

# CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS' WORKING CONDITIONS: A SURVEY OF MINNESOTAN LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS

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## FACT SHEET #1: Neoliberal Managerialism



### BACKGROUND: Child Welfare and Neoliberalism

Child welfare is a cornerstone of the social work profession and scholars have often researched its workforce. In the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal policies were implemented in the social services, including child welfare, altering its work functions and aims.<sup>1</sup>

**Neoliberal governing logic** applies market logic and business principles to social and political arenas, including social welfare administration and management.

Neoliberalism has had a significant impact on the profession of social work. At the legislative policy level, social programs have been cut significantly, devolved to states

through block grants, and frequently require work or other behavior of clients to receive services.<sup>2</sup> At the state rule-making level, private providers negotiate service performance contracts. Neoliberal's market logic requires competition among agencies to secure contracts; they are pressured to offer more services and to cut costs, inviting entrepreneurial management.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberal managerialism within human services agencies and organizations includes:

- a) Prioritizing productivity and efficiency goals over quality of services, (e.g. speed of work, emphasis on paperwork, taking on more clients)
- b) Worker surveillance and monitoring practices such as tracking workers' computer and phone usage
- c) Use of incentives and sanctions based on productivity to modify worker behavior and upon which to evaluate performance
- d) Standardization of client intervention methods and practice goals<sup>4</sup>

Some studies of the child welfare workforce address social worker issues: work-family balance, lack of commitment to the workplace, low job satisfaction, burnout, and high turnover.<sup>5</sup> Although there are a handful of studies from the social workers' perspective that address pay, stress, and supervision issues,<sup>6</sup> few have centered how neoliberal managerial practices themselves affect social workers' assessment of their working conditions.

This fact sheet presents findings on the effects of neoliberal managerialism on the working conditions of child welfare social workers in Minnesota, *Impacts of Neoliberalism on MN Social Workers Project*.

#### We asked:

**To what extent do direct line child welfare social workers experience the following aspects of managerialism?**

- 1) Pressure to increase productivity and efficiency?
- 2) Close monitoring of work?
- 3) The use of incentives and sanctions? and
- 4) Lack of control on practice decisions (standardization of methods and outcomes)?

## THE SAMPLE

157 direct line child welfare licensed social workers in Minnesota completed our survey:

#### Practice Setting

- 47% child protection
- 33% child and family welfare services
- 11% adoption services
- 8% foster care services

#### Employment Sector

- 80% public sector
- 17% private nonprofit sector
- 3% private for-profit sector

#### Workplace Geography

- 70% urban communities
- 39% rural communities
- 1% suburban communities.

#### Respondent Demographics:

- 125 women
- 10 men
- 1 transgender\*

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- 39 years (mean age)
  - 22 to 72 years (age range)

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- 87% White
  - 5.5% Black/African American/African
  - 3% American Indian/Alaska Native
  - 2% Hispanic
  - 2% Asian.\*

\*= Not all participants replied to these items.

## FINDINGS

### 1. PRESSURE TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY?

Child welfare social workers in this study were under increased pressure to get more done, take on more clients and close cases quickly. They were also pressured to prioritize paperwork over practice, and were placed with complete responsibility for client outcomes to a significant extent (see Table 1).

**Table 1: The extent to which management pressures child welfare social workers to**

Item	Not at all/ to a small extent	To some/ moderate extent	To a great/ very great extent
Get more done in the same amount of time**	25%	42%	33%
Take on more clients**	29%	36.5%	34.5%
Close cases quickly*	55%	29.5%	15.5%
Select clients based on likely positive outcomes	93%	5%	2%
Drop clients who do not perform well	93%	6%	1%
Place complete responsibility for client outcomes on the worker*	57%	29%	14%
Evaluate performance based on efficiency over quality of practice*	58%	30%	12%
Prioritize paperwork over practice**	41%	35%	23%

\* = more than a third of respondents experienced this to a moderate extent or more

\*\* = more than a half of respondents experienced this to a moderate extent or more

### 2. USE OF INCENTIVES AND SANCTIONS?

A fair number of child welfare social workers reported monetary sanctions, and increased oversight if productivity goals were not met.

**Table 2: Management's use of various incentives and sanctions among child welfare social workers**

To what extent does your organization...	To a great/ very great extent	To some/ moderate extent	Not at all/ to a small extent
Pay less if performance goals aren't met	2.7%	21.6%	75.7%
Increase oversight if performance goals aren't met	20.5%	48.6%	30.8%
Pay more if performance goals are exceeded	4.7%	23%	72.3%
Promote competition among co-workers	2%	8.8%	89.9%

The majority of child welfare social workers practice in the public sector and they were more likely to experience management increased oversight than monetary sanctions (or incentives) in response to worker behavior. However, public sector workers also reported management's use of monetary sanctions (see Table 2). Private sector child welfare social workers were more likely to report the use of monetary incentives and sanctions (Mean=9.3) than public sector ones (Mean=7.8).

### 3. CLOSE MONITORING OF WORK?

Child welfare social workers felt more monitored compared to all social workers (Mean = 9.81, 8.67, respectively,  $p < 0.00829$ ).

- In general, public sector workers (most child welfare social workers) felt more monitored (Mean=10.3) than private sector workers (Mean = 8.07) ( $p < 0.034$ ) scale range from 5-30”.
- Workers reported fairly limited monitoring of phone calls (14.3%) and worker activities using video recording (5.4%).
- 33-54% reported email and computer usage monitored to some extent and 24.5% reported management tracking employees’ location.
- 18-25% of child welfare social workers were not sure if they were being monitored (varies by computer, phone, or video camera).

#### INCOME

Full-time child welfare social workers mean annual salary was: \$50,000%-60,000. The breakdown in dollars:

- 5%: 30,001-40,000
- 13%: 40,001-50,000
- 22%: 50,001-60,000
- 30%: 50,001-60,000
- 18%: 70,001-80,000
- 12%: 80,001-100,000

### 4. CONTROLLED PRACTICE DECISIONS?

As indicated in Table 3, child welfare social workers report that management controls a fair amount of their practice options. For example, 81.7% of respondents reported that management decided the set of practices or interventions with clients from some extent to a very great extent. Furthermore, 61% required evidence-based practice interventions from some to a very great extent. Performance outcomes, rather than practice quality itself, was emphasized from some to a very great extent among 49% of respondents, and 54% report those treatment goals are set by management from some to a very great extent. Standardization of practice is considerable.

**Table 3: The extent to which management controls practice decisions**

In my agency, to what degree does organizational management...	To a great/ very great extent	To some/ moderate extent	Not at all/ to a small extent
Sets practice treatment goals for clients	22%	32%	46%
Requires evidence-based practice interventions	23%	39%	38%
Determines the set of practices or interventions allowed with clients	28%	53%	29%
Emphasizes my performance outcomes rather than my practice	15%	34%	51%
Sets the total number of sessions or length of relationship with clients	6%	25%	69%
Determines the length of time allowed per client meeting	6%	22%	71%

N= 143

#### CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS' LEVELS OF BURNOUT AND INTENTION TO LEAVE THEIR JOBS

- 20% of respondents experienced constant burnout symptoms and frustration at work. Additionally, 7% felt they needed to seek help.
- 33% felt one or more symptoms of burnout such as physical and emotional exhaustion.
- 41% felt occasional stress, and only 6% did not report any symptoms of burnout.
- 39% indicated that they were somewhat likely, likely, or very likely to actively look for a new job in the next year.
- There was not a statistically significant difference between child welfare workers and the larger sample level of burnout. This was also the case for intention to leave job (although child welfare social workers were higher).

## Early evidence of effects of Covid-19 on child welfare social workers:

This survey was administered about a year after the Covid-19 pandemic hit Minnesota. We asked respondents a few questions about working conditions during the pandemic.

- Most of the child welfare social workers in this sample remained fully employed. Approximately 50% continued to work in-person, 50% switched to work remotely. Nine workers were required to work increased hours; one had their hours reduced (n=134).
- Most respondents (79%) of this question said they somewhat agreed, agreed or strongly agreed that management provided them with enough protection, but 21% somewhat disagreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, 81% indicated that they felt moderately-well-or very protected from contracting Covid-19, while 19% indicated they felt minimally protected or not protected at all (n=67).

## CONCLUSION

As a sample of mostly public employees (80%) with a charge to protect children and follow state guidelines and protocol, child welfare social workers experience neoliberalism largely through pressures to speed up work and be efficient. They also felt pressure to take on more clients and prioritize their paperwork over their practice. On the other hand, they did not experience a common facet of neoliberal managerialism: incentives and sanctions based on performance; although more monitored than others, monitoring practices were fairly limited (although there was some uncertainty of whether or how much they were monitored). Additionally, child welfare social workers in this sample indicated relatively high levels of control over practice decisions related to length of engagement with clients. Child welfare social workers did seem limited in the interventions or the practice methods to be used. Finally, we learned that during the pandemic, about half of child welfare social workers who responded were required to continue to work in person; about about a fifth of them did not feel well-protected during work. However, management's standardization of practice rivaled, if not surpassed, productivity pressures, warranting further investigation.

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