

IDHS Child Welfare Employee Survey: Preliminary Results

This report presents preliminary results of an on-line survey administered to child welfare employees of the Iowa Department of Human Services from September to November 2004. The purpose of the survey was to measure employee attitudes toward their job and their workplace. The survey is part of the University of Iowa/Iowa Department of Human Services' federal child welfare training grant on improving recruitment and retention in public child welfare.

Survey development

The child welfare survey contains a variety of items pertaining to employees' perceptions of their job and the workplace, as well as demographic and human capital (education and employment) items. Most of the survey questions were derived from well-established scales used in previous workforce research on a variety of occupations and work settings, including public child welfare. Several scales and individual items were developed by the Principal Investigator, with input from DHS employees. The survey was constructed in an on-line format, and was divided into six sections which allowed individuals to complete and submit sections as their time permitted. Prior to administering the survey, the instrument was reviewed by DHS employees and pre-tested by the DHS statewide training committee, which serves as an advisory group to the federal child welfare training grant.

Survey administration

In advance of the survey, the Director of the Iowa Department of Human Services sent two electronic email messages to staff alerting them to the survey and requesting their participation. Following these preliminary notifications, an email message including a link to the survey website was distributed to employees, followed by two subsequent reminders with links to the survey website. Out of 856 employees to whom the survey was distributed, 497 responded, for a survey response rate of 58%. While this percentage represents an acceptable response rate, a higher rate of participation would have allowed for greater confidence that the results are representative of the population of Iowa's public child welfare employees.

Survey results

This report presents descriptive data about the survey respondents as well as results from some bivariate analyses. The next stage of the analysis will focus on estimating a structural equation model examining the relative effects of workplace factors, service perceptions, and job stressors, on employees' job satisfaction, commitment, and intentions to stay in the organization and in child welfare practice.

Characteristics of survey respondents

Demographics

The gender distribution of respondents is about 80% female, 20% male. Employees are overwhelmingly Caucasian (96%), with nine self-reporting as African-American, eight as “other,” and one as American Indian. Nine employees described themselves as Hispanic/Latino. [Table 1]

The largest percentage of employees reported their marital status as married (66%), while 16% are single, 14% are divorced, and a small number reported themselves as separated, widowed, or “other.”

Employees vary widely in age distribution, though they are concentrated between the ages of 30-59. Sixty percent are over the age of 40. Fourteen percent are younger than 30 and three percent are older than 59. About six percent reported that they plan to retire within the next two to three years.

The primary location of work is evenly distributed between urban and rural (30% each), while 40% reported working in both urban and rural areas. This expanded geographic coverage is a result of the last Departmental reorganization.

Educational background

The majority of survey respondents (83%) hold a bachelor’s degree, while 16% have earned a master’s degree. With regard to social work education, 47% hold a Bachelor of Social Work degree and nine percent hold a Master of Social Work degree. Fifty-two percent hold either a BSW or MSW degree. Thirteen employees reported that they are currently pursuing an educational degree.

Employment characteristics

The respondents are predominantly Social Worker 2s (n=294, 59% of sample) and 3s (n=108, 22% of sample). These two classifications together represent 81% of the survey respondents. Fourteen Social Worker 4s and Fifteen Social Worker 6s also responded, representing nearly 6% of the sample. Fifty-three Social Work Supervisors representing 11% of the sample also participated. A small number of Social Work Supervisor 3s, Service Area Managers, and “others” represent a total of 12 respondents, or slightly more than 2% of the sample [Table 2].

Respondents vary widely in their length of employment within the Department. The mean number of years reported in the current position is 6.9 (s.d. = 6.5) and working in the local office, 9.4 (s.d.=7.9). The mean number of years working for the Department is 13.1 (s.d.=9.5), while the mean number of years in the labor force in total is 20.6 (s.d.=10.6). Salary also varies widely, though more than one-half of the respondents reported earning between \$35,000 and \$45,000.

Data were also gathered on the number of times that employees had experienced different types of promotions and transfers, both within and across local offices. About 28% of respondents reported having been promoted at least once within local office, and 31% transferred laterally at least once within the local office. About 23% were promoted at least once across offices, and

32% transferred laterally across offices. With regard to involuntary transfers, approximately 19% of respondents were laterally transferred within their local office, 12% across offices, and 10% reported having experienced at least one involuntary transfer to a lower pay scale. [Tables 3 and 4]

Workplace factors

Table 5 presents the means, standard deviations, and reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the scales used to measure workplace factors, job stressors, and service perceptions. Definitions of these scales are presented at the end of this report. The highest means (strongest level of agreement) regarding workplace factors were in the areas of coworker support, legitimacy, Departmental communication, public agency advantage, and supervisory support, while lower mean ratings were found for decision-making, distributive justice, agency support, and leadership.

Among the job stressors measured, work overload and emotional stress were the highest ranked (strongest level of agreement), while role ambiguity and role conflict were the lowest. Two of the service perception measures, service orientation (belief in the value of social work) and working relationships with clients had the highest means, while organizational citizenship had the lowest.

The responses to work, which included job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intent to stay (measured separately for the local office and the larger Department of Human Services, and occupational commitment and intent to stay in child welfare work, all received mean scores between 3.3 and 3.6 on a five-point scale. [Table 6]

Differences between line workers and other employees

Workplace factors, job stressors, service perceptions, and responses to work were analyzed for statistical differences between line workers (social worker 2s and social worker 3s) and other employees (all other job classifications). Using independent samples t-tests to test for differences between the means of these two employee groups, several differences were noted. [Tables 7 and 8]

Line workers expressed significantly higher levels of coworker support, concerns about safety on the job, and emotional stress of the job, than did the other employees. Line workers also reported significantly lower levels of decision-making, legitimacy, distributive justice, and organizational citizenship behaviors. On all of the other workplace, job stress, and service perception variables, no significant differences were found. Similarly, responses to work (job satisfaction, commitment, and intention to stay) did not differ significantly between line workers and other employees.

Relationship between workplace, stress, service factors and responses to work

Correlation matrices presenting bivariate correlations between workplace factors, job stressors, service perceptions and responses to work are presented in Tables 9 and 10.

At the bivariate level, most of the workplace factors are significantly related to the responses to work in the expected (positive) direction, although decision-making and formalization demonstrate fewer significant correlations. The magnitude of the correlations for departmental communication, leadership, supervisory support, and agency support with most of the responses to work variables are particularly strong.

Examining job stressors, job safety is the only stressor with no significant correlation to any of the response to work variables, however this relationship appears to be non-linear. Role ambiguity and community stress are significantly negatively correlated with all response to work variables, which means that high levels of perceived ambiguity of one's role and strong perceptions that the agency is under fire by the community reduce job satisfaction, commitment, and intentions to stay in the organization and the occupation.

Most of the service perception variables are significantly and positively correlated with responses to work, especially service orientation, empowerment, service satisfaction, service network, and staff training.

As expected and consistent with previous workforce research, all of the response to work variables are significantly and positively correlated with each other. [Table 11] This means that the stronger one's satisfaction with the job, the stronger the attachment to the employing organization and to the field of child welfare, and the greater the likelihood of intending to remain working in the organization and the field of practice.

Relationship between other variables and responses to work

Several additional variables identified from the child welfare workforce literature were examined for their relationship to responses to work. Females reported significantly higher levels on each of the commitment and intent to stay variables, though there was no gender difference in job satisfaction.

Possession of a degree in social work—either a BSW or MSW--was only significantly related to intention to stay in child welfare work (those with a social work degree more likely to stay in child welfare). Having a social work degree was not related to job satisfaction, commitment, or intent to stay in the organization, however.

The number of promotions and transfers experienced by the respondents had some relationship to their responses to work. Specifically, voluntary transfers, both within the local office and across offices, were associated with lower levels of organizational commitment. Promotions across offices were associated with stronger intentions to stay with the Department. Involuntary transfers were not significantly associated with respondents' commitment or intentions to stay.

Those approaching retirement did not differ in their job satisfaction or commitment, though understandably they expressed lower intentions to remain with the Department.

Future analysis

The next step in the analysis of the child welfare survey data will be to construct and estimate a structural equation model to examine relative effects of perceptions of work, job stressors, and service perceptions, on employee job satisfaction, commitment, and staying intentions. While the bivariate analyses presented in the present report are useful in examining relationships between individual variables and responses to work, the multivariate model will provide information on what factors have the greatest explanatory power.

TABLE 1
Demographics

Variable	Number	Percent
Gender: female	359	79.8
male	91	20.2
Race/ethnicity		
Caucasian	436	96.0
African American	9	2.0
American Indian	1	.2
Other	8	1.8
Hispanic/Latino	9	2.0
Marital Status		
single	73	16.2
married	298	65.9
separated	6	1.3
divorced	64	14.2
widowed	5	1.1
other	6	1.3
Age		
< 25	8	1.8
25-29	55	12.2
30-39	114	25.2
40-49	134	29.6
50-59	128	28.3
> 59	13	2.9
Plan to retire in 2-3 years	29	6.4
Locale		
Urban	149	30.1
Rural	148	29.9
Both	198	40.0

TABLE 2
Employment Characteristics

Variable	Number	Percent
Position		
Social worker 2	274	60.2
Social worker 3	97	21.3
Social Worker 4	13	2.9
Social Worker 6	13	2.9
Social Work Sup	46	10.1
Other ¹ (Supervisor 3, SAM, other)	12	2.6
Years in current position		
< 1	45	9.9
1-5	210	46.1
6-10	88	29.3
11-15	49	10.8
16-20	41	9.0
21-25	19	4.1
> 25	3	.7
Years in local office		
< 1	27	5.9
1-5	172	37.8
6-10	89	19.6
11-15	61	13.4
16-20	57	12.5
21-25	30	6.6
> 25	19	4.2
Years in DHS		
< 1	13	2.9
1-5	115	25.3
6-10	93	20.5
11-15	51	11.2
16-20	73	16.1
21-25	50	11.0
> 25	59	13.0

¹ These categories are combined due to small numbers and to protect confidentiality of respondents

TABLE 3
Promotions and Transfers (Voluntary)

Variable	Number	Percent
Number of times promoted in local office		
0	325	71.6
1-2	114	25.1
3-4	13	2.9
5 +	2	.4
Number of voluntary lateral transfers in local office		
0	316	69.5
1-2	119	26.2
3-4	18	4.0
5 +	2	.4
Number of promotions across offices		
0	349	76.7
1-2	84	18.5
3-4	19	4.2
5 +	3	.7
Number of voluntary lateral transfers across offices		
0	310	68.1
1-2	130	28.6
3-4	15	3.3
5 +	0	0

TABLE 4
Promotions and Transfers (Involuntary)

Variable	Number	Percent
Number of involuntary lateral transfers in local office		
0	370	81.3
1-2	79	17.4
3-4	6	1.3
5 +	0	0
Number of involuntary lateral transfers across offices		
0	397	87.6
1-2	52	11.5
3-4	4	.9
5+	0	0
Number of involuntary transfers to lower pay scale		
0	410	90.3
1-2	41	9.0
3-4	2	.4
5+	1	.2
Salary		
<\$25,000	10	2.2
25-29,999	6	1.3
30-34,999	60	13.4
35-39,999	115	25.6
40-44,999	131	29.2
45-49,999	59	13.1
50-54,999	35	7.8
55-59,999	14	3.1
60-64,999	19	4.2

TABLE 5
Perceptions of Work

Scale	Mean	Standard deviation	Scale reliability (alpha)
Workplace			
Autonomy	3.03	.75	.46
Decision-making	2.21	.83	.68
Formalization	3.59	.78	.53
Legitimacy	3.97	.57	.60
Distributive justice	2.75	.89	.83
Professional growth	3.10	.83	.74
Promotional opps	3.05	.83	.71
Job security	3.34	.80	.83
Supervisory support	3.73	.93	.89
Coworker support	4.00	.71	.85
Agency support	2.80	.97	.83
Communication in unit	3.41	.77	.76
Dept communication	3.87	.65	.77
Leadership	2.86	.86	.93
Public/private	3.79	.64	.61
Job stressors			
Role conflict	2.92	.79	.53
Role ambiguity	2.10	.57	.63
Work overload	4.16	.68	.74
Job safety	3.69	.91	.85
Community stress	3.28	.81	.60
Emotional stress	4.01	.67	.69
Service perceptions			
Service orientation	4.11	.59	.84
Org citizenship	2.98	.45	.80
Service satisfaction	3.27	.65	.79
Service network	3.08	.64	.72
Staff training	3.30	.82	.68
Empowerment	3.92	.41	.62
Client relationship	4.11	.64	Na

TABLE 6
Responses to Work

Scale	Mean	Standard deviation	Scale Reliability
Job satisfaction	3.58	.76	.83
Org commitment (local office)	3.35	.74	.76
Intent to stay (local office)	3.58	.82	.81
Org commitment (DHS)	3.31	.80	.70
Intent to stay (DHS)	3.56	.78	.78
Occupational comm (child welfare)	3.42	.71	.77
Intent to stay (child welfare)	3.36	.78	.75
Perceived turnover	3.21	1.22	na
Controls			
Available jobs	2.44	.74	.83
Work centrality	2.83	.66	.58
Negative affectivity	2.96	.78	.72

TABLE 7
Perceptions of Work
(Differences between line workers and others)

Scale	Social worker 2s and 3s Mean (sd)	Others Mean (sd)
Workplace		
Autonomy	2.98 (.73)	3.09 (.83)
Decision-making	2.00 (.69)***	3.01 (.82)***
Formalization	3.60 (.77)	3.52 (.80)
Legitimacy	3.02 (.56)**	3.20 (.59)**
Distributive justice	2.69 (.88)*	2.92 (.96)*
Professional growth	3.11 (.85)	3.01 (.77)
Promotional opps	3.05 (.84)	3.03 (.82)
Job security	3.34 (.79)	3.31 (.82)
Supervisory support	3.76 (.96)	3.57 (.82)
Coworker support	4.07 (.72)***	3.72 (.65)***
Agency support	2.77 (.99)	2.83 (.86)
Communication in unit	3.39 (.77)	3.45 (.80)
Dept communication	3.85 (.65)	3.96 (.63)
Leadership	2.84 (.85)	3.00 (.88)
Public/private	3.78 (.66)	3.83 (.55)
Job stressors		
Role conflict	2.92 (.78)	3.00 (.85)
Role ambiguity	2.10 (.58)	2.10 (.56)
Work overload	4.17 (.66)	4.12 (.76)
Job safety	3.87 (.80)***	2.86 (.88)***
Community stress	3.27 (.73)	3.34 (1.10)
Emotional stress	4.07 (.65)***	3.73 (.75)***
Service perceptions		
Service orientation	4.10 (.61)	4.16 (.53)
Org citizenship	2.95 (.44)***	3.15 (.43)***
Service satisfaction	3.28 (.66)	3.23 (.58)
Service network	3.09 (.65)	3.04 (.62)
Staff training	3.30 (.83)	3.33 (.79)
Empowerment	3.91 (.42)	3.99 (.38)
Client relationship	4.18 (.60)	3.77 (.70)

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

TABLE 8
Responses to Work
(Differences between line workers and others)

Scale	Social worker 2s and 3s Mean (sd)	Others Mean (sd)
Job satisfaction	3.56 (.77)	3.65 (.72)
Org commitment (local office)	3.35 (.76)	3.33 (.70)
Intent to stay (local office)	3.59 (.84)	3.52 (.72)
Org commitment (DHS)	3.29 (.74)	3.41 (1.01)
Intent to stay (DHS)	3.55 (.78)	3.59 (.76)
Occupational comm (child welfare)	3.41 (.72)	3.47 (.64)
Intent to stay (child welfare)	3.35 (.81)	3.42 (.62)
Perceived turnover	3.23 (1.23)	3.12 (1.16)
Controls		
Available jobs	2.48 (.75)	2.32 (.76)
Work centrality	2.80 (.66)*	2.99 (.65)*
Negative affectivity	2.98 (.78)	2.87 (.73)

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

DEFINITIONS OF VARIABLES

Work Environment Factors

Autonomy	the extent to which the employee believes that he or she has control over the way his or her work is performed
Decision-making	the extent to which the employee participates in making decisions with the organization (developing procedures, hiring, promotions, etc.)
coworker support	degree of perceived support within the immediate work group
supervisory support	extent to which the employee believes that the immediate supervisor provides instrumental (knowledge or skill based) and affective (emotional) support
agency support	degree to which the employee feels supported by the employing organization.
Promotional opportunities	extent to which the employee believes that opportunities for advancement within the organization are available
Professional growth	degree to which the employee believes that the organization provides opportunities for the development of skills and knowledge
job security	extent to which the employee believes his or her job is stable
formalization	degree to which agency rules, regulations, and procedures are specified in written form
legitimacy	degree of acceptance by the employee of the authority structure of the employing organization
distributive justice	degree to which the employee believes the system of rewards and punishments within the organization is fair
communication (unit)	degree to which the employee believes that communication procedures within the immediate work unit are strong
communication (Dept)	degree to which the employee believes that communication procedures within the Department are strong
leadership	extent to which the employee believes that the Department's leadership is strong

public/private	extent to which the employee perceives an advantage to working in child welfare's public sector compared to the private sector
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Job stressors

role conflict	degree to which the employee's role expectations are incompatible
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role ambiguity	degree to which the employee's role expectations are not clearly defined
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work overload	extent to which performance expectations of the job seem excessive
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community stress	degree to which the employee perceives the organization is consistently "under fire" by the community
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job safety	degree to which the employee feels exposed to physically harmful working conditions
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Service perception variables

service orientation	degree to which the individual believes that social work is a valuable service to society
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organizational citizenship	degree to which the employee participates in voluntary activities that contribute to the organization's mission and goals
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service satisfaction	degree to which the employee perceives satisfaction with available services and outcomes
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service network	degree to which employee perceives a strong network of services in the community
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empowerment	extent of the employee's perceived self-efficacy, individually and collectively
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client relationship	extent to which the employee feels that he/she develops good working relationships with clients
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Responses to work

job satisfaction	individual's overall satisfaction with the job
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organizational commitment (local office)	relative strength of the individual's identification with and involvement in their local DHS office
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intent to stay (local office)	likelihood of remaining with the current local DHS office
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organizational commitment (Department)	relative strength of the individual's identification with and involvement in the Department
intent to stay (Department)	likelihood of remaining with the Department
occupational commitment	relative strength of the individual's identification with and involvement in the field of child
intent to stay (occupation)	likelihood of remaining in the field of child welfare

Controls

job opportunities	extent to which the individual perceives that job opportunities are available outside of the employing organization
work motivation	degree to which work is a central life interest of the individual
negative affectivity	degree to which the individual generally has a negative outlook on life