



TRELLIS SOCIETY

A Thriving Social Service Sector: How Might Organizations Support The Early Career Social Worker

Actionable Strategies for Human Service Organizations

Prepared for the Trellis Society
Catamount: A Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers
Researcher and Author: Ayden Osvath
Mount Royal University
June 2026

A Note on This Brief

This document was produced as part of the Catamount Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers at Mount Royal University, in community partnership with the Trellis Society and under the faculty mentorship of Dr. Leda Stawnychko.

The author, Ayden Osvath, has a Bachelor in Communication, major in Information Design and minor in Social Innovation. The findings in this Brief are not drawn from personal experience as a social service practitioner. Instead, they are drawn from and grounded on the author's analysis of a structured literature review and a review of best practices on reflective practice, mentorship, burnout, and early career support in social work and other social service fields.

This Sector Brief is for human service sector leaders (directors and senior managers), funders, and policy advocates working on early career workforce challenges across Canada and internationally. It is meant for internal use at Trellis to inform leadership decisions, sharing with Trellis sector partners, and for use in a Catamount Fellowship portfolio.

Researcher: Ayden Osvath, Catamount Fellowship for Emerging Changemakers

Community Partner: Kate Heney, Trellis Society

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Leda Stawnychko, Mount Royal University

Executive Summary

Social service organizations across Canada, and internationally, face a shared and growing challenge: early career social workers are leaving the sector and the organizations that train them are absorbing the human, organizational, and financial cost of that turnover. Further, excessive turnover rates negatively impact the individuals and families served by social service organizations as the remaining social workers have increased caseloads, continuity of care may fail, and the building of trust may erode, each of which may lead to poorer outcomes. [1, 2]

The first two to three years of practice are documented in Canada and internationally as the highest-risk period for departure from the social work profession, with 20 percent to 40 percent turnover rates across the child and family welfare sectors. The research also notes that up to 60 percent of social workers in high stress sectors, such as child welfare and mental health, will report burnout. [1, 3, 4, 5, 6]

This Sector Brief synthesizes findings from a community partnered inquiry with the Trellis Society, in Calgary, Alberta that included a structured literature review, a review of best practices on reflective practice, mentorship, burnout, early career support in social work and other social service fields, and community engagement sessions. The analysis is grounded in systems thinking and identifies systemic conditions that drive early departure from the practice, examines why conventional responses have been insufficient, and presents a research grounded framework for a high leverage, low resource intervention that organizations can control and rapidly implement.

This Sector Brief notes that supporting early career social workers to thrive is not only, or even primarily, a matter of compensation and caseloads, even though addressing these two issues will help. Based on the academic research, an impactful intervention is developing organizational support for designing, creating, and fostering relational infrastructure, developmental supervision and mentorship structures, and reflective practice cultures. These tools will allow capable early career social workers to develop and build capacity, resilience, and skills that will help them thrive and grow. [1, 2, 7, 8, 9]

Key Finding

One of the highest leverage interventions that most human service organizations may be able to introduce within organizational realities is a formal, structured Reflective Practice Mentorship program. Such a program takes the form of a dedicated, non-evaluative space for early career social workers to process the emotional and relational dimensions of their practice. The key features of such a program is that it is separate from administrative supervision and provides individualized support to the social worker. The value of this

intervention is that it can be introduced at low cost, draws on existing organizational strengths, is evidence based, adaptable, and scalable.

1. The Problem: Why Early Career Social Workers Leave

The human service sector has a well-documented, international history of retention challenges. The focus of this Sector Brief is the extremely high turnover rates that are found in the first three years of a social service workers professional career, and an intervention that may address this specific problem. What the research has documented is that these high turnover rates are not necessarily a function of poor hiring practices, candidates, organizations, or training programs. It is about filling a necessary gap between an early career social workers theoretical knowledge and the lived experience and tools that are required for the early career social worker to learn and understand how to process and unpack the complexity and emotionality of working in the child and family protective services sector. As these essential tools are developed and built, through the course of practice, the early career social worker will develop their individual capacity and resilience. Not only will the early career social workers become better equipped to meet the demands and needs of the families who are served, but organizational resilience may also be strengthened leading to improved overall organizational outcomes. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

1.1 The Theory-to-Practice Gap

Academic preparation for social service work equips graduates with frameworks, tools, ethics, and theoretical knowledge. What academic preparation is unable to do is provide the lived experience of professional practice that may help fully prepare the individual social worker for the emotional and relational reality of practice in the front lines, especially. This is especially so when the early career social worker is dealing with vulnerable children and families. International research consistently documents a real gap between theory and practice with the result that the new social worker may not feel equipped for the reality of practice, leading to an early exit from the practice field. Areas of weakness commonly identified in new graduates include formation of professional identity, management of emotions, managing demanding conversations with clients, managing authority, managing power structures, collaboration, coping with stress, and resilience and well-being. [5, 8]

1.2 The Supervision Gap

Organizations must not only grapple with funding challenges, but they must do so in an environment where the organization must meet funder expectations on outcomes, satisfy regulatory and ethical obligations, manage risks, and administer increasingly complex caseloads. Research demonstrates that formal supervision in this setting will typically default to administrative oversight of the early career social

worker that focuses on case management, documentation and process review, goal setting, outcomes, and performance monitoring. The developmental and reflective dimensions of supervision, which research consistently identifies as protective against burnout, promotes well-being, and builds capacity and resilience are frequently missing. Under managerialist conditions, organizations will use supervision as a managerial and administrative tool rather than a safe space for critical reflection. When supervisors are responsible for monitoring performance metrics and conducting evaluations the early career social worker is less likely to raise or address vulnerabilities that may be seen as a personal weakness or failing. Formal safe spaces for critical reflection are often missing or not practiced. [2, 9, 10]

1.3 Structural Drivers of Burnout

Structural conditions of the sector, in which organizations must operate, also drive early departure. Five recurring structural drivers of burnout are identified in the research: systemic underfunding; emotional labour; erosion of autonomy; gendered expectations; and precarious employment. These conditions create an environment of constraint, moral dissonance, and emotional overload which impacts even the most committed workers as they struggle to sustain practice. [6]

Even when resources may be available to assist the front line social worker, they may not be used due to 'recovery paradox' in which the social worker is least likely to engage in recovery activities even when they are in need of assistance. Quantitative workload, work guilt, and overcommitment compound emotional exhaustion in ways that individual self-care alone cannot resolve. [11]

1.4 Individual Responsibility and the Culture of Blame

Research tells us that burnout in high stress practices such as child welfare may impact up to 60 percent of social workers in this field of practice. The academic study of burnout is often framed as a function of personal resilience rather than underlying structural causes. This framing tends to shift responsibility and the blame for managing and coping with stress and burnout onto the individual social worker rather than the structural causes that may lead to high stress and burnout. Since capacity and resilience must be developed and built by the individual research tends to focus on individual traits, skills, and resources rather than the socio-cultural processes needed to support the development and building of capacity and resilience. Further, research on individual traits misses the point that child welfare organizations can develop organizational resilience when the organization builds, supports, and promotes social networks and a culture of reflection across all levels of the organization, and especially so among the early career social workers. In other words, the building of individual capacity and resilience, leading to organizational capacity and resilience, should be an interactional and transactional process. [2, 5, 6, 8, 10]

1.5 The Cost of Inaction

Turnover in child welfare and similar high stress settings is among the highest in the social work field, at rates of 20 to 40 percent per year. There is a financial cost to such turnover rates. Further, each departure disrupts continuity of care for the families being served, undermines the development of trusting relationships that may take months or even years to build, and increases stress for the remaining workforce, who must absorb the caseload and emotional weight of those who have left. Similar to above, turnover is reinforced when turnover is attributed to the individual social worker's failure to manage complexity, rather than the structural conditions that organizations and social workers must operate within. [1, 5, 6]

2. Three Systems Thinking Tools to Help Understand the Research

The findings of the literature review were analyzed through three systems thinking tools to inform the learning of the Fellowship members and to help make visible the underlying systemic dynamics that produce and sustain high turnover rates in the early career social worker. Each tool examines the system from a different perspective and together help to create a visual understanding of a small portion of the system within which social service organizations and early career social workers, that work with children and families, currently function.

2.1 The Systems Map

The systems map is a powerful visual storytelling tool that helps translate a complex and messy reality into a model that traces the feedback loops between organizational culture, organizational supports, human vulnerability, and socio-political factors and their impacts on burnout and retention. This map illustrates how four groups of organizational inputs (organizational supports (coaches, mentors, sponsors, supervisors, role models), organizational culture (constructive vs. passive defensive), socio-political context (resources, caseloads, funding, ideology) and human vulnerability (organizational mission, values and goals)) either build or undermine the early career social worker's resilience over time.

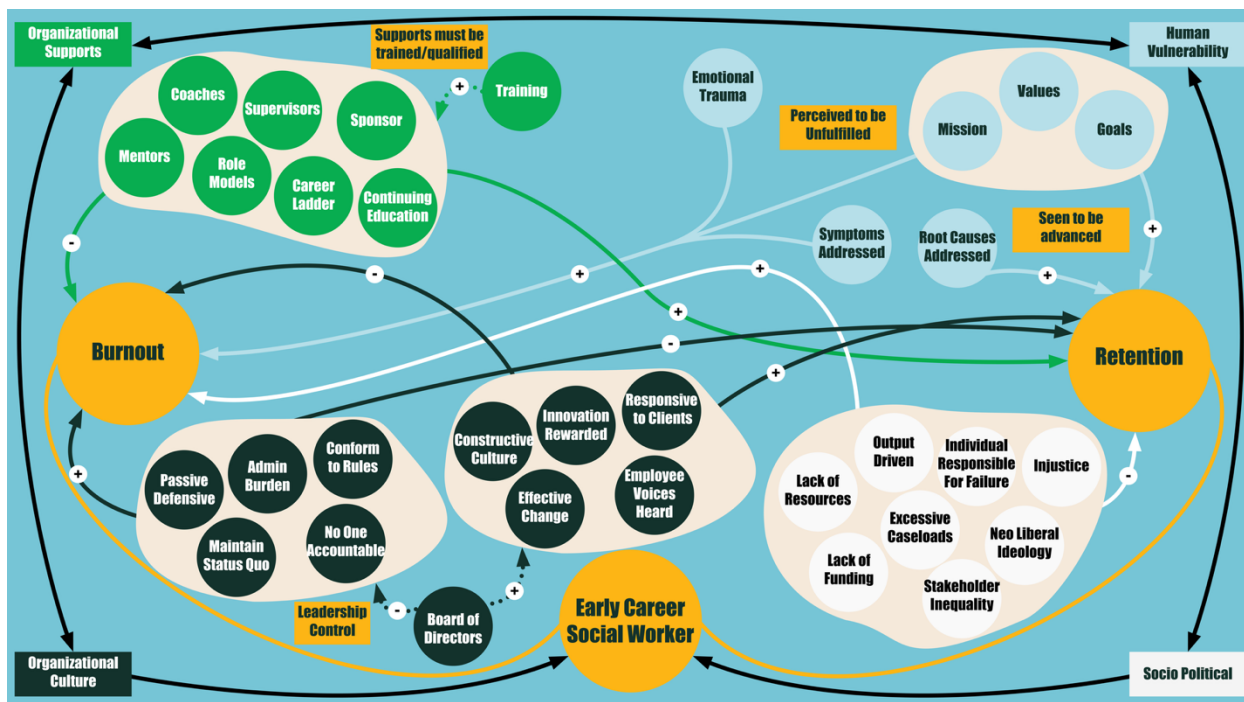


Figure 1: Systems map of organizational and contextual feedback loops impacting the early career social workers burnout and retention.

What the Systems Map Reveals

As with any complex or wicked problem, burnout and retention of the early career social worker does not depend on any single variable but on complex feedback loops that influence different outcomes. To reduce burnout and increase retention a key leverage point is incorporating within the organizational culture relational, reflective, and developmental supports for the early career social worker. Establishing and promoting effective supports is within the control of boards and senior leadership and can be designed within existing organizational resources, while structural variables, such as ideology, funding, caseloads, and social inequities, are slower to change and outside the direct control of the organization.

2.2 The Iceberg Model

The iceberg model explores the complexity of the problem through an analytical lens using the metaphor of an iceberg to organize the complexity by starting with visible surface level events and then identifying the underlying patterns of behaviour, systemic structures and mental models that all work together to produce and sustain the visible problem.

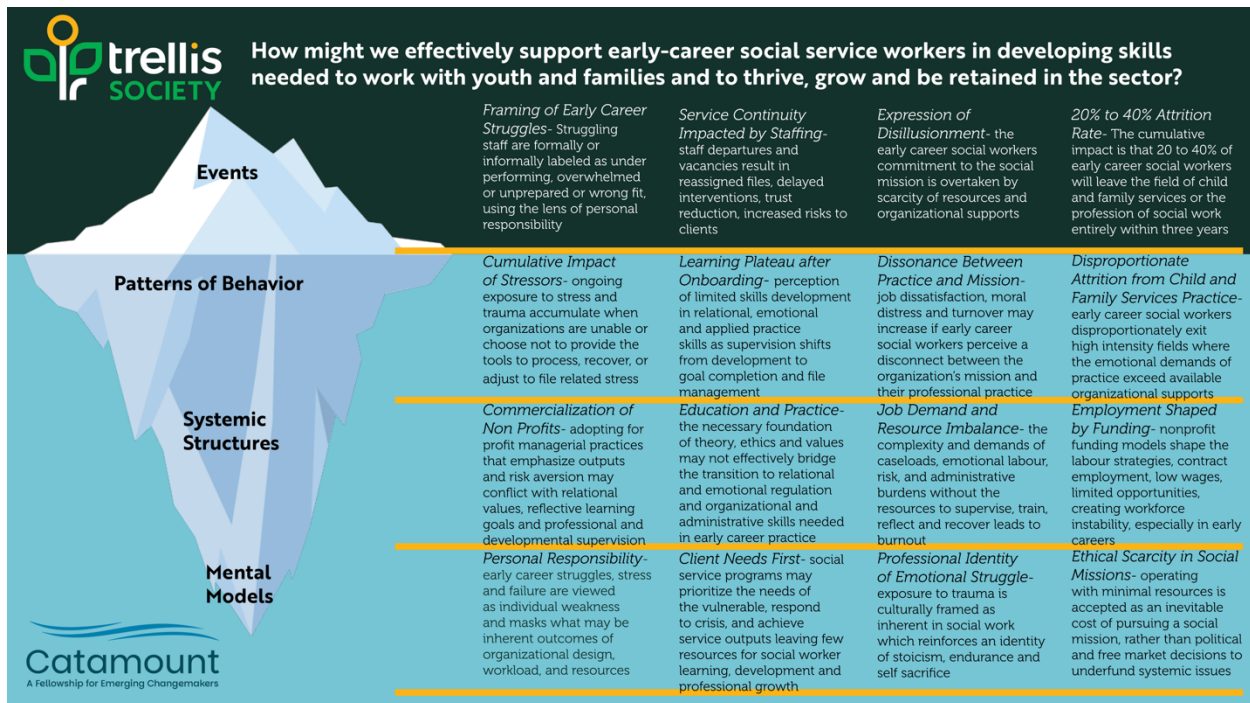


Figure 2: Iceberg model of the early career social service worker attrition: events, patterns, structures, and mental models

What the Iceberg Model Reveals

Altering mental models, while difficult is the most powerful means to effect change. The cultural beliefs that early career struggles reflect individual weakness may mask inherent outcomes of organizational designs, lack of resources and high workloads. Similarly, the cultural belief that exposure to secondary trauma is inherent to social work reinforces the social workers sense that they must endure through self-sacrifice. These mental models may hide the fact that child welfare organizations can develop organizational resilience when the organization builds, supports, and promotes social networks and a culture of reflection. Naming and shifting these mental models is a foundation to sustainable change.

2.3 The Impacts Gap Canvas

The Impacts Gap Canvas is a structured visualization that helps identify “how” to build meaningful solutions to the problem landscape. By examining the problem landscape and comparing it to the desired solution state, this canvas helps identify the actual gaps between the problem and solution. Critically, the canvas also identifies existing resources that may already be in place or that may be developed and put in place that can be used to design an intervention to help support and retain the early career social worker.



Figure 3: Impacts Gap Canvas that maps the distance between current early career social worker outcomes and the goal of thriving and growing social workers.

What the Canvas Reveals

An organization's experienced workforce may be an underutilized resource that may help build capacity and resilience in the early career social worker. Utilizing senior practitioners as reflective practice mentors in a formal reflective practice mentorship program may be the means to narrow the gap between current state and desired state, without requiring new hires or significant new investment.

3. What the Research Tells Us, In Broad Strokes

The following synthesis is grounded on the literature review of peer reviewed academic research that was completed as part of this Fellowship's research process. A summary of the academic papers and what they say about the problem landscape and the solution landscape is found in the research dossier that is attached as an appendix to this Sector Brief. This synthesis continues the theme of examining the two landscapes: the problem landscape (what drives early departure and burnout) and the solution landscape (what interventions may increase retention and reduce burnout).

3.1 The Problem Landscape

Theme A: Managerialist Drift in Supervision and Practice

Research across multiple international studies has found a recurring theme of social service organizations adopting a managerial, or passive-defensive, organizational culture and practice. Resource constraints, regulatory requirements, funding requirements, an audit culture, and increasing caseloads allows for organizational drift toward managerial control focused on processes, documentation, outcome measurement, and risk avoidance. Supervision of the early career social worker follows this organizational drift towards case management, goal setting, and performance evaluation. As the drift takes hold over organizational culture the administrative role of supervision takes precedence over, and even replaces, the developmental, relational, and reflective functions of supervision that research suggests remains a critical tool for supporting the early career social worker. The result is that the safe spaces (that remain unconditionally supportive instead of judgemental and evaluative) required to fully support and properly develop reflective and relational understanding and thinking are often missing in the early career social worker's developmental path. [2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10]

Theme B: Structural and Organizational Drivers of Burnout

The academic study of burnout in the high stress practice areas of social services, such as child and family welfare and protection, often focuses on individual traits and skills. Yet, the academic research also demonstrates that burnout is driven by and a symptom of systemic underfunding, emotional labour, erosion of autonomy, precarious employment, chronic caseloads, and other structural drivers. An individual's inherent resilience, no matter how strong, cannot fully counter these structural drivers of burnout. A further layer of complexity is the recovery paradox where the structural conditions leading to burnout are compounded when the social workers most in need of recovery are least likely to utilize recovery tools or engage in recovery activities. [6, 2, 10, 11, 4, 12]

Theme C: The Gap Between Theory and Practice

Early career social workers across international studies not only demonstrate being underprepared but report feeling underprepared for the relational and emotional reality of front line practice, especially in the child and family welfare sectors. Areas of common weakness include formation of professional identity, management of emotions, managing demanding conversations with clients, managing authority, managing power structures, collaboration, coping with stress, and resilience and well-being. These are skills that are developed through lived professional experience, as opposed to academic theory. The literature also identifies that the first three to five years of a social workers professional practice is the critical window to develop the relational and reflective skills needed to thrive and grow in the social work profession. [5, 8]

Theme D: Quality of the Supervisory Relationship as a Retention Factor

The research consistently identifies supervision and the support of supervisors as a critical factor for reducing early career attrition rates. However, the research also demonstrates that it is not the existence of supervision that matters, instead the quality and form of supervision and the supervisory relationship is what supports retention. Supervision and supervisors that are proactive in identifying symptoms of stress, that are compassionate not judgmental and build a safe space to explore difficulty will positively drive retention in the field. On the other hand, poorly trained supervisors and administrative supervision that focuses on process, evaluation, enforcement, and even punishment leads to a social worker culture based on survival mode that reduces retention. [2, 3, 12]

3.2 The Solution Landscape

The following summary of the solution landscape to reduce burnout and improve retention rates is based on an analysis of the academic research but is also focused on changes and interventions at the organizational level within the control of organizational leadership. This summary does not intend to suggest that other systemic drivers of burnout and attrition may be ignored. Instead, the solutions landscape below are meant to reflect the reality of existing organizational constraints. Further, the following solutions landscape are not meant to be prescriptive. Instead, these themes may be a starting point for organizational discussion and decision making.

Theme E: A Structured and Formal Reflective Practice Mentorship

Reflective supervision and formal mentorship is discussed and considered across multiple academic studies and has the strongest evidence base and support for an organizational level intervention. As discussed above, research suggests that reflective supervision builds capacity and resilience, develops emotional reserves, improves mental and physical well-being, and enhances the quality of practice. A formal reflective supervision program does not assume that the early career social worker arrives at practice with inherent capacity and resilience. Instead, capacity and resilience is built through support and guidance as the early career social worker develops the relational and reflective skills needed to explore, process, and integrate complexity and difficulty into their practice.

To create the safe place that is necessary to develop relational and reflective skills it is recommended that reflective supervision be administered through a formal mentorship program that separates the evaluative administrative supervision from reflective supervision. Both forms of supervision coexist, in parallel streams. The additional organizational benefit of a formal reflective mentorship program is that mentorship in social work produces measurable improvements in career success and satisfaction for both mentees and mentors. [2, 5, 8, 12, 13]

Theme F: Constructive Organizational Cultures

The academic research suggests that the constructive organizational culture outperforms the passive-defensive organizational culture on retention measurements. The constructive culture emphasizes self-actualization, achievement, responsiveness to client needs, competence training, and the opportunity to advance within the organization. The necessary feature for the constructive culture is leadership that engages with front line social workers and allow the front line to participate in decision-making, provide autonomy to experiment and try new approaches, recognize achievements, and strives to align client and organisational outcomes and outputs with organizational missions and values. These organizational features are documented to increase affective commitment and reduce turnover. Further, organizational environment is identified as the strongest predictor of organizational commitment, even more so than compensation or workload satisfaction. [Chenot, Wang, Roulston]

Theme G: Workforce Investment and Supervisory Training

Investment in supervisory and management training, structured induction, caseload protection in the early years, and ongoing professional development consistently appear in the solution landscape across international studies. The proper training of supervisors is needed most in those organizations where there is no formal and independent reflective supervisory process. In these instances, reducing burnout and increasing retention will depend on the administrative supervisor's own capacity to competently model self-care, proactively identify early signs of stress, engage in non-judgmental communication, and create safe spaces for difficult conversations. These are skills that supervisors can learn and develop through training.

For the early career social worker, not only do they have to cope with the reality of front line practice, but they may also have to deal with a perception (especially for the post-secondary trained social worker) that they are trained to hit the ground running. This perception may often be found in organizations influenced by managerialist or passive-defensive management styles that may value the specialized social worker versus the generalist produced by post-secondary institutions. Further, as fixed term contracts become more prevalent, ongoing training and continual professional development may not be offered. To meet organizational needs and to foster the early career social workers perception of being a valued member of the organization, the research suggests that early-career social workers have greater success and higher retention rates when the organization supports and promotes intensive and structured induction, caseload protection for the first two years and inhouse training and continuing professional development. [3, 9, 10]

4. Identifying High-Leverage, Low-Resource Interventions

The following table organizes potential interventions based on estimated feasibility within typical organizational constraints and potential impact on retention and wellbeing. This is meant to be a tool to help lead organizational discussions on where to focus limited time and resources.

Intervention	Feasibility	Potential Impact	Research Base
Structured Reflective Practice Mentorship Program (formal pairing, non-evaluative, parallel to administrative supervision)	High Utilizes existing staff and low financial cost	High Significant academic research on high value and positive outcomes	Addresses themes A, B, C, D Applies theme E
Increased supervisor training in relational and developmental functions	Medium-High Review of staff qualifications, cost of training	Medium-High Improved capacity to better identify and meet needs of early career social workers	Addresses themes A, D Applies theme G
Constructive culture interventions	Medium-Low Leadership must buy in, monetary and time cost to implement	High Strongest predictor of organizational commitment	Addresses themes A, B Applies theme F
Structured induction and continual professional development	Medium-Low Monetary and time cost to train staff	High Helps narrow the theory and practice gap	Addresses theme C Applies theme G
Caseload protection in first two years of practice	Medium-Low Additional staff requirement	Medium Addresses one systemic issue	Addresses theme B Applies theme G
Routine wellbeing monitoring (e.g. ProQOL) with response protocols	High freely available instruments	Medium-Low May help identify symptoms of burnout	Addresses theme B Applies theme G

Table 1: Interventions classified by feasibility and estimated impact on retention rates and well-being

4.1 A Potential High-Leverage Starting Point

Social service and non-profit organizations may have limited organizational capacity to quickly introduce certain interventions, let alone multiple interventions, without specific funding to do so. One intervention that may be introduced relatively quickly, with minimal monetary costs and most strongly supported by academic research is the implementation of a structured Reflective Practice Mentorship program. A Pilot program has been developed for the Trellis Society. This intervention attempts to:

- Address burnout and early departure from the practice of social work by focusing on providing the necessary tools for early career social workers to develop the relational and reflective skills needed to explore, process, and integrate complexity and difficulty into their professional practice.
- Draw on existing organizational capacity by utilizing the knowledge and wisdom of experienced practitioners who are already employed by the organization.
- Create a safe place for the early career social worker to explore difficulty and vulnerability outside of the administrative supervision and evaluation process.
- Provide individualized support to address the specific mentee's developmental needs.
- Monitor the individual mentee's mental and physical health and well-being.
- Build organizational capacity and resilience through individual growth.
- Improve career success and satisfaction for both the mentees and mentors participating in the program.
- Measure and track outcomes on well-being and retention rates.
- Adaptable and scalable to meet shifting organizational needs.

This intervention can be designed and implemented without significant financial investment. It does, however, require deliberate organizational design that include the selection and preparation of the mentors, establishing pairing rules that promote a safe place to explore emotions, confidentiality, allotted time for the mentee and mentor pair to meet at least once every four weeks, structuring sessions to remain reflective rather than drifting to administrative content, and tracking outcomes over time. The Fellowship has developed prototype design of a Reflective Practice Mentorship that the Trellis Society may be prepared to share with peer organizations. [2, 13]

5. A Call to Collective Action

As this Sector Brief emphasizes, burnout and high turnover rates among early career social workers is not unique to Trellis society. It is a problem that is seen internationally, especially in the high stress practice of child and family protection

and services. The academic research is clear that burnout and retention rates for the early career social worker are impacted by the:

- Existing gaps between theory and practice.
- Failure to appreciate that capacity and resilience must be nurtured, built, and developed by the 'individual' but not 'individually' without any formal supports and mentorship.
- Drift of supervision from reflective and relation practice toward managerial and administrative functions.

As the structural pressures on the practice of social work is sector wide the response should also be sector wide.

Organizational Leaders

If an organization is dealing with burnout and high turnover rates of their early career social workers, it should not be assumed that this is a function of poor hiring practices, poor training not necessarily a function of poor hiring practices, poor educational outcomes, or personal weakness or flaws in the new hires. Certain skills needed by the early career social worker, to thrive and grow, can only be developed through the lived experience of professional practice, but to process, understand and integrate this lived experience into their professional practice may require guidance and mentorship. Organizations should look to their experienced social workers, to existing supervision practices, to onboarding and induction processes, and continual professional development opportunities and consider how these resources can be redesigned and redeployed to support the developmental needs of the early career social worker.

The Trellis Society's Reflective Mentorship Practice Program is one such designed intervention that some peer organizations may adapt. Other organizations, with different needs may need to design other interventions, and this Sector Brief provides some examples that should be explored.

Sector Funders

The research reviewed in this Sector Brief suggests that the burnout and retention challenge is primarily a function of missing supports or the manner in which existing supports are deployed. Investments in supervisory and management training, continuing professional development training, peer learning networks, mentorship capacity, and reflective practice infrastructure may help reduce burnout and improve retention than additional investments in recruitment. [7]

Funders may be able to improve outcomes for children and families served by this sector by allocating additional funding for workforce wellbeing and developmental supports or in some cases to change funding policies to include these programs as an eligible program expense.

An Invitation

This Sector Brief is meant to kickstart the exploration of feasible interventions to address burnout and high turnover rates among early career social workers. Collective exploration and action are a means to drive systemic change. If you wish to explore this issue further, please reach out to the Trellis Society.

References

- 1 Brown, A. R., Walters, J. E., & Jones, A. E. (2019). Pathways to Retention: Job Satisfaction, Burnout, & Organizational Commitment among Social Workers. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 16(6), 577–594. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2019.1658006>
- 2 Russ, E., Lonne, B., & Lynch, D. (2020). Increasing child protection workforce retention through promoting a relational-reflective framework for resilience. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110 (Pt 3), Article 104245. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104245>
- 3 Chenot, D., Benton, A. D., & Kim, H. (2009). The Influence of Supervisor Support, Peer Support, and Organizational Culture Among Early Career Social Workers in Child Welfare Services. *Child Welfare*, 88(5), 129–147. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45400442>
- 4 Roulston, A., Mackle, D., Ross, J., Montgomery, L., MacDermott, D., Boyle, S., McFadden, P., & Hayes, D. (2025). Promoting staff retention in social work: Identifying the 'push' and the 'pull' factors from the perspective of newly qualified social workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf152>
- 5 Tham, P., McFadden, P., Russ, E., Baldschun, A., Blakeman, P., & Griffiths, A. (2023). How do we prepare students for the challenges of social work? Examples from six countries around the world. *Social Work Education*, 42(4), 494–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1976135>
- 6 Pazer, S. (2025). Burnout among social workers structural causes, coping strategies and organizational interventions. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies* 7(1), 583–587 (2025). <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7.i1h.233>

- 7 Wang, R. (2022). Organizational Commitment in the Nonprofit Sector and the Underlying Impact of Stakeholders and Organizational Support. *Voluntas* 33, 538–549 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00336-8>
- 8 Bostock, L., Shephard, L., & Grant, L. (2024). What Knowledge and Skills Do Early Career Social Workers Need to Practice Effectively With Children and Families? *Child & Family Social Work*, 31(1), 521–532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13306>
- 9 Mack, B. (2022). Addressing social workers' stress, burnout, and resiliency: A qualitative study with supervisors. *Social Work Research*, 46(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svab032>
- 10 Hunt, S., Tregurtha, M., Kuruvila, A., Lowe, S., Smith, K. (2017) Transition to professional social work practice: The first three years. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 19(2), 139-154. <https://journal.anzswwer.org/index.php/advances/article/view/176>
- 11 Paquin, A., Giroux, A., Radziszewski, S., Lauzier-Jobin, F., Coulombe, S., Houle, J., & Meunier, S. (2025). Trajectories of well-being and burnout among health and social services community workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal study of job demands and resources. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 53(8). <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.70052>
- 12 Cleece, K., Cheneler, B., Harrison, J., & Hill, J. E. (2025). Relational practice, a critical component for successful social work. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2492402>
- 13 Collins, P. M. (1994). Does mentorship among social workers make a difference? An empirical investigation of career outcomes. *Social Work*, 39(4), 413–419. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23717052>



How might we effectively support early-career social service workers in developing skills needed to work with youth and families and to thrive, grow and be retained in the sector?

Research Dossier
Researcher: Ayden Osvath
Catamount Fellowship 2026
Literature Review
June 7, 2026



Organizational commitment in the nonprofit sector and the underlying impact of stakeholders and organizational support

Wang, R. (2022). Organizational Commitment in the Nonprofit Sector and the Underlying Impact of Stakeholders and Organizational Support. *Voluntas* 33, 538–549 (2022).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00336-8>

This US study of over 200 nonprofit sector employees provides a knowledge base on employee turnover rates, satisfaction, and engagement in the nonprofit sector. This study suggests that increasing “affective commitment” increases an employee’s identification and emotional attachment to an organization based on shared values and goals. Perceived respect and value lead to stronger commitments to organizational values and social missions. This study found that employees focus on an organization’s engaged leadership, community engagement, and daily business operations, rather than wages, as factors that influence organizational commitment. How leadership manages stakeholder relationships is significant. Employees expect the Board and executives to encourage employee participation in decision making. Hearing and acting on employee voices increases employee commitment. Formalized operations and procedures that encourage communication, innovation and accountability increases employee commitment. Mission alignment, through engagement with community partners increases employee motivation. Professional development and career advancement matter more than wages. Supporting employee mental health is critical. The study determines that executive management will foster employee engagement by creating a participatory work environment that values autonomy and creative problem solving, factors leading to increased employee retention.

Problem Landscape

Leadership is a key factor that influences employee and stakeholder engagement.

Volunteer Boards may suffer from “role ambiguity”, failing to engage with employees.

Board and employee relationship significantly influences the stability of a nonprofit.

Frustration with managers is a key reason for employees leaving an organization.

Micromanaged employees will become dissatisfied.

Failing to communicate with community stakeholders.

Failing to satisfy community stakeholders.

Focusing on treating symptoms of a social problem leads to dissatisfaction.

Solutions Landscape

Engaged leadership creates a participatory work environment where voices are heard and employees contribute to decision making process.

Management significantly influences employee engagement and organizational commitment.

Delegation to employees develops self-motivated employees and then to action.

Autonomous environment positively impacts employee perception of organization.

Formal nonprofit structure: clear, defined organizational goals and clear organization rhetoric.

Encourage and accept employee innovations to achieve organizational mission.

Focus on addressing root causes of a problem increases employee retention.

Offering professional development and career advancement attracts and retains employees.

Focusing on employee mental health and wellbeing attracts and retains employees.

Burnout among social workers structural causes, coping strategies, and organizational interventions

Pazer, S. (2025). Burnout among social workers structural causes, coping strategies and organizational interventions. International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies 7(1), 583-587 (2025).

<https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7i1h.233>

This article, by a German based researcher, is an important starting point in examining the potential structural reasons for new social workers leaving their field. Up to 60% of social workers in high stress sectors such as child welfare and mental health will report burnout. Burnout emerges from an environment of constraint, moral dissonance, and emotional overload with five key structural drivers: systemic underfunding; emotional labour; erosion of autonomy; gendered expectations; and precarious employment. Burnout, or avoidance of burnout, is related in part to the ongoing attempt to balance sufficient levels of organizational supports, such as autonomy, supervision, and peer support against organizational demands, including emotional intensity, workload, and administrative burdens. Research suggests that social workers may be subject to increasing ethical distress as they know what needs to be done to support clients but may be subject to organizational policies that conflict with a social workers values. Organizational models emphasizing managerial control, audits, and output driven logic reduce a social workers discretion and relational engagement. Resilience and self-care within the profession continues to be promoted as effective coping mechanisms but this shifts responsibility onto the individual social worker and ignores structural roots of distress. In other words, while individual adaptation is part of the solution it must be coupled will collective strategies and structural transformation. Caring for social workers should be viewed as a "recognition that the emotional, cognitive and moral labour of social work is not inexhaustible" and sustainability depends on "radically rethinking how care is valued, structured and supported."

Problem Landscape

Political, economic, and organizational mindsets manage how care is managed, funded and morally framed.

High caseloads predict emotional distress and priorities based on economic efficiency.

Exposure to trauma, suffering and human crisis makes social workers vulnerable to secondary trauma, stress, and compassion fatigue.

Empathy and relational strength become an occupational risk.

Standardized procedures, documentation mandates, and top-down management restrict discretion and ethical judgment.

Precarious employment, short term contracts, low wages and limited advancement impact professional identity and institutional belonging.

High ethical demands with perceived low social prestige, lead to feelings of invisibility and devaluation.

Solution Landscape

Implementing enforceable caseload standards may reduce emotional exhaustion and staff turnover.

Trauma informed organizational cultures that prioritize emotional safety, reflective practice, transparency, and staff empowerment may mitigate psychological toll on social workers.

Fostering ethical cultures where institutional mandates support professional ethics.

Redistributing decision making to front line workers and legitimizing partitioner voices strengthens alignment between values and actions.

Participatory leadership enhances trust, ownership, and psychological safety.

Empowerment based governance foster's identity, competence, and engagement.

Structural investment in wages, working conditions and mental health protection.

Trajectories of well-being and burnout among health and social services community workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal study of job demands and resources

Paquin, A., Giroux, A., Radziszewski, S., Lauzier-Jobin, F., Coulombe, S., Houle, J., & Meunier, S. (2025). Trajectories of well-being and burnout among health and social services community workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal study of job demands and resources. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 53(8).
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.70052>

This study of 1425 health and social service community (HSSC) workers in Quebec examines the challenges faced by an essential workforce related to decreased well-being and burnout that continues to be influenced by fluctuating job demands and resources. HSSC workers offer essential services (e.g. mental health support, housing assistance, food insecurity) through mission driven community organizations that meet critical needs or advocate for marginalized populations. Psychological well-being at work depends on: interpersonal fit, thriving, feeling of competency, perceived recognition, and desire for involvement, at work. Burnout, due to prolonged exposure to unmanaged work stress include: emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness. Common job demands for HSSC workers that influence well-being include chronic overload of tasks, role ambiguity, emotional labour of supporting vulnerable populations, financial insecurity, guilt for taking time off and overcommitment. Job resources that alleviate the demands include support from colleagues and supervisors, job autonomy, use of personal strengths, and sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Engaging in projects that align with individual interests and strengths bolsters competence and well-being. However, these resources are influenced by organizational stability, resources scarcity, and external crises. Addressing the well-being of HSSC workers is crucial for individual health and quality of care provided as well as the overall resilience and well-being of broader society. This study notes that it did not examine leadership, organizational culture, and individual coping mechanisms.

Problem Landscape

Colleague support and supervisor support, when perceived as lacking or if it is disrupted influences well-being over time.

Declining use of employee strengths parallels decreased well-being.

Quantitative workload and work guilt leads to increased burnout.

Overcommitment, excessive overtime, emotional exhaustion, difficulty detaching from work leads to increased burnout.

Recovery paradox, HSSC workers least likely to engage in recovery activities when they need them the most.

Prolonged stress and increased workload impact psychological health.

Employees with high initial engagement are sensitive to changes.

Structural factors, funding, employment stability, and management practices impact job precarity and emotional overload.

Solution Landscape

Monitor HSSC workers over time to assess long term impacts of crises.

Identify employee strengths with tools like the VIA survey.

Foster use of employee strengths by the organization.

Identify and support the at-risk worker, those with high demands and low resources and those with high initial engagement.

Implement routine mental health screening with psychological tools.

Implement routine resource checks with checklists.

Peer support groups and reflective practice spaces sustains well-being.

Strengths based coaching sustains well-being.

Management training to identify overcommitment and burnout.

Structural policies on workload balance, recovery time, employee recognition.

Pathways to retention: Job satisfaction, burnout, & organizational commitment among social workers

Brown, A. R., Walters, J. E., & Jones, A. E. (2019). Pathways to Retention: Job Satisfaction, Burnout, & Organizational Commitment among Social Workers. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 16(6), 577–594.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/26408066.2019.1658006>

This study of 1,786 social workers in the US is helpful since it specifically considers the practice setting of child welfare and its impact on job satisfaction, burnout, and organizational commitment. Organizational commitment is the employee's alignment with an organization's values, goals and mission and impacts not just turnover rates but also effectiveness and performance. In the child welfare setting, turnover is at least 20% per year which is among the highest in the social work setting. This impacts continuity of care, clients and their families and loss of trusting relationships. Burnout and low job satisfaction, often related to large caseloads, predicts low organizational commitment for social workers. Workplace culture, coworker and supervisor supports, employee recognition, autonomy, and professional development impact the organizational environment and is related not just to increased burnout but directly predicts organizational commitment. The study found that organizational environment most impacts organizational commitment followed by burnout and then workload satisfaction. Turnover will happen before the burnout stage is reached if the social worker is not supported, unhappy with work structure or the work environment is unhealthy. Organizations must assess the social worker's satisfaction and consider changes to the work environment as needed. Leaders and managers have direct control over the organizational environment which means direct control over organizational commitment. A climate of wellness and recognition of employee contributions will increase social worker satisfaction. The collective mindset of employees, managers and leaders will revitalize a culture by defining the values of the workplace and engaging in the change process. Further research is needed to identify additional factors associated with burnout, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Problem Landscape

Lack of support reduces commitment.

Poor work arrangement reduces commitment.

Unhealthy work environment reduces commitment

Solution Landscape

Variety in roles and challenges increases cohesion and commitment.

Leaders and managers have direct control over organizational environment.

Organizational environment is strongest predictor of organizational commitment.

Supervisor and peer support is important for building culture and climate.

Mentors assigned to new hires.

Professional development supports including assisting with cost of providing paid leave.

Employee recognition and autonomy is important for building culture and climate.

Professional development, flexibility and compensation improve job satisfaction.

Implement scheduled recognition of outstanding work.

Performance reviews must recognize strengths and improvement along with employee feedback.

Workplace wellness programs such as group activities and gym memberships.

Promote work-life balance.

Promoting staff retention in social work: Identifying the 'push' and the 'pull' factors from the perspective of newly qualified social workers

Roulston, A., Mackle, D., Ross, J., Montgomery, L., MacDermott, D., Boyle, S., McFadden, P., & Hayes, D. (2025). Promoting staff retention in social work: Identifying the 'push' and the 'pull' factors from the perspective of newly qualified social workers. The British Journal of Social Work.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf152>

The focus of this study is specific to the retention of newly qualified social workers and collected data from 122 social workers who graduated in 2022 in the UK, however, the study noted that retention is an issue for the "profession globally". This study found that the UK experience mirrors international findings. Dissatisfaction with the organization, management and working conditions is prevalent with social workers in child welfare. International literature echoes the necessity of a team culture where peer support, self-reflection, supportive management and a space outside the team promote professional identity. Social workers in children's services had high levels of dissatisfaction with organizations, management and working conditions. Stay or go moments include the new social workers struggle to finish their when dealing with child protection emergencies that impacts commitments to their own families and dealing with their peer's high turnover rates which impacts the remaining social workers ability to develop strong relationships with parents and children. On the other hand, professional identity, support and being valued leads to competent and confident social workers. Similarly, building space to allow for transitions into new roles is necessary. Supervision is key to retention but is inconsistent or insufficient for complex or high risk cases. New social workers are motivated and committed however organizations must invest in improving management and supervisor skills, competency and quality and support mentoring and peer learning opportunities.

Problem Landscape

Inadequate support and supervision leads to burnout and leaving.

Push Factors: culture of blame, lack of clarity about role, increased bureaucracy.

Supervision is inconsistent or insufficient for high risk cases.

Management may not have the necessary skills or competence.

Solution Landscape

Social and supervisory support lead to retention.

Time and space to develop knowledge, skills, and experience.

Pull Factors, sense of making a difference, quality supervision, continuous professional development, career progression, positive organizational culture, team, and peer support.

Professional identity, management support and being valued increases competency, confidence, and retention.

Incentives for retention include higher wages, reduced caseload, healthier work-life balance, high quality supervision, training as a specialist, continuous professional development.

Invest in management to develop and improve competency and quality to supervise generally and to provide guidance in complex or high risk cases.

Peer learning and mentoring promotes competence and team environment leading to stability.

The influence of supervisor support, peer support, and organizational culture among early career social workers in child welfare services

Chenot, D., Benton, A. D., & Kim, H. (2009). The Influence of Supervisor Support, Peer Support, and Organizational Culture Among Early Career Social Workers in Child Welfare Services. *Child Welfare*, 88(5), 129–147.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45400442>

This study of 767 social workers involved in child welfare (both public and general) directly examines the impact of supervisor support, peer support and organizational culture in the retention of early career social workers. Studies have confirmed that the retention rate of social workers in child services is related to length of employment and that the social workers most likely to leave an agency are those who are in their first two years of their social work career. This study examined two categories of organizational cultures. Constructive cultures emphasize self-actualization, achievement, motivation to excel, responsiveness to client needs and competence in fulfilling roles. Passive defensive cultures focus on approvals, conformity with conventional operations, rule following, evasion of responsibility, accountability and blame, and resistance to change in the form of apathy or even suppression. Supervisor support includes both knowledge and skill development as well as emotional support while peer support is focused on the level of assistance and understanding a social worker receives from co-workers. This study confirms the critical role of supervisor support in the socialization of new social workers in child services. Strong supervisor support increased retention within the field of child services social work as well as the employer. Strong peer support increased retention only within the employer, not the childcare social work field. Supervisor training is essential to retain social workers. The role of mentoring by supervisors should not be understated, however, research is required to understand how best to train mentors. In addition, interventions in relation to organizational culture change should receive further study.

Problem Landscape

Passive defensive organizational cultures impact early career retention, but not late career retention.

Enforcement and punishment oriented functions performed by supervisors creates a survival mode for social workers within organizations.

Solution Landscape

Supervisor training to fulfill roles beyond compliance with agency mandates and policies is essential.

Educating supervisors and the role they play in the careers of child welfare social workers must be major priority.

Professional development of social workers must be targeted through intentional mentoring by supervisors.

Encourage creative thinking by social workers that targets improving client lives.

Reward creative decision making should be enhanced and will have multilevel benefits.

Constructive organizational cultures increases probability that clients receive effective services.

Does mentorship among social workers make a difference? An empirical investigation of career outcomes

Collins, P. M. (1994). Does mentorship among social workers make a difference? An empirical investigation of career outcomes. *Social Work*, 39(4), 413–419.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23717052>

While older, this study of 420 social workers considered the role mentorship played in the career outcomes of social workers, from both the mentor and mentee perspective. The mentor relationships that were studied were between individuals at different stages of professional development, in contrast to peer mentoring which may occur between individuals at similar stages of professional development. The mentor's role was to facilitate the development and advancement of the mentee by serving as a source of social support beyond the formal confines of the professional relationship. This study tests whether mentoring facilitates career development and measures career success, satisfaction, and income levels. The study found that measurable differences exist in career success, satisfaction and incomes levels for those who participate in a mentorship relationship. Critically, the necessary investment of the mentors resources in the relationship benefits the career development of both the mentee and the mentor. Social workers in supervisory positions should be encouraged to take on mentorship roles to enhance their own development as well as to sustain the development of the profession.

Problem Landscape

Resource commitment, especially time, on the part of the mentor, as well as the mentee, may discourage some senior social work professionals from entering into a mentorship role.

Solution Landscape

Career success is highest for individuals who were both a mentee and later a mentor, followed by those who were a mentee only and not a mentor, followed by those who were a mentor only and never a mentee and finally those who did not participate in a mentorship.

Career satisfaction follows the same pattern, highest for individuals who were both a mentee and later a mentor, followed by those who were a mentee only and not a mentor, followed by those who were a mentor only and never a mentee and finally those who did not participate in a mentorship.

Income level had somewhat different results where income was, again, highest for individuals who were both a mentee and later a mentor, followed then by those who were only a mentor and never a mentee, then those who never participated in a mentorship and finally those who were only a mentee but not a mentor.

How do we prepare students for the challenges of social work? Examples from six countries around the world.

Tham, P., McFadden, P., Russ, E., Baldschun, A., Blakeman, P., & Griffiths, A. (2023). How do we prepare students for the challenges of social work? Examples from six countries around the world. *Social Work Education*, 42(4), 494–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1976135>

This international study once again emphasizes that the challenges faced by early career social workers is a global issue, especially in the field of child protection and welfare. While the focus of the study is on university curriculums there may still be some merit in considering whether findings from this study may be incorporated in the early professional training of social work graduates. As this paper notes, effective induction or onboarding and supervisory support are critical for new social workers. If new social workers are expected to engage with clients who have experienced trauma, must face difficult situations and deal with high caseloads and crises, appropriate supports should be available. Internationally, new graduates in the field of child welfare work face significant stress and high turnover rates. The studies show that there is a need for adequate support and guidance in the early years and that organizational structures negatively impact retention such as large caseloads, role ambiguity, administrative burdens and lack of support from colleagues. This study suggests that new graduates may be weak in the following areas: formation of professional identity, management of emotions, managing demanding conversations with clients, collaboration, coping with stress, resilience, and well-being. This study notes that ongoing support in the workplace, is a positive development. However, more research is required to understand the social workers specific needs for support from the employer as they transition into the workforce.

Problem Landscape

Organizational factors, including large caseloads, role ambiguity, administrative burdens and lack of support from colleagues.

Areas of weakness in new graduates include formation of professional identity, management of emotions, managing demanding conversations with clients, collaboration, coping with stress, resilience, and well-being.

Workplace induction and supervisory supports are missing or inadequate

Solution Landscape

Proper induction and regular supervision and support are tools to help achieve success.

Ongoing training at the workplace, by identifying recurring professional weaknesses in new social work graduates and actively addressing these issues through training tools or courses for new recruits.

Transition to professional social work practice: The first three years

Hunt, S., Tregurtha, M., Kuruvila, A., Lowe, S., Smith, K. (2017)
Transition to professional social work practice: The first three years. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 19(2), 139-154.
<https://journal.anzswwer.org/index.php/advances/article/view/176>

In this interesting study from New Zealand, a cohort of social work graduates were followed for three years to better understand the challenges of transforming into a competent professional social work practitioner. The study notes that expect new social work graduates to "hit the road running" and that the "managerialist approach" is reluctant to invest in targeted induction, professional development and regular supervision. Social work education is focused on generalist knowledge that is reflective of social work values while the managerialist approach pushes for specialization and less focus on critical reflection. The literature suggests that neoliberal political environments impact the transition from school to professional practitioner. Market based values leads the practice to focus on measurable outputs, defensible risk assessment, statutory control, and individual compliance. As the managerialist approach to social work increases the preparation and support of new social workers decreases. The study found that new social workers experience a wide range of induction and supervision experiences. Further, some second year social workers were placed into supervisory roles. Supervision often focused on assessing measurable deliverables. Most social workers had case load protection for the first six months with no case load protection by the end of the second year due to resources, workload and the expectation that at the end of the second year social workers are competent. The researchers concluded that the political environment significantly influences the new social workers transition into practice and limits development of a professional identity and engaging in reflective practice. This also leads to conflicts between new social workers asked to emphasize individual empowerment over addressing structural causes of inequality. Graduation is only the foundation to a social workers knowledge and there should be recognition that social work requires lifelong learning that must be invested in. Employers were found to use supervision as a managerial and administrative tool rather than a safe space for critical thinking and exploration and formal mentorship programs were not available or not practiced. It should be noted that the researchers believe that these findings are relevant internationally.

Problem Landscape

Managerialist approach reluctant to invest in targeted induction, professional development, and supervision.

Managerialist approach values specialization with limited focus on critical reflection.

Missing CPD or training associated with missing managerial support and feelings of being devalued,

Fixed term contracts limit training and CPD opportunities.

Market based values where management focuses on outputs, risk assessment, statutory control, and individual compliance.

Neoliberal environment conflicts with a reflexive, analytical, person centered practice as new social workers try to negotiate government policy, employer responsibilities, and social justice needs of the client.

Supervision use to emphasize administrative and management goals and deliverables.

Office politics workplace bullying and oppressive atmosphere limits collegiality and limits mentorship opportunities.

Solution Landscape

Intensive structured induction, to guard against overload and burnout, leading to increased retention.

CPD and other training bridges the gap between education and specialized knowledge.

Caseload protection for at least the first two years of practice.

Lifelong learning is critical component of social work that should be accepted by employers and governments and will help lead to the specialized knowledge that is valued by employers.

Reflective thinking and practice must be encouraged, and employers must invest in a practice that uncovers underlying causes of inequality which is aided by induction, caseload protection, ongoing CPD, supervision and collegiality.

Supervision is a safe place to critically reflect on practice, structural power structures that impact clients and to bolster the social workers emotional resilience.

Addressing social workers' stress, burnout, and resiliency: A qualitative study with supervisors

Mack, B. (2022). Addressing social workers' stress, burnout, and resiliency: A qualitative study with supervisors. *Social Work Research*, 46(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svab032>

This is a very interesting study as it examines how 24 supervisors in the social work practice help their supervisees approach stress, burnout, and resiliency. This is the only study to examine this issue from the perspective of the supervisor. In this study supervisors "provide oversight, guidance, training and mentoring of supervisors" and address health and well-being by offering support and resources to increase "professional resilience" and to help supervisees bounce back from challenges. In other words, the focus and function of the supervisor is neither managerial nor administrative. The study found that supervisors developed awareness of the signs and symptoms of stress and burnout and that communication builds resilience. Supervisors must be practice, attentive and committed to learning about supervisee job related stress. Supervisors must be proactive in messaging and create opportunities for the supervisee to talk about pressures while supervisors listen to understand. Supervisors also stated the importance of building supportive relationships through unconditional support through which difficult situations can be tackled together. Supervisors view it as a duty to educate supervisees about self-care, self-care tools and work-life balance. Supervisors also need to know when supervisees should be directed to external or internal resources that helps supervisees deal with stress. Sometimes this was just additional supervision and more frequent meetings and check-ins. Supervisors also play an important role in proactively encouraging supervisees to take time off, create boundaries and help establish autonomy and flexibility when possible. This study demonstrates that organizations should consider how to create or strengthen their supervision models to build a resilient practice. Engaging in these practices will strengthen the current and next generation of social workers.

Problem Landscape

Managerial supervision is focused on administrative matters, case reviews, and outputs.

Supervisors may lack the required training or may not understand that role of the supervisor in the social work context.

Solution Landscape

Supervisor communication is nonjudgmental and compassionate and intended to help social workers deal with adverse job related experiences.

Supervisors proactively assess employee stress and then initiate conversations with the supervisees.

Brave spaces are created by supervisors which are environments and opportunities to engage in discussions and can be individual or groups.

Humour and laughter are tools to encourage laughter, reduce stress and avoid burnout.

Highlighting self-care by encouraging and supporting supervisees to engage in personal and professional well-being behaviours, practices and activities including organization based opportunities.

Solution Landscape

Resources, supervisors must understand what external and internal resources are available to assist supervisees in times of stress and when it is appropriate to use these resources.

Work-life balance must be emphasized and encouraged, to allow supervisees to reenergize and rejuvenate.

Supervisor training will include: resiliency building strategies and practices, regular scheduled meetings, checking in to confirm plans have been implemented, advocating for organizational changes.

Organizations should introduce policies and procedures to create or strengthen opportunities to develop effective supervision and intentionally building a resilient workforce.

Identify existing challenges and barriers to implementing resiliency practices and problem solving.

Action plan should be developed regarding individual and group training needs on the topics of stress, burnout, wellness and resiliency building.

Relational practice, a critical component for successful social work

Cleece, K., Cheneler, B., Harrison, J., & Hill, J. E. (2025). Relational practice, a critical component for successful social work. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2492402>

This article reviewed a previous scoping review that considered Canadian, US and UK research on relational practice and considers the findings in the context of social work services. The authors noted that globally, social work is defined as practice based and underpinned by academic theory to support the liberation and empowerment of people to achieve social change and cohesion using principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibilities, and respect for diversity. The ability to build safe and trusting relationships with the vulnerable is a pivotal skill for social workers. A key component of a relational practice is the ability to reflect and evidence self-awareness of how the social worker responds to service users. Effective relationship and reflective practice must be embedded in an organization from top to bottom, requiring vision, understanding, commitment and perseverance. A relational practice that helps develop understanding of interpersonal dynamics will lead to effective teamwork, increased job satisfaction, improved staff retention, and improved clinical practice. Classroom based education is not sufficient for new social workers. Therefore, incorporating reflective supervision, peer support and organization culture will contribute to developing a reflective practice and relationship-based approach to the practice of social work that will benefit the social worker, the organization, and the service users.

Problem Landscape

Balance of power, when not recognized may result in approaching problems through compliance and intervention.

Burnout or vicarious trauma increases when organizational culture does not align with relational practice and fails to support highly emotive relationship based work.

Limited resources lead to task driven practices and limited individual supervision.

Solution Landscape

Pivotal skill is relationship building with the vulnerable.

Balance of power, when recognized may lead to the use of personal and intuitive approaches to problems such as helping and compassion.

Relational and reflective practice is embedded from top to bottom in an organization.

Relational practice enhances knowledge, insights and understanding of interpersonal dynamics.

Solution Landscape

Effective teamwork leads to increased job satisfaction, improved staff retention and improved clinical practice.

Relational practice allows social workers to better navigate personal and professional boundaries including when to connect and when to separate.

Individual supervision improves health and psychological well-being of social workers and improves quality of practice.

Reflective supervision encourages exploration of emotions and tools to address challenging emotions which ensures a therapeutic approach to practice.

Reflective supervision increases the social workers resilience and emotional reserves.

Training of reflective supervisors to facilitate conversations and encourage reflection about challenging events.

Training of reflective supervisors to understand how self-aware the supervisee is and whether the supervisee demonstrates the skills and character for effective relational practice.

Increasing child protection workforce retention through promoting a relational-reflective framework for resilience

Russ, E., Lonne, B., & Lynch, D. (2020). Increasing child protection workforce retention through promoting a relational-reflective framework for resilience. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110 (Pt 3), Article 104245.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104245>

This interesting study from Australia, is focused on social workers, in the area of childcare services, who have stayed in the social work profession, who are satisfied with their jobs and have demonstrated resilience while navigating complex and demanding challenges. (The authors note that this study is relevant to other anglophone countries.) The author's acknowledged the high turnover rate and burnout in this area of the profession but note that the majority of social workers continued to work in this field. Child protection in Anglophone countries is focused on statutory, forensic and managerialist approaches to intervention that are bureaucratic, risk averse and adversarial. This approach is associated with high turnover, burnout, and dissatisfaction. Further, in the blame culture social worker turnover is attributed to the individual worker's failure to manage complexity. On the other hand, reflective practice to critically examine relational interactions enables social workers to unpack the complexity and emotions associated with child protection. Viewing resilience from the perspective of an individual's traits, skills, and resources ignores socio-cultural processes that support the development of resilience. Organizations may also be resilient which, in the child services context, is an organization that responds to ongoing concerns by promoting social networks, a culture of mindfulness at all levels, and values workplace social capital to reduce stress among younger workers. This study developed a framework of resilience that is developed and sustained through a transactional process based on interactions between the worker, organization, and the work relationships. Even in a managerialist culture, those organizations that develop a culture that values the contributions of the social workers, promotes reflective processes, and promotes relationships will develop social workers with the greatest level of resiliency and improved outcomes for the client. A deficit based, individual focused, blaming and managerialist approach will not develop a resilient workforce and organizations should consider the relational-reflective framework in the challenging and complex content of child protection.

Problem Landscape

Statutory, forensic and managerialist approach to intervention is bureaucratic, risk averse and adversarial.

Blame culture attributes social worker turnover to the individual worker's failure to manage complexity.

Resilience is viewed as an individual characteristic or attribute.

Role confusion occurs when social workers are pressured with administrative tasks.

Solution Landscape

Resilient organizations respond to issues by developing responses or solutions to ongoing concerns in the child services practice.

Resilient organizations promote social networks, a culture of mindfulness from top to bottom, and value workplace social capital to reduce stress among new social workers.

Process of resilience recognizes that resilience is developed over time, fluctuates in response to specific experiences and responds to appropriate supports and organizational culture.

Solution Landscape

Relational context recognizes that there is a relational feature between the working environment and the actual work.

Supportive supervision and management acknowledges stressors and emotional labour of child support services and its impacts on social workers.

Supportive supervision and management encourage debriefing, reflection and learning as tools to increase resilience.

Peers who understand the work may be valued sources of support.

Supervisory relationships allow social workers to process emotional impacts of work and build practice knowledge and wisdom.

Supportive relational context in the workplace when management creates a sense of safety in emotional processing, learning, and decision making.

Mistakes and successes are both tools to develop improved practice through learning.

Spaces for reflection may help make the "unbearable bearable".

What knowledge and skills do early career social workers need to practice effectively with children and families?

Bostock, L., Shephard, L., & Grant, L. (2024). What Knowledge and Skills Do Early Career Social Workers Need to Practice Effectively With Children and Families? *Child & Family Social Work*, 31(1), 521–532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13306>

This literature review considers 51 research papers that examined the knowledge and skills required by early career social workers to work effectively with children and their families. The first 5 years of a social workers career can be daunting as they weave together their knowledge sources to affect positive change for children. The international studies suggest that a theory-practice gap does exist and new social workers may not feel equipped for the reality of practice and leads to early exits. The literature review revealed a gap when specifically examining what knowledge and skills are required or missing in the first five years of the social work career. That is the literature does not break down knowledge and skills gaps by career stage. However, studies strongly suggest that the quality of a social workers practice with children and the ability to build relationships and authority requires quality supervision and direct practice. At a minimum, the literature provides evidence on the skills that early career social workers require, and these can only be developed through deliberate effort, practice, attention and support. Early career support requires a focus on building confidence to be a social worker who is also equipped to effectively perform child protection work.

Problem Landscape

Areas of weakness in new graduates include formation of professional identity, management of emotions, managing demanding conversations with clients, collaboration, coping with stress, resilience, and well-being.

Limited Time new graduates have years to effectively weave their existing knowledge to the knowledge they gain through practice

Theory and Practice Gap leads to new social workers leaving the practice

Solution Landscape

Partnership building between agencies should be taught to new social workers through observation and participation.

Communication skills and relational skills are built through high quality supervision along with direct practice.

Support to build confidence to be a social worker.

Support to build competence to perform tasks rather than just do tasks.

Understanding child development to build relationships with children.

Understanding sociological theory and the impacts of poverty and socioeconomic status on parenting and development.

Relationship building with parents is a specific learned skill especially how to engage with parents on an emotional level without adopting the parents' perspective.