

Using Comprehensive Family Assessments
to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes
Ramsey County Community Human Services &
University of Minnesota School of Social Work
St. Paul, Minnesota

Comprehensive Family Assessment Case Management Baseline Report: Workload Study Addendum

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Workload Study

Introduction

In Minnesota and throughout the United States, child protection workers are expected to meet an abundance of responsibilities and high performance expectations (Perry & Murphy, 2002). Workload studies can reveal how these workers perform their jobs beyond a simple count of cases per worker or the number of staff per office. The following addendum is based on a 2008 workload study conducted by the American Humane Society (AHA) of Ramsey County Community Human Services Department (RCCHSD) child protection staff in concert with evaluators from the University of Minnesota. The purpose of the workload study was to better understand the tasks that occupy staff time and the context in which these tasks occur, as well as the time and tasks each case receives.

Methods

A time study, also known as a 100 percent workload study, was conducted with Ramsey County child protection staff (screeners, intake and case management workers, case aides, and supervisors) in all units (program/case management, investigation, kinship search, family group decision making) for a full seven day week in the month of July 2008. The University of Minnesota partnered with the AHA to capture staff activities. AHA developed a software package and database to capture encrypted data as entered by staff. The software created by AHA, called the *Time Data Collector* (TDC), had been utilized in other child protection/child welfare systems in counties and states across the country, although the software was customized for Ramsey County.

Software was installed on staff computers and data entered was stored in Ramsey County networks for decryption and retrieval by AHA. Within the software was a list of codes for worker tasks (see Appendix A). The list was developed based on existing lists used in other parts of the country, with changes and additions to address differences in tasks of Ramsey County child protection workers. The TDC task lists were reviewed and edited by Comprehensive Family Assessment (CFA) advisory committees and Ramsey

County child protection staff to ensure the list was comprehensive, and used language with which workers were familiar. A new required category was also added to the existing software, asking workers about task context. Context options included assessment, planned intervention, crisis intervention, assessment with planned intervention, assessment with crisis intervention, as well as a not applicable option available for workers to select when coding for activities such as taking unpaid leave.

All workers, case aides, and supervisors within all units in child protection within Ramsey County were required to attend a half day training facilitated by University of Minnesota researchers. The participating staff consisted of 57 case-carrying workers, 10 support staff (case aides), five non-case-carrying workers (screeners), and eight supervisors; this represents participation from 80 out of 83 staff members (a 96% response rate). During the training, staff were given further information about the purposes of the workload study. The majority of the training time was spent introducing the workload study and allowing staff to practice using the TDC software with trainers present to answer questions or address concerns as they arose. Ramsey County CFA Project staff and University of Minnesota staff were also present to assist staff solve technical problems and answer questions about task lists during the week of data collection. Following data collection, staff were given one week for data cleaning. Data were then removed from the Ramsey County network and sent to the AHA in Colorado for decryption and analysis.

Results

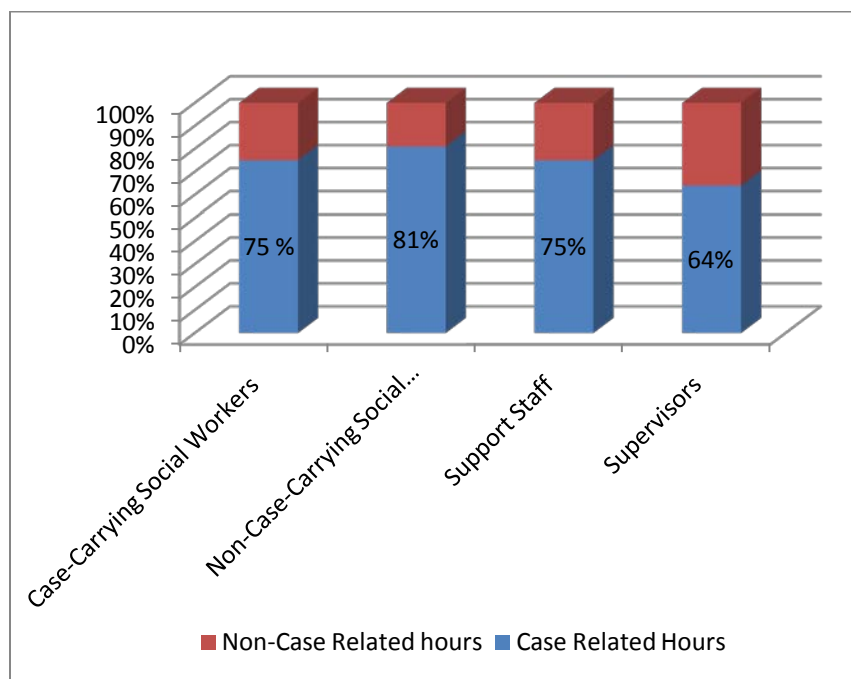
Results obtained from workload studies can be presented in two ways – hours devoted by worker or hours devoted to cases. Both of these presentation perspectives are important in understanding how workers are able to use their time to provide services. Therefore, results of the current workload study will be presented utilizing both of these perspectives, where applicable, to create the most comprehensive picture of workers' and families' experiences. Findings of other workload studies will be presented throughout the results section for comparative purposes.

Staff Hours

Case-Related Activity

Ramsey County child protection staff reported working an average of 40 hours a week over four days. Of those 40 hours, case-carrying social workers (intake and case management) and support staff (case aides) reported spending 75% of their time on case-related tasks, such as contact with clients, travel, documentation, etc. Non-case-carrying social workers (screeners) spent slightly more time on case-related work (81%), while supervisors spent less time on case-related work (64%). (See Figure 1)

Figure 1. Case-Related Activity by Worker



As a group, Ramsey County case-carrying child protection staff spent slightly more time on case-related activities as compared to workers in other states. In general, other workload studies show convergence with an overall “one-third rule.” That is, approximately one third of case-carrying staff time is spent on non-case-related duties (Tooman & Fluke, 2002). Documented time spent on case-related activities has been

reported in other workload studies as follows: 61% (Arizona¹), 67% (California¹), 69% (Alaska² and Washington²), 70% (Oregon²), 71% (Idaho²), 72% (New York²), and 75% (Montana²) (American Humane Association, 2006; Edwards, Reynolds, & Ruehrdanz, 2009; Tooman & Fluke, 2002; and McDonald & Associates, 2007). One notable exception to the one-third rule is the amount of time spent on case-related activities in Florida². In this state, workers reported spending 89% of their time on case-related activities. However, it should be noted that the Florida study utilized a different method of categorizing case-related time that included such things as training and professional development; these tasks were classified as non-case related time in the current study. In addition, the Florida study also included assessment workers from non-profit agencies that provided child welfare services, and only followed a small sample of 24 workers, factors that differ from this study and that could contribute to this anomaly in outcomes (Perry & Murphy, 2002).

Overall, the high proportion of hours staff devoted to case-related activities (in comparison to other states) may partly be a reflection of the work Ramsey County has been doing to address the needs of families in response to findings of the 2005 CFSR. (This explanation will be further examined in the upcoming Management Study). The 2005 CFSR indicated that the area most in need of improvement was helping families develop the capacity to provide for their children's needs, including identifying needs and providing services to meet those needs; involving children and families in the case planning process; improving the frequency and quality of worker visits with children and families; and providing services to address children's mental health, educational, and physical health needs. Thus there may have been an increased awareness of, and attention to, spending time on case-related activities that fall in these areas on the part of workers. The high proportion time devoted to case-carrying activities was found across staff role. Case-carrying and support workers spent equal amounts of time on case-related activities. Not surprisingly, non-case-carrying social workers, (screeners) devoted the highest percentage of time to case-related activities while supervisors devoted the least amount of time to case-related activities, compared to the other groups of workers. However, even supervisors reported spending approximately two thirds of their time in case-related activities. In comparison, supervisors in Washington

¹ Time spent on case-related activities by Child Protective Service workers only

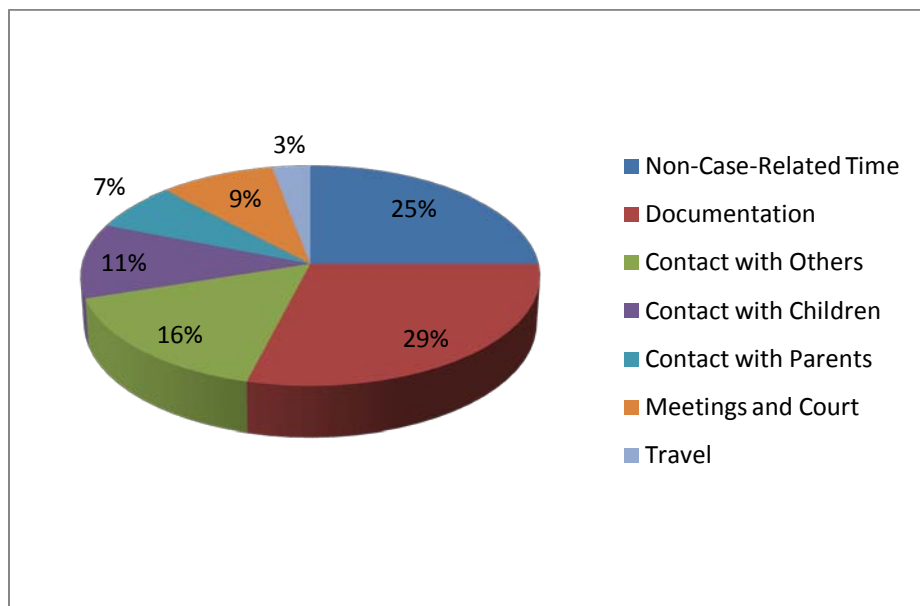
² Time spent on case-related activities by child welfare workers

state spent 46% of their time on direct case-related activities. This work was the result of supervisors picking up work that was previously assigned to others, and it was recommended that the direct case work be handled by others to prioritize supervisor case time (McDonald & Associates, 2007).

Worker Tasks

The workload study provided information on the specific tasks staff performed, as well as an estimate of how much of reported staff time was spent on these specific tasks. Staff reported spending most of their time in contact with clients (others, children, and parents); followed by documentation; attending meetings and court; and finally, traveling. (See Figure 2.) All statistics reported hereafter are based on the percent of total staff time the task requires; 2%, 5%, and 10% requirements of total staff time reflect a dedication of approximately one, two, and four hours, respectively.

Figure 2. Percent of Total Staff Time Allocated to Tasks



The workload study also provided information about the proportion of time staff devoted to specific sub-tasks within the larger task categories. Noteworthy findings about the tasks staff performed indicated the following:

Contact with parents, children, and others comprised approximately one-third (roughly 14 hours in a 40 hour week) of total staff time. Staff reported spending 11% of their total time in contact with children, which is significantly higher than Florida, where workers reported spending approximately 2% of their time in contact with children, or in Washington, where workers reported spending 4% of their time in contact with children (Perry & Murphy, 2002; McDonald & Associates, 2007). Slightly more than 10% of Ramsey staff time was devoted to meeting with children face-to-face; the remaining 1% of time was spent in contact with children using methods other than face-to-face.

Staff reported spending 7% of their time in contact with parents. Approximately 6% of time was spent in face-to-face contact with parents (including Family Group Decision Making, where approximately two-thirds of the contact with parents occurred); the remaining 1% of contact with parents included phone or email contact with parents. Staff spent a total reported 16% of their time in face-to-face contact with either children or parents, slightly more than workers in New York (McDonald et al., 2006). Additionally, staff reported spending 16% of their total time in contact with others, including contact with placement providers and other collateral sources. Approximately 10% of this time was spent in face-to-face contact with others, 6% waiting for contact with others, and a negligible amount of time attempting to contact others.

The second largest proportion of workers' time was spent on documentation. A total of 29% of total staff time (approximately 12 hours in a 40 hour week) was spent on this task overall. Staff reported spending 16% of their total time searching for and retrieving information, and 9% of their total time recording information. In comparison, staff in Washington reported spending 5% of their total time searching for and retrieving information, and 13% of their total time recording information (McDonald & Associates, 2007). The remaining portion of time staff spent on documentation (4%) consisted of public disclosure and discovery. Staff at Ramsey County spent 8% more time in documentation-related activities than workers in both New York and Florida (Perry & Murphy, 2002; Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc., & American Humane Association, 2006).

A total of 9% of total staff time (approximately four hours of a 40 hour work week) was devoted to attending meetings and court. This time included face-to-face supervision

and consulting with supervisors (1%), peer consultation (1%), work to maintain licensure (2%), case staffing (1%), case assignment and transfer (1%), case review (<1%), court and waiting (<1%), and supervisee training (<1%). Overall, Ramsey County staff spent less total time in court and meetings than workers in New York or workers in California, who spent roughly 10% of their total work time either in court or waiting for court, or even workers in Washington who spent 4% of their time in court-related work (Tooman & Fluke, 2002; McDonald et al., 2007).

Of all tasks that staff completed in the week studied, travel took up the least amount of total time (3%, approximately one hour total in a 40 hour work week). Transporting clients accounted for 1% of the total time; the remainder of the time was spent on work-related travel for investigations, court, or other case-related duties. Reported travel time for Ramsey County staff is significantly less than travel time for New York workers, who on average spent 9% of their time traveling for case-related work, or Florida workers, who spent approximately 13% of their time travelling (Perry & Murphy, 2002). Workers in Washington reported spending approximately 5% of their time in travel – a number that is more closely aligned with that of Ramsey County (McDonald et al., 2007).

Task Context

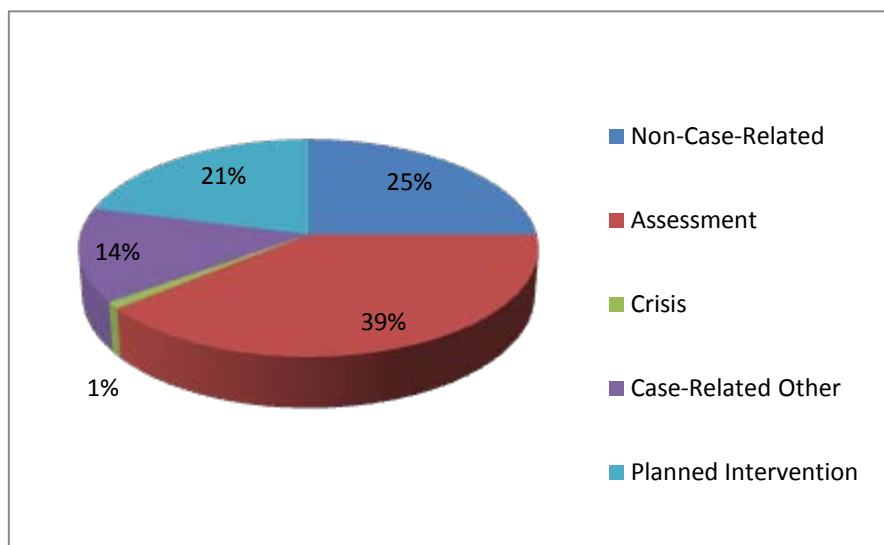
Although it is informative to note the particular tasks staff complete on a day-to-day basis, it is also important to assess the context in which these tasks occur. Like Figure 2, Figure 3 demonstrates how staff, on average, reported spending their time over the week studied. However, Figure 3 depicts the amount of time staff reported spending on task *by context*, including assessment, assessment with crisis intervention, assessment with planned intervention, crisis intervention, planned intervention, or not applicable (case-related other). These tasks were collapsed in order to provide more detailed information about the context in which workers spend their time and the context in which cases are worked. Staff reported that they spent the majority of their time in assessment, followed by planned intervention, other case-related activities, and finally, crisis (using the collapsed categories noted above). In comparing Figure 3 with information on individual cases, the information demonstrates that:

- 1) Staff spent 39% of their time performing assessment-related tasks; 76% of all cases involved assessment of some sort (assessment with crisis intervention,

- planned intervention, or without intervention). In the context of assessment, workers spent most of their time on documentation (35%), followed by contact with others (23%), contact with children (21%), and contact with parents (12%). (Contact with clients in total took up approximately 56% of workers' assessment time.) Workers spent 9% of their assessment time in meetings and court, and only 2% in travel.
- 2) Staff spent 21% of their time performing tasks related to planned interventions without assessment; 72 % of all cases involved a planned intervention. Workers' time in the context of planned intervention closely mirrors that of the assessment context. Workers spent most of their planned intervention time on documentation (34%), followed by contact with others (20%), contact with children (19%), and contact with parents (10%). (Contact with clients in total took up approximately 49% of workers' planned intervention time, slightly less than the amount of time workers were spending with clients in the assessment context.) Workers spent 9% of their planned intervention time in meetings and court (equivalent to the amount of time spent on this task in assessment), and 8% in travel (slightly higher than the amount of time workers were spending on travel in the assessment context).
- 3) Staff spent slightly more than 1% of their time on crisis intervention without assessment; 11% of all cases involved a crisis. Workers' time in the context of crisis intervention was quite different from the time workers spent on various tasks in the context of either assessment or planned intervention without assessment. Workers spent an overwhelming majority of their crisis intervention time on contact with clients (81%); this included contact with children (32%), followed by contact with parents (25%), and contact with others (24%). Contact with clients in total took up substantially more of workers' time in the context of crisis intervention than in the contexts of assessment or planned intervention without assessment. Workers spent 8% of their crisis intervention time in meetings and court (consistent with the amount of time spent in other contexts), 6% in travel (a median amount of time as compared to the other

- contexts), and only 6% on documentation (significantly less time as compared to the contexts of assessment or planned intervention without assessment).
- 4) The category of case-related other (25% of staff time), allowed staff to document their time as working on case related work, but in a way that did not apply to any of the context categories. However, this number may be artificially high; as it appeared that some workers may have used this option to circumvent the purposes of the study. For instance, one worker documented spending 100% of their work time in this context.

Figure 3. Percent of Staff Time Allocated to Tasks by Context



The context in which staff perform their tasks is important for two reasons. First, on-going, comprehensive assessment is critical in meeting federal and state mandates, such as the 2005 Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act, the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, and the 2006 Child and Family Services Improvement Act. On-going, comprehensive assessment is also perceived as being, helpful to staff and families served, especially when used to target interventions that meet the specific needs of families while also recognizing families' strengths. (In order to fully understand staff assessment activity, this aspect of the study solicited their *perception* of assessment activities.) Second, the

context of crisis represents a significant cost to all parties involved. Past experience tells us that we spend a great deal of time in crisis in a reactive practice, which is costly in many ways: it is not helpful to families, it results in longer placements for children, and it represents a significant financial cost for the agency when allocating resources in an emergency situation. One tenet of CFA is that by doing a thorough assessment, fewer crises will emerge because workers will have information readily available to help problem solve, intervene, and realign their case plan prior to the family's situation. The costs associated with crisis span the domains of safety, permanency, and well-being, and are thus imperative to take into consideration, even if they only represent a small percentage of workers' time.

Conclusions

The purpose of the Ramsey County child protection workload study was to better understand the tasks that occupy staff time, the context in which these tasks occur, and the types of activities and time different cases receive. Overall, it appears that Ramsey County child protection staff is in close alignment with other child welfare workers across the country on the tasks that occupy staff time. Ramsey County child protection staff report spending more time on case-related activities than workers in other states. It appears that Ramsey County staff spend slightly more time in contact with clients and working on documentation than workers in other states, but less time attending court and meetings, and travelling than workers in other states.

Limitations

Several limitations should be taken into consideration when trying to understand the implications of these findings. First, although this study reported a high participation rate from staff (96%), data was only collected for the duration of one week in the month of July. July is typically a slower month for child protection staff in Ramsey County, especially in Intake. Intake workers (case-carrying) typically have a caseload of approximately five to seven cases per worker during this time, whereas the average caseload is approximately 10 cases per worker in the months between January and May; Case Management workers (case-carrying) typically have a caseload of approximately 12-13 cases during this time,

whereas the average caseload is approximately 13-14 cases per worker in the months between October and December. Therefore, results of this workload study may not be generalizable to other times of the year.

Secondly, the amount of crisis experienced by staff (1% of total staff time; only 11% of cases) may be underreported, as the majority of staff did not document experiencing a crisis in the time period studied. The 24 staff members who coded work time as crisis intervention spent on average 4% of their total time in this context, representing approximately two hours of their average 40 hour work week. However, in focus groups and in conversations with staff and supervisors, staff reported dedicating approximately 10% of their total work hours to crisis situations. It may be that staff truly do dedicate approximately 10% of their total work hours to crisis interventions, but like case loads, the prevalence of these situations may peak at other times of the year or may have been more prevalent across a longer study period (e.g., one month).

Third, researchers at the University of Minnesota modified the existing AHA time study software to fit the particular needs of the CFA project (i.e., the category of task context was added). While the software served its purpose and was generally user-friendly for workers, the alteration of the software proved to be somewhat cumbersome for workers in terms of entering in the task context data. Additionally, although the addition of the task context category proved to be helpful in terms of understanding the situation in which workers complete their tasks, several questions remain unanswered. For example, does case contact by various staff (e.g., case-carrying workers, supervisors, etc.) vary by task context? In other words, do supervisors spend more time on cases which receive crisis interventions and less time on other types of cases, or is the amount of time supervisors spend on cases equivalent across task context? This question (and others related to task context) is yet to be answered. Time permitting, questions such as this will be answered.

In sum, workers' use of time is generally consistent with other child welfare agencies with regard to time spent with clients, case-related activity hours, documentation hours, and supervision. Currently, workers spend approximately 39% of their total time in the context of assessment; this represents a devotion of just over half of their case-related time to assessment. It is hoped that workers will increase the amount of time they spend in

assessment following implementation of the new CFA model because on-going comprehensive assessment is crucial for ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children.

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APPENDIX A

List of Tasks Available to Workers

Contact with Child	Contact with Parents	Contact with Others	Travel	Documentation	Meetings/Court
Face to Face Contact with Child only	Face to Face Contact Bio/Adoptive/Step Mother Only	Placement Provider	Travel	Recording Information - manual	Peer Consultation
Face to Face Contact with Child (not residence not office)	Face to Face Contact Bio/Adoptive/Step Father only	Collaterals - no Child no Parents	Transportation of clients	Managing and Handling Information - manual	Consultation with Supervisor
All other Contact with Child	Face to Face Contact with more than one parent/caretaker	Attempted Contact		Public Disclosure and Discovery – manual	Case Staffing
Attempted Face to Face Contact with Child	Face to Face Contact with parent and collateral contact	Waiting for Contact		Retrieving and Searching for Information – manual	Waiting for Court
Face to Face with Child and Parent in Residence	FGDM			Entering or Recording Information – computer	Court Time
Face to Face with Child and Parent in Office	Phone or Email Contact with parent			Managing or Handling Information – computer	Pre Placement Activity
Face to Face with Child and Others at Placement Site				Public Disclosure and Discovery – computer	Ongoing Support
Face to Face with Child and Others in Office				Retrieving or Searching for Information - computer	Licensing
Face to Face with Child and Others (not office not residence)					Face to Face Supervision
Supervised and Monitored Visits					Supervisee Training
					Case Review manual
					Case Review computer
					Case Assignment and Transfer computer