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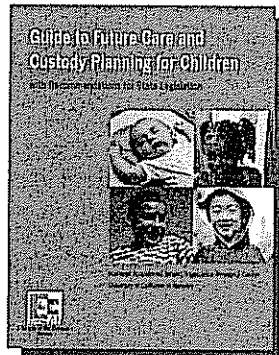
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Child Welfare Workers: Who They Are and How They View the Child Welfare System

Maristela C. Zell

This article examines the characteristics of child welfare caseworkers, their views of the child welfare system, their clients, their agency of employment, and child welfare policies, and whether these views vary according to caseworkers' characteristics. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze in-depth interviews conducted with caseworkers in New York and Chicago. The major themes that emerged from the analysis indicate caseworkers believed that the child welfare system does not meet the needs of the children in care, lacks the resources to appropriately serve clients, and often establishes goals that cannot be attained by the biological parents. Caseworkers held negative views of the biological parents and, although most described their organization as well equipped, almost as many reported that their organization lacked technical, administrative, and personnel resources. Caseworkers' views of child welfare policies emphasized the need for reforming the system and reevaluating funding priorities.

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In the past four decades, child welfare public policies have reflected increased efforts to ensure children's safety, stability, and well-being. The 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act mandated the reporting of child maltreatment, resulting in increasing reports of child abuse and neglect, as well as a growing number of children entering custody of the child welfare system. Child maltreatment increasingly became the focus (Hagedorn, 1995; McGowan & Walsh, 1985; Petr, 1998). As foster care caseloads grew, critics charged that the system lacked case planning and adequate practices to reestablish family functioning or to ensure that children who could not safely return to their parents became members of new permanent families through adoption (Gambrill & Stein, 1978; Kadushin, 1980; Laird & Hartman, 1985). The 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act mandated "reasonable efforts" to prevent family break up and rapid identification of permanent placement options.

As dissatisfaction with the rise of out-of-home placements grew steadily, a philosophy of family preservation became the major trend of the 1980s. Programs designed to prevent out-of-home placements emerged throughout the country that included intensive, round-the-clock interventions to teach families new skills and resource acquisition (Kelly & Blythe, 2000). The 1993 Family Preservation and Family Support program increased funding for intensive services to keep families together, reflecting the view that family preservation programs were the best way to remedy problems that led to foster care placements. These programs

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suffered a resounding backlash in the mid-1990s because of media stories based on horror stories of children harmed by their parents even after the system's interventions, the continued rise in child maltreatment reporting, and the failure of family preservation programs to prevent out-of-home placements (Kelly & Blythe, 2000; Schuerman, Rzepnicki, Littell, & Chak, 1993).

Although some researchers pointed out that the growth in foster care caseloads was fueled by increases in poverty and substance abuse, others focused on inadequacies of the child welfare system, including limitations in caseworkers' knowledge and skills, mishaps in child welfare cases, and the out-of-control caseload growth (Curtis & McCullough, 1993; Esposito & Fine, 1985; Gleeson, O'Donnell & Bonecutter, 1997; Huxtable, 1994; Lieberman, Horny & Russell, 1989; McGowan & Walsh, 2000; Ozawa, 1993; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio & Barth, 1992). These concerns led to research funding to examine the functioning of the child welfare system and those who worked within it, and ultimately led to the passage of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, which emphasized child safety and established shorter timelines for termination of parental rights (Kelly & Blythe, 2000; Lindsey, 1994; McGowan & Walsh, 1985; Tracy & Pine, 2000).

Ultimately child welfare caseworkers are responsible for implementing the policies and laws designed to provide children with protection and permanent living arrangements. However, we only have a sketchy, outdated picture of the child welfare workforce, and few studies have looked at caseworkers' characteristics and their opinions of the system. In 1995, the U.S.

Chicago, and the National Resource Center for Permanency Planning at the Hunter College School of Social Work. The author also acknowledges the many agencies in New York and Chicago and the caseworkers from these agencies who shared their time and their views with the research staff, particularly to Sally Mason, coinvestigator; Deborah Adamy, project coordinator for the New York study site; Christina Bruhn, project coordinator for the Chicago study site; Ted Thompson, who entered all of the data for this project; and the many research assistants who conducted interviews in both cities. In particular, the author would like to acknowledge the work of Adamy and Anderson, who conducted a preliminary analysis of the caseworkers' responses to open-ended questions, which are further analyzed in this article.

Children's Bureau funded a research project to examine case planning for the children who, at the time, were entering state custody at the highest rate and remaining in care the longest—those who entered state custody as infants in two major cities (Gleeson, Anderson, Mason, Bruhn, Adamy, & Thompson, 1999). The study specifically examined barriers to permanence for children who appeared unlikely to return home, but lingered in the custody of the child welfare system. This article describes an analysis of the caseworkers who participated in this study and their views of the child welfare system, the clients of the child welfare system, the agency they work for, and child welfare policies. The study was conducted between 1996 and 1997, as the Adoption and Safe Families Act was becoming law.

The findings of this study are useful in understanding the views of child welfare caseworkers in two major cities at a time of considerable dissatisfaction with the child welfare system. The tragic and highly publicized stories of Joseph Wallace and the Keystone Case in Chicago and the Elisa Izquierdo case in New York were still fresh in the minds of the public and child welfare practitioners. Child welfare caseworkers were depicted in the press as incompetent and ineffective. The negative and frequent press coverage surely affected the views of caseworkers during the time that this study was conducted.

Literature Review

Studies describing caseworkers' characteristics are scarce and outdated. A 1981 national survey reported the majority of caseworker participants were of Caucasian background, mostly female, and holders of bachelor degrees, although only 26% held bachelor degrees in social work (Vinokur-Kaplan & Hartman, 1986). No recent, large-scale studies examining the gender composition, race, levels of education, and experience of the child welfare workforce were located. In addition, no recent research

has examined these elements in major urban areas, where the most recent growth of child welfare services has taken place.

Historically, many frontline child welfare personnel come to the field unprepared for the demands of the job, and they have been consistently criticized for not meeting expectations (Miller & Dore, 1991; Olsen & Homes, 1982). Caseworkers encounter high levels of stress and burnout and feel devalued in the work they do (Gregoire, 1994; McMahon, 1998; Samantrai, 1992). Most of the studies that yielded these findings, however, were conducted with small samples.

Studies examining child welfare caseworkers' views and opinions are even more rare. These studies state that child welfare caseworkers hold negative views of the system in general, contending with insufficient resources, inadequate working facilities, unsupportive or nonexistent supervision, cumbersome paperwork, and role conflict (Beggs, 1996; Gleeson et al., 1997; Gold, 1998; Samantrai, 1992). Caseworkers play an important part in implementing child welfare policies, and have a unique, untapped perspective about the child welfare system, their clients, the organizations they work for, and the policies that regulate their work. Knowledge about their views may identify certain problems with the policies designed to protect children and ensure their well being, as well as obstacles to implementing these policies. This knowledge also can provide the basis for developing new and innovative strategies to train, educate, and support child welfare caseworkers.

Methodology

This article is a secondary analysis of the data gathered as part of the Case Planning for Children Entering State Custody as Infants project (Gleeson et al., 1999). The original study, funded by the U.S. Children's Bureau, examined the factors that delayed or facilitated changing the case planning for young children who entered foster

care at less than one year of age in New York and Chicago, persons involved in the case planning and decisionmaking process, and whether the factors varied by type of placement (kinship care or nonrelative foster care) and length of time in care. The study conducted in-depth, case specific interviews with 279 caseworkers from 26 private agencies and three Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) regional offices in Chicago, and 287 caseworkers from 23 private agencies and 10 Administration for Children's Services (ACS) offices in New York City. To be eligible for the study, caseworkers needed to be serving at least one child who had entered custody in the first year of life and had been in foster care for at least one year, but no longer than four. Each caseworker in the participating agencies who met the study criteria was invited to participate in a detailed interview that focused on a single case. In selecting a child from each caseworker's caseload, research staff attempted to select an equal number of children in their second, third, and fourth year in the custody of the child welfare system, and equal numbers of children placed with relatives and nonrelated foster parents. Interviews lasted up to three hours, and the interview instrument included 234 questions, four of which were open-ended questions.

This article analyzes data from the four open-ended questions at the end of the in-depth case specific interviews (Table 1). From the 566 initial interview protocols, 492 were suitable for the present analysis. Caseworkers' responses to the four open-ended questions provided the data necessary to examine caseworkers' views of the child welfare system, the clients of the child welfare system, the agency the caseworkers for which they work, and child welfare policies.

Caseworkers' responses to these questions were analyzed using an open coding approach, the first level of analysis from a grounded theory perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The author and two coders began the data analysis by selecting and coding 30 interview protocols separately. The Non-Numerical Unstructured

TABLE 1
Open-Ended Questions in the Initial Interview Protocol

- Many children enter the system and stay there for a very long time. What do you think gets in the way of placing them in a permanent home, whether with their birth parents or with another permanent care provider?
 - What do you think are the barriers to changing the case goal from return home to adoption or another permanency plan, when it is apparent that the child will not return home?
 - What are the factors within the field or within your own agency that influence your ability to work effectively with your clients?
 - If you could tell the government anything about your work and/or the child welfare system, what would you want them to hear?
-

Data Indexing (NUD*IST) program was used, with each coder identifying chunks of data, such as sentences or paragraphs that they believed expressed a meaningful idea related to caseworkers' views. Each chunk was broken down, examined, and assigned a label that the coder believed described the idea represented. Coding by the three coders ensured that definitions were more accurate relative to the meaning of responses. The three coders meet regularly and frequently to discuss their codes and labels to accurately reflect caseworkers' views and opinions. After all 30 interview protocols were coded and consensus about the meaningful chunks and their appropriate labels were reached, the data were reduced to a set of 136 concepts. These concepts were compared and grouped by the coders according to major themes. Ultimately, the database was reduced to a coding scheme of 58 themes that characterized caseworkers' views of the child welfare system, clients, agency, and policies. This coding scheme then was used to code all 492 protocols. For reliability purposes and to ensure that all possible meanings were captured accurately, each protocol was coded by two different coders. Subsequently to coding, an SPSS database was created, treating each theme as a dichotomous variable. If the theme was present in the response of the caseworker, that variable was coded "1." If the theme was not present, the variable was "0."

A univariate analysis then was conducted to examine how many caseworkers identified the same themes in their responses to the four open-ended questions. This article focuses on the 26 themes mentioned by at least 15% of the caseworkers participating in this study.

A series of bivariate analyses were conducted to determine whether caseworkers' views varied by gender, race, level of education, child welfare experience, the city in which they worked, and employment by a public or private agency.

This article does have limitations. First, the responses of caseworkers to open-ended questions were not audiotaped. Interviewers attempted to write the responses of caseworkers verbatim; however, there are obvious inferential problems with data reported by one individual but recorded by another. Another limitation is the way the four open-ended questions were asked. Although caseworkers were asked to describe barriers to change the case planning goal, they were not asked to describe their views of the factors that facilitated their case planning. This line of questions may have influenced respondents to focus on deficits and more negative aspects of the child welfare system, clients, agency of employment, and child welfare policies.

Results

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the 492 caseworkers whose responses to open-ended questions were analyzed for this study. Females constituted 74% of the sample while males constituted 26%. Sixty-five percent were African Americans, 18% Caucasians, and 11% Latinos. Caseworkers who identified themselves as Black/African, Asian, Native America, and biracial caseworkers were combined in an "other" category, representing 6% of the sample. The majority, 82%, held bachelors degrees, while 10% held masters degrees in areas other than social work, and 7% held Master in Social Work degrees. Caseworkers employed

TABLE 2
Caseworkers' Characteristics by City and Agency Auspices

| | City | | | | Agency | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|----|------------------|----|----------------|----|-----------------|----|
| | CHICAGO (n=262) | | NEW YORK (n=230) | | PUBLIC (n=196) | | PRIVATE (n=296) | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Gender | | | | | | | | |
| Female | 206 | 79 | 160 | 70 | 132 | 67 | 234 | 79 |
| Male | 56 | 21 | 70 | 30 | 64 | 33 | 62 | 21 |
| Race | | | | | | | | |
| African-American | 171 | 65 | 150 | 65 | 146 | 74 | 175 | 59 |
| Caucasian | 62 | 24 | 26 | 11 | 15 | 8 | 73 | 25 |
| Latino | 22 | 8 | 30 | 13 | 15 | 8 | 37 | 12 |
| Other | 7 | 3 | 24 | 11 | 20 | 10 | 11 | 4 |
| Education* | | | | | | | | |
| Bachelor's degree | 211 | 81 | 191 | 83 | 163 | 83 | 239 | 81 |
| Graduate degree | 31 | 12 | 21 | 9 | 24 | 12 | 28 | 9 |
| Master's degree | 19 | 7 | 17 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 27 | 9 |
| Experience | | | | | | | | |
| 3 to 12 months | 20 | 8 | 25 | 11 | 9 | 5 | 36 | 12 |
| 13 to 24 months | 39 | 15 | 15 | 6 | 8 | 4 | 46 | 16 |
| 25 to 60 months | 124 | 47 | 71 | 31 | 71 | 36 | 124 | 42 |
| Over 5 years | 79 | 30 | 119 | 52 | 108 | 55 | 90 | 30 |

*n = 490, two cases excluded from chi-square analysis.

by public agencies represented 40% of the sample, compared to 60% employed by private agencies. Caseworkers' child welfare experience ranged from 3 months to 26 years, with a median of 48 months. Forty percent of the sample had more than five years of child welfare experience, 40% had two to five years, 11% one to two years, and 9% one year or less.

The sample comprised 262 caseworkers from Chicago and 230 caseworkers from New York, and the majority in both cities were females. Although the majority of caseworkers in both cities identified themselves as African Americans, more caseworkers who identified themselves as Caucasian were found in Chicago, while the majority of caseworkers who identified themselves as Latinos were in New York. Caseworkers in both Chicago and New York

samples were found to have similar levels of education, with the majority holding bachelors degrees. Also, the majority in both cities had more than two years of child welfare experience.

The sample included 196 public agency caseworkers and 296 from private agencies. Again, a higher percentage of caseworkers employed by private agencies were females. More caseworkers in the sample employed by public agencies identified themselves as African Americans. Conversely, private agencies in the sample employed more caseworkers who identified themselves as Caucasians and Latinos. Caseworkers in both public and private agencies were found to have similar levels of education, most holding bachelors degrees. A higher percentage of the sample employed by public agencies had more than five years of child welfare experience, compared to those employed by private agencies.

The qualitative analysis of caseworkers' responses yielded 58 themes, which reflected caseworkers' views. Table 3 shows the 26 themes that were mentioned by at least 15% of the respondents. The analysis presented in this paper focuses on these 26 themes.

Views of the child welfare system encompassed opinions about casework, the legal system, resources and services, and caseworkers. The single most negative theme that emerged from the analysis, described by more than half of the respondents, was that children's basic needs are not met by the system. One caseworker said that the system "abused kids just as much as parents do," and that "a lot of times, these children should never have been taken from parents in the first place." Others stated that children get lost in a system that does not have enough placement or adoptive resources. Connected with this view, 35% of the caseworkers identified intrasystem contention as a troubling theme. Caseworkers described the "adversarial" relationship between court and child welfare personnel, pervasive disagreement between providers involved in a case, and the lack of consensus and collective decision-making. Twenty-five percent of the caseworkers mentioned that child welfare casework is plagued by a hindering bureaucracy, as

TABLE 3
Percentages of Caseworkers' Views Grouped by Themes

| <i>Caseworkers' Views of the Child Welfare System</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---|----------|----------|
| <i>Views of Casework</i> | | |
| Children's basic needs not met by system | 250 | 51 |
| Intrasystem contention | 173 | 35 |
| Plagued by hindering bureaucracy | 125 | 25 |
| System could do more for birth parents | 117 | 24 |
| Unattainable goals are established | 103 | 21 |
| Case movement hindered by worker turnover/transfer | 90 | 18 |
| System is too lenient toward birth parents | 80 | 16 |
| Child welfare issues are complex | 77 | 16 |
| <i>Views of the Legal System</i> | | |
| Frustrating court processes | 240 | 49 |
| Leniency toward noncompliant birth parents | 73 | 15 |
| <i>Views of Resources</i> | | |
| Lack of services to refer clients to | 142 | 29 |
| <i>Views of Caseworkers</i> | | |
| Burnout | 216 | 44 |
| Overwhelmed by system requirements | 185 | 38 |
| Loses focus on child's well-being/goals of the case | 168 | 34 |
| Attributes of inadequate caseworkers | 136 | 28 |
| Attributes of adequate caseworkers | 104 | 21 |
| <i>Caseworkers' Views of Clients and Foster Parents</i> | | |
| <i>Views of Biological Parents</i> | | |
| Ambivalent | 213 | 43 |
| Biological parents' negative attributes | 159 | 32 |
| Parents' involvement is inconvenient to caseworkers | 84 | 17 |
| <i>Views of Foster Parents</i> | | |
| Foster parents resist adoption | 73 | 15 |
| <i>Caseworkers' Views of Their Agency</i> | | |
| Well equipped | 198 | 40 |
| Agency resources are inadequate | 178 | 36 |
| Poor morale | 117 | 24 |
| <i>Caseworkers' Views of Child Welfare Policies</i> | | |
| Significant reform needed | 163 | 33 |
| Funding issues | 145 | 29 |
| Time frames are too long | 74 | 15 |

they spoke about “red tape”—the increasing regulation, rules, and protocols present in their work—as well as the system’s tendency to treat cases as numbers, not as people.

Twenty-four percent of caseworkers indicated that the system could do more to support birth parents. The system’s resources, according to respondents, are insufficient and inadequate to achieve and to maintain reunification of families. One caseworker stated, “birthparents have to go to 10 different agencies...it can take at least six months to find a provider.” More than 20% of the caseworkers stated that unattainable goals are established that either cannot be accomplished by parents of children who come into the custody of the child welfare system, or do not have clear workable solutions. Caseworkers pointed out that the system is biased toward adoption despite other viable permanency options, seemingly to set parents up for failure rather than help them regain custody.

Eighteen percent expressed enormous frustration about case movement being hindered by worker turnover or transfer, indicating that this problem often results in lost information and spotty record keeping. Sixteen percent expressed the concern that the child welfare system is too lenient, allowing for repeated delays in the process of terminating parental rights. As one caseworker commented, “right now we give parents too much time; they get in services and regress repeatedly.” Reinforcing these themes is the view that child welfare issues are complex. Here, caseworkers expressed dissatisfaction that the system does not have adequate tools to evaluate clients, and that compliance and failures often are measured subjectively. Some pointed out that the child welfare system is affected by poverty in the society at large: “If there is poverty, there will be a problem.”

Regarding their views of the legal system, 49% of caseworkers in the sample expressed discontent with a frustrating court processes. This theme not only included references to excessive and unnecessary court delays, but also lack of preparation of lawyers to represent their clients in juvenile court. Conversely, some case-

workers spoke about the legal loopholes that protect birthparents and lawyers’ abilities to manipulate the legal system. Also, 15% of the respondents lamented the court’s leniency toward uncomplying birthparents.

About their views of resources provided by the child welfare system, 29% described being at a loss as to where to find needed services, qualified providers, and culturally competent services.

Respondents’ views often included references to burnout. One caseworker stated, “our work is not valued by society as essential and important.” Forty-four percent attribute burnout to stress and discouragement, use as scapegoats, portrayal of incompetence, and inadequate compensation. Thirty-eight percent also indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the system requirements, have little time to perform good casework because the high volume of cases, and are daunted by unrealistic expectations. Reinforcing this view, 34% also described how daily emergencies, redundant paperwork, and excessive court dates cause them to lose focus on the child’s well being or the goal of the case. One caseworker said, “Everyone [lawyers, liaisons, case reviewers] passes off work and it always ends up on the desk of the caseworker, and it is just too much.” Twenty-eight percent described the attributes of adequate caseworkers, emphasizing the conviction, commitment, and experience that help them to overcome the disappointments of the job. Conversely, 21% pointed out that inadequate caseworkers do not properly address with biological parents the reasons that brought the family into contact with the child welfare system, fail to set clear limits for clients, and neglect to conduct concurrent planning with biological families.

Caseworkers’ views of people they served included views of biological parents and foster parents. Ambivalence was a theme that 43% used to describe biological parents’ characteristics, which included procrastination to plan and minimal compliance with the system’s requirements. One caseworker said, “Parents come around and decide they are going to plan, then drop out of the picture...two days before [court] parents pop into picture...start

all over." In addition, 32% described parents' negative attributes, which included lack of self-esteem, lack of knowledge of the system, and tendency to manipulate the system. Along with these views, 17% indicated that the biological parents' involvement is inconvenient to caseworkers. One caseworker stated, "The diligent search is a waste of time for workers," while another said, "Birthparents have too many rights." Regarding their views of foster parents, 15% indicated that foster parents resist adoption, are unsure whether the adoption subsidy will be sufficient to cover any services that the child may need in the future, and commit to adoption "contingent on the child's behavior."

Caseworkers' views of their agency included three themes. Forty percent of caseworkers described their agency as well-equipped relative to training support, time flexibility, and supportive relationships with supervisors. Almost as many (36%) said that their agency's resources were inadequate, lacking in services for clients; training for caseworkers; technical, clerical and logistic support; and office supplies and equipment (phones, computers). In addition, caseworkers complained that management within their agency was unsupportive, administration was disorganized, and coworkers were unprofessional and unqualified. Frustration with their work environment, expressed by 24%, can be summed up as poor morale. This theme included the lack of positive reinforcement for doing a good job, lack of recognition for caseworkers, disregard for caseworkers' safety in the field, seniority rather than competence being the basis for promotion, and poor working conditions.

Caseworkers' views of child welfare policies included three themes. Thirty-three percent of caseworkers indicated that significant reform of the child welfare system is needed. They pointed out the need for higher hiring and training standards for caseworkers and foster parents, as well as the necessity to reduce caseloads. Funding issues figured as an important theme in the responses of 29% of caseworkers, showing that they view budget cuts as interfering with their work and their agency's ability to serve children.

In addition, these caseworkers believe that, because of funding problems, government priorities are shifted from needed family preservation and prevention issues to out-of-home programs. Fifteen percent indicated that time frames are too long, and they expressed their frustration at having to wait one year before changing the goal from reunification with a biological parent to adoption or some other alternative permanency option.

The 26 themes that emerged from the content analysis and that were mentioned by at least 15% were included in a bivariate analysis that examined whether the ways child welfare caseworkers view the system, the clients of the system, the agency they for which they work, and policies vary according to gender, race, level of education, child welfare experience, the city in which they work (Chicago or New York), and type of agency (private or public). The most meaningful differences were relative to city of employment and type of agency. A higher percentage of Chicago caseworkers described their agency of employment as well equipped, while a higher percentage of New York caseworkers described their agency's resources as inadequate. Also, a higher percentage of caseworkers in New York reported poor morale within their organizations. Caseworkers employed by private agencies were more likely to view their organization as well equipped, while most caseworkers employed in the public sector tended to view their organization's resources as inadequate and to report poor morale.

Discussion and Implications

This article aims at providing an updated, more complex understanding of child welfare caseworkers' characteristics and opinions. While, like participants in earlier studies, the majority of caseworkers were females and held bachelors degrees, unlike other studies, the majority identified themselves as African-Americans. These caseworkers cannot be considered representative of all child welfare caseworkers; however, their views are important examples of the perspectives of caseworkers who were

practicing in two cities that were experiencing overwhelming growth in their foster care caseloads between 1996 and 1997.

In addition to the themes previously described in the literature, this article introduced new themes, as well, which can be the basis for developing new strategies to train, educate, and support child welfare caseworkers in several areas. The findings suggest that caseworkers view the system as ineffective and not fulfilling its mission. Policymakers must recognize that caseworkers' views of the system and their work may have a negative impact on their practice decisions, on their ability to provide services effectively, and on their willingness to comply with certain policies. (These views might have been affected in more recent years by the passing of significant legislation and policy changes, which led to a decrease in caseloads and promoted "best practices.") Typically, solutions to fix the system have focused on establishing more stringent guidelines and shorter timelines for terminating parental rights and establishing permanency goals. This article, however, shows that caseworkers may see a difference between establishing reasonable guidelines to prevent foster care drift and the mechanical enforcement of procedures that disregard critical systemic barriers (including resource availability), child and family characteristics, and the quality of relationship between various systems and players (i.e., the court and child welfare personnel).

Negative themes associated with central aspects of caseworkers' jobs (burnout, discouragement, low morale, fear of recourse, job dissatisfaction) also require a closer examination. For instance, in the past, measures suggested to address these issues included decreased caseloads, time flexibility, and diverse work assignments. Perhaps future research can determine whether reducing caseloads, increasing flexibility, and diversifying work assignments results in improved job satisfaction, morale, feelings of effectiveness, and, ultimately, better outcomes for children and families.

Intrasystem contention seems to go beyond the mere idea that caseworkers' decisions are not respected, but instead that everybody's decisions possibly are open for attack and contest-

ing, and that one organization's or system's rule is consistently undermined by another's. Coupled with the view that child welfare issues are complex, intrasystem contention exposes the background against which critical outcomes are determined and where many systems that might collaborate, collide. Caseworkers may benefit from training and skill acquisition to build connections and relationships with other child welfare organizations, court personnel, and service providers to approach cases from a comprehensive, multidisciplinary perspective.

Although a significant part of a caseworker's responsibilities is to orchestrate and monitor services from a variety of systems and providers, skills in negotiation and mediation are a low priority in their training. Open-systems theory informs us that child welfare personnel are in constant commerce with the external environment, receiving valuable feedback about their performance, the functioning of their organization, the effect of their services on clients, and the effect of their policies. Thus, training is needed to enhance caseworkers' ability to mediate and skillfully intervene with various systems, as well as negotiate successful outcomes for their cases.

Caseworkers in this article appeared to be aware of larger socioeconomic and political issues that affect the child welfare system. This awareness was illustrated in the views that instruments used to assess families were inadequate; funding priorities were skewed toward placement, not family preservation; and decisions about parental capability were made subjectively. Coupled with the opinion that the "system could do more for birthparents," this theme suggests that a number of caseworkers in this sample developed a more comprehensive and empathic view of their clients. These findings, however, are offset by a tendency of many in this study to describe biological parents in negative terms. These opinions illustrate the conundrum with which caseworkers contend. Having to resolve the contradictions between system mandates, social expectations, and client responsibility, all without a framework that integrates the socio-political context in

which families exist, some caseworkers single out one element—the birthparents—and assign responsibility for the systemic failure to them. Caseworkers' negative views may interfere with their ability to engage families meaningfully. Training designed to change caseworkers' perspectives about their clients and provide a more comprehensive and systemically oriented framework is needed. In addition, continuous clinical training is needed to help caseworkers increase their awareness and sensitivity toward the concerns, perspectives, and feelings of birthparents. Current assessments of families and children focus on clients' deficits and needs and emphasize risk. Given caseworkers' opinions that the system is not meeting children's or birthparents' needs, practitioners and researchers need to develop more inclusive, multidisciplinary ways and techniques to assess families and children that are not deficit-oriented.

Although a significant percentage of the sample described their agency as well equipped in terms of supervisor and peer support, time flexibility, and access to training, almost as many experienced lack of resources, agency disorganization, unqualified supervisors and coworkers, lack of services for clients, and poor morale within their agency. It is important to recognize that large, urban child welfare settings constitute stressful environments in and of themselves. Add to this the stress that occurs when changes in leadership are common. Working with families in which child maltreatment has occurred and who are dealing with pressures of urban life is stressful enough without dealing with the disruptions that occur when leadership procedures and policies change. Clearly, essential elements for caseworkers to effectively perform their jobs are the consistent support of their supervisor, as well as the presence of a steady, reliable, and strong administrative leadership.

Many things have changed since the data were collected for this study. In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed. This law emphasizes the need to ensure the safety of children, to limit the time and number of chances parents receive to demonstrate that they can safely care for their children, and to

ensure that children are quickly placed in permanent homes through adoption if they cannot be safely returned to their parents' care in a very short time period. As a result, caseloads have decreased considerably in Illinois and New York. If this study were replicated today, the views of child welfare caseworkers might be quite different from those voiced by those who participated in the 1996 and 1997 interviews. Certainly lower caseloads could make child welfare practice more manageable and less stressful. However, the pressure to work more diligently and persistently to facilitate rapid achievement of permanency may present new challenges and a different source of stress. There also is the perception that today, only cases at imminent risk of harm are opened and served by child welfare systems, largely because of the pressure to keep caseloads low. Clearly, further research needs to determine whether ASFA and related policy changes at the state and local levels have had positive or negative effects on caseworkers' views.

Further research also needs to examine the relationships between the views of caseworkers and their performance, turnover, burnout, job satisfaction, and ability to deliver high quality services. In addition, caseworkers are not the only persons who can contribute to our knowledge of how the child welfare system functions. Future research should examine the views of clients, foster parents, supervisors, administrators, and policymakers. Toward this end, studies that incorporate qualitative as well as quantitative methods should be encouraged as a way to expand theoretical interpretations and understanding of practice challenges.

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