

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

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FACT SHEET #2: Professional Discretion

BACKGROUND: Child Welfare Social Workers' Professional Discretion under Managerialism

In social services, neoliberal managerialism, or the application of business principles to social work practice, may compromise its quality. Managerialism aims and tools include worker efficiency and productivity, close monitoring of workers, incentives and sanctions of workers, and pre-determining methods and goals^{1,2}. The ongoing austerity of managerialism leads to less costly modes of service delivery, such as doing more with less, increasing caseloads, selecting modifiable clients, increasing responsibilities within same work hours.^{3,4} Such managerial conditions compromise social workers' professional authority.^{5,6}

Professional authority is established through rigorous education and supervised skill development to address complex problems.⁴ Under these conditions, the public grants social workers discretion to professionals to engage their knowledge, skills, and ethics in their practice. More than merely avoiding improper practice, the public expects social workers to *actively exercise* their professional discretion. Social work *professional discretion*, based on professional literature,^{8,9,10} includes the ability to:

- Adhere to the profession's code of ethics
- Implement the ecological framework
- Build trusting relationships with clients
- Tailor interventions to clients' needs
- Collaborate with other agencies
- Address clients' issues at the macro level
- Use a socio-political and historical lens to shape practice
- Advocate on behalf of clients or against unjust social policies

While most social work workforce studies assess workers' satisfaction with their jobs,^{11,12} here we assess the degree to which social workers can engage their knowledge, skills and ethics in their workplace. This report is part of the larger *Impacts of Neoliberalism on MN Social Workers Project*.

We asked:

- 1. How much professional discretion do Minnesota's direct line child welfare social workers have under neoliberal managerialism?**
 - To what extent can social workers engage their education, skills, and ethics in practice?
 - Do workers experience conflict between their professional values and the requirements of their organization?
 - How effective do workers feel in meeting the goals of their clients?
 - Are workers able to engage in advocacy on behalf of their clients?
 - Who are workers being supervised by?
- 2. Are social workers resisting neoliberal managerialism? If so, how?**
 - In what ways do workers resist managerialism on the job?
 - Do workers belong in a union? If so, how protected do they feel? If not, would they be interested in unionizing?

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. HOW MUCH PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION DO CHILD WELFARE WORKERS HAVE?

Child welfare workers had a mean score of 26.2 (out of 35) on the professional discretion scale, a score a little lower than the larger sample of direct line social workers (mean = 27.2).

Table 1: The Extent to Which Workers are Able to Exercise Their Professional Discretion.

In your workplace, to what extent are you able to...	Not at all	To a small extent	To some extent	To a moderate extent	To a great extent
Practice your professional values as a social worker (as stated in the NASW Code of Ethics)	0.00%	1.46%	16.06%	32.85%	49.64%
Incorporate the ecological framework in assessment	1.47%	8.09%	29.41%	37.50%	23.53%
Build trusting relationships with people you serve	0.00%	2.92%	10.95%	33.58%	52.55%
Tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs	0.00%	3.65%	23.36%	39.42%	33.58%
Engage with other agencies in supporting your clients	0.00%	2.92%	14.60%	34.31%	48.18%
Address clients' issues at the macro level	14.60%	34.31%	20.44%	20.44%	10.22%
Shape practice by groups' social, economic and political history	6.6%	20.4%	30.7%	32.1%	10.2%

N=137

Takeaways

- More than 50% indicated they were able to **professional social work values** only to a moderate extent or less.
- Almost 40% reported they were able to **incorporate the ecological framework** only to some extent or less.
- A strong majority believed they **build trusting relationships** with clients to a moderate or great extent (86.2%).
- About 40% could **tailor interventions with clients** to a moderate extent; 33% to a great extent; 25% to some extent or less.
- The majority could **engage with other agencies** to support the workers' clients to a moderate or great extent (82.5%).
- Nearly 50% reported they **address clients' issues at macro level** only to a small extent or less; 14.6% not at all.
- The majority (57.7%) of child welfare social workers reported limited ability to **shape practice based on social, economic, and political history** of client groups.

Overall, child welfare social workers indicated high degree of control over relationship-building ability with clients and ability to engage with other agencies to assist clients. They rated their professional ethical adherence fairly high, but indicated a limited ability to incorporate the ecological model, tailor interventions, and address macro issues to support clients. The ways in which social workers use their knowledge and skills are compromised.

DO WORKERS EXPERIENCE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATION REQUIREMENTS AND SOCIAL WORK ETHICS?

When asked, "To what extent do you experience conflict between your professional values as a social worker and the requirements of your organization or agency?" Participants answered:

- 11% to a great or very great extent
- 43% to a moderate or some extent
- 30% to a small extent
- 16% did not experience any conflict of values.
- Public sector workers experienced more value conflict (Mean = 2.9) than private sector workers (Mean = 2.27) ($p < 0.0229$).

Overall, public sector workers experienced more value conflict than private sector ones.

HOW EFFECTIVE DO WORKERS FEEL IN THEIR WORK?

- 42% of child welfare social workers felt they were only effective to a small or moderate extent in meeting the goals of their clients.
- Most respondents (58%) indicated they were effective in meeting the goals of their clients to a great or very great extent.
- None of the respondents indicated that they were not effective at all in meeting the goals of their clients.

Workers' Perceived Ability to Engage in Professional Advocacy

Many participants (39%) indicated that they believed they were allowed to engage in political advocacy in their professional capacity, yet a substantial 28% believed they were not allowed and another 33% were unsure.

WHO IS SUPERVISING CHILD WELFARE WORKERS?

Of respondents, 68% reported that their workplace-based supervisor was a social worker, compared to the larger sample in which only 52% of all direct line workers reported social workers were their supervisors. Even though 28% did not have social workers as supervisors (4% were not sure), child welfare social workers were fairly likely to have social workers as direct line supervisors.

2. HOW DO WORKERS DEMONSTRATE DISAGREEMENT OR RESISTANCE IN THEIR WORKPLACE?

Participants demonstrated disagreement or resistance to unjust rules or policies was the same as the larger workforce sample.

Table 2: The Resistance to Neoliberal Managerialism

When I disagree with managements policies over practice, I have...	Never	On occasion	Somewhat frequently	Frequently
Loosely interpreted eligibility and assessment guidelines	48.50%	44.03%	5.22%	2.24%
Practiced outside of management approved interventions	70.90%	23.13%	5.97%	0.00%
Altered my performance reports	91.79%	6.72%	1.49%	0.00%
Organized with co-workers	51.88%	38.35%	7.52%	2.26%
Expressed disagreement to management	14.93%	52.24%	20.90%	11.94%
Expressed disagreement among co-workers	4.48%	50.57%	25.37%	19.40%
Contacted my professional association	94.74%	3.76%	1.50%	0.00%
Contacted the board of social work	94.74%	5.26%	0.00%	0.00%
Other	92.47%	6.45%	1.08%	0.00%

N= 134

The most common way to demonstrate disagreement was to express it among co-workers (85% of respondents who answered this question), followed by expressing it to management (75%); the least was to contact the Board of Social Work (8%), or their professional associations (5%). Overall, workers did not engage in action to resist neoliberal managerialism practices.

DO CHILD WELFARE SOCIAL WORKERS BELONG TO UNIONS?

- 34% of the child welfare social work respondents **were members of a union** (n=45).
 - » 71% of these unionized social workers reported they were protected to a moderate, great, or very great extent (n=32).
- 66 % were **not members of a union** (n=88).
 - » 74% of these non-unionized social workers reported they somewhat agree, agree or strongly agree that they would join a union if available (n=67).
 - » 26% of these social workers (n=21) indicated that they were not interested in joining a union.

This sample of child welfare social workers were overwhelmingly public sector employees (80%), and as the research would predict, they were the most likely to be unionized among respondents (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Although public employees are not obligated to join a union, a good portion did and many were interested in joining. Interestingly, nearly a quarter were also members of professional associations, perhaps demonstrating an interest in staying connected to the social work profession in addition to union workplace protections.

CONCLUSION

Child welfare direct line social workers experienced less professional discretion than the larger sample of social workers, even though they were more likely to be supervised by a social worker. Public sector child welfare social workers experienced fairly high levels of discrepancy between professional values and the organizational requirements. While union membership of child welfare workers was higher than for the larger sample, workers demonstrated little resistance to neoliberal managerialist practices and less than half engaged in advocacy on behalf of their clients.

Future research should gather first-hand accounts of child welfare social workers' exercise of professional discretion, including the interrelationship between managerial pressures and professional discretion. Also, how supervisors mediate between organizational demands and social workers' professional discretion needs further study. Relationships between discretion, workload, burnout, resistance and union membership deserve further explication.

In a democratic society, the public sanctions professions based on their expert knowledge, skills and adherence to a code of ethics. As a profession dedicated to social justice and the full civil, political, social, and economic inclusion of marginalized populations (such as parents and children in poverty and otherwise oppressed), social workers must be able to carry out these responsibilities through substantial professional discretion.

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