BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE AND RETENTION OF
RURAL CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

A Project

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Social Work
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

by

Annie Lynne Hockett

SPRING
2012
BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE AND RETENTION OF
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Department of Social Work
Abstract

of

BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE AND RETENTION OF

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by

Annie Lynne Hockett

Child Welfare Services (CWS) programs have historically struggled with retaining social services staff. This study examines staff retention among rural CWS agencies to determine if certain characteristics of rural practice impact staff longevity. This study collects qualitative and quantitative data from social service staff employed in 16 rural California counties. Findings suggest that workers' personal and professional lives frequently overlap given the nature of rural counties, however the frequency of these encounters had no statistically significant impact on staff retention. The ability to maintain boundaries between one's personal and professional self were explored and found to be a source of conflict for many workers. Respondents cited the importance of peer debriefing to help cope with work challenges, and the role community safety plays in staff retention and overall job satisfaction.

______________________________
Francis Yuen, DSW, Professor

Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe deep gratitude to my colleagues at Tuolumne County Child Welfare Services who provided me with support and encouragement throughout this project.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social workers employed with public child protection agencies face incredibly challenging work conditions. Among these challenges are extremely high caseloads that cannot be managed effectively, limited resources and supervision, and inadequate training opportunities. Given such conditions, many social workers leave the field of child protection to seek more desirable employment. The turnover of child welfare social workers has been studied extensively for the last several years, however research studies have focused primarily on social workers in large metropolitan areas. Only recently has attention been paid to the factors influencing workforce turnover in rural communities.

Working in rural areas provides an additional set of complicating factors. Not only are resources more scarce, but workers face unique challenges by living in the same small community in which they work. These challenges may include high visibility, unwelcomed community encounters and the management of both personal and professional boundaries. While these characteristics have been causally linked to decreased worker retention in rural child protection agencies, research is somewhat sparse in this area. With twenty-one of California’s Counties being classified as rural (Brooks, 2005), this appears to be a population worth exploring.

The State of California is facing an unprecedented fiscal shortfall. Given the current budget deficit facing California, child protection agencies around the state are
being forced to cut costs while still operating under strict mandates to provide services to the state’s most vulnerable children. This fiscal crisis is causing increased difficulties on counties experiencing high worker turnover. The cost of recruiting and hiring new staff is significant. The vacancies left in some of these agencies results in increased caseloads to the remaining social workers who are already carrying caseloads that exceed the recommended size. The struggling economy in California is causing families to be referred to child protection agencies at record rates. This strain on an already tenuous system is making the issue of staff retention more critical than ever.

**Background of Problem**

The rate in which child welfare workers are leaving the field has been described as a workforce crisis (Child Welfare League of America, 2002). While turnover rates have varied, current estimates suggest the rate of child welfare workers leaving the field range from 20% to as high as 100% annually in certain locations (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003). Such trends have major financial implications to public welfare agencies. The estimated cost of to fill a vacancy is approximately $17,000, and the average time required to fill a position ranges from 7-13 weeks (Cyphers, 2005; Daly, Dudley, Finnegan, Jones & Christiansen, 2000). With the average length of stay for a social worker in child welfare services ranging between two and seven years, and fewer college undergraduate and graduate students entering the field (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Cicero-Reese & Clark, 1998), the workforce is often
comprised of highly inexperienced workers with little to no educational background in the field of social work. This undoubtedly can have profound negative impacts on the consumers of child welfare services.

While research has demonstrated recruitment and retention are difficult for the field of child protective services, there lacks a clear understanding as to why the issue is so problematic. Researchers have evaluated workplace conditions and individual worker characteristics, and certain themes have emerged. High caseloads, demanding workloads, unsatisfactory supervision/management and emotional fatigue have all been cited as contributing factors in worker burnout and subsequent turnover.

Perhaps the most commonly cited theme is that of high and demanding caseloads. Multiple analyses have been completed on this issue and new caseload recommendations have been made. Despite the evidence suggesting that caseloads must be reduced in order to provide adequate services to children and families, these recommendations have not translated into any practice modifications. As a result, the budget methodologies implemented in 1984 are still in operation today and workers on average carry caseloads two to three times higher than recommended (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2002).

From a historical perspective, the upswing in caseloads has been in motion for the last several decades. As a profession, child welfare services used to be viewed as a prestigious profession that required a highly skilled and competent individual. In the
early 1960’s the field merged with public assistance, which historically placed less emphasis on educational achievement. When the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 was passed, agencies were faced with an onslaught of reports. To combat this, agencies began lowering staff qualifications in order to achieve an adequate sized workforce. This reduction in staff qualifications is believed to be the beginning of what some call the deprofessionalization of the field (CWLA, 2002). This shift has resulted in workers with minimal education, training and experience occupying positions in already struggling social service agencies.

Efforts to reform the system have been met with great resistance. Rather than increased autonomy and enhanced resources, agencies have received increased oversight and enhanced regulatory restrictions. Perhaps the most recent example can be found in the passage of Assembly Bill 636. Known as the California Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, AB 636 requires child welfare agencies to meet certain performance standards. Failure to meet these standards could result in fiscal penalties to counties. Given the general staff shortage across the nation, agencies are struggling to meet these performance thresholds. As a result, staff are being asked to dedicate more time monitoring data compliance than providing direct service to clients.

Recent California budget cuts have been observed to have a disproportionate affect on rural communities (Belanger, 2008) thus increasing worker vulnerability in these areas. With estimated turnover rates higher in rural settings (Sprang, Clark, &
Whitt-Woosley, 2007), the issue of worker retention, specifically in small communities is one of incredible importance. Despite the timeliness and relevancy of this workforce issue in rural communities, relatively little research is available on what specific factors add to worker turnover in non-urban settings.

Statement of the research problem

Utilizing previous literature related on social worker retention, this study takes a deeper look at factors associated with worker turnover and the resulting effects on those employed in rural communities. The study examines individual, organizational and community factors in order to look holistically at the issue of turnover. The researcher will pay close attention to the concept of worker visibility. The researcher hypothesizes that high levels of visibility can affect worker satisfaction. The researcher will aim to determine if decreases in work satisfaction translates into potential for worker turnover.

Purpose of the study

The study examines the use of personal and professional boundaries for child welfare services employees working in rural California counties. This study explores how workers maintain such boundaries and how balancing these two roles affect worker retention. The study will also examine factors believed to lead to worker turnover and evaluate if rural practitioners report challenges similar to their urban counterparts. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the practice knowledge of rural social workers and
extract practical methods that enable workers to manage the fine line between their professional and private lives and maintain overall job satisfaction. Once analyzed, practice recommendations will be provided.

**Theoretical framework**

Several theoretical orientations are useful to consider when evaluating the cause and effect of worker turnover in the field of child welfare services. These include the ecosystems perspective (Germain & Gitterman, 1995), the rational/social exchange perspective (Homans, 1958) and the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2002).

The ecosystem perspective is perhaps the most widely accepted and most applied perspective in the field of social work. It surmises that both individuals and their environments can be fully understood only if one examines the relationship they have on one another. Individuals strive for a goodness of fit within their environment and in order to achieve this, individuals may adapt their behaviors to achieve a satisfactory balance (Johnson & Rhodes, 2010). Using this perspective, one could argue that social workers in the field of child welfare services are continuing to adapt to the ongoing changes occurring in the field, while simultaneously searching for that goodness of fit. This process can be difficult, and if unsuccessful, could lead workers to seek a more harmonious employment fit elsewhere.

Overlapping the ecosystem perspective is organizational theory. This theory suggests that stress within an organization results in psychological strain due to
demanding work conditions. As this tension builds, workers begin to contemplate leaving. If this pressure is not relieved, workers will voluntarily terminate their employment (Kim, 2010).

Research has shown that in addition to formally terminating their employment, many social workers in the field of child welfare frequently contemplate leaving (Strolin, Mccarthy, Lawson, Smith, Caringi, & Bronstein, 2008). The relational/social exchange perspective suggests that human behaviors are purposeful, goal directed and aimed at serving an individual’s best interest (Johnson & Rhodes, 2010). When applying this perspective to the issue of retention, it helps explain the frequent job contemplation that occurs among child welfare social workers. If workers are not experiencing high levels of job satisfaction, they may seek employment they believe will lead to greater overall happiness.

When isolating the concept of compassion fatigue and the feelings of emotional exhaustion some workers experience, an additional perspective emerges. The strength perspective has been applied to the concept of compassion fatigue and is believed to help prevent its onset. The strength perspective teaches practitioners to shift the focus of intervention from problematic behaviors to the positive qualities of the client. By focusing on unique client strengths a social worker can experience increased feeling of hope and optimism. This can help social workers view challenges in their work
environment in a more global perspective, and can improve overall worker satisfaction (Bell, 2003).

**Definition of terms**

**Social Worker:** Pursuant to California Government Code, every agency receiving federal funds to carry out social services must be overseen by a governing board that ensures recruitment and hiring activities are carried out via a merit system. All of the Counties selected for this research study contract with Merit Systems Services (MSS). MSS defines a social worker as one who performs comprehensive assessments to determine various needs of the client. In addition, a Social Worker’s duties include case plan development, client advocacy, resource directory and the establishment of a therapeutic relationship with those they serve. (Merit System Services, 2011).

**Child welfare services:** In the State of California, Child Welfare Services (CWS) is a branch of the Department of Social Services. Formally known as Child Protective Services (CPS), this branch of government is responsible for investigating reports of child maltreatment and intervening in situations where a child’s health, safety and/or well-being is at risk. CWS also works to reunify families who have been separated because of abuse and/or neglect and connect at risk families with services that will help address the challenges they are experiencing. The terms Child Protective Services (CPS) and Child Welfare Services (CWS) are often used interchangeably.
Rural: While many definitions exist for the term rural, perhaps the most accepted explanation of this term can be found from the United States Census Bureau. According to the Census Bureau, a rural location is any area not classified as an urban area. Urban areas are defined as core areas blocks with a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile, and/or subareas with an overall population density of at least 500 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Using these definitions, all counties participating in this study are classified as rural.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are at the basis of this research project:

- Social workers employed in CWS are necessary to protect children.
- Recruitment and retention strategies are necessary to maintain a qualified CWS workforce.
- Budget shortfalls in the State of California are having negative impacts on the delivery of social services.

Justification

While scholars have been advocating for more inquiry into the field of rural social work, the amount of research available remains limited. Practicing child welfare social work in rural areas presents added challenges given the limited resources and greater needs of the population. Poverty rates are higher in these areas and challenges with
substance abuse and mental illness are exacerbated given the severe resource limitations (Belanger, 2008). As a result, children and families in rural areas are interfacing with agencies not equipped to provide adequate services. As a profession, the field of Social Work is dedicated to reducing barriers to services and advocating for the needs of those struggling to achieve an appropriate standard of living. This cannot be done without a stable child welfare services workforce. This study will aim to draw more attention to the characteristics impacting worker retention in small communities and learn what mitigating factors exist to keep educated, qualified and dedicated professionals serving the state's most vulnerable children and families.

**Limitations**

Obvious threats to this study’s internal validity include the non-laboratory setting and the participant’s knowledge of the research topic. Efforts to ensure internal validity include the use of a uniform instrument and the study design that allows participants to take part in the survey only once. The non-experimental design prohibits the ability to identify causation between the independent and dependent variables. The limited external validity of this design will not allow the findings to be applied to the general population. It is the researcher’s intention to draw conclusions that may assist in better understanding the unique working conditions for rural child welfare workers.

Additional limitations include the use of participant self-reporting and possible bias in reporting. The measurement tool used in this survey was created by the researcher
for the purposes of this study and is not an instrument commonly used in assessing issues of social worker turnover, burnout, and job satisfaction. The small sample size of participants was an additional limitation of this study.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review provides an examination of the academic research, professional writings and government reports available on the issue of social worker retention in the field of child protective services. While this topic has been examined extensively, relatively little information is available on how this issue affects social workers employed in rural settings. This review will address environmental factors connected to the physical work environment as well as individual worker characteristics associated with social worker longevity. Major themes present in this review include issues of turnover, burnout, and boundary maintenance as they relate to rural social work practice.

Turnover

Turnover among Child Welfare social workers has been a topic of discussion for many years. With tenure estimated at two years for the average child welfare services worker (Cicero-Reese & Clark, 1998) and annual turnover estimates as high 100% in some areas (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Ellett, Ettett, & Rugutt, 2003) efforts have been taken to understand what is causing child welfare social workers to leave the field at astonishing rates. The majority of the literature has found that turnover can be linked to the categories individual factors, supervisory factors and organizational factors (Stronlin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007).

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the Alliance for Children and Families joined with American Public Human Services Association (ASPHA) in the fall of 2000 and conducted a national child welfare workforce study. Surveys were sent to 43 states, including California. Annual turnover throughout the participating states measured 20% and while California turnover rates measured 21%. Nationwide, preventable turnover was calculated at 67%. This study found that overall vacancies rates were lower than originally anticipated. The authors explained this finding by suggesting the frequency in which child welfare services agencies encounter turnover has resulted in many organizations becoming highly efficient at filling vacancies quickly (Cypher, 2001). It should be noted that all participating California counties were large and there was no representation from rural agencies.

The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) analyzed data from fiscal year 2002-2003 to determine turnover rates of different child welfare services personnel. Turnover rates for administrative personnel measured 7.1%. The rates were
9.8% for social work assistants, 9.5% for child welfare social workers and 8.6% for child welfare supervisors. This study looked only at problematic turnover such as demotions and terminations initiated by both the employee and the agency. Acceptable turnover in the form of promotion and retirement were not included in this analysis (Clark, 2005). CalSWEC conducted a similar study in 1998 and the data collected in this study showed slight improvements on turnover statistics for child welfare workers (Erbes, 2009).

In 2004, APHSA conducted a national workforce study. This study determined that different work positions influenced tenure of employees. The average years of employment for a child protection worker was determined to be five years. Retention was rated at three years for adoptions social workers and nine years for supervisors (Godsave, 2006). Another survey involving all 58 counties in California found that the median length of employment for social workers was three and a half years while supervisors remained an average of only four years (Clark & Flucher, 2005).

The County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) contracted with CPS Human Resource Services in 2006 and requested an analysis of staff turnover over a five-year period. The purpose of the survey was to look at previous data and determine which employees were at most risk of leaving. Twenty-three counties participated in this project and this sample was representative of both rural and urban agencies. Case carrying child welfare social workers were found most at risk of terminating their
employment and researchers concluded that these workers typically leave within the first five years of employment (Godsave, 2006).

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) were interested in looking at the relationship between staff turnover and system functioning. Utilizing the SafeMeasures® database that provides information on county compliance to state and federal outcome measures, researchers analyzed approximately 40,000 individual cases. This equated to nearly 3,000 social workers. In addition to the information collected from SafeMeasures®, researchers also obtained information on salaries, benefits, turnover rates and staffing levels from the 12 California counties participating in this study. After analyzing this data, researchers delineated three different clusters, which represented high, moderate and low organizational functioning. Those counties with the highest functional ratings had the lowest turnover rates, higher salaries, no requirement for being on-call or working mandatory overtime, and demonstrated good compliance with practice standards. These same counties had the lowest rates of re-abuse for the foster youth they serve (NCCD, 2006).

Using SafeMeasures® data along with data from the California Child Welfare Services database, researchers at the Center for Social Services Research at U.C. Berkley have been closely monitoring re-abuse rates along with a number of other compliance measures. This analysis has shown that rural counties fare different in certain outcome
measures. Rural counties have a higher rate of overall foster care placements, however beat out the urban counties in timely reunification (Mick, 2005).

**Caseloads**

Passed in April of 2000, Senate Bill 2030 mandated the California Department of Social Services to conduct a statewide evaluation of child welfare services workload. SB 2030 was intended to look at the budget methodologies that were initially established in 1984 and determine if the current method for allocating basic child welfare services to the state of California was adequate (American Humane Association, 2000). The findings of SB 2030 showed that the caseload standards fueling the CWS allocation are grossly outdated. The 1984 standards contrasted with both the minimum and optimum standards elicited by the SB 2030 workload study are depicted in Table #1 (American Humane Association, 2000). Despite the results of SB 2030, outdated caseload standards still dictate allocations for the 58 California counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Component</th>
<th>Minimum Standard</th>
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<td>Emergency Response</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.88</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Maintenance</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>10.15</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunification</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>11.94</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Placement</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>16.42</td>
<td>54</td>
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Some of the literature has distinguished between caseload and workload. While a social worker’s caseload can be represented in a numerical figure, actual workload can be
more difficult to calculate. Workload is measured by the amount of time required to
complete all tasks associated with job functions. This can include providing direct client
services, court appearances, interagency meetings, supervision and all associated
paperwork and data entry (Strolin, McCarthy, & Carigi, 2007). Older studies have not
found a link between workload and turnover, however these studies are over a decade old
and do not account for the recent legislative changes that have resulted in more mandated
services and increased data accountability. Additional financial assistance has not
accompanied these new mandated services and workers are now required to do more with
less. Adding to this difficulty is the infringement of mandatory furlough days due to the
California fiscal shortfall.

While caseloads and workload remain topics of great discussion, multiple other
factors have been linked to social worker turnover. Some of these include systematic and
organizational issues, while others focus on the emotional toll child protection work can
have on an individual worker. Compassion fatigue has been a concept that has received
increased attention as efforts are underway to determine the reasons child welfare social
workers leave the field. This term is often used interchangeably with terms such as
burnout, vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress although these three terms can
have different meanings.
Compassion Fatigue

Traumatologist, Dr. Charles Figley, coined the term compassion fatigue. The term which is often a synonym for secondary traumatic stress, is used to describe the natural desensitization that occurs in individuals working with traumatized populations. Figley initially surmised these feelings of emotional numbing were best described by the term burnout. As he continued to explore professionals’ feelings of sadness, depression, sleeplessness and anxiety, Dr. Figley realized that compassion fatigue could result from a single event, while burnout is more appropriately viewed as a process (Figley, 1995).

While secondary traumatic stress cannot be found in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), it is believed to have symptoms nearly identical to those present in individuals suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The onset of symptoms has been associated with unresolved childhood trauma on behalf of the professional (Salson & Figley, 2003). Other known factors that can contribute to compassion fatigue include poor self-care, inability to control work stressors and an overall lack of job satisfaction (Radey & Figley, 2007). Compassion fatigue is the preferred terminology to describe secondary traumatic stress as it is believed to be a less stigmatizing term. (Bride, 2007; Radley & Figley, 2007; Sprang, Clark & Whitt-Woosley, 2007).

In a study of 282 licensed clinical social workers in California, over 70% of respondents reported experiencing at least one symptom of secondary traumatic stress in
a given week. Approximately 55% of this sample displayed multiple symptoms associated with the PTSD clinical clusters of intrusion, avoidance and hyper-arousal (Bride, 2007). In a study evaluating child welfare social workers self-reported scores of compassion fatigue, researchers in Florida found that young female workers appeared most vulnerable. Length of employment did not appear to be a factor in the development of symptoms, while those holding management positions showed increased compassion fatigue scores (Van Hook, 2008).

In a survey of 363 child protection workers from the state of Colorado, researchers found that approximately half of the sample demonstrated a “high” or “extremely high” risk of developing compassion fatigue. Additionally, researchers determined that those with the ability to find satisfaction in their employment despite challenging work conditions showed lower levels of compassion fatigue and burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006).

The development of compassion fatigue appears to be an unfortunate casualty for workers employed in child welfare agencies. Some research has indicated that professionals with specialized training in trauma work are less apt to develop problems associated with compassion fatigue (Sprang, Clark, Whitt-Woosley, 2007). For those without this training, attention must be paid to the potential impacts compassion fatigue can have on both the social worker and the families receiving services. Aside from the emotional toll compassion fatigue can take on individual workers, one suffering from this
condition runs the risk of losing objectivity in their work with families. This loss can translate into poor service delivery. If the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue are not identified and addressed early, the families could ultimately be the ones that suffer (Salston & Figley, 2003).

**Compassion Satisfaction**

The opposite of compassion fatigue is compassion satisfaction. This term is defined as the benefits derived from working with traumatized and/or suffering individuals (Figley, 1995), and as previously illustrated can have a mitigating role on the development of compassion fatigue. The power of compassion satisfaction in retaining child welfare workers was showcased in a study involving Canadian child welfare services employees. This study found that despite reporting high levels of emotional exhaustion, 95% of child welfare workers simultaneously reported high levels of job satisfaction (Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007). Efficacy beliefs, sense of community and effective coping strategies have also been linked to increased job satisfaction for workers employed in crisis driven fields (Cicognani, Pietrantoni, Palestini, & Prati, 2009).

Coping strategies were isolated in a study on emergency workers exposed to stressful work environments. Effective strategies were found to be maintaining high self-efficacy and having a strong sense of community. The use of such strategies were found to mitigate the effects of burnout while self-destructive coping strategies such as
distraction and self-criticism were found to intensity feelings of compassion fatigue (Cicognani, Pietrantoni, Palestini & Prati, 2009). Anderson (2000) found similar findings and used the phrase emotionally engaged coping strategies to describe the workers ability to actively manage the stressful person in environment transaction.

**Burnout**

The concept of burnout became a public interest in the early 1970’s and Herbert Freudenberger and Christina Maslach are largely credited for its technical application to the fields of psychology and sociology. Burnout is a catch all term that is used to describe a number of different psychological responses to workplace stress. Elements of burnout include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment that occur when professionals are forced to work in situations plagued with workplace stress. Burnout can lead to worker cynicism, psychological impairments, and problems with interpersonal relationships (Sprang, Clark & Whitt-Woosley, 2007). Workers experiencing burnout feel overextended and depleted of both physical and emotional resources (Kim, 2001). The term vicarious trauma is used interchangeably in the literature to describe this phenomenon.

A comparison study was conducted that evaluated the job perception among child welfare workers with social workers employed in other settings. Four hundred and eight participants took part in this study, seventy of which were public child welfare employees. Results found that public child welfare workers had significantly higher rates
of depersonalization and decreased feeling of personal accomplishment compared to child welfare social workers in the private sector (Kim, 2001).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a widely used and acceptable tool used to study the concept of burnout. Developed by Christine Maslach, the tool is designed to look at the three main elements of burnout which include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. In a study of 177 social workers from the state of Missouri, the MBI was distributed. Researchers found increased levels of emotional exhaustion had an inverse negative effect on feelings of personal accomplishment. When isolating for job exit, emotional exhaustion was the only element of burnout found to have a direct impact on workers leaving the field. (Drake & Yadama, 1996).

The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) is another frequently used tool to measure burnout in the social service field. A group of German researches developed this tool after surmising the MBI framed most questions in a negative way (Demerouti & Baker, 2007). Using the OLBI, researchers examined burnout rates and secondary traumatic stress in social workers responsible for conducting forensic interviews with child victims of abuse and neglect. Sixty-six subjects completed an online version of the OLBI. Results suggested that the work of forensic interviewers did not have a statistically significant impact on levels of reported burnout. Instead, dissatisfaction with the participant’s organization was the largest predictor of burnout (Perron & Hiltz, 2006).
Organizational Factors

Salary is a factor routinely mentioned in discussions surrounding worker retention. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobs in social services such as a child welfare social worker rate as the top five worst paying jobs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Unlike the traditional supply and demand model that dictates funding to many occupational fields, the salaries of child welfare staff are dictated by public policy and resulting federal, state and local regulations (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Some suggest that a master’s level employee makes approximately $9000 less annually working in a child welfare agency compared to a similar position in a different human services field (Strolin, McCarthy, Caringi, 2007).

The APHSA national workforce study conducted in 2004 highlighted the importance of compensation in social worker retention. Researchers involved in this study noted that between 2000 and 2004, the average salary of a child welfare services social worker rose by 6.3% while the federal cost of living index increased by 9.7%. This same study cited a perceived imbalance of workload demands and monetary compensation among participants (APHSA, 2005).

While poor pay has been found repeatedly to be an indicator of job dissatisfaction (CWLA, 2002; Strolin, McCarthy, Caringi, 2007; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006), a study conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency found that only 5% of surveyed child welfare workers reported a salary increase would resulted in continued
employment (NCCD, 2006). A statewide survey of California child welfare workers cited low wages as the third least important factor impacting their decision to stay (Cyphers, 2001).

The impact of organizational factors on employee satisfaction is not unique to the field of social work. The role of management and workplace harmony can be found across disciplines. Poor supervision is cited throughout the literature as a major reason social workers leave (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; APHSA, 2005; Cyphers, 2001; Jacquet, Clark, Moraze, & Withers, 2008). In a study involving 765 masters’ level social workers who had gained employment with child protection agencies through a work incentive program known as title IV-E, supervisor satisfaction was found to be more indicative of worker retention than overall caseload size (Jacquet, Clark, Moraze, & Withers, 2008). Another study involving 572 first line social workers, supervisors and managers were asked to rate their job satisfaction in seven areas including workload, quality of supervision, salary, opportunities for advancement, being valued, agency cultural sensitivity and physical working conditions. Researchers from Chapin Hall Center for Children compiled this data into a measure of overall job satisfaction and quality of supervision was found to have the largest impact on a workers satisfaction (Jacquet, Clark, Moraze, & Withers, 2008).

In contrast with the finding of the aforementioned studies, some research has determined supervisory factors are less indicative of staff turnover compared to general
organizational factors. In a survey of 668 social workers, researchers selected participants from agencies with high turnover (above 17% annually) and compared data with workers employed in agencies with low reported turnover. Analysis found that supervisory support and competence did not affect worker satisfaction and instead organizational factors were highly influential. These organizational factors included clear job expectations and knowledge, the ability to balance job demands with one’s private life, a sense of efficacy, peer support and adequate training and technology. Effective work-life fit was found to be highly predictive of social worker retention in agencies with both high and low turnover rates (Strolin, Mccarthy, Lawson, Smith, Caringi & Bronstein, 2008). While this work-life fit is one that is routinely discussed among child welfare services social workers, there is virtually no research that looks in depth at how this issue is connected to social worker burnout and turnover.

Another reason often cited for the increase in worker turnover is the increase in regulatory functions and limited time allowable to provide direct service. Workers are often required to work overtime in order to accomplish required tasks and paperwork, and spend the smallest percentage of their time working directly with families. This realization can often lead to disheartened workers who realize their desire to help at risk families is overshadowed by state mandates and fiscal restraints. A study conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency found that 75% of child welfare social workers who left their employment cited mandatory overtime as an issue that influenced their decision to leave (NCCD, 2006).
Individual Factors

Specific characteristics of worker retention were isolated in a study that collected data from various focus groups involving social workers from rural, suburban and large metropolitan settings. The characteristics associated with increased retention included: effective time management, organizational skills, a nonjudgmental attitude, self-confidence, commitment to clients and the larger profession, compassion, firmness, intuition, ability to make quick decisions, strong self efficacy, ability to work as a team and independently, self advocacy and the enjoyment of problem solving. Respondents of this study spoke specifically about their ability to compartmentalize work and private life and indicated their ability to set clear boundaries between the office and home created reduced stress, anxiety, tension and fear. Methods employed to maintain such boundaries included not ruminating on thoughts of work while at home, self-care through exercise and hobbies, vacationing, avoiding media that involves child abuse and neglect themes, and not engaging with friends or family members who are experiencing social duress (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

Some have linked education levels to the problem of worker turnover. Agencies requiring degrees in social work tend to have lower turnover rates (CWLA, 2002) and the presence of a Master’s degree in social work has been associated with increased worker retention (APHSA; 2005, Weaver, Chang, & Gil de Gibaja, 2006). With fewer college graduates gravitating towards a career in social work, relief does not appear in sight. Job intensity, low pay, and social stigma are factors believed to directly affect an individual’s
desire to enter the field of child protection. Agencies offering educational reimbursement have shown a statistically significant relationship with staff retention (NCCD, 2006). The completion of a cost-benefit analysis suggests there is an overall savings to the agencies if financial incentives for higher education are provided (Godsave, 2006).

Age, gender, marital status and ethnicity have been isolated as contributing factors in keeping workers employed at public child welfare settings. Workers under the age of 30 have been found more likely to leave (NCCD, 2006; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007). In a study of worker retention in public child welfare departments, individuals identified as Caucasian and African American were more likely to leave compared to study participants who identified themselves as Latino or Asian Americans. In addition, married social workers were found more apt to exit than unmarried workers (Weaver, Chang, & Gil de Gibaja, 2006).

**Safety**

The field of child protection is by its nature confrontational. Families referred to child welfare services can present with a myriad of social challenges. These challenges often take the form of chronic substance abuse, extreme poverty and severe family violence. Given the emotional intensity of child protection work, social workers employed in this field are often the victim of verbal threats and physical assaults. Estimates of workers experiencing verbal abuse while on the job have ranged from as low as 42% to as high as 92% (Jayaratne, Vinokur-Kaplan, Nagda, & Chess, 1996; Newhill &
Wexler, 1996). Although lower, the estimates of workers being the recipient of actual physical violence or bodily harm have been shown to be quite high. These numbers range from 2.8% up to 24% (Jayaratne et al., 1996; Tully, Kropf, & Price, 1993). Given the lack of any federal registry to record threats and actual acts of violence, some believe many incidents go unreported and therefore the severity of the problem is not well understood (Fox & Harmon, 2008).

A study conducted in a rural area of Montana found verbal and physical threats caused 17% of workers surveyed to experience a heightened level of fear on a monthly basis and an additional 14% of workers to feel frightened on a weekly basis. These researchers also found that the threats of violence and verbal abuse caused 62% of the study respondents to consider leaving their place of employment (Horejsi, Garthwait, & Rolando, 1994).

Generalized fears and concerns of harm do not appear limited to those working in a full time capacity. Criss (2010) found that social work students working in child welfare programs were also the victims of verbal and physical violence. This study found that hearing veteran social workers talk about their experiences involving verbal and physical violence influenced the level of fear the students displayed. Unlike previous studies addressing the topic of social worker safety and workplace violence, this student study included threat of a lawsuit as a form of verbal abuse, and this was found to be the students’ most feared category. Threat of property damage was rated as their least feared
category. Unlike studies that have connected social worker fears with desires to leave the profession, this student study found no support in this connection and indicated case debriefing allowed the students process the underlying reasons for violent threats (Criss, 2010).

Fears can be exacerbated if a social worker feels his or her family may be in jeopardy. This fear can lead to feelings of hypervigilence especially when the fears are connected to a social worker’s child. In a study of rural Australian social workers, researchers found that levels of hypervigilence were especially high for employees working with perpetrators of violent crimes or child sexual abuse. Workers employed in these areas reported increased attention on their children’s whereabouts at all times and showed increased attention on the social contacts and friendships their children had in the community (Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2003).

Ringstad (2009) examined the effects threats and fears had on the quality of service delivery to clientele. This researcher found that while 70% of the study participants reported being victimized, 22% of the participants admitted to victimizing clients. This victimization took the form of psychological, verbal and physical assault. Gender, ethnicity, age, employment position, and years of experience were not found to have any impact on the study results, while unfavorable workplace conditions were found to be a factor in the development of unprofessional social work behaviors (Ringstad, 2009).
Many researchers evaluating the topic of social worker victimization and its ramifications cite concerns about worker complacency when dealing with aggressive clientele and threatening behaviors (Fox & Harmon, 2008; Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2003; Horejsi, Garthwait, & Rolando, 1994; Ringstad, 2005; Ringstad, 2009). The frequency of threats and violence are believed to cause some to think they are natural elements of the job, which may lead some to overlook or dismiss dangerous warning signs. Fox and Harmon (2008) also suggest that work in child protection leads workers to be in a constant state of crisis, which in turn drains their emotional energy and leads them to become more susceptible to dangerous situations. Such conditions are believed to have an impact on social worker retention, however there is a lack of evidence to fully support this association.

Rural Social Work Practice

Research in the area of rural social work has increased in recent years, however compared to its urban counterpart, research remains limited (Reisbshleger, 2007). Those interested in this topic tend to study rural social work using empirical means and have primarily focused on the challenges of working in such settings. Noted challenges of rural practice include poor pay, high visibility, demands for increased credibility and social and professional isolation.

While poor pay is a common theme throughout the literature on social worker retention, rural agencies fair worse in this area. A child welfare social worker employed
in a rural setting can make approximately $3,000 less annually compared to workers in larger agencies (Merit Services System, 2011). This disparity causes rural agencies to be less competitive with social worker recruitment and typically results in small agencies attracting social workers with less education and training (Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly, & Zubrzycki, 2004).

Aside from organizational factors, researchers have identified unique environmental elements of rural practice that appear related to social worker retention. One such factor is commonly referred to as the “fishbowl effect” (Endacott, et al., 2006). All behavior, both professional and private, is subject to an audience when one lives and works in a rural community. Workers in these settings can find it difficult to maintain a level of privacy as they may live in the same neighborhoods as their clients, eat at the same restaurants and experience unwanted encounters at various other locations within the community.

These high levels of public visibility can lead to detachment and withdrawal from social activities (Pugh, 2007). The resulting social isolation is believed to be an effective mechanism to avoid boundary violations. In order to maintain professional boundaries, social workers may be required to decline social invitations and may choose to avoid certain public settings in order to avoid encountering clients (Schank & Skovholt, 1997). Others have dispelled this notion and argued that workers with primarily urban work
experience dedicate more time to keeping a low public profile compared to workers with mostly rural experience (Halverson & Brownlee, 2010).

Professional expectation differentials among rural and urban social workers is another topic believed to impact worker retention. Child welfare workers in rural settings often feel a duty to remain professional at all times in the event they encounter a client in the community. These feelings are intensified when they are called upon to provide services to those they share a preexisting relationship. Given the multiple roles present in rural social services agencies, and the requirement to serve the public, workers may encounter situations in which they have to provide direct service to a friend, family member, or service provider they have a personal relationship with.

The choice to segregate oneself socially has been connected to the idea of professionalism (Endacott, et al., 2006: Saltman, Gumpert, Allen-Kelly, & Zubrzycki, 2004). Some social workers believe they must remain acting in a professional capacity at all times and this belief can be intensified for workers who practice in rural areas. Social workers in rural areas feel the requirement to blend the personal and professional self to create a professional self-presentation. This translates into feelings of higher expectations and a general lack of privacy (Pugh, 2007). These perceived higher personal and professional expectations have been found more difficult to deal with for younger social workers (Reisbscheeger, 2007) and the overall stress of balancing work and
private life is amplified if these expectations are transferred to the professionals’ spouse or children (Endacott, et al., 2006).

Australian researcher Lonne identified a series of phases for social worker transitioning from an urban to a rural environment. These stages include disorientation, honeymoon, grief and loss, withdrawal, depression, reorganization and adjustment (Green, 2003). Lonne determined these adjustments take between 12 and 18 months to complete. A comparable study addressing a transition from rural to urban is not available but would be helpful to isolate if the difficulties lie entirely on the rural atmosphere, or if inherent challenges exist in any transition between contrasting geographical areas.

Working in a rural community has its share of rewards. Some cited benefits include the ability to focus more on the community, increased networking opportunities and the ability to be more active in community planning, development and advocacy (Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2006). Working in smaller communities also allows for the use of a generalist or holistic approach and allows social workers to experience a wide array of work experience and be creative in their approach with clients.

While efforts to compare rural and urban practice have determined little variation between these practice settings, many rural practitioners acknowledge significant differences. In a study involving a random sample of 1200 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), researchers examined beliefs of certain practice behaviors among rural and urban social workers. Findings revealed urban social workers
were highly opposed to the notion of bartering for services or having multiple relationships with clients. Rural practitioners were more accepting of these behaviors while acknowledging they were practice realities of their settings (Croxton, Jayaratne, & Mattison).

**Dual Relationships**

A dual relationship is a term commonplace in the field of mental health, but rarely discussed in relation to non-clinical social workers. Dual relationships occur when multiple roles exist between a service provider and a client. Dual relationships are inevitable in small communities (Brownlee, 1996) and can result in negative consequences such as personal and professional detachment, emotional guarding, inhibited enjoyment in social setting and impacts on the professional’s objectivity and professional judgment (Brownlee 1996; Pugh, 2007). These impacts are intensified when clinicians have a long-term connection with the community (Endacott, Wood, Judd, Hulbert, Thomas, & Grigg, 2006). These connections can include growing up in the community, attending schools located in the community and having family still living in the community (Endacott, et. al, 2006). Such conditions are believed to be somehow related to social worker burnout, however there is insufficient data available that shows any correction.

More recent literature has focused on the positive attributes of dual relationships. Some believe these overlapping of roles and relationships can have a humanizing effect
for the social worker (Pugh, 2007) and can contribute to the creation of an egalitarian relationship and an anti-professional stance (Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2006). The notion of being an “insider” in one’s community can give the practitioner more credibility in the eyes of the clientele (Nickel, 2004). Increased community involvement, community development and political advocacy are among other factors identified as positive outcomes of working and practicing in rural settings (Pugh, 2007; Green, 2003).

**Recruitment and Retention**

As illustrated, the field of child welfare services is littered with challenges and obstacles that have been proven to cause staff turnover. Adding to the disillusionment is the realization that public opinion for child welfare services social workers is poor and there is a gross undervaluement of the work performed by these individuals (Stolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007). The field is one that is highly scrutinized and such negative perceptions cause the public not to invest resources. This has been exemplified in the recent cuts to social services statewide.

Now that the field is aware of these challenges, more recent research efforts have been directed on recruitment and retention strategies. Out of these studies have come a number of practice recommendations. Some of these recommendations include providing applicants with a detailed and realistic description of job duties and responsibilities (Jordin Institute for Families, 2006; Graef, Potter, & Rhode (in press). Another suggestion is to allow more time for new social workers to acquire a full
caseload as a longer transition and training period has been linked to increased retention (Weaver, Chang, & Gil de Gibaja, 2006). Other suggestions include increased opportunities for “horizontal advancement” for those who are not necessarily interested in supervisory positions but still have an interest in professional advancement (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellet, 2006). Development of peer support programs have been recommended (Weaver, Chang, & Gil de Gibaja, 2006, Gellis, Kim, & Hwang, 2004) in order to provide additional mentorship and support for new workers.

**Summary**

With some challenges well documented, professionals in the field have been advocating for a paradigm shift within the arena of child welfare. Instead of focusing on the negative consequences of the work, some suggest attention be shifted to characteristics that allow social workers to flourish. This suggestion is supported by the belief social workers can maintain inspiration by keeping positive attitudes about their clients, increasing their resources to manage stress, and increase their levels of self-care. Along with these changes, comes the recommendation for appropriate boundary maintenance, good training and effective supervision (Radley & Figley, 2007).

This study will expand on the existing literature and shed more light onto the issue of social worker retention in the field of child protective services. Utilizing factors shown to impact worker longevity, the researcher will examine the characteristics of rural
social work practice and ultimately develop practice recommendations that can assist counties in retaining quality workers.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Recruiting and maintaining quality Child Welfare Services social workers is becoming more of a challenge as qualified personnel are showing hesitance to enter the field, and those who do enter the workforce stay for a short duration. The focus of this study is to examine factors that may be contributing to job exit. Special attention will be paid to the rural areas where recruitment is even more difficult due to non-competitive wages and the belief that working conditions are more difficult due to limited resources.

Study Design and Purpose

The researcher conducted a descriptive quantitative and qualitative study to examine the factors in rural communities that impact a worker's desire to remain working in the field of child protective services. The study examines the use of personal and professional boundaries for child welfare services employees working in rural California counties. The study explores how workers maintain such boundaries and how balancing these two roles affect worker retention. The study also examines factors known to contribute to worker turnover and determine if these factors have a similar impact on rural social workers. The purpose of this study is to examine the practice knowledge of rural social workers and extract practical methods that enable workers to manage the fine
boundary between their professional and personal lives and maintain an adequate level of job satisfaction. Following data analysis, practice recommendations are provided.

The sub-questions for this research study include the following:

1. Does high public visibility impact worker retention?
2. Do social workers use coping skills that increase and/or decrease retention?
3. Do certain public encounters challenge workers ability to maintain appropriate boundaries?
4. Does the ability to separate work from personal life impact worker retention?
5. Does experience living in rural communities help or hinder worker retention?
6. Do organizational factors have an impact on worker turnover?

**Sample**

Research participants consist of child protection social workers employed at county agencies throughout California. These agencies are representative of small rural counties. The California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) indentifies such rural counties through a subcommittee known and the “Twenty Small Counties.” These counties consist of Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Del Norte, Glenn, Inyo, Lake, Lassen, Mariposa, Modoc, Mono, Nevada, Plumas, San Benito, Sierra, Siskiyou, Tehema, Trinity
and Tuolumne. Given the relatively small sample size, surveys were offered to all social workers employed at the abovementioned agencies. Surveys were also provided to management staff and support staff. This non-random purpositive sample was selected to ensure the focus of the study would remain on child protection workers employed in rural settings.

The researcher personally contacted the Program Manager and/or Agency Director of each county to seek permission to include the respective county employees in this study. If permission was granted, the researcher requested a staff electronic mail directory. Nineteen of the twenty counties agreed to participate in this research project. The participating counties are shown in Table 2. For those counties who declined involvement, concerns regarding participation included reduced staffing and workloads that prevented any non-critical task from being preformed. It should be noted that several counties voiced an eagerness to participate citing their success in staff retention. A total of 89 individuals participated in this study.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mariposa</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amador</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Modoc</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calaveras</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mono</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colusa</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del Norte</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Plumas</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Tehama</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inyo</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Trinity</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Tuolumne</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instrumentation

A survey questionnaire designed by the researcher consisting of 30 questions was used to collect data for this study. The construction of the questionnaire was informed by the current literature review and guided by the research question and its research hypothesis. The survey included, but was not limited to the following areas: worker demographics, worker experience and training, the intersection of personal and professional life in rural social work practice, responses to boundary maintenance and strategies to effectively cope with the challenges inherent in child protection social work.

The goal of this researcher was to have participants complete the survey online through the web-based program SurveyMonkey.com. Technological limitations existed for some counties and therefore completing the survey using SurveyMonkey was not possible. Approximately nine of the participating counties encountered this barrier. As a result, the researcher provided an alternative option of completing this survey through the use of a mailed questionnaire. Both versions of the survey were distributed to all members of the sample. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix B.

Data Collection

Participants received an introductory email describing the research project and requesting their participation. Participants were provided with the name and contact number of the researcher as well as the researcher’s academic advisor. The survey was sent to all participants on January 24, 2012 and remained available for four weeks. The
Data collection methods utilized in this study followed the policies and procedures outlined by Sacramento State University Office of Graduate Studies for collecting data using electronic mail.

**Data Analysis**

Using the information collected in the questionnaire, the researcher calculated general statistics regarding the survey participants (i.e., average age, average length of employment, percentage of female to male participants, percentage of respondents with graduate degrees, etc.). Further analysis was completed on variables related to job satisfaction, boundary maintenance, coping strategies and the desire to seek alternate employment. These analyses were completed through advanced data features of the SurveyMonkey program.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

A research proposal outlining this study was prepared by the researcher and submitted to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in October of 2011. The proposal was approved as minimal risk with an approval number of 11-12-014.

The level of risk was kept minimal by allowing all participation to be voluntary. The study sought to garner participants' perspectives on the topic of worker retention in rural areas and the study did not subject participants to any emotional harm or discomfort.
Both versions of the survey contained an informed consent statement (See appendix A). This statement explained the methods utilized to ensure confidentiality and discussed the survey’s design to ensure respondent anonymity. Given the small sample sizes of some counties, the researcher intentionally did not ask respondents to provide the name of the county in which they were employed.

Prior to distributing the survey the researcher provided all participants with a summary of the study via an electronic mail message. Confidentiality was addressed in this message and respondents were encouraged to contact the researcher with any questions or concerns regarding the survey. The researcher received several responses to this original message and responded to all questions raised by prospective participants. Additional respondents voiced enthusiasm to participate citing their desire to share their concerns regarding the role administration plays in maintaining staff satisfaction. Such respondents wanted the opportunity to share their concerns in a confidential manner and not face any type of retaliation.
CHAPTER 4

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the data and their findings are presented below. This section begins with an overview of the general demographic data, and then expands to discuss the specific findings related to the original hypotheses. Data are displayed using both descriptive and illustrative methods.

The survey was sent to 189 participants employed in rural Child Welfare Services settings. Sixty-five participants completed the survey online while 24 participants completing an electronic version created in Microsoft Word. This version was emailed to prospective participants. The overall response rate for this survey was 47%.

Respondents were overwhelmingly female (84.3%, n=70) The largest percentage of participates indicating they ranged in age from 30 to 39 years. The majority of respondents held a bachelors degree (54%, n=48), however only a third of participants described themselves as having a degree in the field of social work (33.3%, n=29). Respondents work positions included Program Manager (7.4%, n=5), Supervisor (16%, n=13), Social Worker (76.5%, n=62). Five respondents selected “other” under the work position category. These positions included Social Service Aides, a staff service analyst and a substance abuse specialist. Caseload totals ranged from as low as zero to as high as 50. The average caseload for all respondents was 15.
The highest percentage of workers reported being employed for 3-4 years (27.4 %, n=23). Seventy-eight percent of respondents reporting living in the same county in which they are employed and 37.6% (n=32) reported long-term associations with their county of residence. The bulk of experience of respondents centered on rural practice with only 14.1% (n=12) indicating any type of urban work experience.

The majority of respondents indicated they have frequent encounters with clientele in their community (See Figure 1). Over half (57.1%, n=48) of respondents indicated they avoid certain public settings in order to avoid having contact with the clients they serve. Some respondents indicated that such encounters have lead them to feel unsafe in their community.

**Figure 1.** Frequency of Client Encounters.

Respondents were asked to report boundary crossing they have experienced as a result of working in a rural setting. The most commonly cited boundary crossing was
receiving telephone calls at home regarding work situations (65.4%, n=53). Other frequently cited boundary crossings included providing direct service to a close friend/acquaintance (46.9%, n=38), and providing direct service to classmates of the respondents' children (45.7%, n=37). See Table 3 for a full listing of boundary crossing reported by this sample.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boundary Crossings</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provided direct service to co-worker</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided direct service to family member</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided direct service to friend/acquaintance</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided direct service to service provider</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received calls at home regarding CWS matter</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided direct service to child’s classmate</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevented relationships</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about their ability to compartmentalize work stress only 13.1% (n=11) of the sample rated themselves as excelling in this area. Most respondents indicated they managed this task satisfactory (47.9%, n=40), while 39.3% (n=33) reported this task was challenging and that they experienced difficulty not thinking about work during their time off. Strategies to cope with work stress were also sequestered by this sample. The top three coping strategies included debriefing with co-workers (88.1%,
n=74), spending time with friends and family (79.8%, n=67), and taking time off from work (72.6%, n=61). See Figure 2 for full listing of reported coping strategies.

![Figure 2. Coping Strategies.](image)

The ability to balance one’s personal and professional life was believed to play a significant role in overall job satisfaction according to 85.7% (n=72) of this sample. When asked what specific steps they take to maintain balance between work and personal life, common themes emerged amongst the respondents. Respondents provided narrative responses to this question. Many spoke of the importance of not allowing thoughts of work to invade one’s thinking while at home. Respondents spoke of the importance of spending time with friends and family and involvement in community activities as ways to maintain balance. Physical exercise, adequate sleep, healthy diet, taking time off, and
spiritual practices were also cited as helpful. The notion of overtime and being on-call were noted to impede this balance. Respondents provided conflicting comments regarding the role co-workers are believed to play. Some felt spending time with co-workers outside of the office help maintain healthy boundaries, while others felt these relationships could be detrimental. Several respondents indicated they work with a therapist to manage appropriate boundaries, and references were also made about the use of psychotropic medication and alcohol and a way to manage the two roles.

Job satisfaction among respondents varied. Over half of respondents indicated they were somewhat satisfied with their work (55.3%, n=47). Approximately 31.8% (n=27) reported they were extremely satisfied, while 12.9% (n=11) indicated they were dissatisfied. Most respondents indicated they consider leaving the field from time to time (58.3%, n=49). Others indicated they often think contemplate leaving (21.4%, n=18) and others reported they never consider job exit (20.2%, n=17).

The factors reportedly influencing workers' desires to leave where, in order of importance: emotional intensity of the work, poor administrative leadership, excessive regulations, poor supervision, high caseloads, lack of anonymity, low pay and fear of being sued. See Table 4 for complete listing of factors influencing retention.
Table 4  
*Rated Factors Influencing Retention*

<table>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Pay</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Caseloads</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td><strong>22.6%</strong></td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Leadership</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td><strong>25%</strong></td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Supervision</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td><strong>21.6%</strong></td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive Regulations</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td><strong>22.8%</strong></td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Lawsuit</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td><strong>45.8%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Anonymity</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td><strong>21.4%</strong></td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intensity of Work</td>
<td><strong>37.5%</strong></td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Rating (1=most important, 8=least important)*

Respondents were questioned about the most enjoyable aspects of working in a rural community. The most commonly cited benefit was the ability to work in depth with families. Respondents spoke about their ability to get to know families on a personal level and work diligently to help families in need. Many also indicated they appreciate the ability to build strong connections and relationships with fellow service providers and how this level of social capital can assist in meeting client needs. Workers also cited the ability to be creative and job variety as some of the benefits of working in a rural setting.
Additional data analysis was completed to examine the relationship between client encounters and job satisfaction. The findings of this analysis did not support the researcher hypothesis that frequent client encounters negatively impact job satisfaction. Fisher’s Exact Test was used to calculate the association between client encounters and job satisfaction. The first analysis of job satisfaction was completed for those reporting daily and more than daily encounters. A second analysis of job satisfaction was completed for participants reporting monthly or more than monthly encounters. The two-tailed P value for both groups of data was determined to be 0.3215. This finding suggests there is no statistically significant association between the frequency of client encounters and level of job satisfaction. Table 5 depicts the two contingency tables used to complete this analysis.

Table 5  
*Contingency Tables for Fisher’s Exact Test*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily/More than Daily vs. Satisfied/Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Outcome 1</th>
<th>Outcome 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p=0.3215

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At Least Monthly/Monthly vs. Satisfied/Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Outcome 1</th>
<th>Outcome 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p=0.3215
For those who reported daily contact, only 8% (n=2) reported job dissatisfaction. Of this same subgroup, 52% (n=13) reported they will avoid public settings to prevent seeing clients and 48% reported feeling fearful for their safety while encountering clients in the community. When questioned about their consideration of leaving the field, the majority (60%, n=15) reported they occasionally contemplate leaving.

Further analysis was completed among respondents that indicated they were extremely satisfied with their employment. These respondents were compared to those who indicated they were dissatisfied with their job. Major differences were noted amongst these two comparison groups. Those who indicated they were dissatisfied reported experiencing higher incidents of fear when encountering clients in the community. This group also reported increased difficulty compartmentalizing work from personal life and were much more likely to consider leaving the field compared to their colleagues that found high satisfaction in the work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced Safety Threats</strong></td>
<td><strong>Experienced Safety Threats</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consider Leaving</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consider Leaving</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maintain Personal/Professional Boundaries</strong></td>
<td><strong>Maintain Personal/Professional Boundaries</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

This study aimed to evaluate the unique features of rural social work practice and determine if certain variables specific to rural practice influenced social workers’ overall job satisfaction. Sixteen counties representing rural California areas participated in this study. The results of this study suggest that workers in these settings frequently encounter clients in their private life, and take measures to avoid such meetings. Despite these encounters, the majority of respondents experiencing frequent client contact did not report decreased job satisfaction or desires to seek alternate employment. While lack of anonymity was hypothesized to play a role in work retention in rural settings, the results of this study did not show this to be a major factor on retaining social workers in rural communities.

A factor that did have implications on job satisfaction and worker retention was fear surrounding client encounters. Those respondents who reported experiencing client encounters that threatened their safety, and/or the safety of their family reported decreased job satisfaction and significantly higher intentions of terminating their employment. Past research has indicated child protection workers are often victims of verbal and physical threats and violence, however the bulk of this research has suggested such violence occurs during regular work shifts. The findings of this research suggest
these threats can transfer into a social worker's personal life and have profound impacts on overall job satisfaction.

The largest cited reason for those respondents who reported intentions of leaving was the emotional intensity of the work. Workers in this field bear witness to the incredible acts of child cruelty and research has proven that this chronic exposure to trauma can be detrimental to the physical and emotional health of some workers. The fact that the majority of respondent in this study reported less than five years experience, lends further support to the role trauma exposure can have on the retention of child protection workers.

Respondents overwhelmingly reported that one’s ability to set good boundaries between personal and professional life was critical in maintaining job satisfaction, however only a small fraction of respondents rated themselves as being able to adequately separate the two. Most were able to explain the steps they take in order to achieve this balance but the results suggest many have difficulty implementing these steps into their daily routines.

**Conclusions**

With the rates of child abuse and neglect continuing to increase each year, it is critical that there is a trained and committed workforce able to carry out the mission of child protection work. Prior research has given suggestions on how to improve the working conditions of social workers employed in child protection programs.
Suggestions have included decreased workloads, increased training, and supportive and effective management. Other researchers have aimed at examining interpersonal skills necessary for effective practice. Such individual worker characteristics have included attributes of empathy, organization and time management and appropriate boundary maintenance. The most referenced characteristic believed to increase worker retention is finding a sense of purpose in the work. This purpose can be difficult to maintain in a field where stories of success can sometimes be difficult to find. When the failures begin to outweigh victories, burnout can become an inevitable consequence.

This current study focused entirely on those employed in rural settings and the unique aspects of rural practice were examined to determine if such factors influenced worker satisfaction and overall retention. The finding of this study revealed many of the factors that impact worker satisfaction and retention in urban and metropolitan areas remains influential in rural settings. These include high caseloads, challenges with supervision and administration and the effects of working with trauma victims. The ability to effectively balance work and professional life has been noted as a critical skill and the results of this current study lend further support that this balance plays an integral role in the ability of social workers to avoid the feelings associated with burnout.

This study also drew attention to the unique aspects of practicing social work in rural settings and the importance of boundary maintenance. The findings suggest social
workers in rural settings are adept at navigating social encounters with their clientele and do not view the lack of public anonymity as detrimental to their overall satisfaction.

While this sample was able to articulate the strategies they use to attempt personal and professional life balance, many indicated challenges with implementing these steps. While lack of anonymity did not appear to play a role in social workers’ job satisfaction, the results of this study suggest that lack of personal privacy and the frequent boundary crossings that occur in rural setting could have impact on the ability to maintain appropriate balance. Further study in this area appears warranted based on the result of the current study’s findings. Expansion of this study to other emergency first responders in rural communities would also be beneficial to explore the role rural settings has on a variety of employment sectors.

**Recommendations**

The results of this study can be transformed into several easy to implement practice recommendations. The single largest coping strategy workers indentified was the ability to debrief with a co-worker. This behavior is sometimes discouraged by agencies as it may be viewed as non-productive and a poor use of company time. Managers should recognized the importance of this practice and encourage staff to participate in these discussions. It is worth noting that these co-worker relationship could have unintended consequences as well. Dissatisfied and disgruntled workers may prove
to have a negative impact on surrounding staff. Managers should intervene if dissatisfied workers are contaminating other staff and decreasing morale.

Safety in the field is a topic that is routinely addressed through agency trainings and informally among co-workers. Safety in the community however is a topic that traditionally does not receive much attention. The results of this survey suggest some encounters with clients in the community are experienced as threatening and dangerous to workers and these occurrences can impact staff satisfaction and retention. For rural agencies, additional trainings and conversations regarding community encounters may be useful in preparing staff to effectively navigate such situations.

Nearly all respondents spoke of the importance of balancing the demands of the work with their personal life. The work of child welfare does not fit neatly into a 40 hour per week job. The accumulation of overtime quickly becomes normal and many social workers will admit to working unpaid hours in an attempt stay on top of their work. If they are not physically working from home, many are spending a significant amount of time ruminating on the work that is waiting for them at the office. Agencies can address this challenge by slowing shifting the culture of child welfare services work. Managers should be closely monitoring the hours of their employees and discouraging any overtime requests. Those in supervisory positions can model these balancing behaviors by avoiding working extended hours themselves and encouraging staff to maintain a healthy
personal and professional life balance. Supervisors should also be discussing this topic
during group staff meetings and during individual meetings with staff.

While the topic of on-call responsibilities was not explicitly evaluated in this
study, several respondents did mention it in their discussion of personal and professional
balance. It may be beneficial for agencies to examine their current on-call requirements
and determine if this job requirement is having negative impacts on workers’ ability to
achieve adequate balance. Alternate suggestions may be contracting this service out to a
private vendor or limiting the number of days workers are required to be on-call.

Practicing social work in rural areas has many benefits. The largest cited strength
of rural practice was the ability to work directly with families and observe them heal and
grow into healthy family units. While successes certainly occur, they can be
overshadowed by those cases that do not have successful outcomes. Rituals aimed at
drawing attention to the positives should be a regular occurrence in agency settings.
Implementation of such practices will not only inspire hope, but with also serve as a
reminder of the importance of child protection work.

While the emphasis of this study was worker retention, it is worth noting that
some employees of child protection agencies will leave regardless of excellent working
conditions. The work is challenging and it is not surprising that workers maintain
positions in child protection work for short durations. Agencies should allow for
positional rotations among different units and support inter-department transfers in order
to maintain a qualified county staff. Agencies should also support workers decisions to leave if they have reached a point of high dissatisfaction. Workers experiencing this pose a risk to agencies who are entrusted serving an extremely vulnerable population of the community.

**Evaluation**

The results of this survey provide several topics worth further study. The role of co-worker support is an area that warrants further examination. Inquiry regarding these relationships may shed additional insight on effective methods to manage workplace stress and trauma exposure.

Additional exploration surrounding threatening client encounters in the community is necessary given the results of this study. Further researchers should examine the nature of these encounters and evaluate how individual workers handle such conflicts. Agency responses to these encounters would also be beneficial to explore.

Similar to other research findings, the results of this survey suggest that despite high levels of job satisfaction, workers continue to experience uncertainty about their employment. An investigation to this phenomenon is worth further study and could provide recommendation for agency mangers on how to effectively handle worker ambivalence.
APPENDIX A

Consent Form

**Purpose:** I understand the purpose of this study is to examine the use of personal and professional boundaries for child welfare services employees working in rural California counties. This study will explore how workers maintain such boundaries and how balancing these two roles affect worker retention.

**Duration and Location:** I understand the study will obtain data through the use of an online survey and I will receive the survey link by email. I further understand the survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

**Procedures:** I will be asked to answer questions about my experiences working as a child welfare services social worker in a rural setting. I will also be asked for my professional opinions on rural child welfare social work and retention.

**Risks/Discomfort:** I understand that some of the survey questions may ask for personal information about my work experiences, however the survey is designed to avoid emotional harm or discomfort.

**Benefits:** I understand the benefits of participating in this study will help further the understanding of rural social work practices and worker retention.

**Confidentiality:** I understand that my responses will be collected in a manner that ensures my confidentiality. The researcher will collect responses through the computer software programming of SurveyMonkey.com and my name, county of employment, or any other identifying information will not be associated with survey results. The information will be kept in a secured location and will be destroyed after the completion of this research project.

**Incentives:** For each completed survey, the researcher will donate $1 to a charity organization. Participants will be able to choose from three pre-selected charities. Participants will be able to take the survey one time only.

**Participation:** I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.

**Consent:** I have read this entire consent form, and understanding the nature of the study and my rights as a potential study participant, I wish to participate in this study.
APPENDIX B

Survey Document

1. Gender: Choose an item.

2. Age:

3. Educational Background:

   Drop Down Options: Some High School, High School Graduate, Some College, AA Degree, Bachelor’s Degree, Master’s Degree, Doctorate

4. If you hold a college degree, is it in the field of Social Work? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable

5. Current Position: ☐ Social Worker ☐ Supervisor ☐ Program Manager ☐ Other:

6. Caseload size:

7. CWS Unit Assignment: ☐ Emergency Response ☐ Family Reunification ☐ Family Maintenance ☐ Permanent Placement ☐ Adoptions ☐ Other:

8. Years employed at CWS:

   Drop Down Options: Less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9-11 years, 12-14 years, 15-17 years, 18-20 years, Over 20 years

9. Do you have any experience working in urban CWS settings? (Urban settings may include Los Angeles County, San Diego County, San Francisco County or Sacramento County) ☐ Yes ☐ No

10. If yes to question above: How much time did you spend in this setting?

    Drop Down Options: Less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9-11 years, 12-14 years, 15-17 years, 18-20 years, Over 20 years

11. How much time have you spent working in the human services in rural settings? (Examples of rural settings may include Calaveras County, Mariposa County, Nevada County and Mono County).

    Drop Down Options: Less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9-11 years, 12-14 years, 15-17 years, 18-20 years, Over 20 years
12. Did you grow up in the same county in which you work? □ Yes □ No

13. Do you currently live in the same county in which you work? □ Yes □ No

14. (Skip if you answered no to question above) How long have you lived in your current county?

   *Drop Down Options*: Less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 3-5 years, 6-8 years, 9-11 years, 12-14 years, 15-17 years, 18-20 years, Over 20 years

15. Have you received any specialized training in rural social work practice? □ Yes □ No

16. If you answered yes, what forms of training have you received? (Check all that apply)
   □ University Course Work □ Training Workshops □ Informal training from supervisor
   □ Informal training from co-worker □ Other:

17. How often do you encounter clients in the community you live?

   *Drop Down Options*: Never (0), Rarely (Several times per year), Occasionally (Several times per month), Often (Several times per week)

18. Do you avoid certain public settings (i.e. restaurants, businesses, community events) to prevent running into clients? □ Yes □ No

19. If yes to question above: In an average month, how often do you attempt to avoid public settings to prevent encountering clients?

   *Drop Down Options*: Once a month, Twice a month, Three times a month, Once weekly, Twice a month, Three times a month, Daily

20. As a result of working in Child Welfare Services, have you ever feared for your safety when encountering a client or his/her family in the community? □ Yes □ No

21. In your time as a CWS employee have you experienced any of the following: (Check all that apply) *(Direct Service may include conducting child abuse/neglect investigations or providing case management services)*

   □ Been asked to provide direct service to a co-worker
   □ Been asked to provide direct service to a family member
   □ Been asked to provide direct service to an acquaintance or close friend
   □ Been asked to provide direct service to a service provider you work with (i.e. parenting instructor, mental health provider, law enforcement official)
   □ Received telephone calls at your home from someone requesting information on a CWS matter
   □ Been asked to provide direct service to one of your children’s classmates
☐ Prevented your child(ren) from having friendships with children/families you know from your work at CWS
☐ Other:

22. How would you rate your ability to compartmentalize work stress and not allow it to interfere with your personal time away from the office?
   ☐ Excellent - I rarely think about work once I leave the office
   ☐ Satisfactory - I occasionally think about work once I leave the office
   ☐ Challenging - I often think about work once I leave the office

23. What strategies do you use to help cope with work stress? (Check all that apply)
   ☐ Debrief with my supervisor
   ☐ Debrief with a co-worker
   ☐ Debrief with my spouse/significant other
   ☐ Debrief with friends/family
   ☐ Debrief/process with counselor/therapist
   ☐ Spend time with family/friends
   ☐ Spend time with co-workers
   ☐ Journal
   ☐ Exercise
   ☐ Meditate
   ☐ Request time off/Vacation
   ☐ Other:

24. In your professional opinion, does the ability to balance one’s personal and professional life impact worker retention in the field of Child Welfare Services?

   Drop Down Options: Has significant impact, Has moderate impact, Has no impact

25. What steps/strategies do you take to maintain a personal and professional life balance?

26. Do you think professional distance interferes with good social work practice?

   Drop Down Options: Yes, No, Not Sure, It Depends

27. How would you rate your current level of job satisfaction?
   ☐ Extremely Satisfied
   ☐ Somewhat Satisfied
   ☐ Dissatisfied
28. How often do you consider leaving the field of CWS?
Drop Down Options: Never, Sometimes, Often

29. (Skip if you answered never to question above) Rate the following factors you consider when contemplating leaving the field with 1 being the most important factor and 8 being the least important factor.

- Low pay
- High caseloads
- Poor administrative leadership
- Poor supervision
- Excessive regulations
- Fear of being sued
- Lack of anonymity/high SW visibility due to rural setting
- Emotional intensity of the work

30. What do you most enjoy about working in a rural setting?
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