Burnout in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Social Work

Issue
A significant problem exists in the fields of child welfare and juvenile justice – a shortage of professional personnel. High burnout and turnover rates of social workers in these systems have dire consequences not only for the children and families involved in terms of adequate services, stability, and intervention, but also for the children and youth-serving agencies in terms of financial strain and consistency.

Three Main Categories of Retention & Turnover Variables:
1. Personal characteristics of the worker:
   - Values
   - Experience
   - Education
   - Motivation
2. Work factors:
   - Nature of the work
   - Client population
   - Severity of cases
   - Paperwork
   - Workload
   - Low pay
3. Agency factors:
   - Climate
   - Supervision
   - Clarity of policies
   - Opportunities for professional growth and advancement
   - Budget cuts

The Needs of Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Youth

Mental Health Needs: Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Youth
Youth in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have more mental health problems than youth in the general population. Between 50% and 80% of youth involved in the child welfare system suffer from moderate to severe mental health problems. Among those youth in the juvenile justice system, as many as 70% have a diagnosable mental health disorder. Of those 70% with a mental health disorder, roughly 79% have met the DSM-IV criteria for 2 or more diagnoses, and over 60% of these youths were diagnosed with 3 or more disorders:

Children's Experiences & Exposure:
- Abuse and neglect
- Dysfunctional home environment
- Poverty
- Emotional and behavioral disorders
- Poor mental and physical health care
- Exposure to deviant peers as well we community and societal problems
- Poor family-school relationships

Examples of loss experienced by children in separation from their homes:
- Primary caregiver
- Family
- Friends
- School
- Neighborhood
- Favorite possessions

Practice Suggestions

Bridging Knowledge
Future Social Work Curricula & Continuing Education Suggestions:
- Incorporation of topics pertaining to criminal justice
- Material included on disenfranchised and at-risk groups
- Integrate diverse content areas into existing academic curricula:
  - Violence
  - Family Reunification
  - Legal Issues

Guiding Principles for Social Work with Offenders:
- The value and worth of all individuals must be upheld.
- Social work mission: Enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people.
- Obligation of the profession to work with involuntary clients.
- View offenders as persons within environments.
- Need for integrative and comprehensive services.
- Must not give up on clients. Change is a slow process.
- Social workers should develop their own support network.

References