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## Staff Retention and Job Satisfaction in Child Protection

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# Staff Retention and Job Satisfaction in Child Protection

By

Brittany B. Kowalewski, BSW, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide the background and theoretical framework that contribute to staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection. This project intends to understand the factors and relationships associated in maintaining successful staff in child welfare. An anonymous mixed methods study was utilized and formatted with both quantitative and qualitative questions. This survey was distributed to four Southeastern Minnesota county child protection units and asked respondents specific questions in regards to personal characteristics, work factors, and agency factors that impact their job satisfaction and levels of compassion fatigue. This study indicates that work factors such as the nature of the work, client population, severity of cases, paperwork, and workload, significantly impacts the level of workers job satisfaction. Implications suggest when adequate supports are provided, there is a reduction in stress, which leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, and ultimately retention of staff.

## Acknowledgements

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Child maltreatment is a complex social problem that is occurring across our nation. Each day, child protection workers are exposed to the challenges within their job duties as they work towards ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children that may be suffering from maltreatment and abuse. Pryce, Shackelford, and Price (2007) acknowledge: "A new child welfare worker sees more evil and suffering within the first few months of work than anyone should see in a life time" (p. 34).

The US Department of Health and Human Services, Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Reauthorization Act (CAPTA) of 2010 defines child abuse and neglect as, at a minimum: "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm" (Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011, pp. 1-2). The abuse or neglect refers specifically to the child's parental figure or caregiver as the perpetrator. CAPTA (2010) also explains that there are current state and federal policies that are in place to assist in guiding child welfare social workers in their professional practice. DePanfilis, Salus, and the United States Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (2003) believe that partial information has been gathered in regards to the support provided for professionals that are the frontline advocates in implementing and following through with the policies that were developed to protect children.

It is apparent that each day children within our society are being exposed to abuse and neglect. "This social issue occurs in a variety of forms and is deeply rooted in cultural, economic and social practices" (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, p. 59). Child protection social workers are the primary advocates attending to the high

needs of children and families that are in a time of crisis as they are experiencing a range of physical and emotional challenges.

“Today, most state child protection services are part of a broader department of human services and there is a growing acceptance that applying a public health model to child protection may help meet demand” (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007, p. 6). The essential theory of such an approach is preventative care by providing additional supports to children and families at risk. This structure may increase the amount of service provided, likely improve service delivery and enhance outcomes for children and their families. This framework will promote a parallel process that will provide additional care to the children that need protection and the workers that need support.

Throughout history, child abuse and maltreatment has been a very complex and sensitive subject within our society. “Child protection workers face stress in the field when having to make immediate decisions on difficult cases, managing large caseloads, and dealing with continuous media scrutiny” (Martinez, 2004, p. 37). In today’s media, the public primarily is exposed to the undesirable incidents that occur in child protection and seldom hear the success stories that occur. Professionals that choose a career in child protection are greatly exposed to the social pressures associated with assuring the safety of children. These social schemes can greatly impact the workers’ sense of self and their perceptions of the world. Retention of child welfare staff is a problematic due to this pressure on child welfare workers. “Fostering a dynamic workforce with the development of appropriate retention strategies to reduce the level of burnout and exit behavior will only increase productivity and efficiency within the child protection services” (Lynn, 2013, p. 8).

## **Literature Review**

### **History of Child Protection Services**

Child protection is continuing to evolve overtime. For many years after the colonial era there was no formalized structure in place devoted to the safety and wellbeing of children. “It was not until 1875 that the world's first organization devoted entirely to child protection came into existence-the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children” (Myers, 2008, p. 3). Prior to this time, many children were going unprotected. “Historians suppose that child abuse, both physical abuse (battering) and sexual abuse, were at least as common in past centuries as they are today, but instances were rarely documented, because neither medical nor legal frameworks existed for identifying or discussing them” (Wolff, 2013, p. 2). Myers (2008) elaborates on how as time evolved, parents had to adapt their parenting beliefs and cultural norms from being able to independently choose a method to raise their children, to being legally obligated to follow statutory regulations.

“In a groundbreaking paper published nearly fifty years ago, Dr. Henry Kempe and his colleagues coined the term ‘battered-child syndrome,’ defining for the first time child maltreatment in pathological terms” (Boyer and Halbrook, 2011, p. 300). Boyer and Halbrook (2011) describe how the research created by Dr. Kepmse facilitated construction of the foundation of our current welfare system. “In 1962, Congress placed new emphasis on child protection with amendments to the Social Security Act” (Myers, 2008, p. 455). This expansion of the child welfare system greatly influenced the demand of child protection services.

“One of the most important legislative responses to the developing concept of child maltreatment was the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA).” (Boyer and Halbrook, 2011, p. 301). Boyer and Halbrook (2011) describe how CAPTA provided federal funding to states to support the prevention, assessment, investigation, and treatment of child abuse and neglect. As our culture develops and research evolves, CAPTA has been amended to meet changing requirements within our society. According to the Child Information Gateway (2011), CAPTA delivers grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations, including Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations, for demonstration programs and projects. They established the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect; moreover, they also identify the federal role in supporting research, evaluation, technical assistance, and data collection activities; and mandate Child Welfare Information Gateway.

Throughout history the recognition of child abuse has improved greatly but there is still room for enhancement. Although today’s child protection system has its glitches, this contemporary structure has greatly improved compared to the underdeveloped systems that were traditionally utilized. “Today, child protective services are available across America, billions of dollars are devoted to child welfare, and thousands of professionals do their best to help struggling parents and vulnerable children” (Myers, 2008, p. 462). As the role of child welfare workers has transformed over time, protection and support for the worker is still being researched and developed.

### **Child Protection Challenges**

Erbes (2009) describes how knowledge and awareness needs to be gained to address the daily challenges that child welfare workers face while advocating for their

most vulnerable population, especially given the large amount of services in child protection. “In Minnesota, 25,839 children were the subject of accepted child maltreatment reports, assessed by county and tribal agencies in 2012” (Department of Human Services, 2013, p. 4). Child protection services are viewed as difficult and demanding with extremely complex working conditions. “It entails large caseloads, long hours, on-call responsibilities, inadequate compensation, insufficient supervision and training, lack of adequate resources to serve children and their families, and stringent state and federal policy requirements, etc.” (Ellett et al., 2007, p. 273).

Regularly in child welfare, supervisors are challenged to meet the need of recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced workers. “The skills and knowledge required to become a proficient and effective worker in the field of child welfare often take years to develop” (Drake & Yadama, 1996, p. 180). In many circumstances “child welfare staff are first responders; just like police officer and fire fighters, they are asked to respond to emergency situations with very little information, and by doing so often put themselves at risk” (Avinadav, Tullberg, Lorence, & Pitman, 2011, p. 5). These workers are susceptible to the physical and psychological risks associated with continual exposure to child maltreatment. DePanfilis, Salus, and the United States Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (2003) explain that without the proper tools and training, child welfare workers are placing themselves and the vulnerable population they serve at great risk. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011) describes the importance of a strong child welfare training system and the impacts it may have on workers. Training systems provide a foundation by discussing the collaboration of curricula, policies, procedures, resources, and structure to support formal informal instruction, educational opportunities, and

professional development intended to improve outcomes (The Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

### **Definitions Related to Compassion Fatigue and Burnout**

“Depending upon empirical research and the discipline, compassion fatigue also has been interchangeably described as burnout, vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatic stress, and empathy fatigue” (Bush, 2009, p. 28). “Definitional consensus is difficult to reach, due in part to the relatively recent awareness of the phenomenon” (Lerias & Byrne, 2003, p. 184). While many of these definitions have similarities, they do vary in nature. Nevertheless, these terms all describe the vulnerability workers are susceptible to while empathetically engaging with those who have experienced trauma.

“Secondary traumatic stress (STS) refers to the experience of people, usually professionals, who are exposed to others’ traumatic stories as part of their jobs and as a result can develop their own traumatic symptoms and reactions” (Avinadav, Tullberg, Lorence, & Pitman, 2011 p. 5). Figley (1995) describes how STS is a natural consequence of emotions and behaviors resulting from having knowledge about a traumatizing experience that occurred to a significant other – the stress resulting from assisting or wanting to assist a person that is traumatized or experiencing suffering. “Those affected by STS experience intrusive symptoms, changes in world view, and physiological reactions paralleling those of the primary trauma victim” (Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003, p. 7). Research completed by Avinadav, Tullberg, Lorence, and Pitman, (2011) at ACS-NYU Children’s Trauma Institute suggests that child welfare staff are particularly vulnerable to STS because of the vulnerable nature of their clients, the unpredictable nature of their jobs, and their relative lack of physical and psychological

protection. The ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute (2011) also indicates that continual exposure to these vulnerabilities places great risk on child welfare workers.

“Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma refers to work related, secondary exposure to extremely stressful events” (Stamm, 2005, p. 5). According to Bush (2009) compassion fatigue can also be described as an emotional state with negative psychological and physical consequences that emanate from acute or prolonged caregiving of people stricken by intense trauma, suffering, or misfortune. Research from Conrad and Kellar-Guenther (2006) note that when compassion fatigue goes untreated, child welfare workers are exposed to the negative impacts that can influence their lives at a personal and a professional level.

“Burnout is associated with feelings of hopelessness, emotional exhaustion, difficulty in dealing with work or in doing your work effectively, and a sense that your efforts make no difference” (Stamm, 2005, p. 5). Stamm further explains that when stress is exhibited, social workers are more likely to experience the negative effects that are associated with burnout.

Examining burnout is an ongoing concern in the area of child welfare since it is often reflected in the development of damaging attitudes and thoughts of incompetence, a distant and possibly neglectful approach toward the profession, and faulty assessment, which may potentially impair client services (Boyas & Wind, 2010, p. 380).

Furthermore, workers experiencing burnout may become irritated, exhibit rigid thinking, express cynicism about the agency, and become increasingly less productive (Azar, 2000). Research suggests that by identifying the level of individual burnout being

experienced in the workplace, systemic approaches can be formulated to address and change the outcomes in behavior associated with high levels of burnout (Hemingway & Smith, 1999).

Job satisfaction can also be experienced while working in child protection.

“Compassion satisfaction refers to the satisfaction derived from “being able to do one’s work well” (Stamm, 2005, p. 5) with an emphasis on being able to help others. Van Hook and Rothenberg (2009) indicate that there is an increase in compassion satisfaction associated with decreased levels of fatigue or burnout within their job duties. This correlation underlines the importance of discovering ways in which services can be enhanced to provide supports to child welfare workers exposed to traumatic experiences. When workers obtain self-awareness skills, Brohl (2004) suggests they have the ability to understand the stress they are experiencing, the reactions they have to it, and the coping strategies they choose to manage it.

### **Child Protection Social Worker Turnover and Retention**

“The child welfare field has long been among the most demanding and difficult vocational paths available in the human services” (Drake and Yadama 1996, p. 181). Particularly problematic for child welfare services is staff turnover, the phenomenon of child welfare workers leaving the field; and its counterpart, retention, the phenomenon of keeping child welfare workers. Recruiting, preparing, supporting and retaining the child welfare workforce are described as the primary challenges that public and private child welfare agencies need to resolve in order to improve outcomes for children and youth under their supervision (US General Accounting Office, 2006; CDF & Children’s Rights, 2006). According to the US General Accounting Office (GAO) (2003), high turnover

rates and the constant influx of new caseworkers into the workforce causes multiple challenges and risks in maintaining the safety of children within the system.

National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2006) describes how the child welfare system's primary function is to protect children from abuse and neglect; however, high staff turnover hinders the system's ability to meet performance outcomes. Rakoczy's research (2009) concluded that the average length of employment in the child welfare field is approximately one year. The data from Rakoczy's (2009) study on staff retention and turnover were gained through direct experience of worker burnout and loss of employees within the system. Landsman (2007) indicates that regardless of employee turnover concerns, federal and state performance mandates on the child welfare system continue to increase as agencies assist children and families with complex, compounding needs.

“Given the high rate of turnover in child welfare settings, the costs associated with training, and the effect that turnover has upon the quality of services for children, it is crucial to identify issues that contribute to turnover as well as retention” (Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009 p. 36). A study completed by Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, and Lane (2006) determined that the retention of child welfare social workers is particularly critical due to working with the vulnerability of the population served. Their research also indicated that many of these children and families need time to address and work on personal issues as well as develop healthy trusting relationships with their designated social worker.

**Factors in turnover and retention.** Job satisfaction can be defined by factors that lead to turnover and retention, which are described in the following paragraphs.

Turnover in child welfare employees can have detrimental effects on the clients served and the remaining workers who struggle to maintain quality services when positions are vacated and then filled by inexperienced personnel (Powell & York, 1992). “The factors causing the high turnover rates can be divided into individual, supervisory and organizational factors” (Strolin, McCarthy & Caringi, 2007, p. 29). According to Bernotavicz (1997) a perusal of the relevant research finds that the many variables offered as explanations for retention or turnover can be divided into three categories: personal characteristics including worker values, experience, motivation, and education; work factors such as the nature of the work, client population, severity of cases, paperwork, and workload; and agency factors that consist of climate, supervision, clarity of policies, and opportunities for professional growth. National Association of Social Work (NASW) scholars, Anastas and Clark (2012) indicate that child welfare workers’ competence is a continual process that develops and evolves over time.

*Personal characteristics.* One’s education level and personal experience is beneficial when working in child welfare. Cahalane and Sites (2008), summarizing several research studies, note that having a master’s degree in child welfare is associated with better job performance and lower burnout. Research from DePanfilis, Salus, and the United States Office on Child Abuse and Neglect (2003) validates that child welfare workers with developed competency skills and experience are more likely to maintain longevity in their child welfare practice. Analysis of child welfare data suggests that child protection social workers who are most vulnerable to burnout and job dissatisfaction are those whose beliefs and self-esteem are primarily founded on their feelings of professional effectiveness (Rail, 2005; Meier, 1997). Current research on job satisfaction

and compassion fatigue has recognized the importance of social workers' individual attributes as significant influences on retention among child welfare workers.

**Work factors.** American Humane Association (AHA) (2008) describes how the management of child welfare workload is neither simply defined nor addressed in the field of practice. Stress-related variables that contribute to the worker turnover rate in child welfare include role overload and lack of clarity in job descriptions (Jayartne & Chess, 1984). "The measurement of the work tasks required to meet minimal standards of practice is but one piece of a larger social issue" (AHA, 2008, p. 3). Caseload size is often linked to worker turnover in child welfare workforce research (Cornerstones for Kids, 2006). When child welfare staff are overworked they experience high levels of compassion fatigue and are dissatisfied with their individual work practice as well as the child welfare system as a whole (Saluse, 2004). Reducing turnover would likely have effects that include reduced caseload sizes, beneficial outcomes for families, and increased worker satisfaction (Cornerstones, 2006).

**Agency factors.** When workers perceive they are supported by their organization they believe in their ability to manage stress and complete their duties more efficiently (Erbes, 2009). Bell, Kulkarni and Dalton (2003) explain how organizations can either promote job satisfaction or contribute to burnout. Research suggests that workers' perceived organizational support is related to fairness, supervisory support, organizational rewards, and favorable job conditions (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). The quality of managerial supervision can influence the workplace in many ways. Salus (2004) indicated that child welfare supervisors are a critical factor in the successful achievement of agency goals and caseworker practices that strengthen families. Salus

(2004) also discusses how job fulfilment can be achieved when workers develop an open and trusting relationship with their supervisor and administration staff. “Satisfaction with supervision has been found to affect retention of frontline caseworkers” (Landsman, 2007, p. 110). The effect of supportive supervision outweighs the effect of pre-service or in-service training on child welfare worker retention (Kleinpeter, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007).

### **Importance of Addressing Compassion Satisfaction and Compassion Fatigue**

Interpreting and understanding the vast elements that contribute to compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary trauma in child protection work can be useful in sustaining effective services and supports in child welfare programs (Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009). Van Hook and Rothenberg (2009) also suggest that an understanding in these factors is critical in meeting staff needs and maintaining the retention of workers. The Administration for Children’s Services-New York University Children’s Trauma Institute (ACS-NYU CTI) (2011) developed the Resilience Alliance project that focused on collaborating with child welfare staff to increase their ability to protect themselves and their co-workers. The Resilience Alliance mitigates the influences of secondary traumatic stress among child protection workers, and thereby increases staff resilience, optimism, self-care, social support and job satisfaction, and decreases stress reactivity, burnout and attrition.

Erbes (2009) described how, an “empowering and supportive work culture, the removal of administrative barriers, decreasing workers’ risk to safety issues and clearly communicating expectations and standards all positively impact readiness and retention for child welfare social workers” (p.1). Salus (2004) describes how excellent

performance and staff retention is more likely to occur when staff experience support, care, and concern from their supervisor. Research from Erbes (2009) conducted on retention of child welfare staff indicated that when workers' needs are being met and their voices are being heard, they have an enhanced ability to manage their caseloads more effectively and are less likely to suffer from job dissatisfaction, burnout, or STS.

### **Summary**

Recent changes within the child welfare system have led to an enhanced scope of service and increased demands on child protection workers (Lynn, 2013). "High turnover has been recognized as a major problem in public welfare agencies for several decades because it impedes effective and efficient delivery of services" (Powell and York 1992, p. 627). A lack of employee retention throughout the country is a firm indicator of the larger national social issue that has generated a deficiency in assuring quality services to children and families that are in greatest need (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to provide the background and theoretical framework that contribute to staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection. This project intends to understand the factors and relationships associated in maintaining successful staff in child welfare. An understanding of these variables could assist employers in sustaining their staff, maximizing resources, and improving the level of services provided by their agency.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Faced with the mission of protecting some of the nation's most vulnerable clients, those employed as child welfare workers have an obligation to continually strive for ways to advance the effectiveness of their duties. In his discussion of theory, Howe (1987)

explained that social workers always employ frames of reference when making practice decisions, even if they are not consciously aware that they are doing so. If theory serves as the primary foundation for decision making in child welfare, it is essential that the theories be respectful in nature and applicable to daily practice. It is also critical that practice frameworks are in accordance with the professional ethics of social work.

### **Ecological Theory**

Those that have selected an occupation in child welfare perform critical services on a daily basis. The consistency of services to children, families and communities continues to be an ongoing challenge within our child welfare system.

An ecological framework suggests that the problem of social work turnover has its roots in the environment, and that the environment includes all the layers of systems (such as the worker's personal and family relationships, workplace, and community characteristics) that impact the worker (Sage, 2010, p. 8).

Sage (2010) proposed that the work environment plays an important role in the workers' devotion to the agency. This theoretical framework utilizes a multiple-intervention approach in addressing the problem of child welfare turnover. According to the University Of Iowa School Of Social Work (2009) the ecological approach suggests that individual workers are affected by the functioning of their work organizations, which in turn are affected by the environment in which the organizations exist. Child welfare workers are greatly impacted by the environment in which they practice. Therefore all levels within the system are important in understanding recruitment and retention in public child welfare.

## **System Theory**

The system functions are typically described as an organized structure that promote the achievement of the overall system goals. With respect to child protection, system functions have been described as falling into one of two categories: those related to case decision making including assessments, gate-keeping, investigation, and placement; and those designed to support system performance such as capacity building, research and evaluation, allocation of resources, cross-sector coordination (Wulczyn, Daro, Fluke et al., 2010, p. 12). In the particular case of human service systems, some examples of system functions include the delivery of particular services, provision of technical support to system actors, monitoring of various system activities, and establishment of standards of care or professional behavior (Begun, Zimmerman & Dooley, 2003; Bennett & Eichler, 2006; Cohen, 2002; Glisson, 2007; Hmelo-Silver & Pfeffer, 2004). Although child protection systems typically serve a wide variety of functions, the effective and efficient operation of the system hinges, at least in part, on a clear statement of how functions and systems are related (Skinner & Bell, 2007). The ability of system functions to be faithfully executed rests, in large part, on the strength of system structures (Gaad, Arif, & Scott, 2006). System functions and structures are, in many ways, interdependent and need to be balanced with caution to assure that the needs within the system are being met.

## **Lens for Research**

As discussed in the literature review, there are multiple factors that contribute to burnout among child welfare workers. Utilizing the ecological system as a scope for research accounts for the various influential factors experienced in daily practice.

Systems theory explains the “processes of systemic interactions,” and identifies “systemic issues and how they affect people” (Urdang, 2002, p. 22). Systems and ecological theory are similar in nature and work congruently as they both place an emphasis on interactions.

Managing child welfare initiatives aims to increase awareness of the child welfare workforce crisis and building solutions to address its challenges (Cornerstones for Kids, 2006). For child welfare agencies to be successful, there needs to be an accumulative effort to “build the capacity of the child welfare workforce by disseminating information on effective and promising workforce practices, facilitating leadership training, coordinating peer networks, and advancing knowledge” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011, p.15). The child welfare system has widely identified the worker, workplace and environmental factors as the primary elements that inhibit the recruitment and retention of qualified employees (US General Accounting Office, 2003). Establishing a connection between these variables is considered to have important implications for practice, theory development, and future research (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). This project will utilize the systems and ecological theoretical framework to examine the factors that can potentially increase or decrease staff retention and job satisfaction in child welfare systems.

## **Methods**

### **Research design**

To complete this primarily quantitative research project, this researcher utilized a survey design to collect data. This project looked at the factors contributing to staff retention and turnover rate specific to child protection social workers. Current studies are

limited that look specifically at the different contributing factors that affect child protection social workers' retention and turnover rate (Cahalane & Sites, 2008). The survey is a formatted designed with both quantitative and qualitative questions. This survey was distributed via internet to the child protection directors at the four identified Southern Minnesota Counties. The directors distributed the survey to the child protection social workers within their agency. The survey was created using Qualtrics and includes minimal identifying questions. The purpose of this project was to encourage child welfare social workers to share thoughts on how they can increase job satisfaction and maintain retention within their employment while meeting the needs of the vulnerable population they serve.

### **Sample**

The population for this study was child protection social workers within four designated southern counties. Once approved by the University of St. Thomas Internal Review Board (IRB), directors in the four identified counties distributed the survey to their child protection social workers within their agency. Extending reach to four counties helped increase generalizing the data results. Data was not disaggregated by county due to data being unidentifiable. It was noted that the four counties have a history of working collaboratively so there may be demographic and relational bias from the sample.

### **Data collection**

The primary data collection method included the completion of a survey by county child protection social workers (see Appendix A). Although this survey was independently developed by this researcher, the original framework used to assess staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection is based off of Bernotavicz's (1997)

work on personal characteristics, work factors, and agency factors in child welfare. The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between the contributing factors in job satisfaction and staff retention in county employed child protection social workers. The survey consisted of 52 open and closed ended questions that included basic demographic information, professional work and education history, and possible characteristics related to compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue and burnout.

It was noted that the scales in the survey were created by the author to reflect the data found in the literature review. The first portion of the survey consisted of 12 short answer and multiple choice questions that discussed the respondents' demographic and background variables. The next 27 questions reviewed the Working Conditions in Child Welfare Scale. Respondents were asked to read each statement carefully and document in the appropriate section the response that best describes their level of agreement (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree). The next eight items came from the Child Welfare Burnout Scale. Respondents were asked to read each statement carefully and document in the appropriate section the response that best describes the frequency of their experience within the last month (more than once a month, almost every day, a few times a week, about once a week, and once in the last month). In the last section of the survey, respondents were asked to reflect on their experience as a child protection worker and answer five open ended questions.

### **Quantitative data analysis**

**Descriptive statistical analysis.** “Descriptive statistical analysis assists in organizing, summarizing, and interpreting data” (Monette, Sllivan, Dejong, & Hilton, 2014, p. 400). Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the nominal variables of

gender, ethnicity, highest level education, highest educational degree, history of professional employment, current job duties, current job status, advancement opportunities, and the primary type of cases on workload and the ordinal variable of income. Frequency distributions, accompanied by bar charts, were run for all nominal and ordinal descriptive variables. Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the interval and ratio level variables of age, length of time employed as a child protection worker, and current caseload size. The statistical procedures used to evaluate these variables are measures of central tendency and dispersion (mean and standard deviation), displayed in a histogram. This statistical procedure was also completed on the Working Conditions in Child Welfare Scale and the Child Welfare Burnout Scale.

**Inferential statistical analysis.** “Inferential statistics encompass a variety of statistical significance tests that investigators can use to make inferences about their sample data” (Allua & Thompson, 2009). Allua and Thompson (2009) suggest inferential statistics are intended to evaluate differences, examine relationships, and make predictions. For this study, a correlation was ran to examine the relationship between the Working Conditions in Child Welfare Scale and the Child Welfare Burnout Scale. The two variables were analyzed to answer the research question: What is the relationship between working conditions and staff burnout in child welfare? The hypothesis is that there would be a relationship between working conditions and staff burnout in child welfare. The null hypothesis was that no relationship would exist between working conditions and staff burnout in child welfare. This relationship was measured using correlation analysis. Subscales from the Working Conditions scale (See Appendix A) were analyzed by the following: personal characteristics (questions 1, 2 and 3), work

factors (questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 23, and 24), and agency factors (questions 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, and 27).

A T-test was completed in SPSS to statistically analyze the following research question: “Does the specific type of cases (sex abuse and neglect) impact levels of compassion fatigue?”

### **Qualitative data analysis**

The qualitative information was gathered from the open-ended narrative questions. These questions were intended to allow the social workers to elaborate on their individual experiences within child protection. Data from the survey was coded by the researcher and transformed from concrete material to more abstract themes. The transcribed responses to qualitative questions were analyzed through the process of coding. Themes were then be developed based off of similarities among the codes (Monette, Sllivan, Dejong, & Hilton, 2014).

A qualitative analysis was used to analyze the five open ended qualitative questions: (a) What are the supports within your agency that enhance your ability to perform your duties as a child protection worker? (b) What are the primary sources of stress in your position? (c) How does worker turnover (workers leaving the department or agency) impact your work? (d) How could your agency improve their support for child protection workers? And (e) Please add any additional comments you believe may be beneficial for staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection.

### **Protection of human participants**

Prior to beginning the survey, the respondents were provided with an informed consent form approved by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board. The

consent form described the relevance of the survey and explains that it is voluntary in nature with no known risks or benefits for participation in the research. The respondents remained anonymous as the survey was disbursed through the internet using the Qualtrics survey system. The researcher was unable to identify the original participant. The directors at the four identified counties distributed the survey link to the child protection social workers within their agency. Once the survey was completed, there was no way to exclude a participant's data from the project as the surveys and data were anonymous. The records of this study remain anonymous and none of the respondents' information was directed back to their supervisors.

The electronic dataset created from this survey was kept password-protected and only accessible by the identified researcher, research chair, and the two designated committee members. At completion of this research project, in June of 2015, all tangible material was shredded and electronic correspondence was permanently deleted.

Participants were informed that the survey was being completed for a Master of Social Work research project and an analysis of the data was utilized for a public presentation. If participants had additional questions, the contact information of the researcher and their designated chair was provided on the consent form.

### **Limitations**

The scope of this study may be biased as the survey was only distributed to child protection social workers from four identified counties that historically work well collaboratively. Because the survey was designed to be anonymous in nature, there was an increased potential for limited replies and an overall reduced response rate. There was

no beneficial gain in completing the survey so this may have contributed to lack of replies.

## Results

### Description of Survey Participants

**Demographics.** The survey was distributed to an estimated 64 social workers in Southeastern Minnesota, which resulted in 34 respondents, a 51.5% response rate. However, one survey was removed due to invalid and incomplete information, leaving a sample of 33 respondents. The majority of respondents identified as Caucasian/White (93%) and female (82%). The age of respondents ranged from 25 to 64 (N=33). Half of these respondents were between the ages of 30 to 39 (52%). Table 1 displays the demographic results of race, gender, and age.

Table 1. *Demographic Table*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Race		
White	28	85%
African American	1	3%
Hispanic	1	3%
<b>Missing</b>	3	9%
<b>Total</b>	33	100%
Gender		
Male	6	18%
Female	27	82%
<b>Missing</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	33	100%
Age		
29-25	6	18%
30-39	17	52%
40-49	6	18%
50-64	4	12%
<b>Missing</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	33	100%

**Education.** All of the 33 participants identified as having some form of higher education. All of the survey respondents had either a Bachelors Degree (55%) or a Masters Degree (45%, one working towards obtaining it). Eighty-four percent of the respondents reported having a degree specifically in Social Work. Table 2 displays the education results. Other responses under highest degree include BA in Psychology, BA in Criminal Justice, BA in History, MA in Family Life Education, and MA in Criminal Justice.

Table 2. *Education*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Highest Level of Education		
Under Graduate Degree	18	55%
Some Graduate Work	1	3%
Masters Degree	14	42%
<b>Missing</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	33	100%
Highest Degree		
BSW	15	46%
MSW	11	33%
Other	5	15%
<b>Missing</b>	2	6%
<b>Total</b>	31	100%

*Note.* BSW = Bachelor of Social Work; MSW = Master of Social Work.

**Employment.** Table 3 indicates that all of the 33 participants reported having full time employment and over half (52%) identified their current responsibilities as an ongoing child protection worker with less than 15 cases (85%). Ongoing child protection workers are typically assigned cases if safety concerns continue to persist after the initial assessment or investigation period. One respondent selected “other” and reported having 85 cases on her current workload, as her primary responsibilities pertain specifically to all legal aspects of child protection cases.

Almost half the respondents (49%) have been employed as child protection social workers less than five years and have a wide range of experience from their former occupations. In a “select all” format the participants were asked to specify their previous employment settings. When asked if there was opportunity for advancement in their current position, forty-three percent reported “yes”, as they identified the opportunity for professional development in the following areas: continual trainings, clinical supervision, and the possibility of becoming supervisor or a senior social worker. Twenty-one percent of the respondents did not believe there was room for advancement in their current position and thirty-six were unsure.

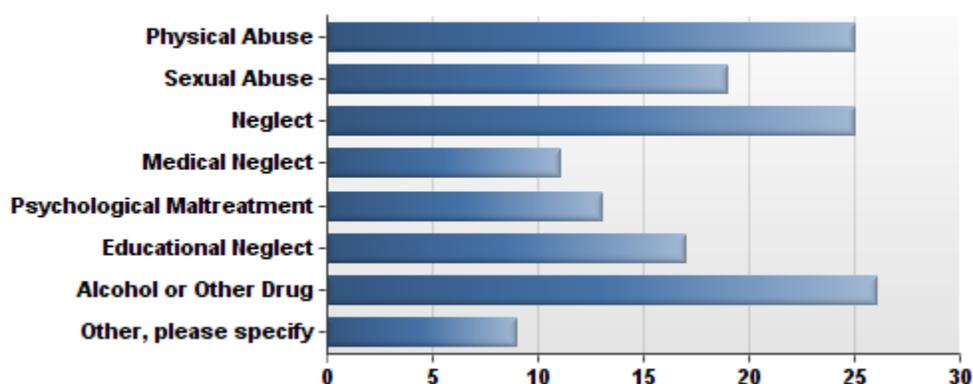
Table 3. *Employment*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Length of Time Employed in CP</b>		
0-5 Years	16	49%
6-10 Years	10	30%
11-15 Years	4	12%
16-20 Years	2	6%
27 Years	1	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Previous Employment Settings</b>		
CP is first professional position	7	18%
Mental health	7	18%
Criminal justice/Victim services/Domestic Violence	6	15%
Family Support/Child Welfare	6	15%
Education	5	12%
Addiction	4	10%
Youth work	2	5%
Hospital/Medical	2	5%
Developmental Disability	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Current CP responsibility</b>		
Ongoing	17	52%
Assessment	7	21%
Afterhours	5	15%
Intake	2	6%
Other	2	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Current Caseload Size</b>		
0-5	10	31%
6-10	11	33%
11-15	7	21%
16-20	4	12%
85	1	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Opportunity for Advancement</b>		
Yes	14	43%
Unsure	12	36%
No	7	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note. CP = Child Protection.*

**Workload.** The respondents were asked to identify the types of cases they primarily worked with in a “select all” question format. Figure 1 indicates that participants work with a variety of different cases. The respondents that chose “other” reported working with domestic violence, threatened sexual abuse, children mental health, and crisis calls.

Figure 1. *Types of Cases on Workload*



### Correlation Analysis

A correlation analysis was completed in SPSS to statistically analyze the following research questions: Are the specific type of working conditions (personal characteristics, work traits, or agency traits) related to compassion fatigue? The correlation analyses are displayed below in Table 4-7. The hypothesis was that working conditions would be related to compassion fatigue. The null hypothesis was that there would be no relationship between these variables and compassion fatigue

**Personal.** Table 4 displays the results of the correlation analysis that describes the degree of the relationship between personal characteristics (higher score meaning more personal characteristics typically conducive to job satisfaction) and level of

workers' compassion fatigue (higher score indicating less compassion fatigue). The Pearson Correlation is  $r=.036$  and the p-value is  $.843$ . This means that personal characteristics were related to less compassion fatigue; however, since the p-value is greater than  $.05$ , the results from this data are not statistically significant. As a result, this statistical analysis fails to reject the null hypothesis that there is a relationship between personal characteristics and the level of compassion fatigue for child protection workers.

Table 4. *Personal Characteristics and Impact on Compassion Fatigue in Child Protection*

<b>Correlations</b>			Personal Characteristics	Compassion Fatigue
Personal Characteristics	Pearson Correlation		1	.036
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.843
	N		32	32
Compassion Fatigue	Pearson Correlation		.036	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.843	
	N		32	32

**Work.** Table 5 displays the results of the correlation analysis that describes the degree of the relationship between work characteristics (higher scores indicating work characteristics considered conducive to higher satisfaction in employees) and level of workers compassion fatigue. The Pearson Correlation is  $r= .570$  and the p-value is  $.001$ . This means that work characteristics were related to less compassion fatigue. Since the p-value is less than  $.05$ , the finding is statistically significant. As a result, this statistical analysis rejects the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between work characteristics and the level of compassion fatigue for child protection workers.

Table 5. *Work Characteristics and Impact on Compassion Fatigue in Child Protection*

		Correlations	
		Compassion Fatigue	Work Traits
Compassion Fatigue	Pearson Correlation	1	-.570
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	32	32
Work Traits	Pearson Correlation	-.570	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	32	32

**Agency.** Table 6 displays the results of the correlation analysis that describes the degree of the relationship between agency traits (higher scores indicating more positive agency traits) and level of workers compassion fatigue. The Pearson Correlation is  $r=.283$  and the p-value is .117. This means that when respondents reported more favorable agency traits, as indicated by higher scores, they were more likely to have *less* compassion fatigue; however, since the p-value is greater than .05, the results from this data are not statistically significant. As a result, this statistical analysis fails to reject the null hypothesis that agency characteristics impact the level of compassion fatigue for child protection workers.

Table 6. *Agency Characteristics and Impact on Compassion Fatigue in Child Protection*

		Correlations	
		Compassion Fatigue	Agency Traits
Compassion Fatigue	Pearson Correlation	1	.283
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.117
	N	32	32
Agency Traits	Pearson Correlation	.283	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.117	
	N	32	32

**Years of experience.** Table 7 display the results of the correlation analysis that describes the degree of the relationship between workers years of experience and level of

compassion fatigue. The Pearson Correlation is  $r=-.167$  and the p-value is .361. There is an inverse relationship between the variables of compassion fatigue and workers' years of experience. This means that workers with more years of experience are more likely to report more compassion fatigue. Since the p-value is greater than .05, the results from this data are not statistically significant. As a result, this statistical analysis fails to reject the null hypothesis that workers' years of experience impact the level of compassion fatigue.

Table 7. *Years of Experience and Impact on Compassion Fatigue in Child Protection*

		<b>Correlations</b>	
		Compassion Fatigue	Years Of Experience
Compassion Fatigue	Pearson Correlation	1	-.167
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.361
	N	32	32
Years Of Experience	Pearson Correlation	-.167	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.361	
	N	32	32

### **T-test**

A t-test was completed in SPSS to statistically analyze the following research questions: "Does the specific type of cases you work with (sex abuse and neglect) impact levels of compassion fatigue?" The group statistics and independent samples t-test are displayed below in Table 8 and 9. Only the statistics for sex abuse are displayed, as respondent means were exactly the same in both sex abuse and neglect cases.

Tables eight and nine display the results of the *t*-test comparing the mean difference in compassion fatigue scores between respondents who reported working with sex abuse cases and those who did not. The mean score of respondents without sex abuse cases was 30.00. The mean score of participants with sex abuse cases was 26.44. The

difference between the mean scores was 3.56. Therefore, participants without sex abuse cases reported lower levels of compassion fatigue.

The Levene's Test of Equality of Variance for the compassion fatigue samples  $t$ -test is .284. Since .284 is greater than .05, the Levene's test is not significant. The  $p$ -value for this  $t$ -test is .187. Since the  $p$ -value is greater than .05, the results from this data are not statistically significant. As a result, this statistical analysis fails to reject the null hypothesis that having sex abuse cases does not impact compassion fatigue for child protection workers.

Table 8. *Group Statistics for Sex Abuse Cases Impact on Compassion Fatigue T-test*

Group Statistics					
	Sexual	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Compassion Fatigue	.00	7	30.0000	4.79583	1.81265
	1.00	25	26.4400	6.46194	1.29239

Table 9. *Sex Abuses Cases Impact on Compassion Fatigue T-test*

Independent Samples Test										
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means								
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Compassion Fatigue	Equal variances assumed	1.191	.284	1.350	30	.187	3.56000	2.63620	-1.82384	8.94384
	Equal variances not assumed			1.599	12.822	.134	3.56000	2.22620	-1.25621	8.37621

## Qualitative Analysis

The respondents were asked a series of four open-ended questions: What are the supports within your agency that enhance your ability to perform your duties as a child protection worker? What are the primary sources of stress in your position? How does worker turnover (workers leaving the department or agency) impact your work? How could your agency improve their support for child protection workers? They were then asked to supply additional comments that may be beneficial in staff retention in child protection staff. The survey results were qualitatively analyzed as the data was compiled, coded, and converted from concrete material to more abstract themes. These themes include support, stress, turnover, and improvements for support. Table four through nine will describe specific examples of participants' responses.

**Supports.** Four primary subthemes were identified as supports within the agency that enhance workers' ability to perform their duties as a child protection worker. These supports included professional relationships, reflective supervision, trainings, and work flexibility. There were a total of 56 replies, as many of the participants provided more than one response. Thirty-one of the responses identified professional relationships as a support, 11 reported trainings, nine felt reinforced by reflective supervision, and five believed work flexibility was beneficial. Table four describes participants' responses by theme. These themes were discovered through the following quotes:

*“There are many supports in place, such as reflective supervision, open door policy from supervisor, stress management group has come up with ideas, supported flexible schedule when needed.”*

*“Supervisor support. She allows us to take time off, if needed, so that our personal lives come first. She always says “Work to live, not live to work.”*

*“Being that I am a new CP worker, the agency I work in support, train, and mentor me to enhance my ability to perform my duties more effectively.”*

*“Multi-level supports including secondary stress reaction, education, 1:1 meetings with supervisor, and flexible scheduling.”*

*“Weekly team consultations and individual consultation with supervisor.”*

*“There is always to support of co-workers and my supervisor to vent to and debrief with over cases and feelings of stress. We also have started a reflective supervision group that meets monthly to digest and reflect on our work with clients on a more personal level. The agency also offers Tai chi and Yoga classes for those that want to participate over lunch hours weekly. There is a group devoted just to secondary stress and are developing trainings and activities to promote stress relief.”*

Table 4. *Supports*

Qualitative Survey Question	Survey Results
What are the supports within your agency that enhance your ability to perform your duties as a child protection worker?	<p><b>Professional relationships (n = 31)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive Supervisor</li> <li>• Support from coworkers</li> <li>• Support from management</li> <li>• Open relationships with supervisor and coworkers</li> <li>• Great teamwork</li> </ul> <p><b>Trainings (n = 11)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unit meetings</li> <li>• Multidisciplinary team meetings</li> <li>• Agency offers Tai Chi and yoga</li> <li>• Mentoring opportunities for new workers</li> <li>• Family group decision making team (FGDM)</li> </ul> <p><b>Reflective supervision (n = 9)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekly team consultation with supervisor</li> <li>• Individual consultation with supervisor</li> <li>• Secondary stress consult</li> <li>• Experienced management</li> <li>• Team decision making</li> </ul> <p><b>Work flexibility (n = 5)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible schedules</li> <li>• Independence in ability to manage workload</li> <li>• Allowed requested time off</li> </ul>

**Stress.** Three subthemes emerged as contributing sources of stress. These stressors include unmanageable workloads, complexity of work, and professional/organizational relationships. There were a total of 38 replies, as many of the participants provided more than one response. Eighteen of the respondents believed their work stress is due to unmanageable workloads, 13 stated it was the complexity of work, and seven attribute it to professional/organizational relationships. Table five describes participants' responses by theme. The themes associated with stress were discovered through the following quotes:

*“When I get behind on paperwork. Lots of meetings and expected trainings to attend while also balancing our workload. When clients are very combative/resistive and still having to engage them. The increasing complex cases that are coming into ongoing case management.”*

*“Paperwork, lack of new employee training, lack of day to day operations (ssis, paperwork, etc).”*

*“Making difficult decisions which will impact children's lives and future.”*

*“Not feeling the families are making enough movement and outside professionals expectations of CP workers-as if we can solve all problems.”*

Table 5. *Stress*

<p>What are the primary sources of stress in your position?</p>	<p><b>Unmanageable workloads (<i>n</i> = 18)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large workload</li> <li>• Paperwork</li> <li>• Meeting deadlines and timeframes</li> <li>• Mandated and repetitive trainings</li> <li>• Additional meetings</li> <li>• Court process</li> <li>• Lack of time to complete job duties</li> <li>• Lack of new employee training</li> <li>• Being “backup” for the entire agency</li> </ul> <p><b>Complexity of work (<i>n</i> = 13)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure to make difficult decisions when the team and supervisor are unable to land on a decision</li> <li>• Complexity of cases</li> <li>• Lack of progress in cases</li> <li>• Verbal abuse and threats that are made to workers</li> <li>• Lack or cooperative ness from families</li> </ul> <p><b>Professional/organizational relationships (<i>n</i> = 7)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External professionals unrealistic expectations of child protection workers abilities and role (expect CP worker to fix all problems)</li> <li>• Unprofessional behaviors</li> <li>• Lack of pay</li> <li>• Administrative decisions that affect families</li> </ul>
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**Turnover.** Three primary subthemes were identified as contributing impacts when turnover occurs. These influences include, increased workload, professional relationships, and decrease in quality of services. There were a total of 34 replies, as many of the participants provided more than one response. Seventeen respondents acknowledged that high turnover leads to an increase in workloads, 12 believe it impacted their professional relationships, and five workers identified a decrease in the quality of services provided. Table six describes participants' responses by theme. The themes associated with turnover were discovered through the following quotes:

*“When workers leave our workload goes up because it takes several months to find and hire a replacement. Even then there is training, etc. needed so current workers have to just take on more.”*

*“We are then taking on cases that we know nothing about and many decisions have already been made. It also leaves us shorthanded and with a high case load yet still the same expectations of how we do the work.”*

*“It seems to slow the momentum of things down. When experienced workers leave, it leaves a gap in our team-a valuable asset often lost.”*

*“It puts more stress on other staff and leads to turn over.”*

Table 6. *High Turnover*

<p>How does worker turnover (workers leaving the department or agency) impact your work?</p>	<p><b>Increased workloads (<i>n</i> = 17)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rise in stress during turnover transitions</li> <li>• Higher caseloads with the same expectations</li> <li>• Workload influx</li> <li>• Causes extra stress that can lead to turnover</li> <li>• Time consuming process</li> </ul> <p><b>Professional relationships (<i>n</i> = 12)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of experience worker leaves a gap in team abilities (Loss of a valuable asset)</li> <li>• Loss of support and consult member</li> <li>• Jealousy</li> <li>• Negatively impacts work</li> <li>• Has no impact on work</li> </ul> <p><b>Decrease in quality of services (<i>n</i> = 5)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complexity of taking over previous workers cases, building rapport with client/families, and readdressing the history and concerns</li> <li>• Taking on cases with limited knowledge on the history and decisions that have already been made</li> <li>• Transitions of workers can slow down the progress of the case</li> <li>• Complexity of cases make case transfers difficult for workers and families</li> </ul>
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**Improvement of supports.** Three subthemes were identified as factors that could contribute to the support of child protection workers. These recommendations included agency factors, work factors, and no changes needed. There were a total of 34 replies as many of the participants provided more than one response. Twenty of the participants believe agency factors can improve support, nine stated work factors could increase success, three workers were unable to think of a response, and suggested no changes as they were currently satisfied with their professional supports. Table seven describes participants' responses by theme. These theme was discovered through the following quotes:

*“Increasing opportunities to consult on cases during decision making points in the case. Also an improvement in decisiveness from management.”*

*“Increase the amount of workers so that caseloads can remain low. With the complex cases we are now working with one case can feel like three. Either that or add additional support workers/case aides to assist with client visits and transportation so workers can focus more on the case management pieces.”*

*“Less future look of CP trainings, more day to day operation training.”*

*“More secondary workers on case.”*

*“Staffing cases more frequently and ensuring there is a mission when we do staff cases.”*

Table 7. *Improve Supports*

<p>How could your agency improve their support for child protection workers?</p>	<p><b>Agency factors (n = 20)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide hourly pay versus salary</li> <li>• Increase in wage</li> <li>• Improvement in decisiveness for management</li> <li>• Increase in workers</li> <li>• Secondary worker cases</li> <li>• Provide additional support such as case aids to assist with client visits and transportation</li> <li>• Continue reflective supervision</li> <li>• More discussion on opportunities for advancement</li> <li>• Provide regular trainings</li> <li>• Allow more flexing of schedule</li> <li>• Fewer trainings on the future of CP and more on day to day operations</li> <li>• Ensure there is a mission when consulting on cases</li> <li>• Improvement of supervision</li> <li>• Lower caseload sizes</li> </ul> <p><b>Work factors (n = 9)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in consultations</li> <li>• maintain lower caseloads</li> <li>• Creating days that are protected/designated to completing paperwork</li> <li>• Decrease in paperwork</li> <li>• Management of specifics that needs to be accomplished</li> <li>• Encourage self-care as a priority</li> </ul> <p><b>No changes needed (n = 3)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agency actively supports staff</li> <li>• Unaware of any changes needed</li> <li>• NA response</li> </ul>
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**Additional comments.** There were several additional comments that respondents believed would be beneficial for staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection. The four subthemes that emerged include: new programs, flexibility, consultations/trainings, and no changes needed. There were only a total of 16 replies to this survey questions. Seven respondents suggested developing new programs, five

expressed the significance of flexibility, two recommended increasing consults and the quality of trainings, and two participants did not advocate for any changes. Table eight describes participants' responses by theme. These themes were discovered through the following quotes:

*“The County would do well to have a chaplain or other person that staff could speak with in confidence regarding the difficulties or challenges they face without fear of being impacted professionally.”*

*“It would be nice to see some sort of program to help foster/promote worker advancement for those interested in being in a supervisor level in the future.”*

*“I do not think workers are trained from the start making them feel incompetent and stressed from day one. New staff NEED a solid training schedule for new employees not just job shadowing!”*

*“I believe that hiring enough workers to manage the caseloads effectively, would be beneficial in the retention of CP workers. Salary increase or more vacation time would also be beneficial. Options to work from home, if possible, are other ways to eliminate burnout and stress.”*

Table 8. *Additional Comments*

Additional comments that may be beneficial in staff retention in child protection?	<p><b>New programs (<math>n = 7</math>)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a program to foster and promote worker advancement for those interested in being a supervisor in the future</li> <li>• Create a position or designate a person that staff could speak with in confidence regarding the difficulties or challenges they face without fear of being impacted professionally</li> <li>• To decrease stress create additional ongoing CP team</li> <li>• Increase in wage</li> <li>• Provide office privacy rather than cubicles</li> </ul> <p><b>Flexibility (<math>n = 5</math>)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health days that staff are allowed to take</li> <li>• Increase in vacation days</li> <li>• Increase options to work from home</li> <li>• Increase/continue the flexibility of workers</li> </ul> <p><b>Consultation/Trainings (<math>n = 2</math>)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To ensure that new employees feel competent, create a solid training for new staff (not just job shadowing)</li> <li>• All workers should cross train to understand the process</li> <li>• Increase consultations</li> </ul> <p><b>No changes needed (<math>n = 2</math>)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain current quality of support</li> <li>• NA response</li> </ul>
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### Discussion

The primary intent of this research study was to determine factors that contribute to staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection. A mixed methods approach was utilized to encourage a more comprehensive assessment of the research. The survey results were then examined through a quantitative and qualitative process.

## **Quantitative Analysis**

Correlation analyses and a t-test were the two methods utilized to examine the quantitative data. The first correlation examined the relationship between the compassion fatigue scale and the working conditions scale that include individual, work, and agency characteristics. The same analysis was then completed on the compassion fatigue scale and workers length of time employed in child protection. Lastly, a t-test was utilized to examine the relationship between the compassion fatigue scale and the primary types of cases assigned to the worker, specifically pertaining to sex abuse and neglect cases (results of neglect cases not shown; see below).

**Correlation.** Three of the four correlation results examining the relationship between working conditions and compassion fatigue were not statistically significant. There was a moderate to strong relationship between work factors and compassion fatigue levels. The survey results also displayed no significant correlation when comparing compassion fatigue and workers years of experience. The limited sample size of respondents likely contributed to the overall lack of statistical significance of this study. Despite the limited statistical significance, the analyses were all in the expected direction. Specifically, more positive reports of personal characteristics, work traits, and agency traits were related to less compassion fatigue. Additionally, more years of experience was related to more compassion fatigue.

**t-test.** Survey results from the t-test indicated no significant relationship between compassion fatigue and the primary types of cases assigned to the worker, specifically regarding sex abuse and neglect. Results for neglect were not shown, because analysis of this data revealed equivalent results when comparing the compassion fatigue scale to

child protection staff working with sex abuse case or neglect cases. This indicates that when workers are interacting with these two types of populations, they are experiencing similar levels of compassion fatigue. This may contribute to the comparable nature of these types of cases and the best practice approach that workers should apply while providing services to this population.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

A qualitative analysis was completed by examining the four open ended survey questions that primarily focused on supports, stress, staff turnover, and improvements. At the end of the survey the respondents were given an opportunity to add any additional information that may contribute to staff retention and job satisfaction in child protection. As the data was analyzed, themes were developed.

**Supports.** Throughout the qualitative responses, the significance of supports for child protection workers was clearly distinguished. Further analysis of the data identified the following subthemes as supports: coworker relationships, trainings, reflective supervision, and flexibility. Many of the responses were parallel to those that were identified throughout the literature review. The data consistently displays an emphasis on supportive relationships and collaborative teamwork at all system levels. Having a constructive balance of supports can enhance workers ability to perform their duties more effectively and decrease compassion fatigue.

**Stress.** Transcription of the qualitative data revealed the primary sources of stress for child protection workers. The subthemes identified from the respondent's results include: unimaginable workloads, complexity of work, and professional/organizational relationships. These responses demonstrate the various stressors child protection workers

encounter on a continual basis. The data displayed similar characteristics that contribute to workers stress but the individual impacts vary. It appears that the respondents attempt to effectively manage the multiple stressors by utilizing various coping strategies. When an effective balance is formed between the identified stressors and coping methods, the less likely stressors will increase compassion fatigue and ultimately lead to turnover.

**Turnover.** Further analysis of the qualitative data identified the impacts turnover has on child protection workers. The subthemes developed from the participants' results include: increased workloads, professional relationships, and decrease in quality of services. The data suggest that employee turnover significantly impacts the ability for child protection workers to complete their duties efficiently. High turnover affects not only the worker, but also the families that are receiving services. Results of the study are congruent with the research as child protection turnover has negative systemic impacts (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006).

**Improvements.** The last theme uncovered while analyzing the qualitative data focused on enhancing the supports for workers. Further analysis of the data identified the following subthemes for improvements: agency factors, work factors, and no changes needed. The responses formulated in this response suggest that workers are able to identify areas that are in need of improvement at both worker and agency level. Data suggests a need for systemic improvements, which include standards of best practice, review of caseload sizes, and an overall commitment to support the child protection system. There is hope for success as some of the respondents believed their agency was doing a great job in supporting their workers.

**Additional Comments.** The last portion of the data reviewed any additional comments the respondents believed would be beneficial for job satisfaction and retention of staff in child protection. Additional analysis of the data identified the following subthemes: new programs, flexibility, consultations/trainings, and no changes needed.

Results from the qualitative data suggest multiple implications for positive change. As time progresses, so do the needs of the worker and the families they support. The results are similar to those found in the research, as for child welfare agencies to succeed, there needs to be an accumulative effort to “build the capacity of the child welfare workforce by disseminating information on effective and promising workforce practices, facilitating leadership training, coordinating peer networks, and advancing knowledge” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011, p. 15). To attain best practice standards, the child protection structure will need to adapt at all levels.

### **Research Implications**

The implications from this study show that additional research is needed to address workers’ needs across diverse types of child protection agencies. In this study, the lack of findings of “agency factors” may contribute to the progressiveness of the agencies interviewed and the size of their community. It would be beneficial to create a study comparing agencies that are more strongly resourced compared to those that have limited access to resources.

Another implication for research would include separating the survey by specific job positions and isolating their specific needs. For example, supervisors’ needs and level of compassion fatigue may look different than that of an assessment worker that is applying direct practice on a regular basis. It would also be useful to see the specific resources needed for each position to be successful.

## **Practice Implications**

The quality of the child protection workers' abilities greatly influences the effectiveness of services they are able to provide to children and families they support. For success to occur, workers need to be provided with a sufficient foundation of support by delivering adequate trainings, assigned appropriate workloads, and have valued professional relationships. Furthermore, it was determined that to effectively retain child protection workers and increase satisfaction, it is necessary to continually address workers' needs at a systemic level.

This study found that there is a moderate and significant relationship between work characteristics and levels of compassion fatigue among child protection social workers. This indicates that work factors such as the nature of the work, client population, severity of cases, paperwork, and workload, significantly impacts the workers job satisfaction. Moving forward, it is critical for administration to ensure that factors associated with work traits are emphasized in practice settings. When staff needs are not being met, it ultimately effects the services provided to the children and families in need.

Positive relationships and supports was an additional theme that continually appeared throughout this study. The data suggest that workers felt supported when they experienced a positive relationship with their supervisor and fellow coworkers. For future implications, it would be beneficial for agencies to individually assess the relationships and supports provided to their workers. Supervision needs to be emphasized as an important cultural practice within the agency settings. Based off the information obtained, programs, supports, and trainings may need to be adjusted accordingly to meet their workers' needs.

Child protection services is a core program that is necessary in today's society. To promote success for children and families, an increase in social reform needs to occur within public policy. With support of policy, agency and workers will have an increased ability to improve the overall quality of services provided. Optimistically, if systemic supports occur, there would be an increase in job satisfaction and staff retention in the child protection field.

### **Conclusion**

This study was focused towards exploring the different variables that lead to staff retention and job satisfaction among child protection workers in Southeastern Minnesota. In conclusion this study identified multiple factors that contribute to worker satisfaction. When adequate supports are provided, there is a reduction in stress, which leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, and ultimately retention of staff.

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## Appendix A

## Survey Questions

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your highest level of education:
  - High school
  - Some college
  - Associates degree
  - Under graduate degree
  - Some graduate work
  - Master's degree
  - Doctorate
  - Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your highest degree:
  - Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)
  - Master Social Work (MSW)
  - Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Length of time employed as a child protection worker: \_\_\_\_\_ (specify years, if under one year, record 'less than one year')
7. What employment settings have you worked in prior to your child protection job (select all that apply):
  - NA; my current position is my first professional experience
  - Criminal justice
  - Addiction
  - School/Education system
  - Mental health
  - In home support
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)
8. Current child protection responsibility(s): (check all that apply)
  - Intake
  - Assessment
  - Ongoing case management
  - After hours
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)
9. Current job status (select one):
  - Full Time
  - Part-time
  - On call
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Is there room for advancement in your child protection role:

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

If yes, please explain advancement opportunities: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Current caseload size: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Type of cases you primarily work with (select all that apply):

- a. Physical abuse
- b. Sexual abuse
- c. Neglect
- d. Medical neglect
- e. Psychological maltreatment
- f. Educational neglect
- g. Alcohol or other drug
- h. Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Please read each statement carefully and check the box that best describes your level of agreement.

<b>Working Conditions in Child Welfare Scale</b>					
	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
1. My values are aligned with the county's mission and values					
2. Staff with graduate degrees are likely more competent as CP workers					
3. The longer the tenure in CP, the higher the competency					
4. The amount of required paperwork contributes to my stress					

5. It's challenging to keep my work and personal life separate					
6. My work negatively impacts my home life					
7. My work positively impacts my home life					
8. My work positively influences the lives of others					
9. My agency has clear set policies to guide my decision					
10. I apply my agency's policies in my daily practice					
11. I have a positive relationship with my supervisor					
12. I have positive relationships with my coworkers					
13. I feel supported by my supervisor					
14. I feel supported by my coworkers					

15. My agency addresses worker stress level					
16. My agency provides sufficient training to improve CP workers' competency					
17. I am able to openly communicate with my supervisor					
18. I am able to openly communicate with my coworkers					
19. My supervisor provides clear expectations of my role as a CP worker					
20. My supervisor is willing to assist in completing difficult tasks					
21. My supervisor is available when needed					
22. Cases are distributed fairly to staff					

23. The size of my current caseload is manageable					
24. The level of difficulty of your current case load is manageable					
25. I am satisfied with advancement opportunities in my agency					
26. I am satisfied with my current salary					
27. I am satisfied with my chances for a salary increase					

14. Please read each statement carefully and check the box that best describes the frequency of your experience **within the last month**.

<b>Child Welfare Burnout Scale</b>					
	<b>Very Frequently</b> (almost every day)	<b>Frequently</b> (at least weekly)	<b>Occasionally</b> (at least monthly)	<b>Rarely</b> (more than monthly)	<b>Never</b>
1. Feeling emotionally drained from your work					
2. Feeling exhausted at the end of the work day					
3. Thoughts of not wanting to go to work					

<p>4. Feeling burned out from work (Burnout is associated with feelings of hopelessness, difficulty in dealing with work or in doing your work effectively, and a sense that your efforts make no difference (Stamm, 2005).</p>					
<p>5. Experiencing compassion fatigue from work (Compassion fatigue refers to work related, secondary exposure to extremely stressful events (Stamm, 2005).</p>					
<p>6. Feeling frustrated with your job</p>					
<p>7. Considered switching departments</p>					
<p>8. Considered leaving the</p>					

county					
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15. While reflecting on your experience as a child protection worker, please answer the following open ended questions:

- What are the supports within your agency that enhance your ability to perform your duties as a child protection worker? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the primary sources of stress in your position? \_\_\_\_\_
- How does worker turnover (workers leaving the department or agency) impact your work? \_\_\_\_\_
- How could your agency improve their support for child protection workers? \_
- Please add any additional comments you believe may be beneficial in staff retention in child protection? \_\_\_\_\_