

THE FLORIDA STUDY OF  
PROFESSIONALS FOR

# SAFE FAMILIES



## CONTACT US

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# EXAMINING WORKERS' EXPOSURE TO CLIENT- PERPETRATED VIOLENCE

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## BACKGROUND

Child Protective Services (CPS) workers face many risk factors for workplace violence including home visits, work in high-crime areas, independent work, irregular hours, and hostile clients. Moreover, non-voluntary clients with poor judgment, low impulse control, and mental health issues, common characteristics among those suspected of abuse or neglect, are prone to act violently, particularly when feeling threatened with temporary or permanent child removal.<sup>1</sup> CPS workers frequently work in dangerous or isolated locations and face hazardous household conditions including the presence of threatening animals, display of firearms, or drug paraphernalia.<sup>2</sup> Limited research examining violence among CPS workers indicates high rates of verbal assaults (nearly 100%), threats of physical violence (11-33%), and physical attacks (2-34%).<sup>3-5</sup> Affected workers commonly describe psychological and emotional consequences (e.g., fear, anxiety),<sup>6,7</sup> which are associated with job turnover.<sup>8</sup> Client-perpetrated violence may also culminate in poor child outcomes (e.g., unsafe homes) as hostile parents create a fearful atmosphere and affect workers' ability to conduct comprehensive assessments.<sup>9</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families is a longitudinal study of newly-hired child welfare workers throughout Florida. Participants were eligible if they were 1) involved in pre-service training; and 2) working toward Florida certification as a Child Protective Investigator or Dependency Case Manager. Baseline data were collected between September 2015 and December 2016, with 86% of newly hired workers across Florida completing initial surveys ( $N = 1,501$ ). Participants completed a second survey six months following baseline data collection, and 87% of the original sample responded ( $n = 1,306$ ). The six-month time period represents approximately two to three months of pre-service training and three to four months of casework with children and families.

This research brief focuses on experiences of client-perpetrated violence among case managers and child protective investigators (CPIs) within the first six months of employment. Study participants were asked if a client or member of a client's household engaged in any of the following behaviors toward them: 1) yelled or shouted; 2) threatened without physical contact; 3) threatened with damage or theft of personal or work property; 4) threatened with a weapon; 5) damaged personal or work property; 6) assaulted without physical injury; 7) assaulted resulting in soreness or minor injury; 8) assaulted leading to pain or soreness that lasted overnight; 9) assaulted that required an emergency room or physician visit. Violent experiences were grouped into three categories: **non-physical** (items 1 and 5), **threats** (items 2-4), and **assault** (items 6-9). Study participants were also divided into age groups consisting of those between 20-29 years, 30-39 years, and 40+ years old.

Chi-square tests were used to detect differences in experiences of client perpetrated violence between case managers and child protective investigators, and between age groups.

## FINDINGS

Overall, 76% of workers experienced some form of client-perpetrated violence with the first few months of employment. Differences were found between case managers and CPIs, as well as among different age groups of workers.

### ROLE

Role and violence type were significantly associated with the incidence of violence. CPIs were more likely than case managers to experience any type of client-perpetrated violence (80% vs. 74%, respectively) and non-physical violence. However, although few workers experienced an assault, a higher proportion of case managers reported physical violence than CPIs.

### AGE

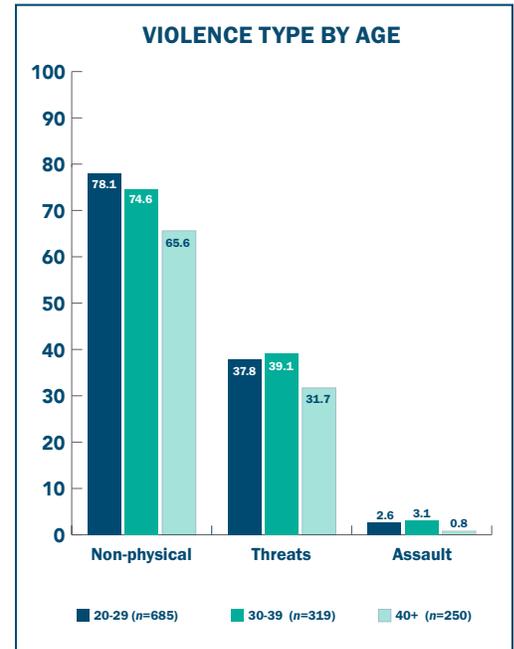
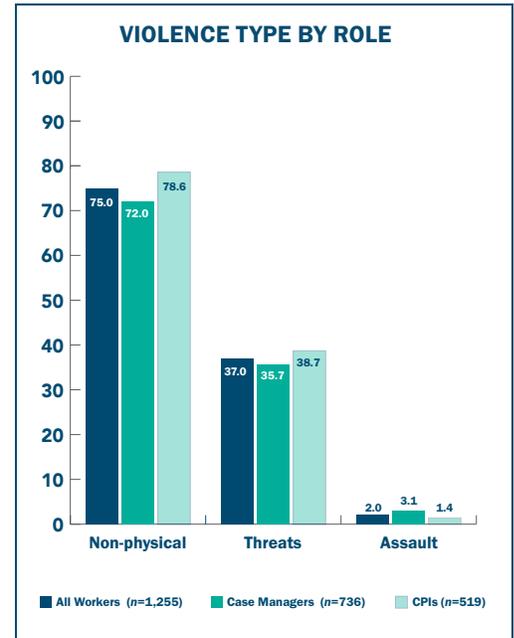
Age is also related to the experience of violence. Workers 40 and older reported significantly less overall violence compared to workers in their 20s and 30s (67%, 80%, and 77% respectively), primarily related to a lower proportion experiencing non-physical violence.

Overall, a substantial majority of newly hired workers experienced some form of client-perpetrated violence within the first few months on the job, and the youngest workers were particularly vulnerable to non-physical violence. Further, although physical assault is a relatively rare occurrence in this sample, the role and responsibilities of a case manager seems to create a greater likelihood of exposure to this particular type of client-perpetrated violence. It is currently unknown how these early, formative experiences impact workers' perceptions of child welfare service recipients or commitment to the field.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Results highlight the importance of child welfare providers recognizing the nearly universal experience of client-perpetrated non-physical violence, and the significant proportion of workers who experience threats in order to:

- Insure adequate training content that prepares workers for potentially hostile interactions;
- Provide structured mentoring and ongoing support around the potential for client-perpetrated violence.



<sup>1</sup> Shields, G. & Kiser, J. (2003). Violence and aggression directed toward human service workers: An exploratory study. *Families in Society*, 84, 13-20

<sup>2</sup> Kendra, M. A., & George, V. D. (2001). Defining risk in home visiting. *Public Health Nursing*, 18, 128-137.

<sup>3</sup> Horejsi, C., Garthwait, C., & Rolando, J. (1994). A survey of threats and violence directed against child protection workers in a rural state. *Child Welfare*, 73, 173-179.

<sup>4</sup> Ringstad, R. (2009). CPS: Client violence and client victims. *Child Welfare*, 88, 127-144.

<sup>5</sup> Robson, A., Cossar, J., & Quayle, E. (2014). The impact of work-related violence towards social workers in children and family services. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, 924-936. doi:10.1092/bjsw/bcu015

<sup>6</sup> Littlechild, B. (2005a). The nature and effects of violence against child-protection social workers: Providing effective support. *British Journal of Social Work*, 35, p. 387-401.

<sup>7</sup> Littlechild, B. (2005b). The stresses arising from violence, threats and aggression against child protection social workers. *Journal of Social Work*, 5, 61-82.

<sup>8</sup> Horwitz, M. J. (2006). Work-related trauma effects in child protection workers. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 32 (3), 1-18. doi: 10.1300/J079v32n03\_01

<sup>9</sup> Brandon, M., Belderson, P., Warren, C., Howe, D., Gardner, R., Dodsworth, J., & Black, J. (2008). *Analysing child deaths and serious injury through abuse and neglect: What can we learn? A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003-2005* (DCSF-RR023). London, England: Department for Children Schools and Families.

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