

A Comparative Analysis of Job Satisfaction and Intent to Leave Among Rural and Urban Caseworkers in Pennsylvania's Child Welfare Agencies

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In Pennsylvania, 67 county Child and Youth Services (CYS) agencies hold the legal authority for child protection, including investigating abuse or neglect, bringing cases before the court, removing children from unsafe homes, and determining custody or foster placements as ordered by the courts. Private child welfare agencies support and partner with public county agencies by providing services such as foster care placements, adoption, counseling, parenting education, and family reunification programs. Both public and private agencies across the state have been impacted by high staff vacancies and turnover. Pennsylvania's public child welfare system continues to face significant workforce challenges related to turnover and vacancies. This report summarizes findings from a statewide survey of Pennsylvania child welfare caseworkers, aimed at identifying factors influencing job satisfaction, performance, and intent to leave. The survey was conducted in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators (PCYA) and the Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth and Family Services (PCCYFS). Some potential differences emerged between rural and urban caseworkers, with the urban caseworkers who were surveyed reporting higher average caseloads. Also from the same survey, rural caseworkers noted that they had greater flexibility and higher satisfaction with court responsibilities. Both rural and urban respondents had moderately high intent-to-leave scores, based on a series of questions asking about job seeking or workplace withdrawal behaviors, with no statistically significant differences between regions. Salary and benefits were the most powerful and consistent indicators of whether a respondent was likely to consider leaving. Further analysis of the survey findings suggests intent to leave does decline as supervisor support improves, but even at what was perceived to be the best supervision among respondents, those who were dissatisfied with salary still showed elevated intent-to-leave scores compared with their satisfied peers. The report recommends some changes at the agency level, as well as state-level policy changes related to child welfare caseworker workload, salaries, and funding.

Methods

The key source of findings in this report is a statewide survey of Pennsylvania child welfare caseworkers. The survey, developed in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators (PCYA) and the Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth and Family Services (PCCYFS), was distributed to public and private child welfare agencies across the state. We surveyed child welfare caseworkers across Pennsylvania to understand factors influencing their job satisfaction, performance, and intent to leave, with a focus on differences between public and private agencies and urban and rural settings. After data cleaning, 400 responses were deemed valid and served as the basis for analysis. Altogether, 257 caseworkers who work in public

agencies and 143 caseworkers who work in private agencies completed the survey. Geographically, the sample was almost evenly split between rural and urban caseworkers.

Key Findings

- Urban caseworkers reported higher average caseloads than rural caseworkers, managing approximately 28 child cases and 16 families compared to 24 child cases and 13 families in rural areas.
- Some respondents reported exceptionally high caseloads, including two caseworkers managing 350 child cases, 10 managing more than 100 child cases, and 16 managing more than 100 family cases.
- Although rural respondents generally reported

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lower caseloads, rural cases may require more time and effort due to larger service areas, transportation challenges, and fewer local resources.

- Average caseloads reported by both urban and rural Pennsylvania caseworkers exceeded those reported in neighboring states.

Factors Influencing Intent to Leave

- Dissatisfaction with salary and benefits was the strongest predictor of turnover intentions and remained significant even after accounting for supervision, resources, and demographic factors.
- Access to organizational resources was more strongly associated with lower intent to leave among rural caseworkers, suggesting that adequate tools and support may be especially important for retention in rural agencies.
- Feeling recognized for one's work was linked to lower intent to leave, with a stronger association in rural areas where recognition may be particularly meaningful.
- Rural caseworkers reported higher satisfaction with court-related responsibilities and flexible work conditions. Among urban respondents, greater satisfaction with job flexibility was associated with lower intent to leave.
- Supervisor support and workplace resources were associated with lower intent to leave, but their effects were substantially weaker than the impact of compensation satisfaction.
- Caseworkers who reported supportive supervisors—providing guidance, emotional support, and problem-solving assistance—generally reported lower

intent-to-leave scores

- The relationship between supervision and retention differed somewhat across settings. In rural counties, compensation satisfaction appeared more influential than supervision, whereas in urban counties, stronger supervision may have played a larger role in retaining staff, even among those satisfied with their salary.

Policy Considerations

Agency-Level Considerations

- Institutionalize employee recognition practices to strengthen morale, workplace cohesion, and employees' connection to the agency mission.
- Implement streamlined and timely supervisor feedback processes to ensure consistent recognition and support.
- Invest in supervisor training and resources to strengthen supportive supervision and reduce turnover risk.
- Maintain manageable caseloads by improving retention, filling vacancies,

and reducing situations in which individual workers carry extremely high workloads.

State-Level Considerations

- Consider establishing statewide minimum salary standards for child welfare staff, given the strong relationship between compensation dissatisfaction and intent to leave.
- Explore a full county reimbursement funding model with year-end reconciliation to support staffing stability and improve equity across counties.
- Consider classifying child protective services staff as first responders to recognize their critical role, enhance professional recognition, and potentially support retention
- Evaluate transferring responsibility for truancy cases involving youth aged 15 and older to Juvenile Probation as a strategy to reduce child welfare caseloads and improve system efficiency.

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