

Funding and Provision of Local Authorities' Children's Services Inquiries

1. About Bath Spa University and the Social Workers Union

Dr Jermaine M Ravalier is Reader in Work and Wellbeing (Psychology) at Bath Spa University, and the lead writer of this inquiry evidence. He has research expertise in stress and mental health at work, in particular the public sector (NHS, education, and social work), and works to alleviate stress-related ill health at work. Over the past 2 years Dr Ravalier has conducted large-scale research studies into social work working conditions, stress, and employee wellbeing-related outcomes.

The Social Workers Union (SWU) is a registered Trade Union dedicated to social work professionals. Formed in 2011 it now has a growing membership of 12,500 UK Social Workers. SWU is able to use their specialist knowledge to advocate and negotiate on behalf of social workers, both individually and collectively within the trade union movement and with employers. SWU is a member of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), a group of 28 specialist unions with over 260,000 individual members.

2. Executive Summary

Child and family social workers are working under some of the greatest pressures and worst working conditions of all UK employment sectors. This is exemplified by struggles to retain experienced staff, a high turnover rate of 15% per year, and the second highest levels of stress-related sickness absence of all sectors. Indeed, recent large-scale research by Dr Ravalier has demonstrated that a lack of resources (due to chronic under-funding from many local authorities) means high workloads, a lack of resources, and a lack of support for child and family social workers. This is leading to more social workers wanting to leave the job, more attending work despite being ill enough that they should stay at home, and greater dissatisfaction in the role. Chronic under-funding is therefore having significant impacts on the workforce, and impacts their ability to fulfil their duties. LA under-funding also means that essential non-statutory services such as respite centres for disabled children, and child and adolescent community mental health services, are being shut down, thus also affecting service users as well as social workers.

3. Introduction & Background

3a. Working Conditions, Sickness Absence, and Turnover in Children's Services

Social workers play an integral part in the very fabric of our society, and yet austerity measures are continuing to limit the resources available to them. These resources not only include the number of social workers and support staff, but also the resources available to offer service users [1].

In 2017, Dr Ravalier was commissioned by SWU to conduct the first national survey of Social Worker working conditions and stress [1], with this repeated 12 months later in August 2018 [2]. Across the two years, over 2,500 children and family social workers took part in a series of surveys and individual interviews.

2017 [1] and 2018 [2] results demonstrated that a lack of resources meant child and family social workers are exposed to chronically poor working conditions, worse than 95% of other UK job roles. Additionally, results have worsened from 2017 to 2018, meaning that under-funding (and associated lack of resources) was contributing to the worsening of working conditions, more children and family

social workers wanting to leave, more dissatisfied workers, and more social workers going in to work despite being so ill that they should stay at home [2]. More specifically, nearly 4 in 10 child and family social workers were looking to leave the profession in less than 18 months – this alone should be cause for concern.

Indeed, this is reflected in the number of children/family social worker vacancies increasing by 3% from 2016-17, with a large turnover rate of 15% [3], and the social care workforce in England having the second highest levels of mental health sickness absence of all sectors. Furthermore, while much is written about the funding crisis in education and healthcare, Dr Ravalier’s research demonstrates that social work working conditions (and associated outcomes as per above) are worse than either of these important sectors [e.g. 4], and worse than any other social work role [3].

Furthermore, it is clear that chronic under-funding is leading to greater stress among child and family social workers. In particular, from over 3,000 comments to the question “In one sentence, how would you make your job less stressful”, lack of funding was clearly related to the four most frequently discussed issues:

1. Workload: In terms of lack of staff and subsequently excessive caseloads.
2. Workload: In terms of too many administrative tasks, and not enough administrative support.
3. Resources: Lack of other non-statutory community resources to offer service users.
4. Managerial support: Due to the sheer workload of management, they are not able to offer sufficient support or effective reflective supervision.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that social workers are more likely to attempt suicide, with psychosocial working conditions buffering against these suicide attempts [5, 6]. Indeed, the increasingly poor working conditions suffered by child and family social workers caused by the lack of resources due to LA funding cuts are leading to increasing reports of suicide attempts among UK social workers. For example, Dr Ravalier has spoken to a number of child and family social workers who have been driven to suicide attempts, with many of the stories matching that discussed by Coleman and Brown [7], with huge workload, lack of support, and lack of resources available to offer service users taking their toll.

Between September and December 2018, Dr Ravalier carried out a number of individual interviews with children/family social workers, and In December 2018, a social worker focus group to investigate the impact of Local Authority (LA) funding and provision on children and family services. The following topics were covered:

3b. LA Funding Impact on Duties

Academic studies have shown the relationship between work stress and ill physiological and mental health [8], with working conditions being a key source of stress in social work [1, 2]. Child and family social workers are finding themselves in a position where it is extremely difficult for them to do the job that they are expected to do and want to do with the resources that they have. This is causing a great deal of stress resulting in ill health. Specific examples given from the focus group and interviews to highlight this include:

Example 1: A law which applies to asylum seekers (‘no recall on public funds’) means parents of a child are not entitled to any benefits of any kind. However, any child in need must be supported, resulting in the only option being to take the child into care and thus breaking up the family. Nothing

can be done to help the parents. It is therefore understandably distressing for a social worker to be put into such a position, and distressing to both the parents and child, due to a lack of funding.

Example 2: The Children Act amendment for 18-21 year olds to be able to stay in foster care does not apply to those resident within children's homes. Therefore, social workers are finding themselves with siblings in various types of care and being able to continue working with some children and not others. Again, this is likely to be an extremely distressing situation to both staff and service users alike.

Therefore, it is clear that funding issues are resulting in social workers not being able to do either preventative or reactive work with the whole family unit.

3c. Impact on the social work workforce

As above, stress and related sickness absence in children and family social workers has grown in recent years. Indeed, the social care sector has the second biggest incidence of stress-related sickness absence in the UK, approximately one third higher than UK industries as a whole [9]. They are feeling stressed, pressured and frustrated at the difficulties of doing the job with a lack of funding and resources. When social workers are highly stressed and burnt out, this is when mistakes are going to be made.

Many social workers are also going to work when they are not well enough (presenteeism) [1, 2]. This is likely because of the amount of engagement social workers have in their jobs [10], and do not want to let children, families, or their colleagues down. Consequently, they carry on to the point of going on long term sickness absence, which is difficult to return from.

3d. Impact on non-statutory services

With financial budgets being increasingly strained, LAs are having to choose to fund some activities over others. For example, Northamptonshire County Council, who are running a significant budget deficit, are seeing budgeting difficulties leading to people in its care becoming 'at risk', with its Chief Executive describing social workers as 'overwhelmed' [11]. As such, due to legal requirements, LAs are having to choose statutory services over non-statutory, despite these non-statutory services being fundamental to the child and family social workers who recommend on them, and the service users who rely on them. Example of non-statutory services lost include:

Example 1: Respite centres for children with disabilities [e.g. see 12].

Example 2: Community mental health advocacy services lost – an essential service for some of the most vulnerable adults.

The result of cuts to funding over the last 10 years means that senior managers are having to get rid of preventative services. With many issues it is necessary to get involved and make positive changes early. Otherwise, things are only picked up once they reach crisis point; this ultimately ends up costing more.

Services are competing against each other in this financial climate and social workers are having to deal with the complexities of the different services as well as the complexities of the families they are helping. Additional complimentary (non-statutory) support for children and families is critical in supporting them through difficult processes.

3e. Innovative Approaches to Support Financial Sustainability

It is important to focus on social workers own wellbeing. Without that being prioritised, the wellbeing of children and families will deteriorate too. We need a strong social worker workforce available to support them. It is vital to listen to front line social workers, trade unions and professional associations who continue to highlight the dire working conditions experienced by social worker teams. Social workers need more supportive supervision, support with stress and wellbeing and help in returning to work following sickness absence. The innovative approaches therefore should be social worker-led, policy-makers and LA employers should listen to front-line social workers in order to develop these innovative approaches to supporting financial sustainability.

4. Summary

To summarise, therefore, it is clear that current LA funding for children and families social work is insufficient, and having a clear and obvious impact on not only individual social workers, but also the children and families they work with. We are seeing chronic under-funding impact the health and wellbeing of social workers, making them unhappier in their role, and wanting to leave the in their droves. This is highlighted by high turnover rates and year-on-year staff turnover increases. This in turn impacts the job that they do with service users and the resources and services which can be provided to service users.

5. References to Evidence

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