



Work & Stress

An International Journal of Work, Health & Organisations

ISSN: 0267-8373 (Print) 1464-5335 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/twst20

Early career burnout trajectories among child protective services workers

Melissa Radey & Dina J. Wilke

To cite this article: Melissa Radey & Dina J. Wilke (2025) Early career burnout trajectories among child protective services workers, *Work & Stress*, 39:4, 416-433, DOI: [10.1080/02678373.2025.2501018](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2025.2501018)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2025.2501018>



Published online: 06 May 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 440



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Early career burnout trajectories among child protective services workers

Melissa Radey  and Dina J. Wilke 

College of Social Work, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

Burnout, or physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from chronic workplace stress, is highly prevalent and of high consequence. Most U.S. workers (60%) report experiencing at least one symptom of burnout, and symptoms pose a significant threat to worker performance, worker wellbeing, and workplace operation. Despite burnout's detrimental effects, limited research considers the development of burnout over the early career stage. Applying time-stress exposure and initial impact models, this study uses the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF; $n = 1,019$ individuals, $n = 3,424$ observations), a statewide, longitudinal cohort study of newly-hired child protective services (CPS) workers, to consider burnout symptoms from 6 months to 3 years on the job. Multi-level mixed effects regression analyses indicated the curvilinear nature of both work – and client-related burnout symptoms over time; the two-year, protective benefit of changing child welfare jobs; and the importance of job attributes in explaining protective effects of job change for work-related, but not client-related, burnout. Findings suggest the importance of targeted strategies to lower burnout (e.g. supervisory support, within-agency job change) particularly after 12–24 months on the job at the peak of burnout symptoms.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 November 2023
Accepted 29 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Workplace burnout; frontline workers; child welfare; longitudinal

Burnout is commonplace and destructive to workers. Classified by the World Health Organization as a work-related syndrome in 2019, defining features include physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from chronic workplace stress (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001; WHO, 2019). Approximately 60% of U.S. workers report experiencing at least one symptom of workplace burnout, including lack of energy (26%), emotional exhaustion (32%), or physical fatigue (44%; Abramson, 2022; APA, 2023). Burnout is particularly salient among frontline workers such as healthcare and social service professionals (National Academy of Sciences, 2019), 911 dispatchers (Linos et al., 2022), correctional officers (Finney et al., 2013), teachers (Bradley, 2007), and social workers (Kristensen et al., 2005). High burnout symptoms pose a significant threat to worker performance, worker wellbeing, and workplace operation while also increasing absenteeism and job turnover (Lizano, 2015; Office of the Surgeon General, 2022). Given burnout's high prevalence and consequences, the Department of Health and Human Services invested \$103 million to address it in 2022 (HHS, 2022).

This study examines burnout among one high-risk frontline profession – child protection services (CPS) workers. CPS workers typically report among the highest work-related stress and burnout scores (e.g. Johnson et al., 2005; Kristensen et al., 2005) as well as high consequences of burnout, including decreased well-being and turnover (Leake et al., 2017; Lizano, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2001). The Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF) data, a statewide, longitudinal cohort study of newly-hired CPS workers, provided the ability to examine burnout among workers over the first years in the field, the potential protection of changing jobs within CPS, and the time-varying contributions of job attributes.

Burnout and risk among CPS workers

Despite high documented rates of burnout symptoms (Office of the Surgeon General, 2022), the concept of burnout is elusive, yet it includes the hallmark characteristic of exhaustion. For example, in the most commonly-used instrument of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Maslach and Jackson (1981) characterised burnout as manifesting symptoms of emotional exhaustion and related feelings of depersonalisation and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. To consider sources of exhaustion, Kristensen et al. (2005) developed the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory, which includes personal, work-related, and client-related burnout. Regardless of the measure, CPS workers experience high levels of burnout symptoms (Leake et al., 2017; Travis et al., 2016). The work includes long hours, high stress, and high-stakes decisions, with families often at the height of hardship and distress. Navigating these conditions within complex, bureaucratic systems further contribute to burnout symptoms (Font, 2012).

Similar to other frontline and human service professionals, CPS workers often operate within understaffed, under-resourced agencies, which can translate to perpetually high caseloads. Yet, workers must meet mandated deadlines and make consequential decisions (e.g. family separation or reunification) regardless of caseload size. High levels of burnout in CPS are associated with increased absenteeism and turnover, as well as reduced psychological well-being, including personal wellness, affect, and work/marriage/life satisfaction (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; Travis et al., 2016). In addition, CPS worker burnout is associated with poor client outcomes, including reduced worker-client engagement and delays in permanency for children (Flower et al., 2005; Gladstone et al., 2014).

Burnout over time within the context of frontline and CPS work

High levels of burnout, particularly in frontline professions including CPS, raise the question of how burnout evolves over worker tenure. Although many studies attest to high levels of burnout among CPS workers (e.g. Leake et al., 2017; Travis et al., 2016), few examine how burnout levels change as workers learn their positions, manage caseloads, and serve clients (Dunford et al., 2012). Conceptually, burnout, a unique type of stress (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993), could change in various ways based on timing and duration of effects (Frese & Zapf, 1988). Two broad models of change trajectories include exposure time effects or initial impacts (Frese & Zapf, 1988). The exposure time model theorises that the longer one is exposed to a stressor, the higher the stress

response. The positive relationship between industrial noise and the probability of deafness exemplifies the exposure time model (Frese & Zapf, 1988). Applied to the present study, Maslach and Jackson (1981) posited that burnout accumulates over time creating a positive relationship between tenure and burnout that maintains over time (i.e. accumulation model). Other exposure time effects possibilities include a sleeper effect that occurs with delayed impact (e.g. burnout does not occur until well after stress) or an adjustment model in which burnout increases as workers adjust to their positions and then stabilises.

The second category of models, the initial impact model, suggests an initial increase in burnout followed by a return to original or baseline levels. Under the initial impact model, although burnout increases as workers adjust to their positions, the increase in burnout symptoms stops and, rather than a levelling off as an exposure time effects model would suggest, burnout declines returning to baseline once workers acclimate to their positions (Frese & Zapf, 1988). This model theorises that early job tenure presents a reality shock creating initial stress because workers do not have the coping skills to handle the unexpected stress. The stress response decreases once workers adjust to their positions (Frese & Zapf, 1988; Nicholson, 1984). The initial increase in emotional exhaustion, a key component of burnout, followed by a decrease among first-year teachers (Voss & Kunter, 2020) exemplifies the initial impact model.

The evolution of burnout over early job tenure for CPS workers is largely unknown. This study contributes both conceptually and methodologically to understanding burnout. Examining burnout trajectories over workers' first years in CPS work responds to the call to uncover the development of burnout as well as the role of position, tenure, and work attributes in this development (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012). With exceptions (e.g. Bradley, 2007 with teachers), most studies suggest burnout symptoms change over time, yet studies vary on the shape of change. The timing, spacing, and number of measurement points in combination with workers' tenure and included covariates (e.g. work attributes) contribute to various findings. A systematic review of the development of employee well-being, most commonly measured as burnout, suggested change was more common than stability with less than one-half of the variance explained by a previous time point. Yet the direction and shape of change varied widely (Mäkikangas et al., 2016).

Congruent with Makikangas et al.'s (2016) findings, the few prior studies of workers in CPS and other related frontline professions are inconclusive regarding the expected direction of burnout trajectories. Savicki and Cooley (1994) and Lizano and Mor Barak (2012) examined burnout among CPS workers over two and three timepoints, respectively. Both studies found that burnout increased over time. However, Lizano and Mor Barak (2012) found among their sample ($N = 355$) that organisational tenure at baseline was negatively related to emotional exhaustion. Rather than burnout increasing linearly over time, the finding that organisational tenure is related to lower levels of burnout suggests the possibility of a curvilinear relationship in which burnout increases in early tenure and then declines. Few time points (Savicki & Cooley, 1994) and varying levels of agency tenure in earlier studies (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012) limited the ability to detect a curvilinear possibility.

Due to few CPS-specific studies, research in related professions may offer insight into burnout trajectories. Several studies document increases in burnout during the

job adjustment period. In a study of healthcare professionals with various levels of tenure ($N = 2089$), burnout increased slightly and then levelled off over a two-year period for recently-hired workers or those who had recently changed positions within the agency (Dunford et al., 2012). In addition, burnout was curvilinear for organisational newcomers such that burnout increased early in job tenure and then decreased. Alternatively, a meta-analysis of studies examining work stress on strain, including burnout, suggested a “sleeping effect” such that the synchronous effects of stressors are not immediate, but build up through cumulative exposure increasing workers’ vulnerability to stress and burnout the longer that they are in their positions (Ford et al., 2014).

The variety of supported patterns of burnout highlight the importance of considering work-related factors for workers’ burnout trajectories (e.g. Dunford et al., 2012). Extensive evidence among CPS workers suggests the power of job attributes in promoting worker well-being (Griffiths et al., 2017; He et al., 2018; McFadden et al., 2018). For example, Lizano and Mor Barak’s (2012) analysis found that over time, job stress (i.e. role conflict and role ambiguity) was associated with increased burnout symptoms. Additionally, in an analysis of CPS workers across 3 states ($N = 1,917$), less time pressure and more social support from co-workers and supervisors related to lower levels of burnout (He et al., 2018).

Job tenure is also important when measuring burnout as it can be a proxy for various concepts related to burnout (e.g. job status, career progression). The importance of considering time in position stems from the well-documented honeymoon-hangover effect for job satisfaction in the general workforce. For example, Boswell et al. (2009) found that newly-hired workers ($n = 132$) reported more job satisfaction and greater wellbeing, albeit short-lived, immediately after beginning a new job. The study found a curvilinear relationship between job tenure and job satisfaction such that satisfaction increased for the first three months and decreased thereafter through 12 months. Yet, the honeymoon effect may only apply to those who change professions – not within-profession moves – or may not apply to burnout (Kim, 2018).

We also know relatively little about the time-sensitive nature of job attributes. Despite large investments in training and supervising new employees, little research has examined if job attributes are particularly important to prevent burnout in early job tenure. A qualitative study of newly-hired CPS workers suggested that workers value supportive supervisors and smaller caseloads when learning their jobs (Radey & Stanley, 2019). Likewise, results from a study of CPS workers ($N = 1617$) found that time pressure and supervisory support related to burnout only for those in their positions for less than two years (Phillips et al., 2020). The current study builds upon these findings and considers the possibility that job attributes are particularly important in early job tenure.

Study contribution

This study provided a unique opportunity to follow a cohort of recently-hired CPS workers to examine burnout symptoms over time (a) as workers adjusted to their positions and (b) changed positions or agencies within the child welfare profession. Research questions and corresponding hypotheses based on available studies were:

- (1) What is the burnout trajectory of CPS workers from 6-months post-hire to three years in the field? Hypothesis 1: Following an exposure time model and documented high levels of burnout among CPS workers, burnout symptoms will increase, particularly during early job tenure, and then level off.
- (2) Do CPS workers experience a honeymoon effect such that switching positions or agencies within child welfare protects workers from burnout symptoms? Hypothesis 2: CPS workers experience a short-lived honeymoon effect.
- (3) How does the contribution of job attributes evolve over job tenure? Hypothesis 3: Job attributes are important for burnout in early job tenure and dissipate over time.

Methodology

Procedure and sample

This study used data from the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), a longitudinal cohort study of all CPS workers hired from September 2015 through December 2016 ($N = 1,500$). The state-wide study examined work experiences and employment decisions. Study personnel physically visited each training for newly-hired workers during baseline data collection. Because workers with frontline child welfare experience in the state were exempt from the training, most respondents were new to the field. Workers were invited to participate in online surveys every six months for the following four years, regardless of employment status or employment destination. A full 84% of eligible workers participated (Wilke et al., 2017). The Institutional Review Board at the authors' university approved all study protocol (Study# 28640).

The current study uses data from Waves 2 (the first measurement of burnout after workers had been on the job about 6 months) through 7. Of respondents after Wave 1 ($n = 1421$) who reported being in child welfare in at least one wave post-baseline ($n = 1,188$), we excluded workers who left child welfare and later returned ($n = 77$) and those who did not provide data for study variables at any wave ($n = 92$), resulting in a sample of 1,019 individuals and 3425 observations. When respondents left child welfare, they no longer contributed observations.

At baseline, respondents were young ($M = 28$ years) with about 5 years of full-time work experience. Most were women (85%) with the remaining workers men (15%) or transgender ($n = 1$). Workers were racially and ethnically diverse with 16% identifying as Hispanic, 33% as non-Hispanic Black, 4% as non-Hispanic and of another race, and 47% non-Hispanic White. Workers were hired in positions as child protective investigators (43%), those who investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, or case managers, those who work with families with maltreatment (57%). Over time, many respondents stayed in child welfare, but left the CPI or case manager position. At Wave 7, for example, the sample was evenly divided among CPIs, case managers, and those in other child welfare positions (e.g. adoptions, licensing, or supervisory positions).

Measures

Burnout

We used the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) to measure burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005). It contains three subscales: work-related, client-related, and personal

burnout and uses a 5-point scale (4 = always, 0 = never). Per the authors' recommendations and prior work (Leake et al., 2017), we separately analysed work-related and client-related burnout and converted scores to a 0–100 range. Work-related burnout measured the level of physical or psychological fatigue due to work through 7 items (e.g. "Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?"). Client-related burnout measured the level of physical or psychological fatigue specifically caused by working with clients through 6 items (e.g. "Are you tired of working with clients?"). Evidence with a sample of CPS workers suggests its reliability and validity (Leake et al., 2017).

Time in position

Beginning at Wave 2 (about 6 months after baseline), respondents indicated if they changed positions since the previous wave. We examined the number of 6-month increments (i.e. survey waves) that respondents were in their current position. When a worker reported continued employment in child welfare and a position departure since the previous wave, we categorised them as being at their job for less than 12 months. Measured at each wave, categories included: 12 months or less, 13–24 months, 25 + months ago, or remained in baseline position.

Work attributes

Time pressure was measured through a 5-item scale with a 4-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). An example item was, "I am too busy at work." The scale has demonstrated initial reliability ($\alpha = .95$) and validity (Potter et al., 2016).

We used 4 subscales from Parker's Organizational Climate scale (Parker et al., 2003) to measure *role challenges*, *job value*, *organisational functioning*, and *supervisory job support*. Workers completed each 4-item subscale to indicate their level of agreement (strongly disagree to strongly agree) on a Likert 5-point scale. *Role challenges* included role ambiguity (e.g. "My job responsibilities are clearly defined."), role conflict (e.g. "I am held responsible for things over which I have no control"), and overload (e.g. "I have more work to do than I could ever get done"). An example item from the four-item, single-dimension job value sub-scale was "I feel that my work is highly important." *Organisational functioning* included the dimensions of innovation (e.g. "I am encouraged to develop my ideas"), justice (e.g. "Decisions about my job are made in a fair manner"), and support (e.g. "This organisation really cares about my well-being"). *Supervisory job support* included trust and support (e.g. "My supervisor can be trusted"); goal emphasis (e.g. "My supervisor stresses the importance of work goals"); and work facilitation (e.g. "My supervisor helps me solve job-related problems"). Items were coded for higher scores to reflect higher levels of role challenges, job enrichment, and workplace supports. Initial testing in a sample of healthcare workers ($N = 1,692$) showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .64$ to $.91$) with only role conflict below an acceptable level and acceptable validity (Gagnon et al., 2009).

The Caplan's Social Support Index was used to measure work-related *social support from supervisors and co-workers*. Respondents indicated the amount of support they received from each source (0 = not at all, 3 = very much) on five items (e.g. availability of support when "things get tough at work"). Evidence from its widespread use suggests that the measure is reliable and valid ($\alpha = .73$ to $.83$; Caplan et al., 1975) across a variety of workplaces, and among CPS workers (e.g. Mor Barak et al., 2001).

Demographic characteristics

Age, sex, race and ethnicity. We calculated age in years from the worker's birthdate. For sex/gender, respondents self-identified as male, female, or transgender. One respondent identified as transgender. We categorised respondents as females (1) or males or transgender (0). To measure race and ethnicity, respondents indicated (a) whether they were of Hispanic/ Latino origin and (b) their race according to the 2010 U.S. Census definitions. We created four mutually-exclusive categories including Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic of another race, and non-Hispanic White (reference). Due to the small number of workers of another race, we could not disaggregate the category further.

Job position. Over the study period, many workers changed positions within child welfare often moving from CPI or case manager to adoptions, licensing, or supervisory positions. We differentiated among CPIs (reference), case managers, and other child welfare positions. The small number of workers in any one type of other child welfare positions, particularly in early study waves, prevented examining individual job categories outside of CPIs or case managers.

Data analysis plan

The analysis included descriptive statistics and multi-level mixed effects regressions. First, we conducted a descriptive analysis to examine burnout and work-related characteristics from 6 months to 3 years post-baseline. Next, we used mixed-effects logistic models, including fixed and random effects (Singer & Willett, 2003), to examine trajectories of burnout over time and how time in position, job attributes measured at each wave, and demographic characteristics contributed to trajectories. The models capitalised on key advantages of mixed effects models by including all available data (e.g. data from workers who contributed complete data at any time point), including time-varying job attributes, and accounting for right censoring (e.g. early exits from child welfare; Singer & Willett, 2003). Including all data is critical in this study because with FSPSF's focus on CPS workers and limited measures of burnout among those who left the field, the number of eligible sample members (i.e. those who remained in CPS) declines at each wave (i.e. 1,138 (W2), 945 (W3), 896 (W4), 880 (W5), 868 (W6), and 874 (W7)). Mixed effects models allowed the inclusion of early waves of data of those who left CPS and no longer met sample criteria at later waves.

Models used data in the person-year format (e.g. long form). Workers contributed up to 6 waves starting in Wave 2 (i.e. 6 months after baseline) through Wave 7 (36 months post baseline). Time was measured in months since the baseline survey accounting for variation in survey timing common in longitudinal research. Mixed models consider variation at two levels. The first level measured within-worker change (e.g. how does burnout evolve over time for workers?), and the second level measured each worker's unique change trajectory considering individual characteristics (e.g. how do workers' attributes contribute to burnout trajectories?).

To consider whether and how time contributed to burnout (e.g. how does burnout change over time?), we tested the shape of burnout trajectories. To select a common shape for the trajectory across workers, we used goodness of fit statistics across a

series of separate models for work – and client-related burnout to test no change, linear change, quadratic change, and cubic change. Beginning with the no-change model excluding time, adding time in a linear model, and building to a cubic model, we tested the impact of polynomial terms. In a stepwise fashion, models included polynomial terms at both level 1 (i.e. fixed effect) and level 2 (i.e. variance components) to allow the curvature parameter to vary across individuals, a key purpose of multi-level modelling (Singer & Willett, 2003).

The final stage of analysis included selecting individual-level demographic and time-varying variables for model inclusion. We recognised overlap among variables. Workers experiencing high levels of role overload, for example, also likely experience high levels of time pressure. Empirically, initial correlational analyses also indicated high correlations among many job attributes. We tested each variable in separate multinomial regressions and interacted each variable with time to test time-contingent effects. We used model statistics (i.e. the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), and deviance) to select the best fitting models.

Missing data

The analysis had missing data due to terminal attrition, non-terminal attrition (i.e. missing a survey wave and returning at a later wave), and non-response to survey items. About 2% ($n = 23$) withdrew from the study and 5% ($n = 67$) did not complete any surveys after baseline. Retention was high, with response rates per wave ranging from 77% to 87%. Item missing data ranged from 0% to 6%. We used person mean substitution to impute scale scores (Dodeen, 2003). For respondents who had less than 50% missing values on a scale, we computed the mean score of the available data and multiplied by the number of scale items for an imputed sum score. Otherwise, we left the data missing. Missing data analysis did not uncover any significant differences between those with and without missing data, with a few exceptions. Workers with missing data tended to be younger (W3, W5, W6, W7). At later waves, those with missing data were less likely to be in another child welfare position (W6), and they reported higher levels of time pressure (W6, W7).

Results

Descriptive results

Figure 1 depicts mean levels of work – and client-related burnout over time from six months in child welfare through 3 years. Both trajectories mirror the same pattern: burnout initially increased and then levelled off until the two-year point when it began to decline. Using the midpoint of the scale as a standard to identify burnout (e.g. Leake et al., 2017), most workers across all waves (53–65%) experienced work-related burnout. A substantial minority (34–46%) experienced client-related burnout.

Table 1 provides a Wave 2 snapshot of the means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables six months after workers entered their new jobs as child welfare workers. Cronbach's alpha scores were at least acceptable at each wave, all exceeding .87 except for job value ($\alpha = .68 - .73$). Work – and client-related burnout

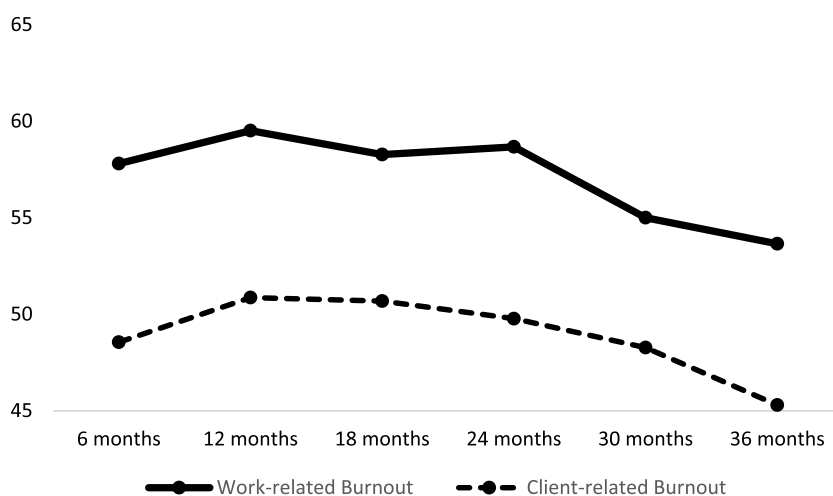


Figure 1. Level of burnout over time.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of time-varying predictors at wave 2.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Work burnout (0–100)	57.80	21.39	.88										
2. Client burnout (0–100)	48.55	21.60	.88	.78									
3. Time pressure (0–15)	11.14	3.55	.88	.51	.39								
4. % cases difficult	27.01	18.88		.21	.15	.21							
5. Caseload size	14.62	7.09		.13	.02	.27	–.10						
6. Role challenges (0–48)	24.51	8.37	.87	.59	.52	.57	.20	.16					
7. Job value (0–12)	11.81	2.59	.70	–.25	–.31	–.10	–.05	.04	–.28				
8. Organisational functioning (0–48)	27.14	9.45	.93	–.40	–.36	–.33	–.09	–.11	–.68	.43			
9. Supervisor: Job support (0–48)	33.53	10.27	.95	–.25	–.21	–.19	–.05	–.04	–.47	.44	.70		
10. Supervisor: Social support (0–15)	9.40	4.30	.92	–.26	–.20	–.21	–.06	–.04	–.44	.26	.60	.77	
11. Coworker: Social support (0–15)	10.14	3.62	.88	–.15	–.15	–.13	–.06	–.06	–.27	.25	.40	.33	.48

Note: All correlations > .08 are significant at $p < .05$.

scores were correlated within themselves over time (work: $r = .18$ to $.60$; client: $r = .22$ to $.53$) and with each other at each wave ($r = .78$ to $.85$). In addition, role, job, organisation, and supervisor attributes were generally correlated with both types of burnout and each other at each wave. Perceiving more negative job attributes and less support correlated to higher burnout levels. In terms of change over time, time pressure and role overload decreased; job value increased; other variables did not significantly change over time.

Regression results

Model tests to consider the shape of burnout over time indicated that the quadratic model fit the data best for both types of burnout. The difference in deviance statistics of 38 when comparing linear and quadratic models for both work – and client-related burnout far exceeded the .05 critical value of a χ^2 distribution, $df(4)$. The comparison of quadratic and cubic models, with deviance statistic declines of 4 and 3 for work and

client, respectively, indicated the improvement was not significant at a $p < .05$ value (critical value < 11.07 , $df(5)$).

Table 2 presents the mixed effects quadratic change regression models of work – and client-related burnout. For work-related burnout, the empty model confirmed sufficient variation between workers to justify mixed effects models. The between-person constant of 58.68, the single fixed effect, approximated the average level of work-related burnout across all occasions and workers. Its statistical significance suggests work-related burnout was not constant across workers and occasions. The interclass correlation coefficient ($r = 0.54$) indicated a high degree of residual autocorrelation: differences between workers accounted for 54% of the variance in the burnout, with the remainder (46%) due to external circumstances (e.g. work attributes).

The next model, the unconditional growth model, added the number of months since baseline to capture the rate of change in burnout and a random time component. The likelihood ratio test was significant ($\chi^2(4) = 138.53$, $p = .000$). The statistically significant positive coefficient of linear time means that burnout initially increased over time. The statistically significant negative coefficient of quadratic time means that after reaching a peak, burnout decreased in later time periods. Significant fixed and random effects indicated variation in both in initial levels and rates of change in work-related burnout over time.

The third model added an indicator of how many months workers had been in their current positions in child welfare. Workers who left their job and started a new job recently (≤ 12 months) had work-related burnout levels a full 10 points less than workers who had not left their original baseline position. The positive effects of exiting the position dissipated over time, yet workers in their new positions for one to two years averaged 6 points lower burnout scores. After two years of starting a new position, the effect was no longer significantly related to work-related burnout.

The fourth model added the best-fitting model of additional work attributes to account for individual differences in levels of work-related burnout. Reflective of the correlations in Table 1, negative job attributes (e.g. time pressure, role challenges) increased work-related burnout while workplace supports typically decreased it. For example, for every point increase on the time pressure scale, burnout scores increased 1.29 points, whereas for every point increase on the organisational functioning scale, burnout decreased by .16 of a point. However, supervisory job support increased work-related burnout: workers who perceived more job support from their supervisors reported higher levels of work-related burnout. In terms of change over time, the relationships between work attributes and burnout were stable with one exception. Job value decreased burnout at earlier, but not later waves. In terms of demographic characteristics, older workers and case managers perceived less work-related burnout, and women perceived more than men. Race and ethnicity did not improve model fit. Notably, in the best-fitting model, time in position was no longer significant indicating that work attributes and demographic characteristics explained the lower levels of work-related burnout among workers who changed positions within child welfare.

The right-hand side of Table 2 reports parallel results for client-related burnout. The average level of client-related burnout across all occasions and workers was 50.14. Client-related burnout was not constant across workers and time. The interclass correlation coefficient of .57 indicated a high degree of residual autocorrelation such that worker



Table 2. Mixed effects linear regression models of burnout: Florida study of professionals for safe families waves 2–7.

	Work			Client		
	Empty	Growth	Time in Position	Empty	Growth	Time in Position
Fixed effects						
Intercept (6 mo status)	58.68***	54.57***	53.68***	50.14***	44.23***	43.25***
(initial status)	.57	1.18	1.16	.60	1.15	1.12
Time (linear term)		.56***	.77***		.73***	.95***
		.12	.12		.12	.12
Time ² (quadratic term)		-.01***	-.02***		-.02***	-.02***
		.00	.00		.00	.00
Time in position						
12 months or less			-10.10***			-10.40***
			.96			.98
13–24 months			-5.95***			-6.69***
			1.69			1.68
25 + months			-3.18			-2.35
			3.7			3.59
Demographic characteristics						
Age (in years)						
			-.42***			-.53***
			.05			.05
Woman (yes)			2.35*			
			1.18			
Work attributes						
Time pressure			1.29***			1.01***
			.08			.09
Role challenges			.81***			.65***
			.05			.05
Job value			-.99***			-1.75***
			.21			.22
Organisational functioning			-.16***			-.11*
			.05			.05
Supervisory job support			.18***			.29***
			.04			.05
Supervisory social support			-.37***			-.51***
			.09			.10
Position: Case manager			-1.66**			2.76**
			.76			.85
Other child welfare role			-1.78			1.07
			1.37			1.50

characteristics accounted for 57% of the variation in client-related burnout. The unconditional growth model significant likelihood ratio test ($\chi^2(4) = 116.46, p = 0.000$) suggests improved model fit. The significance of the within-worker constant indicated that the average burnout level varied over time.

Similar to work-related burnout, changing positions decreased client-related burnout by 10 points for those who changed within the past year and almost 7 points for those who had changed one to two years prior. Work attributes in the best-fitting model for client-related burnout operated almost identically: negative job attributes related to increases in burnout; job resources related to decreases in burnout with the exception of supervisory job support. Moreover, job value protected workers from burnout in the first years after hire, but not in later waves. There were also notable differences between work – and client-related burnout models. Gender was not significant and did not improve the model of client-related burnout. Also, case managers perceived higher client-related burnout levels compared to CPIs. In addition, the effect of changing jobs remained significant in the final model although its effect decreased by more than one half. Workers who switched child welfare positions and had been on the job two years or less had lower mean burnout scores than their counterparts who remained in their baseline job.

Discussion

Burnout is prevalent and highly consequential for frontline health and human service professionals including CPS workers. The FSPSF followed a newly-hired cohort of CPS workers at six-month intervals for three years providing a unique and ideal opportunity to examine burnout over time among early-career workers (Dunford et al., 2012; Leiter, 1993). The study's main findings suggest: the amount of burnout symptoms was curvilinear over time; changing child welfare positions or agencies had a protective benefit for up to two years; and job attributes and demographic characteristics explained the contribution of changing positions for work-related, but not client-related burnout.

Congruent with research on job satisfaction (Boswell et al., 2009) and in partial support of Hypothesis 1 (an initial increase in burnout), the relationship between both types of burnout and time increased until about 18–24 months, and then decreased through 36 months. Although the initial increase in burnout over early job tenure was much steeper than the gradual decrease after 18–24 months, the curvilinear pattern followed the initial impact model (Frese & Zapf, 1988). The effects of doing child welfare work (e.g. child removals, high stakes decisions) dissipates over time allowing burnout symptoms to decrease (Frese & Zapf, 1988).

In support of Hypothesis 2, workers who changed jobs within child welfare reported fewer burnout symptoms, on average, for the following two years. Boswell et al. (2005, 2009) found similar “honeymoon” effects for job satisfaction. Our findings suggest that work attributes largely account for the decrease in work-related burnout symptoms upon changing jobs. In other words, fewer challenges and pressures and higher supports suggest that moving to a new position in child welfare creates an environment in which workers report fewer work-related burnout symptoms. In contrast, switching jobs within child welfare protected workers for up to two years from client-related burnout above and beyond work attributes. The cause of this relationship is unclear. Models included position type differentiating between CPS workers, case managers, and workers in

other areas of child welfare (e.g. adoptions, supervisors) indicating that exits to positions with less client contact does not account for the relationship. Future work with the power to distinguish promotions from lateral moves is needed.

Results also largely supported the importance of job attributes in contributing to burnout. Negative attributes, including time pressure and role challenges, as well as job value, organisational functioning, and supervisory social support related to burnout in the expected directions. An unexpected, counterintuitive finding was that supervisory job support (i.e. providing trust and support, emphasising goals, and facilitating work) related to higher burnout. In post-hoc tests, providing trust and support and facilitating work subscales contributed most to the positive relationship. Although incongruent with most prior findings (e.g. Mor Barak et al., 2001), it is consistent with research suggesting that supervisory job support is positively related to burnout for those serving vulnerable populations (e.g. CPS workers, Boyas & Wind, 2010; people with serious disease, Catalan et al., 1996). Future studies using models designed to address causality (e.g. cross-lagged effects) can improve understanding of the potentially context-specific relationship between increased supervisory job support and burnout.

The contributions of job attributes were largely consistent over time, not supporting our hypothesis that initial levels of attributes are particularly important for burnout symptoms. Job value was the only work attribute that changed in impact over time, decreasing over time as hypothesised. The stability of the impact of other factors may reflect that measurement began six months post-hire and three months after workers started their casework, a time following perhaps the most intense impact of job attributes when workers adjust to their positions (Radey & Stanley, 2019).

Practical implications

The curvilinear shape of burnout over job tenure combined with the importance of manageable job demands and accessible job supports provide guidance for targeting strategies for workers at high risk for burnout symptoms. Findings suggest that workers experience the highest levels of burnout symptoms 12–24 months after hire, the same time in which workers are at highest risk of exiting the child welfare field (Radey et al., 2024). Frontline workers want actively involved, hands-on supervisors as they learn their positions (Radey & Stanley, 2018). The current study's finding that supervisory job support is associated with increased burnout symptoms while supervisory social support is associated with decreased symptoms suggests that workers may reach out to their supervisors for job tasks for necessary compliance or surveillance in difficult cases rather than for practical or intellectual reasons (Beddoe, 2010). Proactive supervision time with early career workers that focuses on learning job expectations, symptoms of burnout, and available workplace support can preempt or respond to the impact of burnout.

Second, the protection that switching jobs within child welfare provides creates potential management tools for organisations. Despite the potential for increased training costs and decreased unit morale, job changes or rotations offer advantages of enhanced skills and knowledge; identification of individual skills and preferences; and lower burnout (Casad, 2012). The finding that the CPIs and case managers were susceptible to work – and client-related burnout, respectively, also supports how serving in various roles may protect workers from burnout symptom accumulation during sensitive time

periods (e.g. 12–24 months). For example, workers may benefit from trading from strict deadlines and administrative burdens (i.e. CPIs) for long-term client relationships and their associated fatigue (i.e. case managers).

Limitations

The study's results should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. First, the study sample included CPS workers in a single state, and we only examined job changes within the child welfare field. Although theory and prior research (e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Kristensen et al., 2005) indicate that findings may apply to other frontline professions vulnerable to burnout (e.g. healthcare, corrections, emergency dispatch, mental health, human services), the generalizability of findings beyond CPS workers in Florida is unknown. Second, burnout symptoms were not measured at baseline. Findings do not contribute to understanding burnout trajectories during the very early months on the job. Third, workers self-reported all measures introducing the possibility that response bias affected individual responses and common method variance affected relationships between variables. However, this could not account for the change in burnout or the contribution of job value over time. Fourth, per Lüdtke and Robitzsch's (2021) recommendation to separate inquiries of developmental process and causal inference, this study focused on trajectories of burnout over time at the expense of examining reciprocal associations between job attributes and burnout symptoms. Cross-lagged effects to examine bi-directional relationships are important for future research. Fifth, analyses indicated that the sample may underrepresent younger workers. However, a meta-analysis suggested that generational differences regarding work attitudes are small to none (Costanza et al., 2012).

Conclusion

With its limitations, this study provided a unique opportunity to examine a curvilinear relationship between time and burnout in a cohort of CPS workers between 6-months and 3-years on the job. The identified peak of both work – and client-related burnout (e.g. 12–24 months) is a critical time to deliver targeted strategies to reduce burnout symptoms and their consequences (e.g. turnover). The continued protective power of positive work environments and short job tenure against burnout symptoms suggest the contribution of job attributes is not time-sensitive; workplace characteristics matter for recently-hired workers as well as those years into their positions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health [grant number R03OH012395-01-00], the Florida Institute for Child Welfare.

ORCID

Melissa Radey  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9058-0349>

Dina J. Wilke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1334-4841>

References

- Abramson, A. (2022, January 1). Burnout and stress are everywhere. *Monitor on Psychology*, 53(1), 72–73. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-burnout-stress>
- American Psychological Association (APA). (2023). *2023 work in America survey: Workplaces as engines of psychological health and well-being*. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2023-workplace-health-well-being>.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309–328.
- Beddoe, L. (2010). Supervision in child welfare: Retaining strong practitioners in risky work. *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education*, 12(1), 101–120.
- Boswell, W. R., Boudreau, J. W., & Tichy, J. (2005). The relationship between employee job change and job satisfaction: The honeymoon-hangover effect. *Journal of applied psychology*, 90(5), 882. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.90.5.882
- Boswell, W. R., Shipp, A. J., Payne, S. C., & Culbertson, S. S. (2009). Changes in newcomer job satisfaction over time: Examining the pattern of honeymoons and hangovers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(4), 844–858. doi:10.1037/a0014975
- Boyas, J., & Wind, L. H. (2010). Employment-based social capital, job stress, and employee burnout: A public child welfare employee structural model. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(3), 380–388. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.10.009
- Bradley, G. (2007). Job tenure as a moderator of stressor–strain relations: A comparison of experienced and new-start teachers. *Work & Stress*, 21(1), 48–64. doi:10.1080/02678370701264685
- Caplan, R. D., Cobb, S., French, J. R., Harrison, R. V., & Pinneau, S. R. (1975). *Job demands and worker health: Main effects and occupational differences* [Monograph]. US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
- Casad, S. (2012). Implications of job rotation literature for performance improvement practitioners. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 25(2), 27–41. doi:10.1002/piq.21118
- Catalan, J., Burgess, A., Pergami, A., Hulme, N., Gazzard, B., & Phillips, R. (1996). The psychological impact on staff of caring for people with serious diseases: The case of HIV infection and oncology. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 40(4), 425–435. doi:10.1016/0022-3999(95)00527-7
- Cordes, C. L., & Dougherty, T. W. (1993). A review and an integration of research on job burnout. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(4), 621–656. doi:10.2307/258593
- Costanza, D. P., Badger, J. M., Fraser, R. L., Severt, J. B., & Gade, P. A. (2012). Generational differences in work-related attitudes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 27(4), 375–394. doi:10.1007/s10869-012-9259-4
- Dodeen, H. M. (2003). Effectiveness of valid mean substitution in treating missing data in attitude assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(5), 505–513. doi:10.1080/02602930301674
- Dunford, B. B., Shipp, A. J., Boss, R. W., Angermeier, I., & Boss, A. D. (2012). Is burnout static or dynamic? A career transition perspective of employee burnout trajectories. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(3), 637–650. doi:10.1037/a0027060
- Finney, C., Stergiopoulos, E., Hensel, J., Bonato, S., & Dewa, C. S. (2013). Organizational stressors associated with job stress and burnout in correctional officers: A systematic review. *BMC public health*, 13(1), 1–13. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-13-82
- Flower, J., McDonald, J., & Sumski, M. (2005). *Review of turnover in Milwaukee private agency child welfare ongoing case management staff*. Child Welfare Associates, LLC.

- Font, S. (2012). Burnout in child welfare: The role of employment characteristics and workplace opportunities. *Social Service Review*, 86(4), 636–659. doi:[10.1086/668817](https://doi.org/10.1086/668817)
- Ford, M. T., Matthews, R. A., Wooldridge, J. D., Mishra, V., Kakar, U. M., & Strahan, S. R. (2014). How do occupational stressor-strain effects vary with time? A review and meta-analysis of the relevance of time lags in longitudinal studies. *Work & Stress*, 28(1), 9–30. doi:[10.1080/02678373.2013.877096](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2013.877096)
- Frese, M., & Zapf, D. (1988). Methodological issues in the study of work stress: Objective vs. subjective measurement of work stress and the question of longitudinal studies. In C. L. Cooper & R. Payne (Eds.), *Causes, coping, and consequences of stress at work* (pp. 375–411). Wiley.
- Gagnon, S., Paquet, M., Courcy, F., & Parker, C. (2009). Measurement and management of work climate: Cross-validation of the CRISO Psychological Climate Questionnaire. *Healthcare Management Forum*, 22(1), 57–65. doi:[10.1016/S0840-4704\(10\)60294-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0840-4704(10)60294-3)
- Gladstone, J., Dumbrell, G., Leslie, B., Koster, A., Young, M., & Ismaila, A. (2014). Understanding worker–parent engagement in child protection casework. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 56–64. doi:[10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.06.002)
- Griffiths, A., Royse, D., Culver, K., Piescher, K., & Zhang, Y. (2017). Who stays, who goes, who knows? A state-wide survey of child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 77, 110–117. doi:[10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.04.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.04.012)
- He, A. S., Phillips, J. D., Lizano, E. L., Rienks, S., & Leake, R. (2018). Examining internal and external job resources in child welfare: Protecting against caseworker burnout. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 81, 48–59. doi:[10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.04.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.04.013)
- Health & Human Services (HHS). (2022). *Biden-Harris administration awards \$103 million in American rescue plan funds to reduce burnout and promote mental health and wellness among health care workforce*.
- Johnson, S., Cooper, C., Cartwright, S., Donald, I., Taylor, P., & Millet, C. (2005). The experience of work-related stress across occupations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 20(2), 178–187. doi:[10.1108/02683940510579803](https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940510579803)
- Kim, J. (2018). The effects of relative organizational tenure on job behaviors in the public sector. *Public Personnel Management*, 47(3), 335–355. doi:[10.1177/0091026017753646](https://doi.org/10.1177/0091026017753646)
- Kristensen, T. S., Borritz, M., Villadsen, E., & Christensen, K. B. (2005). The Copenhagen burnout inventory: A new tool for the assessment of burnout. *Work & Stress*, 19(3), 192–207. doi:[10.1080/02678370500297720](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678370500297720)
- Leake, R., Rienks, S., & Obermann, A. (2017). A deeper look at burnout in the child welfare workforce. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 41(5), 492–502.
- Leiter, M. P. (1993). Burnout as a developmental process: Consideration of models. In W. B. Schaufeli, C. Maslach, & T. Marek (Eds.), *Professional burnout: Recent developments in theory and research* (pp. 237–250). Taylor & Francis.
- Linos, E., Ruffini, K., & Wilcoxen, S. (2022). Reducing burnout and resignations among frontline workers: A field experiment. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 32(3), 473–488. doi:[10.1093/jopart/muab042](https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muab042)
- Lizano, E. L. (2015). Examining the impact of job burnout on the health and well-being of human service workers: A systematic review and synthesis. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 39(3), 167–181. doi:[10.1080/23303131.2015.1014122](https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2015.1014122)
- Lizano, E. L., & Mor Barak, M. E. (2012). Workplace demands and resources as antecedents of job burnout among public child welfare workers: A longitudinal study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(9), 1769–1776. doi:[10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.02.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.02.006)
- Lüdtke, O., & Robitzsch, A. (2021). A critique of the random intercept cross-lagged panel model. *PsyArxiv*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/6f85c>
- Mäkikangas, A., Kinnunen, U., Feldt, T., & Schaufeli, W. (2016). The longitudinal development of employee well-being: A systematic review. *Work & Stress*, 30(1), 46–70. doi:[10.1080/02678373.2015.1126870](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2015.1126870)
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. E. (1981). The measurement of experienced burnout. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2(2), 99–113. doi:[10.1002/job.4030020205](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030020205)

- McFadden, P., Mallett, J., & Leiter, M. (2018). Extending the two-process model of burnout in child protection workers: The role of resilience in mediating burnout via organizational factors of control, values, fairness, reward, workload, and community relationships. *Stress and Health*, 34(1), 72–83. doi:10.1002/smi.2763
- Mor Barak, M. E., Nissly, J. A., & Levin, A. (2001). Antecedents to retention and turnover among child welfare, social work, and other human service employees: What can we learn from past research? A review and metanalysis. *Social Service Review*, 75(4), 625–661. doi:10.1086/323166
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, Committee on Systems Approaches to Improve Patient Care by Supporting Clinician Well-Being. (2019). *Taking action against clinician burnout: A systems approach to professional well-being*. National Academies Press. <https://nam.edu/systems-approaches-to-improve-patient-care-by-supporting-clinician-well-being/>
- Nicholson, N. (1984). A theory of work role transitions. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 29(2), 172–191. doi:10.2307/2393172
- Office of the Surgeon General. (2022). *Addressing health worker burnout: The U.S. surgeon general's advisory on building a thriving health workforce*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/health-worker-wellbeing-advisory.pdf>.
- Parker, C., Baltes, B. B., Young, S. A., Huff, J. W., Altmann, R. A., Lacost, H. A. & Roberts, J. E. (2003). Relationships between psychological climate perceptions and work outcomes: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24(4), 389–416. doi:10.1002/job.198
- Phillips, J. D., Lizano, E. L., He, A. S., & Leake, R. (2020). Factors associated with caseworker burnout in child welfare: Does tenure matter? *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 11(2), 261–283. doi:10.1086/709673
- Potter, C. C., Leake, R., Longworth-Reed, L., Altschul, I., & Rienks, S. (2016). Measuring organizational health in child welfare agencies. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 61, 31–39. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.11.002
- Radey, M., & Stanley, L. (2018). “Hands on” versus “empty”: Supervision experiences of frontline child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 91, 128–136. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.05.037
- Radey, M., & Stanley, L. (2019). Beginning the “never-ending” learning process: Training experiences of newly-hired child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104, 104378. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.06.013
- Radey, M., Wilke, D. J., Zhang, X., & Randolph, K. (2024). Timing and predictors of frontline worker departures from child welfare: A survival analysis. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 15(3), 513–538. <https://doi.org/10.1086/721663>
- Savicki, V., & Cooley, E. J. (1994). Burnout in child protective service workers: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15(7), 655–666. doi:10.1002/job.4030150708
- Schaufeli, W. B., & Greenglass, E. R. (2001). Introduction to special issue on burnout and health. *Psychology & Health*, 16(5), 501–510. doi:10.1080/08870440108405523
- Singer, J. D., & Willett, J. B. (2003). *Applied longitudinal data analysis: Modeling change and event occurrence*. Oxford University Press.
- Travis, D. J., Lizano, E. L., & Mor Barak, M. E. (2016). I’m so stressed!: A longitudinal model of stress, burnout and engagement among social workers in child welfare settings. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46(4), 1076–1095. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bct205
- Voss, T., & Kunter, M. (2020). Reality shock” of beginning teachers? Changes in teacher candidates’ emotional exhaustion and constructivist-oriented beliefs. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 71(3), 292–306. doi:10.1177/0022487119839700
- Wilke, D. J., Radey, M., & Magruder, L. (2017). Recruitment and retention of child welfare workers in longitudinal research: Successful strategies from the Florida study of professionals for safe families. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 78, 122–128. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.05.013
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2019). *Burnout an “occupational phenomenon”: International classification of diseases*.