

"Child Welfare Workers: Who They Are and How They View the Child Welfare System," by Maristela Zell, *Child Welfare*, January / February 2006 summarizes a secondary analysis of data gathered as part of the Case Planning for Children Entering State Custody as Infants project, a study of children entering out of home care in New York City and Chicago in the mid - 1990s. The 492 caseworkers whose views of their child welfare systems are the subject of this article were interviewed at length in 1996 -97; this article reports on the main themes in the caseworkers' responses to 4 open ended questions. The 492 caseworkers worked for public or private agencies responsible for planning for children in foster care; each of these caseworkers had a child on her / his caseload who had been in foster care for longer than 1 year but not longer than 4 years. Approximately two thirds of these caseworkers were African American; slightly less than one fifth were Caucasian and 11% were Latinos. "The majority, 82%, held bachelors degrees, while 10% held masters degrees in areas other than social work, and 7% held Master in Social Work degrees."

This group of caseworkers was relatively experienced. Forty percent had more than five years of child welfare experience; 40% had 2-5 years experience, 11% had 1-2 years of experience and 9% had less than 1 year of experience in child welfare. Three quarters of the caseworkers were women.

The caseworkers interviewed in this study worked in agencies with high caseloads just prior to the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, and they worked with babies placed in foster care for longer than one year. It is a safe bet that the majority of these infants were headed for adoption. "The single most negative theme that emerged from this analysis, described by more than half of the respondents, was that children's basic needs are not met by the system." Some caseworkers described children harmed by their experiences in foster care and caseworkers talked about the lack of adequate placement and adoptive resources. A third of the caseworkers "identified intrasystem contention (i.e., interagency conflict) as a troubling theme." Conflicts with court personnel and frequent disagreements among service providers weighed heavily in caseworkers' views of the system. "Twenty - five percent of the caseworkers mentioned that child welfare casework is plagued by a hindering bureaucracy, as they spoke about "red tape" -- the increasing regulation, rules and protocols present in their work -- as well as the system's tendency to treat cases as numbers, not as people."

These caseworkers expressed a great deal of ambivalence regarding birth parents. Almost a quarter of the caseworkers stated that the child welfare system could do more to help birth parents. However, a third described birth parents' characteristics in unflattering terms such as lack of self esteem, manipulative, inability to plan ahead. Approximately a sixth of caseworkers stated that the courts give birth parents too much time to correct the problems which led to their child's placement in foster care. Some

caseworkers were critical of their co-workers' professional competence, especially when their peers failed to address the issues leading to placement, did not set clear limits with parents or failed to engage in concurrent planning.

Approximately 40% of respondents talked about burnout as a response to stress and discouragement, overwhelming workload demands and the public's view of caseworkers as incompetent. Slightly more than a third of caseworkers "described how daily emergencies, redundant paperwork, and excessive court dates cause them to lose focus on the child's well being or the goal of the case."

The authors comment that "The findings suggest that caseworkers view the system as ineffective and not fulfilling its mission." However, this may be the response of caseworkers in 2 overwhelmed under-resourced systems. The author notes that in both New York City and Illinois, caseloads have been greatly reduced in recent years; in addition, the number of children in out of home care in these systems have been greatly reduced thereby reducing the demands on their foster care systems, the courts and service providers. The author speculates that "the pressure to work more diligently and persistently to facilitate rapid achievement of permanency may present new challenges and a different source of stress." "Clearly, further research needs to determine whether AFSA and related policy changes at the state and local level have had positive or negative effects on caseworkers' views."

This is one of the few articles in recent years to carefully examine the views of child welfare practitioners about the system they work in. It is apparent that caseworkers in these 2 child welfare systems were extremely critical of their agencies and indeed the total child welfare system; and it is hard to believe that in many instances these views did not negatively impact their commitment and resolve. It would be fascinating to know how the dramatic changes (most would say improvements) in these 2 child welfare systems during the past decade have effected caseworkers' perspectives on the agencies they work for and their views of the child welfare system's ability to fulfill its mission.