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# Understanding Intention to Leave: A Comparison of Urban, Small-Town, and Rural Child Welfare Workers

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This study compared the influence of personal and organizational factors on intention to leave among 2,903 public child protection caseworkers and supervisors residing in urban, small-town, and rural counties in Texas. Although geographical location was not found to be a predictor of intention to leave, underlying factors that may influence and explain the differences between urban, small-town, and rural employees' intention to leave were identified. Workers residing in urban areas were more likely to have a master's degree and be members of a racial/ethnic minority group, while workers in small-town counties were older and had longer tenure at the agency.

*Keywords:* child welfare, intention to leave, organizational factors, personal factors, rural, urban

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, public child protection agencies have experienced considerable difficulty maintaining a well-trained workforce of child welfare professionals. Federal incentives to address the issue (e.g., Title IV-E child welfare stipend program, public service loan forgiveness programs) corroborate the seriousness of this problem (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 2003). The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) estimates that the national annual turnover rate for public child welfare workers is approximately 22% (CWLA, 2008); however, some states report annual turnover rates as high as 50% for some service positions, such as investigations (American Public Human Services Association, 2001). Nationally, the average length of employment for child welfare

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workers is less than two years (GAO, 2003). Some turnover, the number of employees who are no longer working for an organization as measured at a defined time (e.g., the start of the fiscal year), is functional and allows for new ideas and innovation (Meier & Hicklin, 2008). However, the lack of tenured public child welfare caseworkers serving on the frontlines is concerning given that some child welfare experts have suggested that it takes approximately two years to obtain the necessary skills, competencies, and confidence to become an effective child welfare worker (Louisiana Job Task Force, 2000).

While considerable effort has been made during the past two decades to understand the various organizational and personal factors that contribute to turnover and retention, little is known about whether the factors that influence retention vary by geographical location. That is, whether the characteristics that contribute to turnover among urban child welfare workers are the same as those that contribute to turnover among child welfare workers in smaller, less populated communities. Research on the effect of geographic location on child welfare turnover and retention remains limited (Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan, & McCarthy, 2008; Weaver & Chang, 2005). As we learn more about the factors that influence turnover and retention, it is important to develop a better understanding of the role of geographic location on the problem and whether factors differ by these locations. If significant differences are found between geographical locations, then this will allow for more effective and efficient efforts to improve retention. This study seeks to address the gap in the literature regarding the impact of geographical location by examining the impact of different personal and organizational characteristics on intention to leave among child welfare workers and supervisors residing in urban, small-town, or rural counties. Specifically, this study seeks to answer three research questions: 1) What is the nature of the relationship between workers' geographic location and their intention to leave their position?; 2) what is the nature of the relationship between workers' geographic location and organizational factors?; and 3) what is the nature of the relationship between workers' geographic location, personal and organizational factors, and their intention to leave their position?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Need for Retention

The retention of an experienced workforce is critical to the provision of quality services to families and children involved in the child welfare system. Research suggests that caseworker turnover can negatively affect clients by creating delays and interruptions in service delivery (GAO, 2003). For example, frequent turnover can delay necessary assessments and interventions as new workers become familiarized with the case. This can have a damaging impact on clients by interrupting service continuity and delaying important decisions and service plan activities necessary to move the case forward (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; Cahalane & Sites, 2008; GAO, 2003). Interruption of services from lack of case continuity potentially hinders the helping relationship, as it does not allow the worker to develop and maintain an adequate working relationship with the families they serve (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; GAO, 2003). Although the magnitude of the problem is unknown, there is some evidence that turnover can also have an adverse effect on permanency outcomes for children (GAO, 2003). A 2005 study conducted by Flower, McDonald, & Sumski examined caseworker turnover in the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare. The most surprising finding related to the impact of caseworker turnover on permanency outcomes of children in care. The researchers noted that with each additional change in caseworkers the probability of achieving permanency dropped. Children with only one caseworker had a 74.5% probability of achieving permanency, while children with two caseworkers were found to have a 17.5% probability of achieving permanency.

In addition to the negative consequences for children and families, turnover can have an adverse impact on the overall agency from an economic and human resource perspective (GAO, 2003; Graef & Hill, 2000). Recruitment and training of child welfare workers is a costly investment for agencies in both time and resources (GAO, 2003; Graef & Hill, 2000; Mor Borak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). This investment holds little payoff for agencies when there is high workforce turnover. While agencies do their best to fill vacant positions, they often do so with inexperienced personnel (GAO, 2003). This can create a burden for those who remain with the agency, as they often must carry higher caseloads while new caseworkers are trained and familiarized with agency protocol (GAO, 2003; Graef & Hill, 2000). An additional concern occurs when new workers are given too many cases upon entry into the field, as this increases the likelihood of them becoming overwhelmed and experiencing burn out (Weaver, Chang, Clark, & Rhee, 2007).

### Factors Affecting Turnover

Prior studies on the retention of child welfare workers have identified several factors and characteristics that affect workforce turnover. These factors include level of education and training, positive mood about work, work environment, case load, salary and benefits, supervision, professional commitment, and personal characteristics (GAO, 2003; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007; Weaver et al., 2007; Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Antle, 2009). Attempts have been made by researchers to categorize these factors. Most characteristics and factors found in the literature can be categorized into two types: 1) personal factors and 2) organizational factors (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). Personal or individual factors refer to characteristics of the worker such as, educational and training background, time employed with the agency, personal and professional commitment, burnout, and demographic characteristics of the worker (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Smith, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2008; Weaver et al., 2007; Zlotnik et al., 2005). In contrast, organizational factors most often refer to factors related to the overall work environment. Organizational characteristics include factors such as degree of support from coworkers and supervisors, quality of supervision provided to the worker, caseload size, organizational climate and culture, salary and benefits, promotion opportunities within the agency, and the degree of administrative burden that employees are given (e.g., paperwork and reporting requirements) (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett et al., 2003; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Strolin et al., 2006; Zlotnik et al., 2005).

#### *Geographic Location and Retention of Child Welfare Workers*

Although some studies have examined differences in intention to leave among workers in different geographic locations, the findings of these studies have largely been mixed. Weaver and Chang (2005) evaluated turnover among 1,165 child welfare workers in California. The researchers found that child welfare workers from rural areas were more likely to leave their jobs than workers from more densely populated counties. A more recent study conducted by Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2008) examined intention to leave among 820 workers and supervisors in New York public child welfare agencies. The researchers found a significant difference among workers' intention to leave based on their location, with fewer suburban workers reporting intention to leave than their rural and urban counterparts.

### CURRENT STUDY

This study contributes to the existing research on child welfare worker retention by bridging a gap between knowledge on organizational factors and geographic location. Previous research has shown that both geographic location and organizational factors influence child welfare worker retention.

However, it is unclear how these two issues work together to influence retention. To effectively retain workers, it is important that agencies understand what factors motivate their employees to leave. Additionally, it is important for agencies to understand if factors that motivate employees to leave vary by location and in what ways. This study examines organizational and personal characteristics and how they influence intention to leave based on whether the worker is living in an urban, small-town, or rural county.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data and Sample

Data used in this analysis were from the 2005 Survey of Organizational Excellence, an 86-item survey administered to all Texas state agencies on a biennial basis. The survey was anonymous and administered to all state agency workers via an online survey format. The current study includes data for those employed within the Child Protective Services (CPS) division of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

Data were collected during February and March 2005. The survey was administered to all 7,647 employees of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. The survey yielded a 67% response rate and included 5,119 respondents. Of those surveys completed, 1,791 participants who did not work within CPS were excluded from the study sample ( $n = 3,316$ ). An additional 125 participants were excluded from the sample because they reported working in the state office or the statewide hotline. These participants were excluded to ensure that our sample only included individuals working directly with clients ( $n = 3,191$ ). We excluded 93 participants who did not report their zip code and therefore their geographic location could not be categorized ( $n = 3,098$ ). Another 55 participants were excluded because they did not answer the question regarding their intent to remain at the agency ( $n = 3,043$ ). Finally, six participants were excluded because they reported only working part-time and an additional 134 participants were excluded due to missing data on independent variables included in the analysis. The final study sample included 2,903 participants. Of these 2,903 participants, 2,480 resided in urban designated counties, 251 resided in small-town designated counties, and 172 resided in rural designated counties.

### Measurement

#### *Intention to Leave*

The dependent variable used in the analysis was intention to leave. Workers' intention to leave was measured by asking employees if they "plan to be working for this organization in two years." Respondents were given the option of answering "yes" or "no" to the question. A review of studies that evaluate intention to leave found that it is common practice to use a single question to measure this variable (cf. Acker, 2004; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2007; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2008; Tham, 2007). While it can be argued that intention to leave a position might not necessarily result in actual caseworker turnover, there is some evidence to show that intention to leave is a relatively strong predictor of turnover among employees compared to other measures such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Alexander, Lichtenstein, & Ullman, 1998; Vandenburg & Nelson, 1999).

#### *Organizational Factors*

Three organizational factors were included in the analysis: fair compensation, work group support, and positive mood about work. Each variable was comprised of four different survey questions.

TABLE 1  
Summary of Variable Constructs

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Alpha</i>
<i>Work group support</i>	13.57	3.31	0.79
Every employee is valued.			
We seem to be working toward the same goals.			
Within my workplace, there is a feeling of community.			
The people I work with treat each other with respect.			
<i>Fair compensation</i>	9.88	3.26	0.77
People are paid fairly for the work they do.			
Salaries are competitive with similar jobs in the community.			
Benefits are comparable to those offered in other jobs.			
My pay keeps pace with the cost of living.			
<i>Positive mood about work</i>	11.01	3.88	0.85
The environment supports a balance between work and personal life.			
The pace of the work in this organization enables me to do a good job.			
We are given the opportunity to do our best work.			
The amount of work I am asked to do is reasonable.			

Table 1 lists the specific survey items included in each variable. All questions included were measured on a five-point Likert scale. For each question, participants indicated whether they strongly disagree, disagree, feel neutral, agree, or strongly agree with the survey question. For each of the three organizational variables, higher scores indicated that the employee felt more positive about the issue. Factor analysis was used to develop the four variables. A reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was completed for each variable to determine the cohesiveness of the questions included in each variable. The alpha coefficients for each of the four variables demonstrated adequate to good reliability.

### *Geographic Location*

The employee's residential geographic location (i.e., urban, small-town, or rural) was used as a moderating variable to test whether geographic location affected the relationship between the various organizational factors and intention to leave. For reasons of confidentiality, respondents were not asked to identify the location where they worked. Rather, respondents were asked to identify the zip code where they resided. Although it cannot be guaranteed that workers are employed in the same zip code where they reside, research conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau (2009) shows that the average one-way commute time in Texas is 24.7 minutes, with 77.4% of residents reporting that they work in their county of residence. It is unlikely that a large number of respondents' residential geographic designation varied from their employment geographic designation since most Americans work close to their place of residence.

A two stage process was utilized to designate participants' geographic locations. Participants' ZIP codes were first matched to their counties of residence. After participant's counties were identified, a modified version of the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) 2003 classification system was used to categorize the individual counties as urban, small-town, or rural. The OMB uses the following classification for counties: metropolitan (i.e., urban) designated counties have at least one urban area of at least 50,000 people, micropolitan (i.e., small-town) designated counties that have at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 people, and non-metropolitan (i.e. rural) designated counties that have no urban clusters (Economic Research Service, 2003).

### *Personal Factors*

Personal factors were included in the analysis to account for basic demographic characteristics of the employee such as gender, race, age, education, and primary wage earner status. Race was measured as Black, Hispanic, White, Asian, and multiracial/other. Age was grouped into five categories: 29 and under, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, and 60 years and over. Education was measured as less than a bachelor's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctorate degree. In addition, respondents were asked if they were the primary wage earner for their family. For analytical purposes, responses for race, age, and education (categorical variables) were recoded as dummy variables.

### *Control Variables*

Four additional variables were included in the analysis to control for factors that might influence intention to leave. These variables largely related to participants' history with the organization. These variables included: years of service at the agency, whether they were in a supervisory position, if they had received a promotion within the past years, and if they received a merit increase in the past two years. Years of service at the agency was categorized as: less than 2 years, 2 to 10 years, and more than 10 years. The remaining three variables were dichotomous, as they were measured by a yes or no response.

### *Data Analysis*

The purpose of this analysis was to examine the interaction of organizational characteristics and county type on intention to leave the agency. Three different research questions were addressed in this study and each question required a separate analysis.

The first research question of this study related to the influence on geographic location on intention to leave. Thus, it was necessary to examine differences in intention to leave based on the three geographic location categories (i.e., urban, small-town, or rural). Because the intention to leave variable was a dichotomous variable, chi-square analysis was used. In order to address the second research question, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to evaluate differences between the three different types of counties with regard to the three organizational factors. In the ANOVA, the three different types of counties were compared based on their mean scores for four organizational factors: work environment, work group support, fair compensation, and positive mood about work. The first two research questions establish differences between geographic regions. The third research question called for a predictive analysis. Thus, four multivariate logistic regression models were used to evaluate factors most predictive of intention.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Summary*

Table 2 provides sample percentages for workers residing in all three types of geographic locations. Significant differences were found for certain personal characteristics including race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment, and supervisory position.

Regarding race, workers living in urban counties were more racially and ethnically diverse than workers who resided in small-town or rural counties. Urban counties were more likely to have higher numbers of Black employees ( $\chi^2 = 55.43$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ) and Hispanic employees ( $\chi^2 = 19.32$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ). Conversely, when looking at percentages of White employees, urban counties had the lowest percentage of White employees compared to other geographic localities ( $\chi^2 = 98.53$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ).

TABLE 2  
Prevalence of Intention to Leave and Personal Characteristics Based on Geographic Location

	<i>Urban</i> ( <i>n</i> = 2,480)	<i>Small-town</i> ( <i>n</i> = 251)	<i>Rural</i> ( <i>n</i> = 172)	$\chi^2$ ( <i>df</i> = 2)	<i>P</i>
Intention to leave the agency within two years	83.9	88.4	86.6	4.30	.116
Gender				1.55	.461
Female	85.5	85.7	89.0		
Male	14.5	14.3	11.0		
Race					
Black	24.8	8.0	9.3	55.43	.000
Hispanic	25.2	19.5	11.6	19.32	.000
White	46.3	69.3	76.2	98.53	.000
Asian	1.2	1.6	1.7	0.59	.745
Multiracial/other	2.0	1.2	0.6	2.48	.290
Age					
29 and under	24.5	18.7	24.4	4.21	.122
30–39	30.6	25.5	29.7	2.84	.241
40–49	24.9	24.7	21.5	1.00	.605
50–59	16.9	26.3	21.5	15.20	.001
60 and over	2.7	4.0	2.3	1.45	.485
Education					
Less than bachelor's degree	20.5	24.3	22.7	2.34	.311
Bachelor's degree	59.0	61.8	67.4	5.30	.071
Master's degree	20.0	13.5	9.9	15.81	.000
Doctorate degree	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.86	.651
In a supervisory position	20.7	14.7	12.2	11.65	.003
Received promotion in past two years	27.3	30.3	21.5	4.03	.133
Received merit increase in past two years	26.2	25.5	25.6	0.08	.962
Is primary wage earner in family	59.6	56.6	52.9	3.67	.160
Years of service at agency					
less than 2	36.0	28.7	37.2	5.64	.060
2 to 10	33.9	37.5	37.8	2.17	.338
10 or more	29.1	33.5	25.0	3.78	.158

Source: Survey of Organizational Excellence (2005).

Age differences were also found between the groups. Workers who resided in small-town counties tended to be older than workers in urban or rural counties. However, the only significant difference with regard to age occurred between workers age 50 to 59 years old ( $\chi^2 = 15.20$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ).

Level of education also varied between the three groups. The percentage of workers who had a less than a bachelor's degree was similar across areas. However, in terms of master's degrees, urban counties had a higher percentage of workers with a graduate degree ( $\chi^2 = 15.81$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ).

The percentage of workers in supervisory positions also varied by geographic area ( $\chi^2 = 11.65$ ;  $p \leq .01$ ). Workers living in urban counties were more likely to be in a supervisory position. In terms of years of services with the agency, workers in small-town counties reported the longest service tenures, although the difference approached significance ( $\chi^2 = 5.64$ ;  $p \leq .060$ ).

### Differences in Intention to Leave Based on Geographic Location

Results of the chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences among child welfare workers who resided in urban, small-town, and rural counties with regard to their intention to leave the



TABLE 3  
Results of ANOVA Analyses for Organizational Factors

	Urban <i>n</i> = 2480		Small-town <i>n</i> = 251		Rural <i>n</i> = 172		<i>F</i> ( <i>df</i> = 2)	<i>P</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Work group support	13.50	3.30	14.06	3.16	14.26	3.29	6.97	.001
Positive mood about work	10.95	3.85	11.47	3.93	11.41	3.81	2.95*	.000
Fair compensation	9.68	3.22	10.83	3.29	11.34	3.26	33.53	.052

Higher scores indicate more positive responses; scale ranges from 0–28.

Source: Survey of Organizational Excellence (2005).

agency in the next two years ( $\chi^2 = 4.30$ ;  $p = .116$ ). Table 2 also contains the results for the analysis of intention to leave. The results of this analysis suggest that geographic location alone does not predict whether an employee will be more likely to leave a child welfare position. However, further analyses were conducted to determine whether geographic location interacted with organizational factors to predict intention to leave.

### Differences in Organizational Factors Based on Geographic Location

Comparisons were made between mean total scores for each of the three organizational variables using one-way ANOVA. Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) were used to analyze the source of these differences. Despite the fact that there were no differences in intention to leave based on geographic location, the results of the analysis showed significant differences among the different localities with regard to each of the three organizational factors. Table 3 displays the results of the one-way ANOVA analyses conducted for the three organizational factors.

Work group support differed significantly between geographic locations ( $F = 6.97$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ), and post-hoc comparisons demonstrated some differences between geographic locations. Specifically, workers in urban counties reported significantly less work group support compared to workers in small-town counties ( $p \leq .05$ ) and rural counties ( $p \leq .01$ ). However, no significant differences were noted in the level of work group support reported by workers in small-town and rural counties ( $p = .807$ ).

While differences were noted with regard to work group support, no significant differences were found in the levels of positive mood about work reported by workers in the three different localities ( $F = 2.95$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ). Consistent with the overall ANOVA results, no significant differences were found in the post-hoc tests.

The final organizational factor examined was fair compensation. Significant differences were found in workers' reports of fair compensation based on geographic location ( $F = 33.53$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). In particular, urban workers reported significantly less fair compensation ( $p \leq .001$ ) compared to rural and small-town workers ( $p \leq .001$ ). No differences in workers' reports of fair compensation were found between workers in small-town and rural counties.

### Predictors of Intention to Leave Based on Interaction with Geographic Location

Four multivariate logistic regression models were used to compare which factors predict workers' intention to leave based on the interaction between organizational factors and geographic location. Overall results of these analyses suggest that factors influencing a workers' intent to leave their

position are based on organizational factors alone rather than an interaction between organizational factors and location. Results of the logistic regression analysis are presented in Table 4.

In the first model, only county types were included; however, county type was not found to predict intention to leave ( $\chi^2 = 4.38$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.11$ ). In the second model, when the three organizational factors were included in the model, both work group support and positive mood about work were found to predict intention to leave. Those workers who reported higher levels of

TABLE 4  
Results of Logistic Regression Models for Intention to Leave (Standardized Betas shown)

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
County Type				
(Urban)				
Small-town	0.69	0.98	0.81	0.59
Rural	0.81	0.76	8.48	6.63
Work group support		0.95*	0.96*	0.93*
Positive mood about work		0.86***	0.85***	0.86***
Fair compensation		0.97	0.98	0.96
Work group support * Small town			1.13	0.97
Positive mood about work * Small town			0.95	1.14
Fair compensation * Small town			0.94	0.95
Work group support * Rural			0.94	0.97
Positive mood about work * Rural			0.97	0.95
Fair compensation * Rural			0.89	0.90
Gender				1.58**
Race				
Black				0.91
Hispanic				1.01
(White)				
Asian				1.74
Multiracial/other				2.02*
Age				
(29 and under)				
30–39				0.87
40–49				0.46***
50–59				0.58**
60 and over				1.38
Education				
Less than bachelor's degree				0.78
(Bachelor's degree)				
Master's degree				1.94***
Doctorate degree				1.77
In a supervisory position				3.24***
Received promotion in past two years				1.36*
Received merit increase in past two years				1.05
Is primary wage earner in family				1.38***
Years of service at agency				
(Less than 2)				
2 to 10				0.58
10 and over				0.47***
$\chi^2$	4.38	199.40***	206.18***	389.84**
Pseudo R square (based on Nagelkerke R-square)	0.01	0.12	0.12	0.22

Source: Survey of Organizational Excellence (2005).

\*\*\* $p \leq .001$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; and \* $p \leq .05$ .

work group support were 5% less likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 6.15,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ). Workers who reported a positive mood regarding work were 14% less likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 67.71,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

Despite the fact that two of the three organizational factors examined predicted intention to leave, in the third model, the interaction effects of county type and the three organizational factors did not predict intention to leave. In this model, work group support (Wald statistic = 3.78,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ) and positive mood about work (Wald statistic = 65.48,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) were the only significant predictors of intention to leave.

Control variables were added in the fourth and final model of the regression analysis. Work group support and positive mood about work remained significant despite the addition of multiple control variables. Similar to the first model that included just geographic location, employees reporting more work group support were 7% less likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 9.50,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Likewise, employees reporting positive mood about work were more likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 46.96,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). Several control variables were significant predictors of intention to leave. Males were 58% more likely to report an intention to leave compared to females (Wald statistic = 0.36,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Compared to White individuals, individuals who identified their race as multiracial or "other" were twice as likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 4.13,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). In terms of age, older workers were less likely than younger workers to report an intention to leave. Compared to workers ages 20 to 29, workers ages 40 to 49 years old were 54% less likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 17.44,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ), while workers ages 50 to 59 were 42% less likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 6.72,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Those workers with a master's degree were 94% more likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 22.22,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). Workers who held a supervisory position were three times as likely to report an intention to leave than workers who were not supervisors (Wald statistic = 28.04,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ), and workers who received a promotion in the last two years were 36% more likely to report an intention to leave than those who had not received a promotion (Wald statistic = 3.84,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). Finally, workers who were the primary wage earner in their family were 38% more likely to report an intention to leave (Wald statistic = 46.96,  $df = 1$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

## Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the findings may not be causal due to the possibility of omitted variable bias. In addition, as these analyses utilized secondary data, the researchers have no means of examining the characteristics of non-respondents. There is a possibility that workers who did not respond to the survey might have been more likely to report intentions to leave their positions.

Another limitation relates to the use of the workers' residential ZIP codes. As previously discussed, respondents did not identify the location where they worked for reasons of confidentiality. However, the majority of Americans work within the county where they reside. The argument that the residential ZIP code is an appropriate tool to gather information about the employees' county types is further strengthened when one understands the way the OMB categorizes counties. In addition to the primary categorization method of population counts, county designation is also impacted by commuters. A county will take on the designation of a more populous adjacent county if there is at least 25% commuting occurring (in either direction) between the two counties (Economic Research Service, 2003). For example, a non-metropolitan (i.e., rural) county by population count would be designated as a metropolitan (i.e., urban) county by the OMB if there was a high occurrence of commuting ( $\geq 25\%$ ) with an adjacent metropolitan county. Therefore, counties designated as rural or small-town are either not adjacent to or have a low level of commuting with a more urban county.

A more significant limitation occurs because of the problems that are often inherent when utilizing ZIP codes, as ZIP codes do not align perfectly with county boundaries. While some of the ZIP codes utilized in this study overlap county boundaries; this was not always the case. In order to address this potential problem, the researchers matched each ZIP code with the county in which the ZIP code was predominantly located. A random sample of the ZIP codes indicated that the county types of the counties that shared overlapping ZIP codes were the same. A final limitation relates to the analysis. It is possible that more significant relationships were detected among workers residing in urban counties due to the large number of these employees ( $n = 2,480$ ). There were a small number of employees living in small-town ( $n = 251$ ) and rural ( $n = 172$ ) counties.

## DISCUSSION

### Overview of Findings

Understanding the influence of location on workers' intention to leave is an important step in understanding the types of workplace interventions needed to effectively improve working conditions and influence workers' intentions to remain in their positions. Research has identified the importance of positive supervisory relationships and extrinsic rewards (e.g., pay, promotions) in increasing positive mood about work among child welfare workers (Smith, 2005). Higher levels of positive mood about work increase the likelihood that child welfare workers will remain in their positions (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Furthermore, prior research suggests that a positive work environment, including positive mood about work, increases positive outcomes (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998) and service quality (Glisson & James, 2002) for clients.

However, the realities of child welfare may mean that many workers will face challenges or have stressors commonly experienced in the field that are exacerbated by factors unique to their location. Creating an effective organizational climate that fosters worker retention is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. While location itself was not found to be a significant factor in a worker's intention to leave, there is merit in discussing the personal and organizational factors found to differ based on county type because of the variation that exists between locales. Such a discussion can help guide child welfare administrators and other human service professionals in their efforts to increase retention among frontline workers and supervisors in public child welfare settings.

### Urban Residents

In urban areas, both personal and organizational factors were found to influence workers' intentions to leave their positions. Urban workers were more likely to have a master's degree, which makes sense, as workers in urban areas traditionally have increased access to university programs. Advanced educational attainment opens new professional opportunities for workers that may not be possible for bachelor's-level child welfare workers. Because of the increased mobility of workers with advanced degrees, retention efforts should focus on helping child welfare workers maximize the use of their degrees. One possible means to accomplish this is to ensure that qualifying child welfare workers have access to advanced clinical supervision, something frequently desired by practicing social workers. This supervision could be offered free of cost as an incentive to workers who have attained a level of seniority (e.g., two or three years) to continue with the agency. Pilot programs offering advanced clinical supervision to child welfare workers highlight its potential to improve the work environment for workers while cultivating expertise among those in the workforce (see Giddings, Cleveland, Smith, Collins-Camargo, & Russell, 2008). Professional development opportunities such as this may allow child welfare workers to feel more supported by their agency, increase their satisfaction with their work, and help them attain their professional goals.

One result that demands further research is the finding that supervisors are more likely to have a greater intention to leave than frontline workers. There have been repeated findings regarding the importance of supervisory support to the child welfare field (cf. Jacquet et al., 2007; Smith, 2005), but only a limited examination of supervisors' intention to leave. One study that did compare preference to leaving by agency position was Strand, Spath, and Bosco-Ruggiero's (2010) analysis of more than 800 child welfare workers, supervisors, and managers. Strand et al. (2010) found that workers were 67% more likely to report their preference to leave than supervisors or managers. Because there were significantly more supervisors in urban areas, additional attention should be given to understanding how to improve supervisor retention in locations that offer a greater number of career options than found in more sparsely populated locales. One consideration may be to increase the rate of pay supervisors receive, as workers in urban areas were significantly less likely to report that they received fair compensation for their work. It is likely that the perceived lack of fair compensation serves as a disincentive to retention, as more qualified employees, including supervisors (and those who received promotions), are often in a better position to seek out new employment opportunities with higher compensation.

### Small-Town Residents

An age difference was found among public child welfare workers residing in small-town counties as compared to their more urban counterparts. A statistically greater number of older workers (ages 50–59) were found in small-town counties than in either urban or rural counties. Additionally, it should be noted that small-town workers had the longest service tenures with the child welfare agency. One explanation might be that this cohort of older small-town workers may be at a more settled point in their life, both professionally and personally, than their younger urban and rural colleagues and thus are less likely to have a variety of factors that could affect their intentions to stay at their jobs. While one can presuppose that the majority of younger professionals may begin their career in an urban area, it becomes more difficult to explain why there are an increased number of younger workers residing in rural counties than in small-town counties. One possible explanation may lie in the placement of new graduates who receive Title IV-E funds to assist in funding their education. In return for receiving a modest educational stipend, Title IV-E graduates are typically placed in areas that have the highest need. While most graduates request placement in more densely populated areas, vacancies within public child welfare agencies are often found in rural communities that have a limited pool of applicants from which to recruit.

### Rural Residents

With regard to intention to leave in rural counties, no factors were identified as significant. However, it is worth noting that rural workers were more likely than their counterparts to report positive responses with regards to fair compensation. One likely explanation is the decreased number of high-paying career opportunities available to workers residing in rural areas. Public child welfare workers residing in rural areas are likely to have relatively high earnings for the region. This may create an incentive for workers to remain in positions regardless of other personal or organizational factors. This explanation is consistent with Strand et al.'s (2010) research that found satisfactory pay and benefits increase retention, even among child welfare workers that would prefer to leave. Although not specifically addressed in this study, rural and small-town workers are more likely to have supervisors housed in off-sight locations, limited promotional options, and exacerbated stress caused by the lack of privacy and confidentiality in the community. Therefore, to improve retention in rural areas, it may be beneficial for child welfare agencies to develop pay incentives for workers to accept and remain in positions in rural areas.

It is also critical in the face of changing rural demographics to address the racial and ethnic diversity of employees residing in rural and small-town counties. Rural and small-town America have demonstrated significant racial and ethnic minority growth over the past couple decades, and one of the biggest demographic changes in America is the influx of Hispanic individuals and families into rural and small-town counties (Johnson, 2006; Johnson, & Lichter, 2008; Kandel & Cromartie, 2004). While workers in urban counties are significantly more likely to be Black or Hispanic, their counterparts in rural and small-town counties are more likely to be White. As rural America becomes more diverse, public child welfare agencies need to develop new strategies to recruit and retain racial and ethnic minority members for these regions.

## CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of high turnover among public child welfare workers, this study can provide stakeholders and policy makers with valuable guidance to help minimize the problem. The findings of this study indicate that it is important to create an effective organizational climate to sustain worker retention by developing specific strategies for workers in particular settings. Although the findings of this study did not suggest geographical location as a predictor of child welfare workers' intention to leave their positions, several underlying organizational and personal factors that potentially influence and explain the differences between employees who reside in urban, small-town, and rural locations were identified. It can be concluded from the findings that factors vary according to geographic location. Because of this variation, newly recruited child welfare workers, including the recipients of Title IV-E training programs, should not expect a to experience a uniform workplace scenario.

Several of the findings associated with intention to leave, such as less work group support and positive mood about work, were found to be congruent with the findings of earlier studies on retention of the public child welfare workforce. These findings can be used to formulate an effective policy framework that can improve the overall work environment of child welfare workers. For the findings that contradict past research, including increased intention to leave among supervisors and racial and ethnic minority members, additional research should be conducted to assess if these trends are present in other states and to determine how to increase retention of these workers.

Overall, we recommend taking an incentive approach to help reduce turnover among the public child welfare workforce population. Incentives should aim to motivate workers by facilitating the provision of career advancement options by enhancing their access to graduate education, clinical supervision, and financial incentives. By taking the workers' location into account and tailoring incentives to address the specific needs of workers in those areas, efforts to retain workers and reduce turnover are far more likely to be successful. Therefore, it is imperative that we work to understand how to create a positive and effective work environment for public child welfare workers regardless of their location.

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