



# The Human Services Workforce Initiative

## *Relationship between Staff Turnover, Child Welfare System Functioning and Recurrent Child Abuse*



Prepared by  
National Council on Crime and Delinquency

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# **The Relationship between Staff Turnover, Child Welfare System Functioning and Recurrent Child Abuse**

## Introduction

The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. HSWI's premise is that human services matter. Delivered well, they can, and do, positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, often at critical points in their lives.

We believe that the quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover; in others an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork renders otherwise capable staff ineffective; and keeping morale up is difficult in the human services fields and it is remarkable that so many human services professionals stick to it, year after year.

HSWI's mission is to work with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a series of publications and other communications efforts we hope to:

- β Call greater attention to workforce issues.
- β Help to describe and define the status of the human services workforce.
- β Disseminate data on current conditions.
- β Highlight best and promising practices.
- β Suggest systemic and policy actions which can make a deep, long term difference.

This paper, authored by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), addresses the important issue of staff turnover in the child welfare system, and links the impact of turnover to the children served. Importantly, NCCD identifies "change points" that agencies can address to make a difference.

Additional information on the human services workforce, and on HSWI, is available at [www.cornerstones4kids.org](http://www.cornerstones4kids.org).

Cornerstones For Kids  
2006

# **The Relationship between Staff Turnover, Child Welfare System Functioning, and Recurrent Child Abuse**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

Annual turnover in child welfare agencies has been estimated between 20 and 40 percent. High turnover rates have several potential costs: time spent hiring and training new workers, money spent on administrative needs rather than services, strain on the existing workforce, and service degradation. Resources channeled to replace workers, rather than to provide services, are likely to negatively affect the functioning of the system and ultimately the children and families served by the agency. While it is logical to conclude that a high turnover rate is a main component of an underperforming child welfare system, this conclusion has not been documented by research.

### **Study Description**

This study is a first look at a very complex issue. It examines the relationships among factors that contribute to the overall level of functioning, including turnover rates, workplace characteristics, system efficiency, and case outcomes. Data were drawn from twelve California counties representing a wide array of economic conditions, child welfare practices, and political environments. Cluster analysis was used to explore the relationships among turnover, efficiency, and effectiveness. With cluster analysis, organizations that are most similar group or cluster together and thus can be described in terms of turnover rates.

### **Findings**

Three distinct clusters emerged from the analysis. In general, these clusters represented three levels of organizational functioning: high, moderate, and low. The highest functioning cluster contained three agencies that had the lowest turnover rates, best paid staff, generally best compliance with recognized practice standards, and lowest rates of re-abuse. The lowest functioning cluster was composed of two agencies that had the highest turnover rates, lowest staff pay, and the highest average rates of re-abuse.

The analysis also showed three distinct levels of average turnover rates for highest, moderate, and lowest functioning clusters (9, 13, and 23 percent, respectively).

### ***Workplace Characteristics***

The analysis suggests that there are three types of organizations characterized by main differences in workplace characteristics. First, the highest functioning organizations have the

lowest turnover rates, highest salaries, and no requirements for being on call or working overtime. Higher functioning agencies also provided more training for new workers.

### ***System Efficiency***

Contrary to expectations most of the system efficiency measures did not show a statistical relationship to turnover rates. These data show that by most indications, agencies with high turnover are able to maintain practice standards; however, their systems are showing the stress. Investigation procedures seem to some extent protected from the effects of system stress. However, fewer case plans are approved and permanency cases are closed more quickly in the cluster of agencies that have the highest turnover. It is likely that workers have less time to complete their paperwork and thus try to close cases more quickly to reduce their load.

### ***System Effectiveness***

The most important measure of the effectiveness of the child welfare system is the recurrence of maltreatment. The cluster analysis showed a clear relationship between agency functioning and this measure of system effectiveness. The lowest functioning cluster of agencies (with the highest levels of turnover) had about twice as many recurrences of abuse or neglect.

### **Conclusion**

This study points to system issues that are related to better agency functioning and reduced child maltreatment *and* that can be impacted by policy makers and administrators. These important change points are increasing the salaries of child welfare workers and supervisors, not allowing or expecting overtime, not requiring “on-call” work, and focusing on the completion of written and approved case plans.

## **The Relationship between Staff Turnover, Child Welfare System Functioning and Recurrent Child Abuse**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Child welfare workers often predict that they will leave their jobs at high rates. In one study, two-thirds (68 percent) predicted that they would stay two years or less in their current position (Harrison, 1980). Another study found that nearly 45 percent of child welfare workers were likely to look for a new job with another employer in the next year (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Annual agency turnover in child welfare agencies has been estimated at between 20 and 40 percent (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Reagh, 1994).

High turnover rates have several potential costs: time spent hiring and training new workers, money spent on administrative needs rather than services, strain on the existing workforce, and service degradation. Resources channeled to replace workers, rather than provide services, are likely to negatively affect the functioning of the system, and ultimately the children and families served by the agency. While it is logical to conclude that a high turnover rate is a main component of an underperforming child welfare system, this conclusion has not been documented by research.

It is important to consider that real world systems function dynamically and it is difficult to know whether job turnover causes a malfunctioning system or is a symptom of it. For example, it is difficult to discern whether poor outcomes for abused children are a result of high turnover or are the cause of staff burnout and short tenure. It is likely that both of these relationships exist in a dynamic system. Thus, this study will examine the relationships among factors that contribute to an overall level of functioning. Describing “system functioning” for this study includes defining the relationship among turnover rates, workplace characteristics, system efficiency, and case outcomes.

### **STUDY DESCRIPTION**

The data analyzed in this study were drawn from twelve California counties. These counties ranged from large metropolitan centers to small rural counties in various geographic areas of the state. They represent a wide array of economic conditions, child welfare practices, and political environments.

The data are from each county's SafeMeasures<sup>®</sup> 2002 database. NCCD created SafeMeasures<sup>®</sup> to provide real time data reports for each county on measures of compliance with agency, state, and federal standards, as well as on a number of outcome measures such as subsequent allegations, investigations, substantiations, and placements. In addition, NCCD surveyed the twelve counties in the study to obtain information on salaries, benefits, turnover rates, and number of staff at each level in the organization. The resulting database represents nearly 3,000 workers and over 40,000 cases. However, all analyses were conducted using aggregate measures since turnover is an agency-based statistic.

Given the small sample size (twelve counties), the most appropriate analyses were exploratory. In order to study the relationships among turnover, efficiency, and effectiveness, cluster analysis was used. Cluster analysis allows for the exploration of the data by creating typologies of organizations. Organizations that are most similar group or cluster together and thus can be described in terms of turnover rates. The data will show whether organizations with low turnover rates are also the most efficient and most effective. To further illuminate the clustering, the statistical significance of the bivariate relationships was also explored.

## **FINDINGS**

Three distinct clusters emerged from the analysis. In general, these clusters represented three levels of organizational functioning: high, moderate, and low. The highest functioning cluster contained three agencies that had the lowest turnover rates, best paid staff, generally best compliance with recognized practice standards, and lowest rates of re-abuse. The lowest functioning cluster was composed of two agencies that had the highest turnover rates, lowest staff pay, and the highest average rates of re-abuse. Table 1 shows a summary of the cluster analysis, as well as the variables that are significantly related to job turnover.<sup>1</sup> Each of the notable differences between the clusters will be explored in the sections that follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Tests of statistical significance for the clusters are inappropriate because the analysis intentionally creates divergence in the variables across clusters. Statistical significance in this report refers to the bivariate correlations.



**Table 1: Characteristics of the Three Agency Clusters/Typologies**

|  | Cluster 1        | Cluster 2         | Cluster 3       | Correlation with Turnover (p<.05) |
|--|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
|  | Highest Function | Moderate Function | Lowest Function |                                   |
| Number of agencies   | 3                | 7                 | 2               |                                   |
| <b>Turnover Rate – 2002</b>  | 9.0              | 13.1              | 23.4            |                                   |
| <b>Workplace Characteristics</b>   |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Average minimum salary for child welfare workers   | \$56,671         | \$41,154          | \$32,245        | -.80                              |
| Average minimum salary for supervisors   | \$70,057         | \$51,199          | \$38,576        | -.75                              |
| Average worker caseload  | 13.4             | 11.4              | 10.5            |                                   |
| Training days for new workers  | 48               | 31                | 14              |                                   |
| Ratio of workers to supervisors  | 5.6:1            | 6.8:1             | 6.8:1           |                                   |
| Educational reimbursement offered  | Yes              | Yes               | Mixed           | -.73                              |
| Flex time allowed  | Mixed            | Mixed             | Mixed           |                                   |
| Overtime allowed   | Mixed            | Yes               | Yes             |                                   |
| On-call allowed  | Optional         | Mixed             | Required        |                                   |
| <b>Efficiency Measures</b>   |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| <i>Investigations</i>  |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Non-compliance with standard time for investigation  | 8.9%             | 26.7%             | 17.3%           |                                   |
| Time from first actual contact to close - % more than 60 days  | 18.2%            | 7.4%              | 40.3%           |                                   |
| <i>In-Home Case Management</i>   |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Current case status plan approved for keeping the child in the family home                                       | 64.7%            | 59.0%             | 33.4%           | -.82                              |
| Cases compliant with face-to-face contact standards for children left in family home                             | 64.9%            | 76.3%             | 66.2%           |                                   |
| Cases open for more than 18 months for in-home cases   | 6.6%             | 4.9%              | 10.1%           |                                   |
| <i>Out-of-Home Placement</i>   |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Current case status plan approved for family reunification cases   | 69.8%            | 61.9%             | 38.4%           | -.69                              |
| Compliant with face-to-face contact standards for children taken from family home but intended for reunification | 69.2%            | 80.5%             | 78.6%           |                                   |
| Cases open more than 18 months for children taken from home but intended for family reunification                | 10.2%            | 4.9%              | 7.1%            |                                   |
| <i>Out-of-Home – Permanency Placement</i>  |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Current case status plan approved for child taken from home and undergoing permanency placement                  | 42.1%            | 56.7%             | 37.6%           |                                   |
| Cases compliant with face-to-face contact standards for children in permanency placement process                 | 31.3%            | 62.0%             | 61.0%           |                                   |
| Cases open more than 18 months for children undergoing permanency placement                                      | 78.5%            | 60.1%             | 55.1%           | -.61                              |
| <i>General Practice Standards</i>  |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Care providers given health and education documents  | 43.9%            | 38.2%             | 17.1%           |                                   |
| Compliant with child receiving standard physical health exam   | 71.1%            | 80.4%             | 51.0%           |                                   |
| <b>Effectiveness - Case Outcomes</b>   |                  |                   |                 |                                   |
| Substantiated re-abuse or re-neglect cases within 3 months   | 6.1%             | 8.4%              | 14.9%           | .79                               |
| Substantiated re-abuse or re-neglect cases within 6 months   | 10.0%            | 12.6%             | 18.2%           | .72                               |
| Substantiated re-abuse or re-neglect cases within 12 months  | 14.6%            | 16.9%             | 21.8%           | .60                               |

The analysis showed three distinct levels of average turnover rates for the highest, moderate, and lowest functioning clusters (9, 13, and 23 percent, respectively). The average turnover rate in the lowest functioning cluster was 2.5 times greater than the turnover rate in the highest functioning cluster. An examination of turnover rates in the individual counties that compose each cluster provides a further layer of detail. Turnover rates in the individual counties ranged from a low of 6.2 percent to a high of 27.3 percent. Interestingly, one county (B) had a low turnover rate, but the data analysis placed it in Cluster 2. Thus, even though this county had a low turnover rate, it was more like the counties in Cluster 2 than those in Cluster 1 on other variables. This may be due to the fact that there was a large statistical difference between clusters in salary levels. County B fit in with Cluster 2 on the salary variable.

**Table 2: Turnover Rates**

| <b>County</b>                           | <b>2002 Turnover Rate</b> |
|---|---------------------------|
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |                           |
| A                                       | 6.2%                      |
| E                                       | 8.4%                      |
| J                                       | 12.5%                     |
| <b>Cluster 2 – Moderate Functioning</b> |                           |
| B                                       | 7.5%                      |
| C                                       | 14.6%                     |
| D                                       | 18.2%                     |
| F                                       | 11.6%                     |
| G                                       | 14.8%                     |
| I                                       | 12.1%                     |
| K                                       | 13.2%                     |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |                           |
| H                                       | 19.4%                     |
| L                                       | 27.3%                     |

The clustering of counties begs the exploration of underlying county differences. Therefore, before further elucidation of the findings, it is important to discuss demographic differences that may potentially have an effect on the results. Table 3 lists characteristics of the counties (compiled as averages for each cluster) that were gleaned from the 2000 United States Census.

**Table 3: General Characteristics of Counties within Clusters**

|                                       | Cluster 1<br>Average of 3 counties |         | Cluster 2<br>Average of 7 counties |           | Cluster 3<br>Average of 2 counties |          |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------------|----------|
|                                       | Median                             | S.D.*   | Median                             | S.D.      | Median                             | S.D.     |
| <b>Total population</b>               | 776,733                            | 599,543 | 799,407                            | 1,182,202 | 390,352                            | 513,140  |
| <b>Percent under poverty level</b>    | 11%                                | 2.6%    | 14.2%                              | 4.0%      | 14.7%                              | 7.8%     |
| <b>Persons per square mile</b>        | 1,957                              | 8,932   | 146                                | 1,292     | 218                                | 269      |
| <b>Median household income</b>        | \$55,946                           | \$9,085 | \$42,887                           | \$7,706   | \$44,654                           | \$21,230 |
| <b>Emergency response referrals**</b> | 4,474                              | 3,523   | 11,853                             | 14,758    | 4,094                              | 4,779    |

\* The standard deviation is a measure of variability.

\*\* The number of emergency referrals to the county Department of Social Services in 2002.

In general, the clusters did not show any discernable pattern of demographic differences. However, there are some distinctions that should be noted. The median population size of Cluster 3 is smaller than that of the other two clusters. On average the counties in Cluster 1 (with the lowest turnover rate) have a slightly lower poverty rate, tend to be more urban (higher population per square mile), and have higher household incomes. Cluster 2 shows the most variability in general because there are more counties composing this cluster. There are a few counties in Cluster 2 that have a large volume of emergency referrals, thus the median number of referrals is substantially larger.

## **Workplace Characteristics**

### ***Salary***

There were significant differences between the clusters on salaries paid to workers and supervisors. The highest functioning cluster of organizations paid the highest salaries. In fact, the employees in the highest functioning cluster were paid almost twice as much on average as the workers in the lowest functioning cluster. Minimum annual salaries for workers and supervisors are presented in Table 4. The lowest starting salary for workers was \$28,262; the highest starting salary was \$58,500. For supervisors, average minimum salaries ranged from \$36,062 to \$76,154.

Salary was closely related to turnover rates. The correlation between average minimum worker salary and agency turnover rate was an extremely strong -.8, and the correlation between turnover and average minimum supervisor salary was -.75. Thus, the higher the salary, the lower the turnover rate.

**Table 4: Minimum Annual Salaries Paid to Workers and Supervisors**

| County                                  | Workers  | Supervisors |
|---|----------|-------------|
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |          |             |
| A                                       | \$58,500 | \$70,252    |
| E                                       | \$55,464 | \$63,764    |
| J                                       | \$56,050 | \$76,154    |
| <b>Cluster 2 – Moderate Functioning</b> |          |             |
| B                                       | \$45,851 | \$54,478    |
| C                                       | \$41,379 | \$51,501    |
| D                                       | \$40,752 | \$48,318    |
| F                                       | \$40,651 | \$52,896    |
| G                                       | \$33,704 | \$48,490    |
| I                                       | \$41,469 | \$51,348    |
| K                                       | \$44,274 | \$51,360    |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |          |             |
| H                                       | \$36,227 | \$41,090    |
| L                                       | \$28,262 | \$36,062    |

Benefit packages across the twelve counties were much more consistent than salary levels. However, levels of training, overtime policy, and on-call requirements varied (see Table 5). Most counties provided educational reimbursement at some level, allowed flex time schedules, and paid caseworkers for overtime. However, educational reimbursement had a significant statistical relationship to turnover because one of the two highest turnover counties did not provide education reimbursement. Also, the highest functioning cluster (with the lowest average turnover rate) was less likely to require that workers be on call and less likely to allow overtime. In fact, regardless of cluster, the counties where on-call status was not required had an average turnover rate of 8.7 percent, compared to 16.4 percent for counties where on-call status was required.

**Table 5: Agency Benefits/Requirements**

| County                                  | Ongoing Staff Training Required | Training Required for New Staff | Agency Provides Education Reimbursement | Flex Time Available | Paid Overtime Available | On Call Status |
|---|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |                                 |                                 |   |                     |                         |                |
| A                                       | No                              | 40 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Optional       |
| E                                       | No                              | 60 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | No                      | Optional       |
| J                                       | No                              | 45 days                         | Yes                                     | No                  | No                      | Not Required   |
| <b>Cluster 2 - Moderate Functioning</b> |                                 |                                 |   |                     |                         |                |
| B                                       | No                              | 15 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Optional       |
| C                                       | Yes                             | 30 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Required       |
| D                                       | Yes                             | 30 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Required       |
| F                                       | No                              | 80 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Required       |
| G                                       | No                              | 30 days                         | Yes                                     | No                  | Yes                     | Required       |
| I                                       | Yes                             | 13 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Required       |
| K                                       | Yes                             | 20 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Required       |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |                                 |                                 |   |                     |                         |                |
| H                                       | Yes                             | 15 days                         | Yes                                     | Yes                 | Yes                     | Required       |
| L                                       | No                              | 13 days                         | No                                      | No                  | Yes                     | Required       |

Salary and some other workplace characteristics were highly correlated. Interestingly, the counties that paid the highest salaries were also the least likely to allow overtime or keep their employees on call. This implies that these counties placed a high value on their employee’s time as well as their finances. Another study recently conducted by NCCD, “Job Turnover in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice: The Voices of Former Frontline Workers,” showed that being on call and working long hours were the main reasons caseworkers left their jobs.

Training requirements, particularly for new staff, also varied substantially. More training was provided for new employees in the highest functioning cluster (more than nine weeks on average) compared to an average of less than three weeks in the lowest functioning cluster. On average, the agencies with the lowest turnover had the highest number of training days for new employees, and agencies with the highest turnover invested a lower number of days in new staff training.

A profile of agency supervision levels is presented in Table 6. This is intended to provide an illustration of the range of workforce conditions represented in the study. A U.S. General Accounting Office study (2003) noted that one reason cited for workers leaving an agency was the level of supervision provided. As one measure of this, the ratio of workers to supervisors was computed for each agency. In the twelve agencies in the study, worker to

supervisor ratios ranged from just over 4:1 to 12.5:1. As the cluster analysis presented in Table 1 illustrates, worker to supervisor ratio was slightly smaller in the highest functioning cluster. However, the relationship between job turnover and supervisor/worker ratio was not statistically significant. Other factors that were not significantly related to turnover were the number of staff and stability in agency leadership. In this sample, there was general instability in agency directors, with an overall average of two new directors in five years.

**Table 6: Agency Supervision Profile**

| County                                  | Supervisors | Case Workers | Worker to Supervisor Ratio | Years in Agency of Current Director | Number of Agency Directors (last five years) |
|---|-------------|--------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |             |              |                            |                                     |  |
| A                                       | 61          | 283          | 4.6:1                      | 2.42                                | 3  |
| E                                       | 42          | 342          | 8.1:1                      | 3.67                                | 2  |
| J                                       | 8           | 33           | 4.1:1                      | 12                                  | 1  |
| <b>Cluster 2 – Moderate Functioning</b> |             |              |                            |                                     |  |
| B                                       | 131         | 581          | 4.4:1                      | 2                                   | 2  |
| C                                       | 100         | 755          | 7.6:1                      | 1.25                                | 3  |
| D                                       | 68          | 436          | 6.4:1                      | 3                                   | 2  |
| F                                       | 12          | 61           | 5.1:1                      | 0.75                                | 2  |
| G                                       | 43          | 285          | 6.6:1                      | 2.5                                 | 3  |
| I                                       | 2           | 25           | 12.5:1                     | 10                                  | 1  |
| K                                       | 11          | 52           | 4.7:1                      | 3.75                                | 2  |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |             |              |                            |                                     |  |
| H                                       | 17          | 113          | 6.7:1                      | 1.33                                | 2  |
| L                                       | 2           | 14           | 7.0:1                      | 3                                   | 3  |
| <b>Total</b>                            | <b>497</b>  | <b>2,980</b> | <b>6.0:1</b>               | <b>3.8</b>                          | <b>2.2</b>                                   |

### *Caseloads*

To determine the average caseload in each agency, a nine-week period at the end of 2002 was sampled (November and December 2002). Against theory, the average caseload of the highest functioning cluster was higher than that of the lower functioning clusters. This difference is likely an artifact of the small sample size as one county in Cluster 1 had an aberrant caseload statistic.

As Table 7 illustrates, caseloads varied greatly among the twelve agencies, ranging from a low of 7.5 to a high of 21.2. The 21.2 average was something of an anomaly among the twelve agencies. It was over 40 percent higher than the next highest caseload level (15) and nearly double the average for all twelve agencies. Seven agencies (58 percent) had average caseloads

between 10 and 15 cases, and five agencies had average caseloads of less than 10. With the exception of County A, caseloads were within or below standards established by the Child Welfare League of America. In this study, caseload was not statistically related to turnover. Unfortunately, the available measure of caseload in this study was not optimal because it was only for the last two months of the year.

**Table 7: Average Weekly Case Count (November and December 2002)**

| County                                  | Worker Average |
|---|----------------|
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |                |
| A                                       | 21.2           |
| E                                       | 8.7            |
| J                                       | 10.2           |
| <b>Cluster 2 – Moderate Functioning</b> |                |
| B                                       | 10.6           |
| C                                       | 12.2           |
| D                                       | 15.0           |
| F                                       | 7.5            |
| G                                       | 8.6            |
| I                                       | 13.7           |
| K                                       | 12.0           |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |                |
| H                                       | 8.4            |
| L                                       | 12.6           |
| Study Average                           | 11.7           |

Note: This reflects all cases, including investigations, divided by the number of workers in each agency.

***Summary of Findings on Workplace Characteristics***

The analysis suggests that there are three types of organizations characterized by main differences in workplace characteristics. First, the highest functioning organizations have the lowest turnover rates, highest salaries, and no requirements for being on call or working overtime. The highest functioning agencies also provided more training for new workers. These findings are generally supported by other NCCD research that asked former caseworkers why they left their agencies. The most common responses were too much overtime, being on-call, high caseloads, and low salaries. The issue of high caseloads was not relevant for most counties in this sample because the caseload size did not exceed the recommended maximums.

## **System Efficiency**

In theory, agencies with high turnover rates would also experience a disruption in case management that would manifest itself in lower levels of compliance with agency standards. Practice standards are the basic tenets of casework and are established with the presumption that good casework, timely completion of required tasks, and regular contact with children and families are essential to achieve positive outcomes for children.

Performance measures and their relationship to the three clusters as well as turnover are presented below. These measures are divided into three principal categories: 1) investigations and response to allegations, 2) in-home services provided to families, and 3) out-of-home services provided to children in foster care or undergoing permanency placement.

### ***Investigations***

A differential pattern was not found among high, moderate, and low functioning clusters in our measures of the investigation process. Also, the turnover rate was not related to any of the variables describing compliance with investigation standards. A possible explanation is that investigatory responsibilities are given precedence and thus maintained. Almost all the agencies were compliant with time to first contact standards for the vast majority of cases.

Investigation compliance measures for all twelve counties are presented in Table 8. These data illustrate the wide divergences in practice found in the twelve counties in this study. For example, the percentage of referrals responded to within 24 hours ranged from 11.4 percent to over 60.0 percent.



**Table 8: Referral/Investigation Compliance Measures Monthly Average for 2002**

| County                                  | Time to First Contact    |                           |                       |                                   |                     | Percent of Cases Requiring 60 or More Days to Complete Investigation |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|--|
|   | Compliant with Standards | Contacted Within 24-Hours | Contacted in 2-9 Days | Contacted After More than 10 Days | No Contact Recorded |  |
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |                          |                           |                       |                                   |                     |  |
| A                                       | 91.0%                    | 37.6%                     | 53.2%                 | 8.8%                              | 0.4%                | 40.8%  |
| E                                       | 85.0%                    | 35.6%                     | 51.2%                 | 12.9%                             | 0.3%                | 12.8%  |
| J                                       | 97.3%                    | 25.2%                     | 71.9%                 | 2.8%                              | 0.1%                | 0.9%   |
| <b>Cluster 2 – Moderate Functioning</b> |                          |                           |                       |                                   |                     |  |
| B                                       | 95.1%                    | 37.3%                     | 58.2%                 | 4.4%                              | 0.1%                | 3.1%   |
| C                                       | 87.5%                    | 36.6%                     | 49.1%                 | 13.8%                             | 0.5%                | 7.0%   |
| D                                       | 78.9%                    | 24.7%                     | 54.1%                 | 20.8%                             | 0.4%                | 8.2%   |
| F*                                      | 34.4%                    | 11.4%                     | 24.4%                 | 19.2%                             | 45.0%               | 11.8%  |
| G                                       | 72.7%                    | 60.4%                     | 17.2%                 | 22.6%                             | 0.6%                | 7.5%   |
| I                                       | 82.3%                    | 29.0%                     | 49.7%                 | 20.2%                             | 1.1%                | 5.6%   |
| K                                       | 62.5%                    | 23.9%                     | 35.5%                 | 40.2%                             | 0.5%                | 8.6%   |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |                          |                           |                       |                                   |                     |  |
| H                                       | 79.4%                    | 18.4%                     | 61.1%                 | 20.1%                             | 0.4%                | 13.5%  |
| L                                       | 86.0%                    | 38.2%                     | 41.7%                 | 19.7%                             | 0.4%                | 67.0%  |

\* The percentage of cases with no contact may be a data entry issue rather than a compliance issue. The 45% figure, given the level of consistency found among other agencies, is highly suspect.

### ***In-Home Services***

One important measure of system efficiency for in-home cases was different among the three clusters of agencies. The highest functioning cluster had a greater percentage of cases that had an approved case plan—approximately twice the percentage of approved case plans compared to the lowest functioning cluster agencies. This factor, case plan approved by supervisor, also demonstrated an exceptionally strong relationship to staff turnover (-.82). Maintenance of case service plans is undoubtedly difficult in agencies that experience high turnover rates. As a subsequent section of this report documents, this disruption appears to have a strong negative impact on case outcomes. Having an approved case plan for in home services also showed a significant relationship to the percentage of children receiving a physical exam (.61). Surprisingly, compliance with case contact standards did not seem to be affected by turnover. This may point out the issue of quality versus quantity. It may be that agencies are able to keep up most of the appearances of being able to handle the caseload, while quality of the interactions (which is extremely difficult to measure) suffers.

### ***Out-of-Home Placement***

A similar pattern of relationships was apparent for out-of-home placement cases that were slated for family reunification. Agencies in Cluster 1, the highest functioning cluster, had higher rates of approved case plans for family reunification cases than did the lowest functioning agencies. Again, agencies with lower turnover were more likely to have approved case plans.

For those cases slated for permanent out-of-home placement, there were no clear differences among clusters in case plan approval. Interestingly, in the highest functioning agencies of Cluster 1, cases were more likely to be left open longer. These agencies seemed to leave more time for permanency planning. The vast majority (79 percent) of cases were still open more than 18 months later as opposed to only 55 percent of the cases in the lowest functioning (highest turnover) cluster. In support of this finding, bivariate analysis showed that agencies that closed their permanency cases more quickly generally had a higher turnover rate.

### ***Summary of Findings on System Efficiency***

Contrary to expectations most of the system efficiency measures did not show a statistical relationship to turnover rates. These data show that by most indications, agencies with high turnover are able to maintain practice standards; however, their systems are showing the stress. Investigation procedures seem to some extent protected from the effects of system stress. However, fewer case plans are approved, and permanency cases are closed more quickly in the cluster of agencies that have the highest turnover. It is likely that workers have less time to complete their paperwork and they try to close cases more quickly to reduce their load. The findings suggest that services to ongoing cases may be the first casualty of high staff turnover as efforts are made to protect the “front end” of the child protection system.

### **System Effectiveness**

The most important measure of effectiveness of the child welfare system is the recurrence of maltreatment. We have defined recurrence as a new substantiated allegation of abuse or neglect within three, six, or twelve months. The cluster analysis showed a clear relationship between agency functioning and system effectiveness. The lowest functioning cluster of agencies (with the highest levels of turnover) had about twice as many recurrences of abuse or

neglect. The results of the cluster analysis depicted in Table 1 at the beginning of this report, shows that within three months, 6 percent of Cluster 1 (highest functioning) cases have another substantiated abuse incident, compared to almost 15 percent of cases in the agencies in Cluster 3 (lowest functioning). Within 12 months, almost 15 percent of cases in the highest functioning agencies had another substantiated case of abuse, compared to almost 22 percent of the cases in the lowest functioning agencies.

In support of these disturbing findings, the correlation between turnover rate and maltreatment recurrence at every time point was strong and statistically significant (see Table 9). The higher the turnover rate, the higher the re-abuse rate, although the relationship declines as time from initial referral increases. Thus, turnover appears to have its greatest impact in the first few critical months of services.

**Table 9: Turnover Rates and Recurrence of Maltreatment**

|   | <b>Correlation with 2002 Turnover Rate</b> |
|---|--|
| Recurrence at 3 months for all cases                  | .79  |
| Recurrence at 6 months for all cases                  | .72  |
| Recurrence at 12 months for all cases                 | .60  |
| Recurrence at 3 months for children left in the home  | .81  |
| Recurrence at 6 months for children left in the home  | .70  |
| Recurrence at 12 months for children left in the home | .61  |

Recurrence rates delineated by county are presented in Table 10. Substantiated re-abuse levels varied significantly across counties. It should be noted that abuse recurrence rates in County H are not consistent with those found in the other county within Cluster 3.

**Table 10: Recurrence of Maltreatment\* for 2002**

|   | All Cases: Recurrence of Maltreatment |                   |                  | In-Home Cases Only: Recurrence of Maltreatment |                 |                  |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|--|-----------------|------------------|
|   | Within 3 Months                       | Within Six Months | Within 12 Months | Within 3 Months                                | Within 6 Months | Within 12 Months |
| <b>Cluster 1 – Highest Functioning</b>  |                                       |                   |                  |  |                 |                  |
| A                                       | 4.8%                                  | 7.2%              | 11.4%            | 4.3%   | 6.3%            | 9.7%             |
| E                                       | 8.1%                                  | 10.5%             | 16.6%            | 8.1%   | 10.9%           | 17.7%            |
| J                                       | 5.5%                                  | 12.4%             | 15.9%            | 6.1%   | 13.2%           | 17.1%            |
| <b>Cluster 2 – Moderate Functioning</b> |                                       |                   |                  |  |                 |                  |
| B                                       | 4.1%                                  | 6.6%              | 10.0%            | 4.1%   | 6.8%            | 10.6%            |
| C                                       | 9.2%                                  | 11.7%             | 15.2%            | 8.2%   | 11.0%           | 14.6%            |
| D                                       | 11.7%                                 | 15.0%             | 18.2%            | 11.0%  | 15.2%           | 19.1%            |
| F                                       | 10.1%                                 | 14.3%             | 20.7%            | 9.5%   | 14.3%           | 20.9%            |
| G                                       | 6.0%                                  | 8.3%              | 12.2%            | 5.0%   | 7.3%            | 11.1%            |
| I                                       | 4.1%                                  | 11.8%             | 14.6%            | 5.6%   | 15.9%           | 19.6%            |
| K                                       | 13.8%                                 | 20.3%             | 27.3%            | 13.3%  | 20.7%           | 28.5%            |
| <b>Cluster 3 – Lowest Functioning</b>   |                                       |                   |                  |  |                 |                  |
| H                                       | 8.9%                                  | 9.8%              | 12.8%            | 9.4%   | 10.2%           | 13.5%            |
| L                                       | 20.8%                                 | 26.5%             | 30.8%            | 22.2%  | 28.5%           | 33.7%            |

\* Defined as a new substantiation.

## Summary of Analyses

While this is a small study involving twelve child welfare agencies in a single state, much can be learned from the findings. In sum, the analyses conducted here support the following conclusions:

1. The data support three typologies of child welfare agencies based on their overall functioning, including workplace characteristics for the caseworkers, system efficiency, and effectiveness in preventing further child maltreatment. These agencies fell into highest, moderate, and lowest functioning categories, while high, moderate, and low job turnover rates were a defining characteristic of the ability of the agency to function.
2. Salary levels for workers and supervisors were related to turnover rates. Along with significantly higher salaries, organizations with lower turnover had employees who were not required to work overtime or to be on call. Given the cost of turnover, both in financial and human terms, an increased investment in staff resources could lead to better protection of children and perhaps save money in the long run. A larger study could delve into the costs/benefits of better compensation, educational benefits, and training programs.
3. There is some evidence that staff turnover is negatively related to the efficiency of the agency and disrupts case planning. The intake process (referrals and investigations) does not seem to be affected as quickly as ongoing services, possibly because agencies strive to maintain the crucial front-end of the child protection system when staff shortages occur.
4. High turnover rates are significantly related to higher rates of maltreatment recurrence. The correlation between turnover and recurrence within three months of service is especially strong (.81). Counties with a turnover rate exceeding 15 percent had a six-month recurrence rate (an important “yardstick” in the federal Child and Family Service Reviews) that was 125 percent higher than those with turnover rates below 8.5 percent.

Future studies that include larger samples and use multivariate analysis that considers and controls for interactions among variables will be better able to measure the impact of turnover on service delivery and child safety. There is great promise that larger databases will soon be available. The database used in this study, for example, has been implemented in several states other than California. A larger pool of data from many agencies around the country will permit analyses of the effect of different policy and practice approaches to child welfare on both turnover and case outcomes.

This study should be viewed as a preliminary analysis (or first look) at a very complex issue. That said, it does offer evidence that staff turnover is related to child safety. The strength of the correlation between turnover and recurrence may be due, in part, to the size of the sample. However, it is such a strong correlation that it would probably remain highly significant in larger studies.

Even though we cannot infer causality from these analyses, we can focus on the factors that are most easily affected by policy and administrative changes. This study points to system issues that are related to better agency functioning and reduced child maltreatment and that can be impacted by policy makers and administrators. These important change points are increasing the salaries of child welfare workers and supervisors, not allowing or expecting overtime, not requiring “on-call” work, and focusing on the completion of written and approved case plans. Although these points of suggested change do not necessarily cause job turnover, they are related to overall agency efficiency and effectiveness, and improvement in one part of the system is likely to show benefits in other parts of the system.

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