OLDER ADULTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE: EXAMINING EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES AMONG RECENTLY-HIRED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

BACKGROUND

Older workers are a significant and growing proportion of United States workforce. Presently, 20% of the overall workforce and 30% of the child welfare workforce is 55 years and older. Older child welfare workers are more likely to remain in their positions than their younger peers, perhaps because certain important skills and characteristics important in child welfare work such as resilience, self-efficacy, problem solving, and conflict resolution tend to improve with age. However, it may also be that older workers have more experience in the field and that makes them more likely to remain at their jobs. Yet little is known about the relationship between age at hire and retention in child welfare. We examined job outcomes and turnover of newly-hired older workers compared to their younger counterparts.

METHODOLOGY

The Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families is a longitudinal survey of newly-hired child welfare workers throughout Florida. Baseline data for Wave 1 was between September, 2015 and December, 2016 when workers were in pre-service training for their new positions. Wave 2 data was collected when workers had been in their positions for approximately six months. The initial sample included 1,500 newly-hired workers.

Workers were categorized into three age groups: young (21-34 years), middle-age (35-49 years) and older adults (50 years and older). The first step of analysis examined the age distribution of workers. Second, we compared job outcomes by age group including intent to remain, job satisfaction, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout. Third, a logistic regression examined the influence of age on turnover holding other worker and training characteristics constant.

FINDINGS

Among the newly-hired workers, older adults (50+ years) comprised 7% (n = 100) of the sample, 23% were between 35 and 49 years, and 70% were younger than 35 years (Figure 1). At 6-months of employment, older workers reported less secondary traumatic stress than young and middle-age adults, and less burnout than young adults.
Age was not related to job satisfaction or intent to leave the job. However, older workers had a lower 6-month retention rate than middle-age and younger workers, with 68% (n = 57) of older workers still employed in the same agency compared to 85% of young adult workers and 78% of middle-age workers. After taking demographic characteristics (e.g., race and ethnicity, sex) and early employment experiences (e.g., consistency between agency practices and training, number of weeks with protected caseload) into consideration, the odds of job retention were approximately three times higher for the young adults compared to older adults. Middle age and older adults did not differ statistically. Taken together, these findings suggest that while older workers were more likely to leave within the first six months of employment, their lower levels of secondary traumatic stress and burnout suggest that those who remain on the job may be more resilient to the stress of child welfare work and have higher long-term retention rates.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Older adult workers had lower rates of retention during the early employment period compared to young adults. However, findings also suggested that older workers who remain at their positions have the potential for positive, long-term employment outcomes given their lower levels of stress and burnout. Supportive practices during the training and on-boarding process may improve early employment outcomes for older workers and enhance overall workforce retention over time.

To address higher initial rates of turnover among older workers and higher levels of stress and burnout among younger workers, specific recommendations include:

- Ensure that the needs of older workers are met in classroom training. Older workers tend to have more work experience in the field and higher educational attainment than younger workers. Often, they have developed strong interpersonal skills. Workforce training that is geared toward younger workers may focus on skills older workers already possess. Including older workers already in their positions in the design and implementation of training can help ensure that the needs of older workers are also met in training.

- Equip agency staff with the tools to work with multiple generations of workers. It is important that supervisors be aware of the values, priorities, and communication styles of different generations. Left unaddressed, generational differences can cause misunderstandings and conflict in the workplace.

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