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**Keywords:** child welfare, job retention, workforce, work-family conflict, intention to leave

**Abstract:**

Not much is currently known about how employment in child welfare agencies operating under performance-based contracts affects worker attitudes related to retention. This study focuses on the relationship of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and conflict between work and family to intention to quit among privatized child welfare staff. An online survey was completed by 152 workers employed by private child welfare agencies operating under performance-based contracts. Results indicate that job satisfaction and work-family conflict predicted intention to quit. Implications for agency practice and further research, particularly in the area of work-family conflict, are discussed.

**Text of paper:**

**Work Attitudes and Intention to Quit among Workers in Private Child Welfare Agencies Operating under Performance-based Contracts**

Michelle Levy, AM  
Research Associate  
University of Kansas School of Social Welfare  
Lawrence, Kansas  
[mlevy@ku.edu](mailto:mlevy@ku.edu)

John Poertner, DSW  
Professor Emeritus  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Urbana, Illinois  
[jpoertner@sunflower.com](mailto:jpoertner@sunflower.com)

Alice Lieberman, Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of Kansas School of Social Welfare  
Lawrence, Kansas  
[alicel@ku.edu](mailto:alicel@ku.edu)

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Michelle Levy, University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, 1545 Lilac Lane, Lawrence, Kansas 66044. Electronic mail may be sent to [mlevy@ku.edu](mailto:mlevy@ku.edu).

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## **Work Attitudes and Intention to Quit among Workers in Private Child Welfare Agencies Operating under Performance-based Contracts**

A stable and supported child welfare workforce is essential to achieving desired outcomes for children and families. Thus, it is of great concern that the estimated annual turnover rates in child welfare range from 30 to 40 percent (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that turnover might be more pervasive within private child welfare agencies. Turnover has been reported to be up to twice as high among private agency workers, when compared with public child welfare workers (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). Studies have also found private child welfare agency staff less committed than public workers to their agencies and to the field of child welfare (Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010; Jayaratne & Faller, 2009).

While states have turned to privatization in hopes of achieving better outcomes for children and families, only a handful of studies have examined factors related to turnover and retention in privatized child welfare systems (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Stronlin-Goltzman & Schudrich, in press; Faller et al., 2010; Jayaratne & Faller, 2009). Furthermore, researchers have yet to examine factors that influence workforce outcomes for child welfare workers within private agencies operating under performance-based contracts.

Performance-based contracts (in contrast to traditional fee-for-service contracts) link agency funding to the achievement of outcomes. As a result, these agencies must focus on structuring their workforce to manage financial risks and provide cost-effective services (McBeath & Meezan, 2010). This puts workers under increased pressure to meet deadlines for achieving permanency, finalizing adoptions, or placing children with relatives. Little is known about how working within the context of performance-based contracts affects work attitudes or retention of staff.

In this article, we report on a study of personal factors related to retention in private child welfare agencies operating under performance-based contracts.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Child welfare research has identified a multitude of factors related to turnover and retention in the field. Typically, these factors are classified as either organizational or individual (also referred to as personal or affective factors or work attitudes). Previous research has examined job satisfaction and organizational commitment as worker attitudes related to intention to leave. Less commonly studied to date, but of growing interest, is work/family conflict and its converse, family/work conflict.

*Job satisfaction* is defined as the extent to which a worker likes his/her job (Spector, 1997). Researchers have examined job satisfaction as both a general or global perception as well as a multidimensional variable. A number of studies specific to child welfare have found a

significant relationship between job satisfaction and turnover (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001.; Weaver, Chang, Clark & Rhee, 2007). Studies of Title IV-E traineeship graduates have revealed that those who remained employed in child welfare beyond their required work obligation period reported higher levels of job satisfaction than those who no longer work in the field (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Cahalane & Sites, 2004). By contrast, Fryer, Miyoshi & Thomas (1989) found that child protection workers who left their positions and those who remained were both generally dissatisfied.

*Organizational commitment* reflects workers' dedication to the agency based on shared values, mission, and goals. Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) define organizational commitment as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in the organization. They characterize organizational commitment by three aspects: a strong belief in an organization's goals and values, a willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization and a strong desire to maintain a relationship with the organization. Low organizational commitment has been found to be a predictor of intention to leave in child welfare (Mor Barak et al., 2006; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak et al., 2001). Calahane and Sites (2004) found that individuals remaining in child welfare had higher perceived pride in their organization and a positive identification with the organization's mission and goals.

Work-family conflict has been defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). As Frone et al (1997) has suggested, this definition implies a bidirectional relationship with two distinct types of conflict. *Work-family conflict* (WFC) occurs when work-related demands interfere with home responsibilities, as in bringing work into the home domain and trying to complete it at the expense of family time. *Family-work conflict* (FWC), on the other hand, arises when family responsibilities impede work activities, as in having to cancel an important meeting because a child is suddenly taken ill. Although a conceptual distinction between work conflicting with the family and family conflicting with work has been made, most research has focused on WFC.

Both types of conflict (WFC and FWC) and its effect on turnover have received surprisingly little attention in child welfare literature. In other fields, both WFC and FWC have been negatively related to employee satisfaction (Netemeyer, McMurrian & Boles, 1996) and turnover (Boyar, 2003).

Two comprehensive reviews of literature related to retention in child welfare reveal minimal impact of work-family conflict on worker turnover. A review of the turnover literature by Mor Barak and colleagues (2005) examined 25 studies and concludes that work-family conflict does not predict turnover, although they admit that it is seldom included in these

studies. In fact, only 2 of the 26 studies included in their review included any family-work variables. Those that were included used very limited measures such as marital status, having children and child in day care. Moreover, in a 2005 systemic review of research on factors influencing retention of child welfare staff, no work-family related concepts made the list of independent variables in quantitative studies that were found to be significant (IASWR).

More recent studies, however, are finding work-family factors to be related to workforce outcomes in child welfare. Smith (2005) identifies that a perception that an employer promotes work/life balance is associated with job retention. In fact, in her study a one standard deviation increase in the measure of work-life balance increases the odds of retention by 59%. Similarly, in research comparing agencies with low and high turnover, work/life fit was the only factor that significantly predicted intention to leave across all types of systems (Strolin-Goltzman, 2008). In another study, life-work fit was a significant factor in intention to leave in rural and urban public child welfare agencies, though not suburban ones (Strolin-Goltzman, Auerback, McGowan & McCarthy, 2008). Nissly and colleagues (2005) found work-family conflict was significantly related to intention to leave; however, it was overshadowed by organizational stress. In fact, when considering the two types of stress together, the impact of work-family conflict disappeared.

Our study, then, illuminates the relationship of 4 worker attitudes: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work-family conflict and family-work conflict to intention to quit the job in child welfare performance-based contract agencies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted through an online survey. Human subject approval was obtained and workers were assured of confidentiality. Three large private child welfare agencies operating under performance-based contracts to provide foster care or family preservation case management agreed to participate in this study. They supplied the names and email addresses of 344 child welfare caseworkers and family support workers. These workers were subsequently sent email invitations to participate in the study. Three follow-up email reminders were sent at one week intervals.

**Measures.** The worker outcome measure/dependent variable was intention to quit. Intention to quit is a widely used measure of turnover with research establishing it as a good predictor of actually quitting (Dickinson & Painter, 2009; Smith, 2005). Dickinson and Painter (2009) found that, for every one point increase in their measure of intent to leave, there was a 39% increase in actual exits. For this study we measured *intention to quit* by asking workers to respond to three items: "How likely is it that you will actively look for a new job in the next year?," "I often think about quitting," and "I will probably look for a new job in the next year."

Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The responses to the three items were added to form an intention to quit score. The score had a Cronbach's alpha of .95.

*Job satisfaction.* Many job satisfaction instruments assess aspects of the organization such as supervision or pay. This study assessed global job satisfaction with a five item scale that asked questions about general job satisfaction. Sample items include: "I feel fairly well satisfied with my present job," "Most days I am enthusiastic about my work," and "I find real enjoyment in my work." Each item was rated on a 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The responses to the 5 items were added to form the job satisfaction score. The scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

*Organizational commitment* was measured by an 8 item scale. Sample items include: "I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization," "What this organization stands for is important to me," and "I feel a sense of ownership for this organization rather than just being an employee." Each item was rated on a 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The responses to the 8 items were added together to form the organization score. This scale achieved a Chronbach's alpha of .95.

*Work-family conflict.* Consistent with the work of Netemeyer, McMurrian and Boles (1996), both work-family conflict and family-work conflict were assessed in this study. Each was measured through five-item scales. *Work-family conflict* items include: "The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life," "The amount of time my job takes makes it difficult to fulfill family responsibilities," and "Due to work-related duties, I have to make changes to my plans for family activities." *Family-work conflict* items include: "The demands of my family or spouse/partner interfere with work-related activities" and "Things I want to at work don't get done because of the demands of my family or spouse/partner." Each item was rated on a 7 point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The responses to the five items on each scale were added together to achieve a score. Work-family conflict had a Chronbach's alpha of .84. For family-work conflict the alpha was .88.

*Years of child welfare experience* and *amount of supervision* were two control variables included in this study. One might expect years of experience to be related to work attitudes and intention to quit. In a 2003 report, the GAO noted that the average length of employment for child welfare workers was less than two years. In a more recent study, it was found that child welfare workers are at the highest risk of leaving during their third and fourth years of employment, with rates of departure stable following that time (Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan & Antle, 2009). These findings suggest that workers who stay longer have adjusted to the job and have less intention to quit.

Similarly one might expect that workers who engage regularly with their supervisor might have less intention to quit. Yankeelov and colleagues (2009) found that supervisor

support in the forms of attachment, guidance and reliable alliance predicted retention. Barth et al. (2008) found that the number of hours of supervision workers received each week was related to job satisfaction. Through regular meetings supervisors may be able to sense when workers are having difficulty managing the many demands of the job and help them balance these demands. In this study, workers were asked the total number of hours of individual and group supervision they received each month. These were added together to produce a variable for the total number of hours of supervision received each month.

## **FINDINGS**

After three follow-up reminder invitations to participate in this study, 152 workers completed the survey for a 44% response rate. As expected the respondents were predominately female (93%) and white-non Hispanic (88%). Seven percent were male. Only 6% of those responding identified themselves as being African American, 5% identified themselves as being Hispanic and 1% as Native American. This sample is representative of the racial/ethnic composition of state's child welfare workforce employed under performance-based contracts. The age range of the respondents in this study was from 23 to 62 years of age. The median was 34.

Respondents' years of child welfare experience ranged from a few weeks to 30 years. The average was 6.5 years with the median being 5 years. Most workers had a social work degree with 35% having a BSW and 20% having an MSW. Twenty one percent reported having less than a bachelor's degree, 13% had a bachelor's degree in something other than social work and 11% had a master's degree in a field other than social work. Under the terms of the state contracts, those without social work degrees are primarily family support workers. The average total number of hours of supervision per week reported by workers was 3.2 hours. The minimum number of hours of reported was 0 and the maximum was 10.

The means and standard deviations for the study variables are reported in Table 1. It is interesting to note that responses to intention to quit ranged from the lowest possible score of lowest score of 3 (i.e. a score of one on each of the three items), to the highest (a score of 7 on each, for a total of 21). Clearly there were some workers who at the time of the survey had no intention to quit while others were highly likely to quit. Workers also report a higher level of work-family conflict (Mean = 18.6) than family-work conflict (Mean = 8.4).

Table 1-Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Number responding
Intention to quit	9.0	5.7	148
Job satisfaction	24.8	6.6	152
Organizational commitment	38.2	11.4	147
Family work conflict	8.4	3.5	152
Work family conflict	18.6	9.1	151

Table 2 shows the correlations between the study variables. The first line of the table shows the correlations with intention to quit which is the outcome variable of interest. All of the worker perception variables are significantly correlated with intention to quit except family-work conflict. It should be noted that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are highly correlated. It appears that workers perceive these two concepts similarly.

Table 2 – Correlations between study variables

	Intent to quit	Job satisfaction	Organizational commitment	Work-family conflict	Family-work conflict
Intent to quit	1	-.77*	-.64*	.43*	.18
Job satisfaction		1	.77*	-.41*	-.25*
Organizational commitment			1	-.38*	.16
Work-family conflict				1	.22*
Family-work conflict					1

\*indicates significance at the .001 level. n=139

**Regression analysis.** The regression was conducted in two steps. First, total hours of supervision and years of experience were entered followed by the worker perception variables. Since family-work conflict was not significantly correlated to intention to quit, it was not included in the regression analysis. The resulting model is shown in Table 3.

The adjusted R square for this model was .60. Neither of the control variables, hours of supervision nor years of experience, were significant predictors of intention to quit. Job satisfaction, the best predictor of intention to quit, was significant at the <.001 level with a Beta of -.66 which is in the expected direction. Work-family conflict was significant at <.05 with a Beta of .12. None of the other variables were statistically significant predictors of intention to quit.

Table 3 – Regression model for intention to quit controlling for hours of supervision and years of child welfare experience

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	23.37	1.847		12.654	.000
Total hours of supervision per week	-.025	.187	-.008	-.136	.892
Years of child welfare experience	-.003	.050	-.003	-.064	.949
Organizational commitment	-.040	.045	-.080	-.897	.371
Work-family conflict	.074	.037	.118	1.991	.048
Job Satisfaction	-.570	.077	-.660	-.7432	.000

n=139

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study are from an online survey of a convenience sample of private agency caseworkers and family support workers employed by child welfare agencies operating under performance-based contracts. The lack of a random sample and the less-than-optimal response rate mean that the results cannot be generalized to all workers in these agencies. In addition, while the measures used in this study have been widely used by others, measurement error is a limitation of this study.

Using intention to quit rather than actually leaving as the dependent variable is also a limitation of this study. While Dickinson & Painter (2009) found intention to quit to be a good predictor of leaving, Weaver et al. (2007) found job satisfaction to be a strong predictor of intention to quit but a weak predictor of actually quitting. Clearly there is more research needed on the relationship of job satisfaction and retention. Still, the perceptions of those workers who responded provide useful insights into factors that predict intention to quit.

The model tested in this study explained 60% of the variance in intention to quit with job satisfaction and work-family conflict as significant predictors. It was surprising that both of these variables predicted intention to quit after controlling for years of experience and amount of supervision. The respondents to this survey had an average of 6.5 years of child welfare experience. Other research has found that the first few years are the most critical for turnover of child welfare staff (Yankeelov et al., 2009). Given these respondents' years of experience, one might have expected they would have adjusted to the job and agency and that their satisfaction would not have been a significant predictor of intention to quit. On the other hand, it may be that employee perceptions of the challenges and supports contributing to their job satisfaction may be altered through the recurring change in agency contracts. Strand and Dore (2009) identified the top three indicators of job difficulty as lack of client resources, lack of support staff, and lack of resources (cars, computers), all factors that might be affected by an agency's fiscal/contractual status.

One might expect hours of supervision to predict intention to quit with workers experiencing less supervision more likely to have a high intention to quit. Barth et al. (2008) found quality and amount of supervision (in this case, an average of 4.1 hours per week) was a strong predictor of satisfaction. By contrast, the average number of hours of supervision per month for workers in this study was less than an hour a week (3.2 hrs per month). While the amount of supervision does not provide insight into the quality of supervision, the minimal amount of supervision found in this study does not appear to have influenced workers' intention to quit.

While work-family conflict was not as strong a predictor of intention to quit, it was the only other statistically significant variable. It is important to note that family-work conflict was

not a statistically significant predictor. This study goes beyond previous work in child welfare (which has typically examined work-life balance or life-work fit) to include consideration of conflict between work and family. In addition, we differentiate work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC). WFC was a significant predictor of intention to quit in this study while FWC was not significantly related to intention to quit.

Little is known about child welfare workers perceptions of these types of conflict. It is possible that workers define this conflict as work interfering with family responsibilities because of their life stage. The median age of these workers was 34 and 75% of the respondents were less than 43. These workers are of prime child rearing age where demands of work and family intersect. We did not ask about family composition but it may be that these workers have children and the nature of child welfare work gets in the way of school or other family obligations and activities. Boyar (2003) suggests that WFC is more commonly reported than FWC because workers perceive more ability to make adaptations in home life than work as work is necessary for one's livelihood.

Organizational commitment was found to be related to intention to quit; however, this effect did not persist in the regression analysis as it has in previous studies. The high correlation between job satisfaction and organizational commitment may explain this finding. As reported in Strolin-Goltzman (2010), these factors have been highly correlated in other studies. Another possibility is the nature of the contracts under which these agencies operate. Since contracts are re-bid and negotiated every few years, there is a period of time during which continued employment within the agency may be perceived as uncertain. At the time this study was conducted, new agency contracts had been in place for approximately six months. A number of workers who completed the survey were likely new to their agencies. Organizational commitment may take time to develop or it may be experienced differently in a system where workers face the possibility of employment change every few years.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR AGENCY PRACTICE**

This study provides new insight into personal factors related to retention in private child welfare agencies operating under performance-based contracts. Not much is currently known about how child welfare employment in this service delivery structure impacts work attitudes in relation to retention. Yet, research indicates that agencies can positively affect worker attitudes. A recent study by Strolin-Goltzman (2010) demonstrates that an organizational intervention can significantly improve agency commitment and job satisfaction. Likewise, Williams and Alliger (1994) show that agencies can impact levels of work-family conflict experienced by employed parents.

Results of this study suggest that it is important to differentiate between work-family (WFC) conflict and family-work conflict. Clarifying these concepts is critical to agency administrators. Research outside of child welfare has found three work stressors –quantity of workload, work variability and frequency of stressful events – correlate with the presence of WFC (Fox & Dwyer, 1999). Other researchers have found that role conflict and role overload contribute to WFC (Boyar, 2003). Understanding that workers perceive that “work” as opposed to “family” is the factor impacting their ability to balance work/family demands, agencies may have more opportunity to intervene in lessening WFC through changes in organizational policy and practice.

The receipt of social support has a significant impact on work-family conflict (WFC). Supervisor support can reduce WFC (Fox & Dwyer, 1999). Kossek and colleagues (in press) found that work-family specific support from a supervisor more strongly related to WFC than general supervisor support. Furthermore, Nissly et al. (2005) found support from significant others to buffer the effect of WFC for public child welfare workers. These findings, along with those of this study, suggest that supervisors should take an active role in providing support to workers and facilitating their ability to obtain support from others. Asking workers about how they are doing in balancing work and family responsibilities might open up an important area of discussion and begin the process of attending to this important aspect of their workers' lives.

Managers can also provide a supportive environment that permits flexibility in schedules, telecommuting options, personal time off, job sharing and other family-focused programs that can positively impact work performance and reduce the stress and conflict between work and home in their employees.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study provides several suggestions for further research. The relationships between job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intention to quit are well established in the workforce research. What is less well known is how these variables vary across service delivery systems. A comparison of results across performance-based contracting, traditional fee-for-service contracting and a public agency might reveal differences in work attitudes and retention that could be related to the structure of these service systems.

Performance based contracts have become popular child welfare service delivery strategies. While these types of contracts attempt to use fiscal incentives to improve outcomes, these contracts vary widely in other provisions.

Requests for proposals (RFP) issued for performance based contracts inherently contain a number of provisions with workforce implications. Round-the-clock support for children in foster care and their families is just one example. An examination of job satisfaction and its relation to intention to quit across types of performance based contracts would be useful for shaping future RFPs.

The contribution of this research in showing that work-family conflict is an important predictor of intention to quit suggests additional study. Some of this research might include exploration of workers coping strategies when they experience this conflict. What adjustments do workers make in their family life to accommodate work demands? Given the inherently stressful nature of child welfare work, how does work-family conflict contribute to workers feelings of stress?

It is popular to talk about family friendly workplace policies and programs. Telecommuting and flexible work schedules are two common examples. However little is known from an empirical point of view as to what cost-effective strategies help child welfare workers manage their work and family responsibilities. Operating outside the bureaucratic public child welfare system, private agencies may provide a fertile environment for studying innovative, creative solutions.

Supportive supervisors are often seen as the answer to any difficulty experienced by workers. Much research had been conducted on supervisors and their effect on workers with mixed results. Our study did not find amount of supervision to impact intention to quit perhaps because workers received a minimal amount of weekly supervision. Little is known about what supervisors actually do to support workers. Determining what a family friendly supervisor is would be a useful research project.

In addition, how workers perceive organizational commitment in a system in which contracts are periodically rebid is worth exploring. Given other studies that find organizational commitment to be an important predictor of job retention, it may be that workers in performance based contracting systems are less likely to have an investment in the organization. This may suggest the use of other strategies to address worker retention.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study of child welfare workers in agencies with performance based contracts found that job satisfaction and work-family conflict predicted intention to quit controlling for years of experience and hours of supervision. These findings have important implications for supervisors and agencies working to retain child welfare workers. As the demands of child welfare work and the use of technologies increasingly blur the boundaries between work and home, there is both the potential for increased work-family conflict as well as opportunities for new tools for balancing demands. With a growing number of states using performance-based contracts (Casey Family Programs, 2009), it is increasingly important to understand factors that impact turnover among this segment of the child welfare workforce.

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