

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

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## FACT SHEET #3: Child Protection Social Workers' Professional Discretion

### BACKGROUND:

Child protection (CPS) workers are responsible for making critical life-altering decisions that directly affect child safety and family stability.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 40% of CPS workers have social work degrees<sup>2</sup> and must adhere to their professional ethics, employing professional discretion in their practice.<sup>3</sup>

However, since the 1980s, neoliberal policy has mandated business-like management in human services. Social work and human service workers labor under a neoliberal managerialism that calls for increased productivity, efficiency, and standardization. Neoliberal managerialism may even limit social workers' professional discretion.<sup>4</sup>

Previous fact sheets addressed implications of managerialism on child welfare social worker working conditions and professional discretion. This fact sheet focuses specifically on Child Protection (CPS) Social Workers. As public sector workers who work mostly with involuntary clients consisting of families with children, their mandate is unique. It is critical to understand if and to what extent these workers are able to exercise their professional discretion under these conditions.

### We asked:

- 1. To what extent do CPS workers experience neoliberal managerialism: productivity, monitoring, incentives/sanctions, and practice standardization pressures?***
- 2. To what extent do CPS workers exercise their professional discretion?***

## THE SAMPLE

73 child protection licensed social workers in Minnesota completed our survey:

### Education

- 56% MSW
- 44% BSW

### Geography

- 76% Urban
- 24% Rural

### Years of experience

- Mean: 20.3
- 44%: less than 5 years
- 25%: 6-10 years
- 18%: 11-20 years
- 14%: over 20 years

### Gender

- 95.5% Women
- 4.5% Men

### Race

- 88% White
- 6% Black/African American/  
African
- 3% Indigenous American
- 1.5% Asian
- 1.5% Other

### Annual Income

- 24%: \$40,001-60,000
- 60%: \$60,001- 80,000
- 12%: \$80,001-100,000

### Average overtime

- 5 hours/week

## FINDINGS

### 1. MANAGERIALISM

#### PRESSURE TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY AND EFFICIENCY

Child protection social workers in this study experienced severe time constraints (74.3%), pressure to take on more clients (72.9%), and pressure to close cases quickly (44.3%). For many, work was evaluated based on efficiency (45.7%) and paperwork was prioritized over practice (60%).

**Table 1: The Extent to which Management Pressures Social Workers to:**

| Item: In my agency, to what extent does management pressure social workers to: | Not Problematic (%) | Problematic (%) |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|
| Get more done in same amount of time   | 18 (25.7)           | 52 (74.3)       |
| Take on more clients   | 19 (27.1)           | 51 (72.9)       |
| Close cases quickly  | 39 (55.7)           | 31 (44.3)       |
| Select clients based on likely positive outcomes                               | 65 (92.9)           | 5 (7.1)         |
| Drop clients who do not perform well   | 68 (97.1)           | 2 (2.9)         |
| Evaluated performance based on efficiency over quality                         | 38 (54.3)           | 32 (45.7)       |
| Prioritize paperwork over practice   | 28 (40.0)           | 42 (60.0)       |

*Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"*

***Problematic** = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent"*

| MONITORING   | INCENTIVES AND SANCTIONS   | BURNOUT AND INTENTION TO LEAVE  |
|--|--|---|
| Although not heavily monitored in some aspects of work, over 50% of participants reported that their computer usage was monitored and 47% reported that their emails were monitored. | 68% of participants reported they experienced increased oversight if performance goals weren't met. However, most workers did not report being sanctioned monetarily or experiencing competition between co-workers as a means of sanctioning. | 53% of participants indicated a high level of burnout and 40% reported they were likely to look for a new job in the next year. |

## STANDARDIZATION OF PRACTICE

CPS social workers in this study experienced considerable standardization of practice decisions. They were limited in ability to determine practices and interventions for clients (77.5%) as well as set treatment goals (55%). Additionally, they had limited ability to include clients' input in intake assessments (67.6%).

**Table 2: The Extent to Which Management Standardizes Practice**

| In my agency, to what degree does management:                        | Not Problematic (%) | Problematic (%) |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|
| Set practice/treatment goals for clients                             | 32 (45)             | 39 (55)         |
| Allow clients' input in determining practice/treatment goals         | 23 (32.4)           | 48 (67.6)       |
| Determine the set of practices or interventions allowed with clients | 16 (22.5)           | 55 (77.5)       |
| Determine the length of time allowed per client meeting              | 57 (80)             | 14 (20)         |
| Require evidence-based practice interventions                        | 28 (39.5)           | 43 (60.5)       |
| Emphasize performance outcomes rather than practice                  | 34 (48)             | 37 (52)         |
| Set the total number of sessions or length of relationship           | 47 (66)             | 24 (34)         |

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"

**Problematic** = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent"

## 2. PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION

Child protection social workers perceived their professional discretion to be problematic on all scale items. Most concerning was their minimal ability to shape practice based on social, economic, and political history and address clients' issues at the macro level. Furthermore, almost 60% felt they were limited in their ability to follow their professional values.

**Table 3: Indicators of Professional Discretion**

| In your workplace, to what extent are you able to:        | Not Problematic (%) | Problematic (%) |
|---|---------------------|-----------------|
| Practice your professional values as a social worker      | 28 (41.8)           | 39 (58.2)       |
| Incorporate the ecological framework in assessment        | 13 (19.4)           | 54 (80.6)       |
| Build trusting relationships with people you serve        | 30 (44.8)           | 37 (55.2)       |
| Tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs | 20 (29.9)           | 47 (70.1)       |
| Engage with other agencies in supporting your clients     | 39 (58.2)           | 28 (41.8)       |
| Address clients' issues at the macro level                | 5 (7.5)             | 62 (92.5)       |
| Shape practice on social, economic, and political history | 5 (7.5)             | 62 (92.5)       |

Note: **Not Problematic** = "Not at all" and "To a small extent"

**Problematic** = "To some extent," "To a moderate extent," and "To a great extent"

## CONCLUSION

CPS social workers in this study experienced significant limitations in the exercise of their professional discretion.

- Standardization of practice, alongside the shortage of licensed social workers in child protection services, continue the decades-long trend of de-professionalization of the child protection workforce.
- CPS social workers have limited ability to frame family and community problems in a broad ecological and political perspective that would call for macro interventions to address social disadvantages.<sup>7</sup> Instead, years of mostly individual family intervention have led to attributing child neglect and maltreatment on individual parent deficiencies, which in turn continues to fuel individual-level interventions.
- More research is needed to further understand the implications of limited professional discretion on client outcomes and implications for the public. If social work coursework (history, policy, human behavior in the social environment, diversity and justice, research, practice) is important; if the integration of knowledge within a field practicum prior to professional work is important; if the commitment to a social work code of ethics is important, then CPS agencies should commit to ensuring professional discretion for the benefit of children and families and the common good.

### ADVOCACY: INDICATOR OF PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION

Social work education, practice, and ethics direct social workers to advocate for their clients on multiple levels. Participants in this study indicated advocating for clients mostly on micro levels rather than on macro levels:

- Most participants (95%) indicated they were able to advocate on behalf of specific clients.
- A little less (80%) indicated they were able to advocate for organizational issues that affect their clients.
- Fewer (54%) indicated advocating for social policies that benefit clients.
- Only 42% reported they would join/mobilize stakeholders for social change.

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