

# The burnout epidemic: High turnover in child welfare

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Job turnover is a concern in any line of work, but few fields experience this as severely as the child welfare system. Studies show that turnover in the social work workforce nationally could be as high as 40%.

A study co-led by Assistant Professor Francie Julien-Chinn of the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa set out to discover why such high turnover rates exist in the field. Researchers examined how different types of burnout among [child welfare](#) caseworkers are associated with turnover in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was published in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*.

## **The problem with turnover**

The researchers found that many child welfare workers decide to leave their jobs for various reasons. In a pool of 258 caseworkers who were surveyed in the study, less than half indicated that they intended to continue working in their positions for five years, and about half of them stated that they were not planning to leave their current agencies as soon as possible.

Every time a caseworker leaves an agency, the loss costs the agency 30% to 200% of the former employee's annual salary. High turnover in the child welfare system negatively impacts not only the agency, but more importantly children and families. One study cited found that youth were more reluctant to trust others as a result of losing a caseworker, which can negate years of work to build trust.

According to the study, the most prominent contributing factor to high turnover is workplace burnout.

"Social workers experience burnout all too often. This is largely due to the high-stress environments they work in on a day-to-day basis. The decisions they make directly impact the reunification of families, and they are often expected to manage heavy caseloads for resource-poor agencies," said Julien-Chinn.

## Alleviating the issue

Julien-Chinn said that reducing the physical and [emotional exhaustion](#) of child welfare workers could help decrease job burnout. One way that this might be accomplished, would be to minimize administrative burdens, such as paperwork. In addition, stronger support systems should be established. Emotional exhaustion specifically has been linked to a lack of supportive leadership.

"We found that the burden of the work intensity was most associated with intentions to leave the workforce," said Julien-Chinn. "Child Welfare agencies can take this information and work to reduce aspects of the work such as caseload and administrative paperwork."

To help bolster the social work workforce locally, UH Mānoa has collaborated with Child Welfare Services (CWS) to create an education program for its master of social work students. The Hawai'i Child Welfare Education Collaboration (HCWEC) program offers up to nine stipends each academic year to MSW students who can commit to at least two years working for CWS, post-graduation. HCWEC has prepared master of social work students to help fill essential positions within CWS.

"We hope our findings aid the child welfare workforce by bringing more awareness to what types of burnout contribute to intention to leave the workplace, as well as constructs that help mediate [burnout](#)," Julien-Chinn said.

The research team included Julien-Chinn, lead author Victor Lushin of Long Island University and co-authors Colleen Katz and Marina Lalayants of CUNY-Hunter College.

**More information:** Victor Lushin et al, A burdened workforce:

Exploring burnout, job satisfaction and turnover among child welfare caseworkers in the era of COVID-19, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2023.106910](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2023.106910)

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