

WORKFORCE



Examining Internal and External Job Resources in Child Welfare: Protecting Against Caseworker Burnout

He, A. S., Phillips, J. D., Lizano, E. L., Rienks, S., & Leake, R. (2018). Examining internal and external job resources in child welfare: Protecting against caseworker burnout. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 81, 48-59.

Issue

Child welfare caseworkers who work directly with families have been found to have significantly higher levels of work-related burnout compared to those who do not work directly with families. Frontline caseworkers are tasked with tremendous responsibilities, including ensuring the safety of children and families; navigating multiple service systems; maintaining documentation; and upholding organizational, state, and federal policies. Simultaneously, they are constrained in the amount of time they can spend investigating child abuse and neglect, connecting clients to services, meeting court reporting deadlines, and developing case plans. Furthermore, their daily work responsibilities center on “people work” that requires deep emotional investments. Given these intense job demands, it is not surprising that job burnout is a consistent threat to the well-being and retention of the child welfare workforce. A central goal of this study was to understand internal and external resources that can mitigate the relationship between job demands and job burnout thereby reducing the high turnover among child welfare caseworkers.

Findings

This study was a secondary data analysis of baseline information collected for a child welfare organizational health and workforce improvement project by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. Caseworkers completed an online survey: Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment. This study used scales that assessed burnout (client- and work-related), job demands (job stress and time pressure), internal job resources (supervision and peer support), and external job resources (relationships with service providers, access to client services, and access to client resources). The sample was comprised of public caseworkers from two Midwestern states and one large county in a Western state. The study was restricted to caseworkers working directly with families ($n = 1917$).

Guided by central postulates of the Job Demands and Resources (JD-R) model, which suggests that job burnout develops because of experiences of high work demands coupled with low resources in the workplace, the authors applied a conceptual model of job burnout (client and work related) that accounts for both 1) internal resources of supervisor support and peer support and 2) external resources of caseworker relationships with service providers and client access to services (i.e., access to substance abuse, mental health, or domestic violence interventions) and resources (i.e., access to housing, employment, food and clothing, or transportation). Two hierarchical linear regressions were conducted to explore the unique and cumulative contributions of job demands, resources, and the interaction between the two when predicting client- and work-related burnout. The findings are as follows:

Client-related burnout (i.e., burnout specifically linked to one’s work with clients).

Hypothesis 1. Job demands will have a positive and direct effect on client-related burnout.

Results: When job demands were included as predictors, job stress and time pressure were significantly and positively linked to client-related burnout and the adjusted variance explained rose to 16.8 percent.

Hypothesis 2. Internal and external job resources will have a negative effect on client-related burnout.

Results: Three resources were significantly related to client-related burnout: as predicted, above average supervision and relationships with providers were associated with lower levels of burnout. Unexpectedly, above average frequency of peer support was linked to higher levels of burnout. Adding job resources to the model increased the adjusted variance explained to 18.3 percent.

Hypothesis 3. Internal and external job resources will mitigate the relationship between job demands and client-related burnout.

Findings

Results: There was one significant interaction indicating that access to client services moderated the relationship between job stress and client-related burnout. The adjusted variance explained with all variables included in the model was 18.5 percent.

Work-related burnout (i.e., fatigue and exhaustion associated with an individual's work).

Hypothesis 1. Job demands will have a positive and direct effect on work-related burnout.

Results: Above average job stress (1 SD above the mean) and time pressure were significantly linked to greater work-related burnout. Adding job demands raised the adjusted variance explained to 36.4 percent.

Hypothesis 2. Internal and external job resources will have a negative effect on work-related burnout.

Results: Supervision, relationships with providers, and access to client resources were significantly and negatively related to work-related burnout. Including job resources in the analysis increased the adjusted variance explained to 38.7 percent.

Hypothesis 3. Internal and external job resources will mitigate the relationship between job demands and work-related burnout.

Results: There were two significant interaction effects: 1) access to client services moderated the impact of job stress on work-related burnout (overall, when job stress is high, caseworkers with greater access to client services report lower work-related burnout); and 2) job stress was significantly and positively associated with work-related burnout, yet the direction of the moderation effect was opposite of expectations. Burnout scores increased at a greater rate when caseworkers reported higher access to client resources. The adjusted variance explained by the final model was 38.8 percent.

Implications

The study's findings have implications for workforce management in the child welfare sector, including the role resources might play in mitigating the negative impact of job demands on burnout in the child welfare workforce. Not surprisingly, the results show that job stress and time pressure continue to pose a threat to the well-being of child welfare workers. Although this is expected, it highlights the need for continued efforts to reduce job stress and time pressure to mitigate the impact of these demands on the development of client- and work-related burnout. Social support in the workplace is a key element of promoting a healthy workforce, and this is particularly true of support from child welfare supervisors. Based on the study findings, developing external resources can assist in alleviating the potentially detrimental effects of job burnout. The key to protecting against the negative impact of job stress may be to strengthen the external resources that child welfare workers have at their disposal to meet their job responsibilities. In addition, given that client-related services and resources influence caseworkers' experiences of burnout, public child welfare agencies should collaborate with specialized service providers (e.g., mental health, substance abuse treatment) to increase access to these services and resources. In a national study¹ of child welfare involved families and child welfare agencies, collaboration increased access to resources for substance abuse treatment. Therefore, future studies should explore collaboration as both an internal and external resource that can influence experiences of job burnout. Future studies should also examine the unanticipated relationship between above average frequency of peer support and higher levels of client-related burnout. Likewise, the relationship between increased work-related burnout and higher access to client resources needs to be understood.

¹ He, A. S., & Phillips, J. (2017). Interagency collaboration: Strengthening substance abuse resources in child welfare. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 64, 101–108.