Experienced child welfare workers are essential to ensuring abused and neglected children and their families are getting the support they need during times of crises. Yet, according to a 2001 study by the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), 43 states reported an average annual worker turnover rate of 22% and a vacancy rate of 7%.¹ One of the reasons for this staggering rate is child welfare workers are overburdened with their workload. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) study provided further evidence of this particular challenge. According to caseworkers GAO interviewed, high turnover rates and staffing shortages leave remaining staff with insufficient time to establish relationships with children and families and make the necessary decisions to ensure safe and stable permanent placements. The GAO analysis corroborated caseworker accounts. Large caseloads and worker turnover delay the timeliness of investigations and limit the frequency of worker visits with children, hampering agencies’ attainment of some key federal safety and permanency outcomes.²

Workload management and studies are critical to determine how workers are spending their time so appropriate standards can be set to improve child welfare agencies’ practices and system functioning and outcomes for children and families.

**Workload Management and its Purpose**

Workload management encompasses many aspects such as time management, staff absences, staff turnover, vacancies, and where effort and time is allocated during a day-to-day process. Studying workload management helps decision makers to understand the required duties of child welfare workers, so they know how many workers are needed and how much time it will take to complete tasks. It enables child welfare agencies to equip their staff with the skills, tools, and models to be able to better assess risk factors in families and provide them with services.

The study of workload management is important to make the child welfare system operate as efficiently as possible. By creating stronger management of workload, the goal of providing the

---


best possible support for the child welfare system and extending help to as many children and families as possible will be accomplished.

How do case workers use their time?

Not all case workers’ time is spent on case-related activity. Administrative meetings, trainings, community outreach, leave time, and breaks can often occupy much of a case worker’s time. These are necessary things to get done in any organization. Insofar as workload informs caseload allocation, the staff of American Humane Association has found, over the course of the past 15 years, that a worker’s time available for case-related activities comes to between 60% to 70% of total work time\(^3\). This is consistent with the 68% to 70% time spent in case related activities found by the Utah Office of Legislative Auditor in 2002\(^4\).

In a study performed for the DHHS in Idaho\(^5\), for example, this distinction was made clearly. Overall, social workers and clinicians spend almost seventy percent of their work time in providing services to children and families. The remainder of their time is spent in required staff meetings, training, paid breaks and leave as well as other job related activities such as travel.

Figure 1 displays the time applied to casework. Determining this is the first step in understanding workload as it represents the proportion of staff time available to provide services.

**Figure 1: Social Worker and Clinician Reported Hours**

---


This percentage is applied to the expected hours of work. The case related time varies according to the type of job. In this study, the term “case supportive time” refers to work not directly related to specific cases.

Time studies generally examine task activities. These activities are inventoried at the front end of workload studies through discussions with stakeholders and examination of the state’s or county’s policies and mandated practices. The study is then formulated to capture all time spent, making sure to specify time spent on these mandated practices and activities.

**Specific Activities**

There have been several workload studies done that showcase time. The 2006 New York State Child Welfare Workload Study collected data which analyzed worker case related time. This time log study revealed several core facts about how child welfare caseworkers spent their time.\(^6\)

The broad categories of tasks were:

- Contact with family members, including the child; these included office and home visits;
- Contact with collaterals;
- Court time and court waiting time;
- Travel time;
- Case-related documentation;
- Non-case-related work time
- Non-work time

---

Case workers spend under half of their time in direct contact with families and children. Nearly one third of available case-related time was spent in various forms of documentation such as the automated child welfare information systems. Just over twelve percent was spent in travel, with the remaining time spent in case-supportive activities. Of the expected work time, 77.8 percent was spent on case related work with the other 22.2 percent being spent on other activities that did not deal directly with children and families.

These defined terms relate directly to how workload studies can determine the strengths and weaknesses of a social worker’s caseload. This information is valuable for supervisors as well as child welfare case workers so they can see where their time is being spent and can learn areas to improve as well as areas that do not need as much time spent on them. By focusing on these studies, decision makers can decide how to create innovative ideas to manage time in ways that benefit children in the child welfare system.

Another study that measured time along several dimensions was the Washington State Children’s Administration Workload Study on how social workers spend their time in required activities.7

A related piece estimated how much time each task would take if mandated results were achieved. For example workers are expected to meet with their child-clients for at least one hour

---

each month. That is the amount of time thought to be necessary for a worker to assess the child’s condition and progress. In workload studies this is often referred to as the **constructed standard**\(^8\). When the actual time per case spent on face to face visits with children was calculated, the mean was lower. This led the researchers conducting the study to recommend a) greater efficiencies in other activities, and b) increased staffing, so that reductions in caseloads would permit workers to spend the requisite amount of time meeting with children.

This study also allowed differentiation among service areas, regions, offices and staff positions in assessing how much time workers spent on case-related activities. Figure 2, for example, shows the number of FTEs, calculated as a function of time spent on all activities and cases. The blue bars show measured time in this calculation, and the red bars show time as mandated for adequate performance. Note that in all position types, the number of FTE’s necessary to perform the work according to standard exceeds the number of FTEs calculated from measured time.

---

**Figure 2 - FTEs as Measured/FTEs as recommended by constructed Standard—Washington state**

![FTEs by Position Type](image)

**Dimensions to Consider**

---

A comprehensive workload study can capture differences in how workers spend their time across service areas. The Washington study, for example, differentiated among the following service areas:

**Intake** – the initial time spent receiving cases, gathering and processing the information and determining if the case meets the criteria for child abuse and/or neglect

**Child protective services investigation and assessment** – the time spent by a social worker once a case has been determined to meet the criteria for child abuse and/or neglect in figuring out the details of a case and establishing a plan to take appropriate action for the situation

**Family voluntary** - the time spent working with families that have cases filed, but is not court ordered

**Family Dependency** - time spent to aid parents in regaining control of their lives and promote long-term stabilized recovery to enhance the possibility of family reunification within mandatory legal timeframes

**Adoption support** – the time spent by social workers on helping families who want to adopt a child as well as working with foster children to transfer them from a foster home into an adoptive family

Recommendations similar to those shown above for FTE by position were also made for FTEs by service area and by region. Time studies need to be carefully planned and customized to fit the needs of the jurisdiction and occasion.

**Overburdened Workers**

Time studies often bring to light caseloads which preclude a worker’s adequate fulfillment of his or her tasks. When social workers are overburdened with high caseloads, it becomes difficult for them to be readily available for new cases. Improving workload management will allow for more available time for these social workers. If a case worker is overburdened with cases, they may feel rushed to get through their existing cases, which will cause the quality of work on these cases to decrease. However, if a case worker dedicates the high amount of time needed on cases and follows them at a careful and slow pace, the cases may begin to pile up and families may go longer without any contact from the case worker. It is vital to allocate caseloads effectively so case workers do not become overburdened.

Case workers need to have ample training on how to process cases both quickly and efficiently to maintain a steady flow of productivity while also not neglecting the quality of work. Decision makers and supervisors can help with this by implementing methods that will streamline how time is spent. One idea is improved data processing by using technology may also help in reducing the amount of time entering information and documentation. New technology, such as remote access, may support less time-consuming data processing. It is the technological
advances such as this that must be used to create more available time for the social workers, which in turn, will allow for higher productivity.\textsuperscript{9} Another method of improving time management would be to focus on time spent in court. Waiting accounts for 42 percent of time spent in court. Working with the staff of the courts will streamline scheduling so that this problem of inefficient use of social worker time may be addressed. Managing workload more efficiently will work in the benefit of having more time available to allocate to other cases. Case workers often multitask while waiting for court sessions. This helps them recoup some of the time lost while waiting.

It is vital to maintain a committed and well-educated work force in the child welfare community. By keeping dedicated social workers in their line of work, the goal of helping as many children and families as possible will be reached. Too many experienced case workers leave their line of work due to heavy caseloads. High staff turnover can have a negative impact on the timeliness, continuity, and quality of services provided by a child welfare agency.\textsuperscript{10} Heavy workloads can negatively impact essential child welfare processes such as relationship building, family engagement, and permanency planning. These processes are very time intensive so it is crucial to ensure the workloads are kept low so that social workers can allocate time available to these issues. The benefits of having a manageable workload will show on the Federal Child and Family Services Review and achievement of safety and permanency outcomes.

**The Benefits of Workload Studies and Recommendations for Child Welfare Agencies**

Workload studies can inform caseload management in a number of ways, not the least of which will be to determine exactly how much time a worker has available for case-related work. Workload studies can measure differences in time spent on necessary activities across regions in a diverse state and across service areas.

These studies can measure differences in time necessary to provide adequate services with respect to case characteristics, such as disabilities, substance abuse, and family size. States should implement and conduct studies so as to cause as little disruption to the workers’ workflow as possible and they should be conducted in a way that is as unobtrusive as possible. Automated time data collector applications can enable workers to enter time almost effortlessly.

Workload management must balance the all-important activities of contact with families and collaterals with the equally important accountability and measurement functions of documentation. Due to this ongoing workload studies can track the balance of contact, assessment and decision making on the one hand and documentation and measurement on the other.


Finally, regularly occurring workload and time measurement will track the impact of changing working conditions on workload. These conditions include technological advances, practice innovations, and external shocks to the system.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Use of Title IV-E Training Funds**
  The Administration and Congress should expand the flexibility of current Title IV-E training funds by encouraging states to better use funds to develop public and private partnerships that can increase opportunities for staff training.

- **National Academy of Science Study**
  Congress should follow up on previous legislative proposals to request a National Academy of Sciences study on the child welfare workforce.

- **Use Of Promoting Safe and Stable Families Funds**
  In reauthorizing the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program Congress should continue the current allocation of $20 million in workforce development funding and HHS should work with states on how these dollars can be better directed to helping states implement workforce studies and other important workforce improvement strategies.