees.

Background of the study

Current difficulties in child welfare agencies in the areas of staff recruitment and retention are becoming an increasingly critical preoccupation of agencies responsible for the mental health and well-being of our children and youth. Although agencies vary widely, both experts and service-providers report a current shortage of child welfare workers. Despite the lack of comprehensive data on the nature and extent of the shortage, it is expected to become more serious in the future, as the demand for child welfare workers shows no sign of decreasing.² Like the general population, the workforce is aging, and we are faced with a shrinking pool of new workers to replace those who are retiring. The Conference Board of Canada has predicted that by 2020 the country will be facing a shortage of one million skilled workers. In addition, numerous studies report decreased levels of job satisfaction among both direct service and supervisory staff, potentially leading to their pursuing other occupations in less traditional workplaces such as high tech.³

The research reviewed for this study comes from the US and Canada. Three main studies formed the groundwork: *In Critical Demand: Social Work in Canada*, a study completed in April 2001 by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) in partnership with the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW); *The Child Welfare Workforce Challenge*, a report by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) published in 2001; and *Recruitment and Retention of Child Welfare Staff*, a national survey commissioned by the Directors of Child Welfare in Canada under the Child Welfare Capacity Building Project, which has not yet been released.

For the purposes of this paper, we have extracted from the literature three main categories of issues that impact directly, to varying degrees, the ability of agencies to recruit and retain child welfare workers: *work environment*, *working conditions* and *salaries and benefits*. For the sake of simplicity, we will trace the trends identified in the current research using the same categories.

Work environment

It is important to state up front that, in today's markets, social work is suffering from a significant image problem, and child welfare has the worst image of all. There is little glory left in the profession, with workers often receiving negative publicity in the media⁴ and little recognition for an extremely complex job.⁵ As a direct result, child welfare work is not appealing to many younger workers,⁶ recruitment is difficult, and retention, specifically in protection work, is highly problematic.

2 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); O'Neil (2001a).

3 CWLA (2001); Ewalt (1991); O'Neil (2001a).

4 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CASW & CASSW (2001); O'Neil (2001b); Zunz (1998).

5 CASW & CASSW (2001); Drake & Yadama (1996); Zunz (1998).

6 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CASW & CASSW (2001).

In a presentation at the 2001 Finding Better Ways Conference put on by the CWLA, Joan Rycraft⁷ identified four main factors as influencing the ability of agencies to retain workers: mission, supervision, personal investment and goodness of fit.

The most common complaint by workers is that they feel generally undervalued⁸ and isolated.⁹ Social work's mission and a commitment to the safety and well-being of children have always been important factors in attracting caring, competent staff into child welfare professions. Agencies that "talk the talk but don't walk the talk," thereby failing to live up to their own values and philosophies, are cited as creating real disillusionment among employees.¹⁰ One of the reasons for this appears to be a dissonance between the theories of social work learned in school and the realities of practice, resulting in disillusionment and discouragement. A significant level of concern around the quality of education in the field of social work.¹¹ Numerous young, inexperienced and idealistic workers are coming into the profession, with insufficient or inadequate training in direct child welfare services.¹²

In the literature, weak leadership is strongly linked to feelings of isolation, frustration, stress and burnout at direct service and supervisory levels.¹³ Indeed, poor agency management is frequently cited as being more significant an issue than financial considerations in terms of job satisfaction ratings.¹⁴

There is strong evidence that open and caring relationships, guidance, partnerships and empowerment of staff are important elements in retention.¹⁵ The feeling of belonging to a community and having a solid peer support network at work reduces burnout at management and front line levels. Too often this feeling of community is absent in agencies, where communication, support and recognition are undervalued.¹⁶

Another important factor cited in the literature is the lack of perceived or real options for promotion or internal movement.¹⁷ Dedicated staff need to feel that their skills and interests are well matched to their job description and need to have a degree of job mobility to ensure the quality of this fit. The research points to opportunities for career growth, learning and development as leading factors influencing staff retention.¹⁸ A lack of training opportunities on the job at front line and management levels¹⁹ leaves employees feeling trapped and promotes movement outside the agency.

7 Rycraft (2001).

8 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CWLA (2001); Soderfeldt, et al. (1995).

9 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); CASW & CASSW (2001).

10 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); Rycraft (1994); Zunz (1998).

11 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); O'Neil (200 b); Samantrai (1992).

12 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); CASW & CASSW (2001); Samantrai (1992); Soderfeldt, et al. (1995).

13 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); Corliss & Corliss (1999); CWLA (2001); Rycraft (1994); Samantrai (1992); Soderfeldt, et al. (1995); Zunz (1998).

14 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); CWLA (2001); Vinokur-Kaplan, et al. (1994).

15 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a).

16 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); CWLA (2001); Soderfeldt, et al. (1995); Zunz (1998).

17 Vinokur-Kaplan, et al. (1994).

18 Kaye & Jordan-Evans (2000).

19 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); CWLA (2001); Rycraft (1994); Corliss & Corliss (1999).

Finally, there is a danger, within the context of the current workforce crisis, to overlook the importance of diversity and cultural competence within the field. “Linking diversity to culturally competent client services will create an organizational culture that will help recruit and retain a more diverse and highly motivated staff better able to deliver high quality services.”²⁰

Working conditions

Working conditions within the field of child welfare are generally perceived as being poor. As service demands increase²¹ caseloads become a critical factor in employee job satisfaction.²² Workers and supervisors alike report an increasing complexity in the nature of problems faced by clients, which, when coupled with the inadequate level of experience that many new workers bring into the job, results in huge task strain. A recent study in Alberta found that 43% of child welfare workers have less than two years of direct experience.²³

Heavy workloads are cited as being another major factor affecting job satisfaction.²⁴ Workers are managing an array of roles (including support person, guardian, advocate and investigator), which, by virtue of their very nature, are in conflict with one another and are a constant source of stress.²⁵ As well, the number of apprehensions and court appearances is increasing at an alarming rate,²⁶ adding to the stress under which employees are working. Because of this growth, direct service staff report that up to 50% of their time is spent on administrative duties and that policies and procedures are heavy and cumbersome (specifically documentation and assessment).²⁷ The obvious impact of this is an increase in the number of hours required to meet the demands of the job and a simultaneous decrease in the time spent on direct services.

Lack of resources is reported as an impediment to being able to deliver quality services; however, this ranges widely from agency to agency.²⁸

Unsafe working conditions are a less prevalent concern in the more recent research studies, appearing to really become an issue in recruitment and retention only after workers are already feeling disillusioned and isolated.²⁹ That said, they continue to contribute significantly to the complexity and stress of child welfare work, and they need to be acknowledged and addressed.

20 Dalano & Larsen (2001).

21 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CASW & CASSW (2001); Rycraft (1994); Vinokur-Kaplan, et al. (1994).

22 CASW & CASSW (2001); CWLA (2001); Ewalt (1991); O’Neil (2001 b); Rycraft (1994); Drake & Yadama (1996); Soderfeldt, et al. (1995).

23 Kinjerski & Herbert (2000).

24 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); Ewalt (1991); O’Neil (2001 b); Rycraft (1994); Samantrai (1992); Vinokur-Kaplan, et al. (1994).

25 Callahan (1993).

26 CASW & CASSW (2001); Drake & Yadama (1996); O’Neil (2000 b); Soderfeldt, et al. (1995).

27 Alwon & Reitz (2000 a); Corliss & Corliss (1999); CWLA (2001); Samantrai (1992).

28 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); Vinokur-Kaplan, et al. (1994).

29 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); Samantrai (1992).

Interestingly enough, financial compensation is cited far less frequently as a source of job satisfaction than are recognition and support by management.

The additional isolation and lack of resources inherent in child welfare work in remote areas, specifically the northern regions, are not well documented in the literature. However, there is evidence that the needs of workers must be considered within the context of their family units and that supportive working conditions become even more important in these remote communities.³⁰

Salaries and benefits

Although the American literature points to salaries as an important element in recruitment and retention, the Canadian research identifies salaries as being secondary to overall job satisfaction and clearly less important in recruitment and retention than other organizational issues. Studies have identified huge discrepancies in pay scales between agencies,³¹ and certainly for those at the lower end of the scale, low salaries do figure in the hiring and retention of qualified workers.³² As in many fields, there appears to be a trend toward the hiring of non-permanent contract workers at higher salaries but without benefits.³³

Studies show worker dissatisfaction with workload increases not being met by either salary increases or any other form of recognition.³⁴ The often significant gaps between direct service and management positions, coupled with low salary caps, do not reward workers for remaining at the front line for any significant period of time, nor do they encourage lateral movement.³⁵ The impact that this has on retention of qualified direct service workers is evident.

Finally, the cost of recruitment, the time that it takes to fill a position and the recruitment strategies used vary significantly from agency to agency. Often agencies do not have either the funds or the human resources expertise required to develop and launch effective recruitment procedures, putting them at a severe disadvantage in a highly competitive recruitment climate.³⁶ As well, the difficult living conditions and restrictions of the local labour pool in the more remote regions of the country present their own challenges.

30 CASW & CASSW (2001).

31 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CWLA (2001).

32 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CWLA (2001); O'Neil (2001 b); CASW & CASSW (2001).

33 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b).

34 Alwon & Reitz (2000 b); CWLA (2001).

35 CWLA (2001); O'Neil (2000 a).

36 CWLA (2001); O'Neil (2001a); Alwon & Reitz (2000 b).

Methodology

The first phase of the project consisted of a review of the current literature, a list of which can be found in the bibliography. The sources were identified through the CWLC, project advisory members and academic references.

A survey encompassing qualitative and quantitative data was developed and sent to 36 CWLC member agencies across Canada. The agencies were identified to ensure representation from different regions as well as to target a fairly even rural/urban split. The response rate was 44%, with 16 completed surveys. This low rate may have been due in part to some agencies having already completed a similar survey recently commissioned by the Directors of Child Welfare. The juxtaposition of these two studies, while unfortunate in some ways, will hopefully allow for comparisons of findings, contributing to the relevance of both.

Interestingly enough, although we received only 16 responses, several of them were completed for more than one agency, resulting in a total of 12,144 full-time equivalent staff positions represented in the results. Specifically, the response from Quebec represents the largest number of employees, which may at times skew the results. Although this complicated the analysis process, we feel that it contributed to the relevance of the results.

Although our survey was qualitative and quantitative, we are very clear that the small number of completed surveys ***does not allow for any kind of accurate statistical analysis***. Our results are intended to provide an anecdotal representation of the issues facing a small number of agencies, and readers should not draw any wider conclusions.

Given the nature and scope of the study, we decided to explore recruitment and retention problems as an interdependent unit. The results of the survey did not allow us to gather the kind of data necessary to complete a separate analysis of the problems experienced by agencies in recruitment and in retention.

Although most surveys were completed by a group of people, the data can only be interpreted as representing the current situation as “perceived” by middle and upper management.

Another complicating factor was that the questions about numbers and length of employment of full-time, part-time, permanent and casual staff posed a challenge for those filling out the survey. Several respondents were unable to complete this section fully. As a result, the numbers may be slightly skewed, and we have limited our quantitative analysis of this section to the reported number of FTE staff.

The survey questions as well as the draft report of the findings were submitted to an advisory group for feedback. The advisory group consists of five members and includes representation from the four sectors surveyed. The group has expertise in human resources, child welfare practices, unionized environments and community-based agencies.

Profile of the agencies surveyed

The following analysis is based on survey results from a small representative sample of child welfare, children’s mental health and children’s residential and young offender programs across Canada. Feedback consists of 16 survey³⁷ responses, representing 12,144 employees, with rural (37%), urban (46%) and remote (17%) representation from the western,(19%) eastern (13%), central (38%) and northern (31%) regions of the country.

Surveys received indicated that agencies were providing all or some of the following services:

- Child Welfare (29%)
- Children/Youth Mental Health (23%)
- Children/Youth Residential Services (35%)
- Young Offenders (13%)

Generally, human resources staff, program managers, supervisors or directors filled out the surveys. Again, although most surveys were completed by a group of people, the data can only be interpreted as representing the current situation as “perceived” by middle and upper management.

Distribution of staff positions

Table 1 Number of full-time equivalents

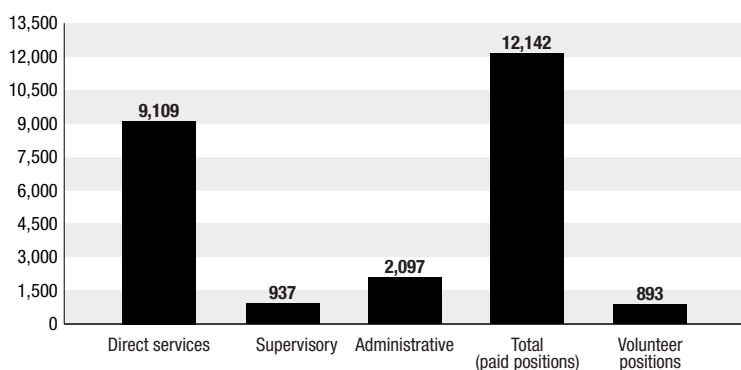


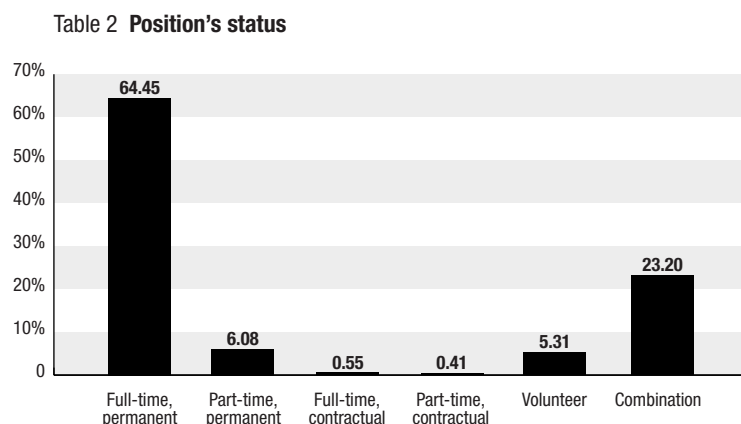
Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the types of positions within the agencies, breaking them down into three different categories: direct services (75%), supervisory (8%) and administrative (17%). Answers to the questions about the ratio of supervisors to direct service workers ranged widely from response to response as well as

from program to program. In 20% of cases, the ratio was 1:15 or higher; in 26.7% of cases it was between 1:7 and 1:10; in 33% of cases it was between 1:4 and 1:6; and in 20% of cases it was either lower than 1:3 or not reported.

³⁷ Some agencies responded individually while others responded for their association of agencies.

Positions' status

Table 2 presents the categories of employment, comparing the percentage of permanent, non-permanent, contractual and volunteer positions. The percentage of permanent full-time positions (64.45%) is surprisingly high and may have been raised by the government agencies. The combination category (23.20%) reflects the surveys where respondents combined their responses (for example, grouping their responses into two categories, such as full-time/part-time).



We had expected to find a much higher percentage of contract workers and have no clear explanation for the low numbers, except to say that they may be hidden in the “combination” category. This section of the survey proved to be problematic for some respondents (see Methodology), which impacted considerably on the clarity and validity of the results.

Volunteers and Board members

Within the responding agencies, there were 893 volunteers (including Board members), with length of service averaging between three and five years. Our questions focused on the requirements for becoming a Board member, not on other volunteer recruitment and retention issues. These requirements mainly have remained stable, with a few exceptions where agencies have raised the expectations. Board members and tightened the criteria. Requirements for becoming a member were fairly general, with community membership and age being most common. Specific skill sets, such as business, fundraising, education, or related service experience were only required 10% of the time. In general the essential criteria appeared to be availability and willingness.

Academic and non-academic requirements

We asked about the minimum academic requirements for direct services or clinical positions, supervisory and management positions (Table 3). We also asked for the non-academic requirements or the level of experience. Overall, we wanted to know if these had changed in the past 10 years and why.

Most of the direct services or clinical positions required a minimum of some academic qualification. Over half of the positions required a university degree, with 27% requiring a bachelor’s degree and 24% a master’s degree. Typically, these would be in the area of Social Work, Psychology, Criminology, Counselling or Education. A Ph.D. in Psychology or a degree in Psychiatry was also

required by some agencies (5%), particularly those providing services to the severely mentally ill or to children and/or youth with complex mental health issues. A college diploma (Child and Youth Worker Diploma or related diploma) with a combination of relevant experience (27%) was also being considered.

Many of the college diplomas were found in residential settings, and some surveys indicated that “fill-ins” with minimal qualifications were also common for short periods of time.

Interestingly enough, 36% of the positions required no direct service experience, and 32% required only 1–2 years.

The minimum academic requirements for a Supervisory Position were a Child and Youth Worker Diploma (14%), a bachelor’s degree (52%) or a master’s degree (19%). The remaining 15% were not specified in the survey responses and are accounted for in the “other category.”

The supervisory positions had a higher level of non-academic requirements. These varied from 2–3 years of experience (31%), to 4–5 years of experience (19%) to 5–6 years of experience (25%). Other requirements included clinical experience and/or direct supervision experience. The remaining positions were reported as having no defined non-academic requirements at all.

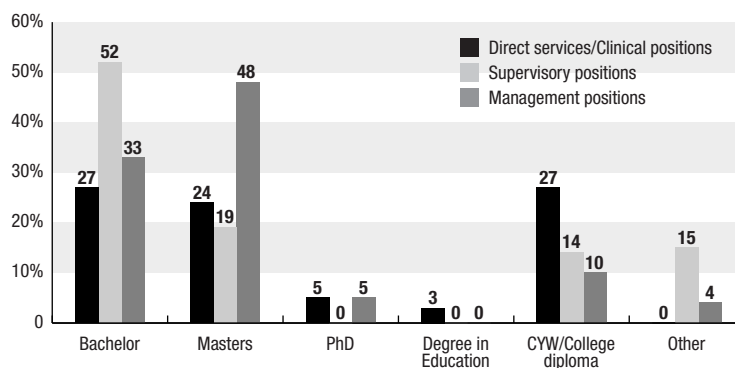
Management positions generally required a master’s degree (48%), a bachelor’s degree (33%), a Child and Youth Worker Diploma (10%), or doctorate level certification (5%). For the most part (64%), these types of positions required anywhere between 5 and 8 years of supervisory or equivalent management experience. Of the remaining agencies half required a combination of field experience and supervisory experience and half did not have standardized requirements.

In all the job categories, agencies combined their academic and non-academic requirements. For example, a candidate with a master’s degree would be considered for a supervisory position. If another candidate had only a bachelor’s degree, that candidate would also be considered if she or he had three years of non-academic experience as well.

For the most part (57%), these academic or non-academic requirements have changed in the past 10 years, with agencies choosing, in fairly equal numbers, to raise either the academic requirements or the non-academic requirements (years of experience). There was also a trend toward increasing the minimum requirements for residential workers.

In general, the academic requirements appear fairly consistent across agencies. The results clearly reflect the general lack of direct service experience required of new employees that is reported in the literature.

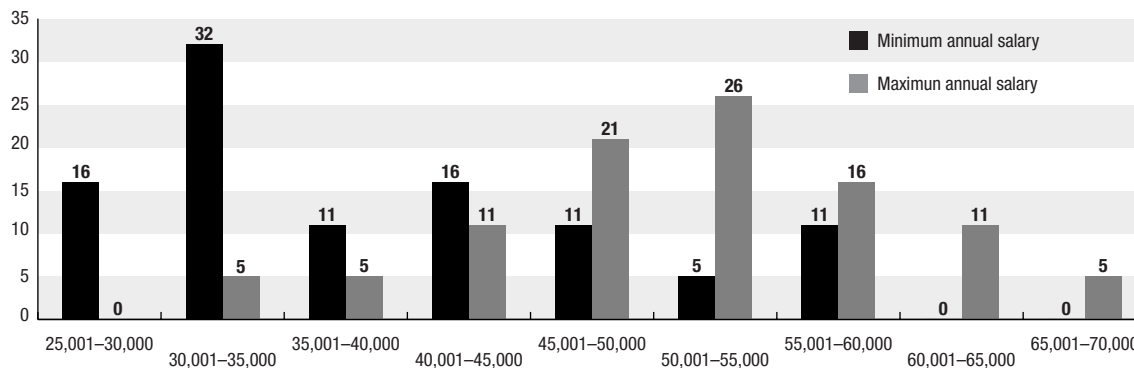
Table 3 Minimum academic requirements



Salary levels

In the reporting of salary levels, we noticed a considerable discrepancy between some of the residential and counselling services. For the most part, direct service salary levels range between \$25,001 and \$70,000, with minimum and maximum average annual salaries reported at \$40,000 and \$52,500 respectively (Table 4).

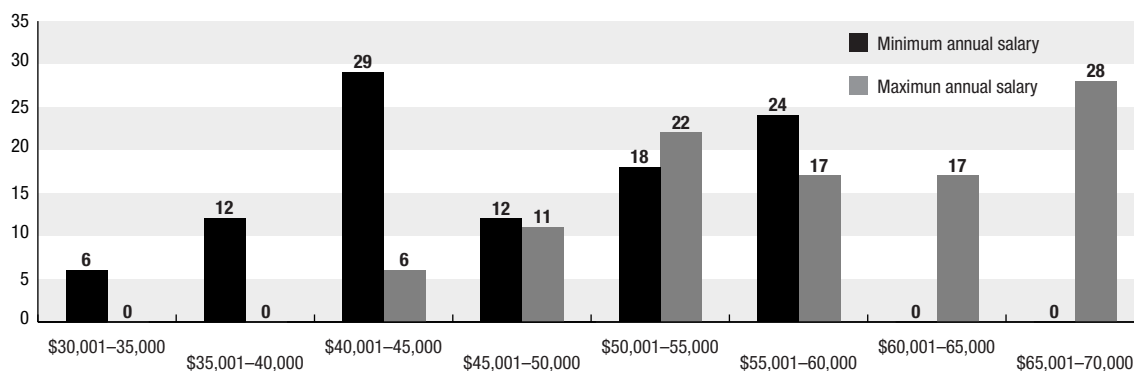
Table 4 Salaries – Direct services/Clinical positions



For supervisory positions, the reported salary levels range between \$35,001 and \$70,000, with minimum and maximum average annual salaries reported at \$47,000 and \$55,000 respectively (Table 5).

All agencies reported salary levels as having increased in the past 10 years. Reasons cited included meeting pay equity requirements, increments to meet union scales, cost-of-living increases, remaining competitive and changing position descriptions to reflect the need for professional staff. Quebec agencies, however, which account for a large percentage of our results, had their salaries frozen for four years.

Table 5 Salaries – Supervisory/Management positions



As we analyze the problems currently facing agencies and the solutions that they are implementing to encourage recruitment and retention (later in the report), we see that, while salaries are often considered to be a barrier, raising salaries is not a highly effective tool for improving the recruitment and retention of employees.

Length of employment

Looking at the FTE direct service workers, we found that 27% left within the first three years, 40% stayed between four and seven years, and 33% remained eight years or more. In supervisory positions, 23% left within the first three years, 31% remained for up to 9 years, and 46 % had been at the agency for over 10 years. In administration, 8% left within the first year, 38% stayed between three and seven years, and 54% remained for over nine years.

The part-time and contract positions were difficult to evaluate because of the lack of data submitted in these categories; however, the terms of employment were generally reported as being much shorter, averaging one to three years.

Regarding average lengths of employment, the clear trend was that employees either left within the first few years or stayed for a prolonged period of time. This was particularly evident in the northern, more remote regions. Although our survey did not collect data on the average ages of employees, it would be interesting to see how the changing demographics in this country will affect the average length of employment at the supervisory and administrative levels.

Staff turnover

i) Vacancies

Overall, 550 FTE positions were reported vacant (about 5% of the total FTEs in the system). In 83% of the surveys, respondents indicated that the recruitment process has become “more difficult,”³⁸ whereas 17% indicated that it was either “about the same” or “much more difficult.” The reasons cited for the recruitment process becoming more difficult were as follows (in order of importance):

- Shortage of human resources
- Challenges in finding qualified workers
- Lack of workers with the right educational background
- Increased competition for staff
- Need to hire across the province (which delays the process)
- New graduates leaving for larger urban centres
- Job-related duties (difficult)
- Shift work
- Increase in standards
- Economic conditions that attract people to other sectors
- Recruitment process is more time-consuming
- Lack of workers with experience in multicultural issues
- Inappropriate salaries

³⁸ The scale was “much easier,” “easier,” “about the same,” “more difficult” or “much more difficult.”

In terms of time required to fill vacancies for direct service positions, (38%) were filled in less than 6 weeks, (44%) in 6–12 weeks and 19% in over 12 weeks. For management/supervisory positions, 25% were filled in less than 6 weeks, 42% in 6–12 weeks and 33% in over 12 weeks.

The overall financial cost of filling these positions averaged between \$1,000 and \$4,000, with wide variation between respondents. This variation may have been partially due to different interpretations of which processes to include in the estimate. Costs of filling positions in more remote regions were higher.

The most significant barriers to recruitment involved availability of qualified staff, a finding supported by the literature. The time required to fill vacant supervisory positions is significantly longer than for direct service. Here again, the influence of demographics and the aging workforce may be impacting the recruitment process. Considering that it takes, on average, 6–12 weeks to fill a position, coupled with the high, complex workloads and difficult working conditions reported, the impact of these vacancies might well be contributing to the overall stress in the child welfare workplace.

ii) Preventable turnover

For the purposes of this survey, the term “preventable turnover” was defined as turnover that was not due to retirement, pregnancy, sickness, education or sabbatical leave.

For 27% of respondents, the rate of preventable turnover had remained stable over the previous 10 years, whereas another 27% believed that it had decreased. Reasons given included these:

- A positive work environment
- Dedicated staffing team
- A program in place to address retention issues
- Results from exit interviews being used to better the work environment
- Annual staff turnover study

For (46%) of respondents, the preventable turnover rate had increased in the past 10 years. This was due to the following:

- High stress levels of the job
- Market salary increases
- Increase in caseloads
- Increase in complexity of caseloads
- Increased level of qualifications
- Better/More attractive working conditions elsewhere
- Better advancement opportunities in other sectors
- Competition/Increased availability of positions

Once again, the theory that failure to compete with market conditions is affecting the ability of child welfare agencies to retain staff is supported by our findings, with a positive working environment contributing to low turnover and poor working conditions compelling workers to seek employment elsewhere.

Findings and recommendations

This section will group the recruitment and retention challenges reported by agencies surveyed within categories adopted earlier in the literature review: work environment, working conditions and salaries and benefits. It will then address these same issues within the context of strategies employed and will list recommendations.

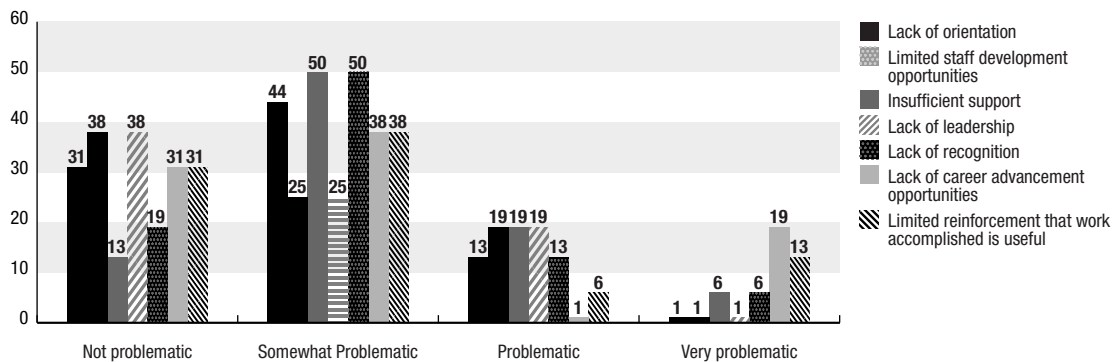
In over 80% of surveys, respondents indicated having some form of process intended to identify staff issues on an ongoing basis, including exit interviews (conducted in 60% of agencies), regular staff meetings, open door policies, individual supervision, quality assurance process, union, suggestion box, conflict resolution policy and staff surveys.

Work environment

i) Problems experienced

Table 6 ranks the problems identified by staff in the work environment in the following categories: orientation for new staff, staff development, support, recognition, leadership, career advancement opportunities and reinforcement that their work is useful. The ratings ranged from not problematic to very problematic.

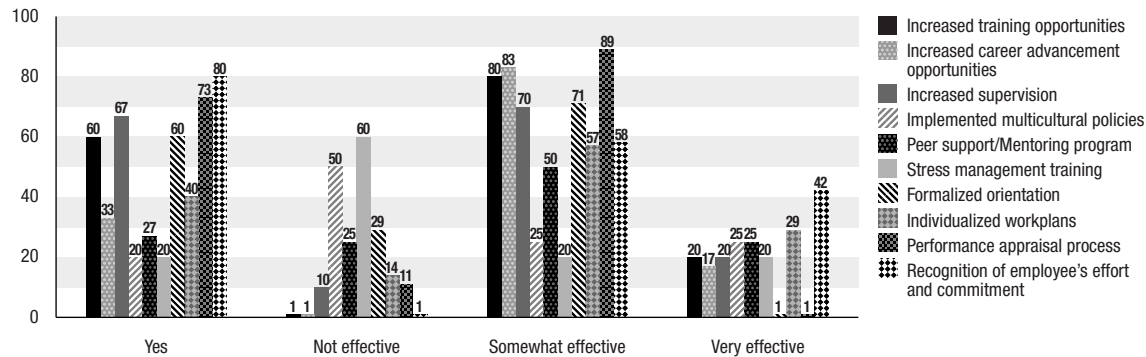
Table 6 Problems experienced – Working environment



Almost 70% of respondents identified insufficient support and lack of recognition as somewhat problematic or problematic, and 8% rated them as very problematic. Only 11% rated insufficient support as not problematic, and less than 20% felt that lack of recognition was not problematic. Lack of career advancement opportunities and limited reinforcement that work accomplished was useful were rated as very problematic in 19% and 12% of responses respectively. According to these numbers, our findings support the literature in concluding that employees are looking for support, recognition and career advancement opportunities within their organization.

ii) Strategies employed

Table 7 Strategies employed – Working environment



Strategies that have been implemented with a goal of improving employee satisfaction within the work environment were rated as not effective, somewhat effective or very effective (Table 7). The results were as follows:

- Increased training opportunities: Implemented in 60% of responses, rated as somewhat effective or very effective almost 100% of the time.
- Increased career advancement opportunities: Implemented in 32% of responses, rated as somewhat effective or very effective almost 100% of the time.
- Increased supervision: Implemented in 67% of responses, rated as somewhat effective or very effective 90% of the time, not effective 10% of the time.
- Multicultural policies: Tried in 20% of agencies, not effective 50% of the time, very effective 22% of the time.
- Peer support/Mentoring program: Implemented in 26% of responses, somewhat effective or very effective 70% of the time.
- Stress management training: Implemented in 20% of responses, not effective 60% of the time.
- Formalized orientation: Implemented in 60% of responses, never very effective, not effective 28% of the time, somewhat effective 72% of the time.
- Individualized workplans: Implemented in 40% of responses, very effective 29% of the time, somewhat effective 58% of the time.
- Performance appraisal process: Tried in 72% of responses, never very effective, somewhat effective almost 90% of the time.
- Recognition of employee's effort and commitment: Tried in 80% of responses, very effective over 40% of the time, somewhat effective 60% of the time.

The working environment was most impacted by increased training opportunities, career advancement opportunities and increased supervision.

The results indicate the importance of fostering a climate where direct service staff are offered opportunities to develop additional skills and knowledge, with the goal of encouraging job mobility within an organization whether it be lateral or upward. The literature supports this notion that honest and compassionate relationships, direction and involvement in decision making are empowering for direct service staff and are essential ingredients in successful retention strategies.

Linking agencies closely with colleges and universities might serve to better prepare workers for the realities of child welfare work. It could also increase the ability of agencies to access ongoing training opportunities.

The ratio of supervisors to direct service workers varied considerably among the agencies surveyed, with some agencies reporting more than 15 employees per supervisor whereas others reported a ratio as low as 1 to 3. Our survey results draw attention to the importance of strong leadership qualities in the supervision of child welfare work. Given the difficult and stressful nature of child welfare work, inadequate levels of supervision and support would make it very difficult for some agencies to successfully implement the above strategies.

iii) Recommendations

- Develop strong supervisory training programs.
- Prioritize relevant in-service training opportunities for all staff.
- Promote agency mission and values that are developed and supported *by* staff, not *for* staff. Ensure that the agency is “walking the talk.”
- Develop and implement agency-specific strategies that provide better support to workers and between workers in order to increase worker morale and effectiveness.
- Regularly reassess the “goodness of fit” between individuals and their job description while acknowledging personal limitations as well as the limitations of the system.

Working conditions

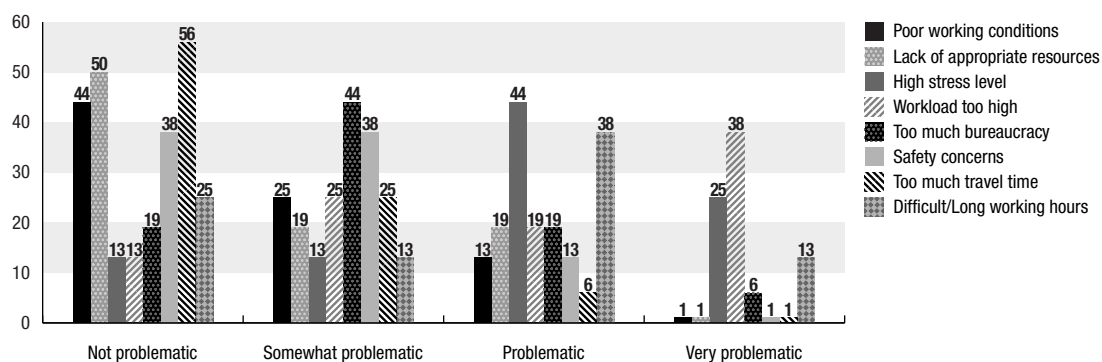
i) Problems experienced

The survey sought feedback on eight possible contributors to working conditions being perceived as unfavourable. They were too much travel time, poor overall working conditions, lack of appropriate resources, high stress level, high workload, too much bureaucracy, safety concerns and difficult/long working hours. The conditions were rated as ranging from not problematic to very problematic (Table 8).

High stress level was identified as being either problematic or very problematic in 70% of cases. A heavy workload was labelled as very problematic in almost 40% of cases. In 50% of responses, long working hours were problematic or very problematic.

Interestingly, poor working conditions, lack of resources and too much travel time were rated as not problematic in over 43% of the cases, and none of the three held any ranking in the very problematic category. Too much bureaucracy was rated as somewhat problematic in 45% of the cases, not problematic in 19% of the cases and problematic in another 19% of the cases.

Table 8 Problems experienced – Working conditions



ii) Strategies employed

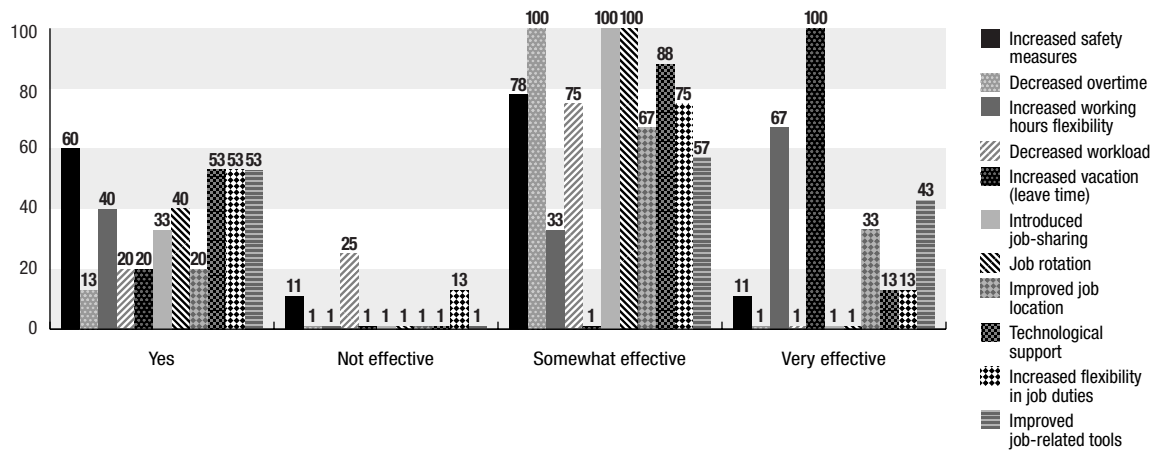
Strategies employed to improve working conditions were also rated as not effective, somewhat effective or very effective, and the results were as follows (Table 9):

- Increased safety measures: Implemented in 60% of responses, somewhat effective almost 80% of the time, very effective 10% of the time.
- Decreased overtime: Implemented in 12% of responses, somewhat effective 100% of the time.
- Increased flexibility in working hours: Implemented in 40% of responses, very effective 68% of the time.
- Decreased workload: Implemented in 20% of responses, somewhat effective 75% of the time.
- Increased vacation (leave time): Implemented in 20% responses, very effective 100% of the time.
- Job-sharing: Implemented in 33% of responses, somewhat effective 100% of the time.
- Job rotation: Implemented in 40% of responses, somewhat effective 100% of the time.
- Improved job location: Implemented in 20% of responses, very effective in 32% of cases.
- Technological support: Implemented in 54% of responses, very effective 12% of the time, somewhat effective 86% of the time.

- Increased flexibility in job duties: Implemented in 54% of responses, not effective 12% of the time, somewhat effective or very effective 88% of the time
- Improved job-related tools: Implemented in 54% of responses, somewhat effective or very effective 100% of the time.

Decreasing overtime and workload expectations, and increasing vacation (leave) time and opportunities for job flexibility were strategies that ranked as highly successful when implemented.

Table 9 Strategies employed – Working conditions



This supports the findings in the literature that employees are facing a significant increase in the number of hours required to meet the demands of the job, as well as experiencing higher levels of stress associated with complex caseloads. It is important to acknowledge, however, that many child welfare agencies work within financial constraints that limit their ability to implement these strategies. For remote communities, isolation may further compound these challenges.

Although the literature does not cite unsafe working conditions as being a major concern of child welfare workers, it does speak to the increasing complexity of caseloads. Interestingly enough, increasing safety measures was the strategy most used overall and seemed to be successful.

iii) Recommendations

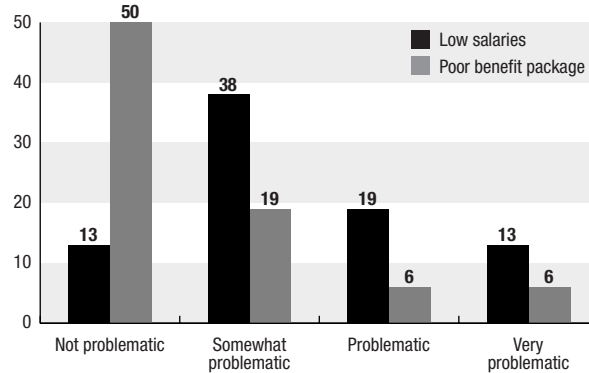
- Encourage flexible working conditions (vacation and leave time, “flex” time, job-sharing) where possible.
- Review size and complexity of caseloads.
- Revisit the time spent on administrative duties.
- Address worker safety through training, policies and procedures.

Salaries and benefits

i) Problems experienced

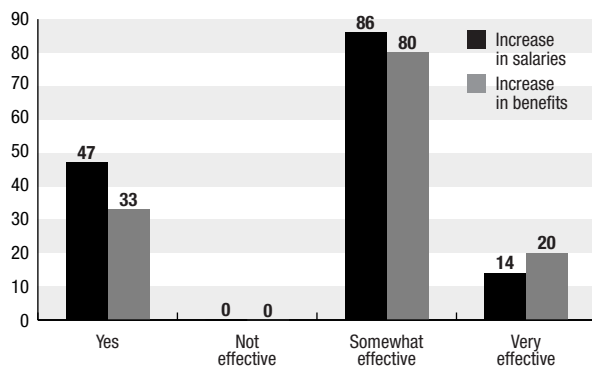
Low salaries and poor benefit packages were ranked from being not problematic to being very problematic (Table 10). Salaries ranked as very problematic in only 10% of responses, and only somewhat problematic or problematic 50% of the time. In 10% of cases, salaries were ranked as not problematic at all. Benefits were seen as not problematic almost 50% of the time, and very problematic or problematic only 10% of the time.

Table 10 Problems experienced – Salaries and benefits



ii) Strategies employed

Table 11 Strategies employed – Salaries and benefits



Increasing salaries and benefits has been problematic for many agencies due to fiscal restraints and salary freezes. Salary increases were implemented in 47% of the cases, and were rated as very effective 14% of the time and somewhat effective 86% of the time (Table 11). Improvements to benefits were tried in 33% of agencies, where they were rated as very effective 20% of the time and somewhat effective 80% of the time.

Increases to salaries and benefits were effective in a limited way. Similarly, in the literature, financial compensation is cited less frequently than are recognition and support on the part of management.

iii) Recommendations

- Identify salary increases as a priority in agencies where they fall short of the marketplace norms, taking into account workload, experience and living conditions.

Conclusion

Surveyed agencies indicated that recruiting and retaining workers has become more difficult over the past 10 years. Although the overall vacancy rate is fairly low at 5%, there is a clear trend toward high turnover rates within the first two years of employment, after which it remains fairly stable. All agencies surveyed are actively addressing current and predicted staff shortages as well as a growing dissatisfaction among child welfare workers by implementing some level of recruitment and retention strategies.

Overall, improving salaries and benefits did not appear to be particularly successful, whereas strategies that addressed working environment and working conditions seemed to be the most effective in recruiting and retaining workers.

Our survey results concur with current literature in identifying the most effective retention and recruitment strategies as being ones that encourage job flexibility and mobility as well as training and career advancement opportunities in a supportive environment where the work accomplished is both recognized and validated.

Implementation of some recommendations could occur on a national level, and this could be spearheaded by the CWLC. Others may be best addressed on a regional level, with pooling of resources among agencies serving to facilitate realization. In other instances, agency-specific approaches may be most effective.

Given the number of recent studies on issues of recruitment and retention and given that recommendations are similar from study to study, the focus should be on using mechanisms that will facilitate sharing of information as well as of resources. To facilitate this process, local subcommittees could be created (either regionally or provincially). These would be spearheaded by the CWLC and would be mandated to do the following:

- Analyze and prioritize the recommendations. (Seeking input from direct services staff at a local level would be an important prerequisite for prioritization.)
- Determine their impact locally.
- Determine their feasibility.
- Develop an implementation plan for those recommendations that could be implemented.
- Develop a strategic plan for those recommendations that could not be implemented but that are deemed a priority.
- Identify successful marketing tools and approaches by region.
- Develop strategies to attract more diversity in recruits.
- Draw on all opportunities to improve the public image of child welfare work in general, and more specifically, the area of child protection.

Summary of recommendations

- Develop strong supervisory training programs.
- Prioritize relevant in-service training opportunities for all staff.
- Promote agency mission and values that are developed and supported *by* staff, not *for* staff. Ensure that the agency is “walking the talk.”
- Develop and implement agency-specific strategies that provide better support to workers and between workers in order to increase worker morale and effectiveness.
- Regularly reassess the “goodness of fit” between individuals and their job description while acknowledging personal limitations as well as the limitations of the system.
- Encourage flexible working conditions (vacation and leave time, “flex” time, job-sharing) where possible.
- Review size and complexity of caseloads.
- Revisit the time spent on administrative duties.
- Address worker safety through training, policies and procedures.
- Identify salary increases as a priority in agencies where they fall short of the marketplace norms, taking into account workload, experience and living conditions.

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Notes



**Centre of Excellence
for Child Welfare**

**Centre d'excellence pour
la protection et le bien-être des enfants**

Toronto

Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
246 Bloor Street West
Toronto ON M5S 1A1
(416) 978-8845

Montréal

Institut de recherche pour
le développement social
des jeunes
1001, de Maisonneuve Est
7^e étage
Montréal QC H2L 4R5
(514) 896-3570

Ottawa

Child Welfare League of Canada/
Ligue pour le bien-être de l'enfance
du Canada
209-75 Albert
Ottawa ON K1P 5E7
(613) 235-4412

First Nations Research Site

First Nations Child and Family
Caring Society of Canada
c/o Faculty of Social Work
University of Manitoba
413A Tier Building
Winnipeg MB R3T 2N2
(204) 474-8261