

TOO FEW TO CARE: WORKFORCE SHORTAGE IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

High worker turnover within the child welfare system leads to increased workloads for remaining staff, higher costs to taxpayers, greater risks to child safety and well-being, and longer wait times for children seeking permanency. One way to reduce these harmful effects is to link federal funding to agency retention rates and implement corrective action when turnover becomes excessive. A child cannot be removed from an abusive or neglectful environment only to be placed into another unstable system and still be expected to heal, build trust, or believe in a secure future.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Since June 2025, I have been working at Rite of Passage, a nonprofit group home dedicated to helping foster youth feel safe enough to learn, grow, and develop into responsible young adults. In that time, I have seen more than 10 coworkers quit, stop showing up, or walk off the job because of the cognitive overload and emotional strain this work creates. Each departure disrupts nearly every aspect of care, increases demands on the staff who remain, and deepens instability within the program. When staffing is inadequate, children's needs go unmet. When I first applied for this job, I was excited to use my lived experience to improve the lives of youth who have faced similar trauma. I wanted to be someone they could rely on, a consistent, safe adult they could turn to. Almost a year later, after many shifts, I find myself needing to decompress in my car, feeling defeated and replaying every moment I did not have time for, every child I had to rush past, and every need I could not meet. Most days, there simply is not enough of me to give. These children need consistent attention, structure, and emotional support to grow into capable adults, and we cannot provide that without adequate staffing. I am tired of seeing children feel forgotten by the very system designed to protect them. Change is needed.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

High worker turnover in child welfare services remains a persistent national issue. While a turnover rate of 12% or lower is considered ideal, many agencies report rates between 20% and 40% (Lushin et al., 2021). This instability

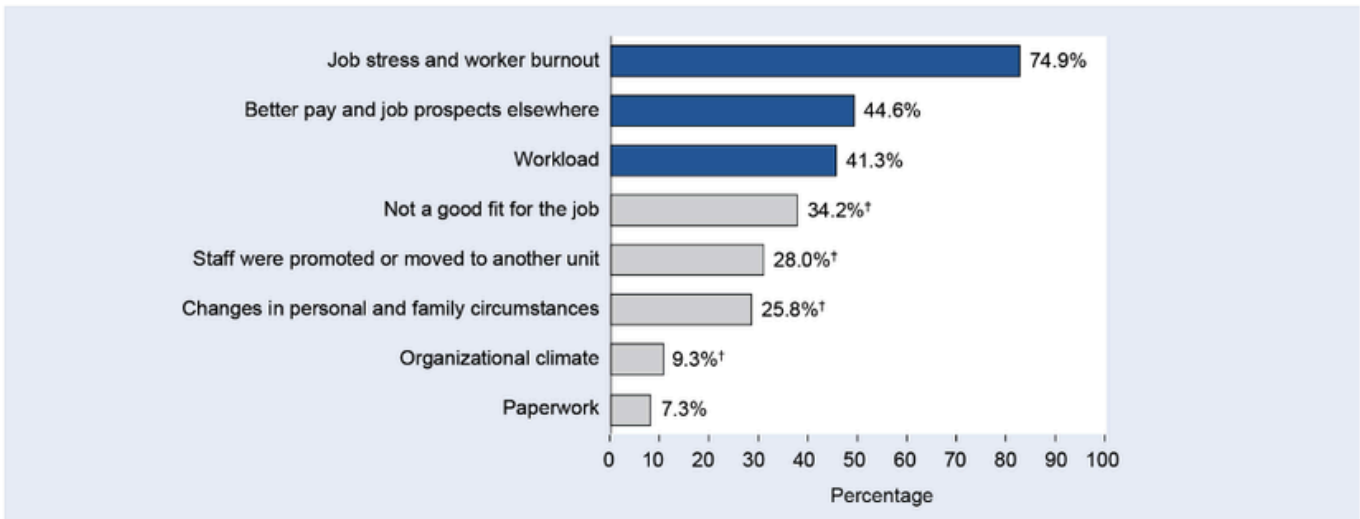
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

increases risk of neglect, raises public costs, and places significant strain on remaining staff. As workloads concentrate on fewer workers, stress and burnout rise, further slowing children's path to permanency and reinforcing a harmful cycle of turnover.

The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) III Child Welfare Workforce Study, which analyzed 61 nationally representative agencies, found that the leading cause of turnover was intense stress and burnout, cited by 74.9% of supervisors (Elgin et al., 2025). Workers are also exposed to secondary traumatic stress, defined as the emotional burden of absorbing the trauma experienced by children and families they serve (Molnar et al.). Symptoms can mirror PTSD and impair both job performance and functioning outside of work (Molnar et al.). Beyond burnout, 44.6% of respondents cited better pay in other fields, and 41.3% cited workload and hours as primary drivers of departure (Elgin et al., 2025). In California, the average child welfare worker salary is \$35,971, roughly \$17 per hour in a high cost-of-living state (Child Welfare Worker Salary in California, 2020).

When staff leave, their caseloads do not disappear; they are redistributed, increasing pressure on those who remain and deepening the cycle of burnout. The Child Welfare League of America recommends caseloads of 12–17 families, yet many workers exceed this range, limiting their ability to provide adequate support (CWLA). Research shows that excessive workload and staffing shortages directly contribute to higher turnover, reinforcing the systemic nature of the problem (Yamatani et al.). Turnover also has direct consequences for children's outcomes. A review of private agency workforce turnover found a strong negative association between caseworker turnover and permanency achievement (MacLochlainn et al., 2026).

Figure 1. Top 3 Reasons Why Staff Left in the Past 2 Years, as Reported by Supervisors (n = 59)



THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Children who remained with the same caseworker achieved permanency at a rate of 74.5%, compared to significantly lower rates when caseworkers changed, with outcomes declining further with each transition (MacLochlainn et al., 2026). Turnover disrupts relationships, slows reunification, adoption, and kinship placement processes, and increases the likelihood of youth aging out of care. One in five youth who age out experience homelessness by age 19 and face elevated risks of incarceration and unemployment (Courtney et al., 2023).

The financial impact is also substantial. California reportedly loses 578 social workers annually, costing an estimated \$2.3 billion (RetailROI, n.d.). Nationally, replacing a single residential childcare worker costs over \$54,000 due to recruitment, training, and lost productivity (Edwards and Wildeman, 2018). These funds could otherwise support services that stabilize families and improve child safety. Investing in retention also produces long-term savings. A RAND Corporation report (2017) found that stronger family preservation and kinship care programs reduce substance abuse (0.4%–9.8%), criminal convictions (3.6%–11.2%), homelessness (2%–8.6%), and underemployment (0.2%–3.9%), yielding up to \$12.3 billion in savings. Strengthening the workforce is therefore both a child welfare and fiscal imperative.

Finally, turnover directly impacts child safety. High turnover reduces supervision, slows crisis response, and limits individualized attention, increasing the likelihood of youth running away (AWOL) (Latzman and Gibbs, 2020). Runaway episodes expose youth to violence, homelessness, trafficking, and exploitation. Research by Dr. Reid at the University of South Florida's Human Trafficking Risk to Resilience Research Lab found that AWOL is the most common pathway into sex trafficking, affecting 44% of foster youth in the studied sample (Latzman and Gibbs, 2020). When systems are understaffed, children are left more vulnerable to harm the system is meant to prevent.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to accomplish a decline in worker turnover within the Child Welfare System, Congress should:

- **Establish Federal Workforce Retention Monitoring and Required Corrective Action Planning.** Congress should direct the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), through the Children's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), to track and report child welfare workforce retention as a core system measure, including turnover rates, average tenure, and vacancy duration using existing reporting systems.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

There is currently no federal standard for workforce retention, staffing levels, or caseload size, though the Child Welfare League of America offers widely used but non-binding guidance. ACF should flag states with persistently high turnover and require Workforce Stabilization and Corrective Action Plans addressing staffing, supervision, and workload distribution. Retention should also be added to the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs). HHS should support workforce wellbeing resources, including mental health services and decompression time, to address burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

- **Establish National Child Welfare Workforce Capacity Standards and Staffing Benchmarks.** Congress should direct HHS, through ACF and the Children’s Bureau, to establish national workforce capacity standards defining adequate staffing in child welfare systems. These standards should be implemented through federal guidance and integrated into existing reporting and Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) processes. HHS should set benchmarks for caseload ranges, staffing and supervisory ratios, vacancy thresholds, and time-to-fill expectations. This would create a federal baseline for workforce adequacy and allow assessment of whether agencies are sufficiently staffed to safely serve children and families.